SANFORD MEISNER

THE MEISNER Technique
An Acting Methodology
SANFORD MEISNER
(1905 - 1997)

Born August 31, 1905, and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Sanford Meisner graduated from Erasmus Hall in 1923 and attended The Damrash Institute of Music (now Juilliard), where he studied to become a concert pianist before talking his way into a job in a Theater Guild production of Sidney Howard's They Knew What They Wanted. Sanford Meisner realized then that acting, which really "dug at him," was what he was looking to find. In 1931, a fervent group of young actors, including Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, and Harold Clurman, among others, joined together to establish the Group Theatre. It was the first permanent theatre company that brought "Method" acting, rooted in the methods of Konstantin Stanislavsky, to practice and prominence in America. Meisner appeared in twelve Group productions, including the first, "The House of Connelly," and all of Clifford Odets' plays, including "Waiting for Lefty," which Meisner co-directed with Odets in 1935.

In 1933 Sanford Meisner became disenchanted with pure "Method" acting. He wrote, "Actors are not guinea pigs to be manipulated, dissected, let alone in a purely negative way. Our approach was not organic, that is to say not healthy." Sanford Meisner had ongoing discussions about technique with Adler, who worked with Stanislavsky in Paris, and Clurman, who took a deep interest in the American character. Eventually Meisner realized that if American actors were ever going to achieve the goal of "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances," an American approach was needed. The Neighborhood Playhouse provided him with a venue to develop that approach on his own.

In 1935 Sanford Meisner headed the Drama Department at The Playhouse, while continuing to act and direct plays produced by The Group Theatre until its demise in 1940. He also appeared on Broadway in "Embezzled" (1944) and "Crime and Punishment" (1948). Sanford Meisner directed "The Time of Your Life" (1955) and acted in "The Cold Wind and the Warm" (1958).

Sanford Meisner left The Playhouse in 1958 to become director of the New Talent Division of Twentieth Century Fox. He moved to Los Angeles, where he was also able to cultivate his career as a film actor. Sanford Meisner starred in Odets' "The Story on Page One" (1959), "Tender Is the Night" (1962), and later "Mikey and Nicky" (1976).

Sanford Meisner returned to the Neighborhood Playhouse as head of the Drama Department from 1964-1990. In 1985 Meisner and James Carville co-founded The Meisner/Carville School of Acting on the Island of Bequia in the West Indies. They later extended the school to North Hollywood, California, where it still exists. Sanford Meisner, and Carville opened The Sanford Meisner Center for the Arts in March 1995, and later the school and theatre were combined to form The Sanford Meisner Center, today the only school and theatre to operate under Meisner's name.

Sanford Meisner received commendations from Presidents Clinton, Bush and Reagan. Sanford Meisner was honored by California Governor Pete Wilson and was named the "Humanitarian of the Year 1990" by The Washington Charity Awards. His final appearance as an actor was in a guest starring role on a special episode of "ER" that aired in February 1995. Upon his death on February 2, 1997, Backstage West dedicated an issue to Meisner and his world-renowned "Meisner Technique."
Arthur Miller once said of Sanford Meisner, "He has been the most principled teacher of acting in this country for decades now, and every time I am reading actors I can pretty well tell which ones have studied with Sanford Meisner. It is because they are honest and simple and don't lay on complications that aren't necessary."
Session One

The Reality of Doing

There is a great mistake, something is very wrong in the theatre today. The majority of our theatre is a theatre where nothing is really happening, nothing is really happening right now. Not only is right now all that we have available to us in life, it is absolutely the key to LIFE on the stage. Yet most actors are reproducing what has been done before. Attempting to repeat what "clicked" in rehearsal or to recapture what "wowed!" last night's audience.

This raises a wonderful question about one of our jobs as actors. How do we create "the first time" every time we perform the play? Clearly, the audience is paying to see the first time tonight not last night tonight. Yet, we have rehearsed the play, made a multitude of choices, we've learned the words and mastered the blocking. So, "We already know." When the surprise knock comes at the door in act two, we know, and, we must not know. The actor must not know. So how do we "not know," not anticipate, not get ahead of where we are. (and not get ready for that big moment in the next scene while in the middle of this scene!)

The answer is really very simple (well, simply said. Or as Sandy said about acting, "It's really very simple—just takes a lot of years to learn.") The way to make it look like the first time is for it to be the first time and to achieve this we must be living fully in the present. For when I am with you right now it truly is the first time and I no longer need to make it "look like." (What a challenge when so much of our lives are spent in the illusion of the past and the future, as if they were real. Or as someone I once heard said, "It's as if we are driving down the highway of life looking in the rearview mirror!"). In fact we must never be "making it look like" on stage. What then do we do?

Sadly, for the most part, what I see in the theatre are actors who are not really doing anything. Acting is doing. It is not talking about—it is really doing. (By the way, very few directors know about this.) Sanford Meisner created a meticulous and expansive process, a step-by-step, organic and healthy approach to the craft of acting. He told us that: "The seed to the craft of acting is the reality of doing." The seed, there could be no better analogy, for this seemingly simple statement continually unfolds with each step of the journey, it is the spine for all of the work.

And yes, I did say a "healthy" approach. Healthy because the work is grounded in who we are today, not who we once were or what we once may have experienced. Also, and especially, because the whole realm of the actor's emotions and the emotional instrument is handled in a way unlike most other techniques. In this approach our emotions come freely, as a side benefit, a gift, when our attention is on something else and that
something else is \textit{what we are doing}. The great news here is that when our attention is not on being emotional, our emotions suddenly become much more available.

You know, there are too many so-called acting classes which are actually therapy sessions disguised as acting classes. Teachers who instigate or push the student to “get emotional” and leave the student open and raw, without a sense of purpose or closure. I have worked with many students who have been damaged by this kind of work. What I want you to know is that acting is not emoting. Again, \textit{ACTING IS NOT EMOTING}. Acting is \textit{doing something}. Of course acting does demand of us the ability to access our own rich emotional life and the way in, the organic way, is through meaningful doing.

\begin{itemize}
  \item In the 1930s, in New York City, a man named Harold Clurman, out of his unbound passion and his tremendous dissatisfaction with the theatrical experience in this country, brought together some of the finest theatre artists of his time to create a company which would totally and fantastically alter the American theatre. They called themselves The Group Theatre, and in the relatively short time they were together, from 1931 until 1940, they brought a depth of spirit, a fervent life and soul to the stage that was unlike anything American audiences had ever witnessed. They were committed to building a new kind of theatre that was truly collaborative and which spoke to the moral and social issues of their time. Many greats of the theatre came out of the Group’s founding company—one of them was Sanford Meisner.

  \item When we think of American acting prior to the Group and look at the examples we have in the silent films, we think of large, cliche gestures and exaggerated posing. And though the Group Theatre members transformed acting in this country some 60 years ago, I believe the work that we are tackling here is still revolutionary. For though the old gestures may be out, the new postures are in. A real moment in the theatre is extremely hard to find and when it does happen it is often the result of an accident on stage—a prop was misplaced, the arm of a chair falls off, or due to the rain and a leaky ceiling, the actors are dripped on. For most actors these are disasters because they are unplanned, not “set” in rehearsals—rather than embraced as a wonderful surprise, simply something new to work-off, to respond to!

  \item I remember a scene in a play I saw a number of years ago. The female lead walked away from the two men she was in conversation with downstage right to go to a table that was upstage left. Though the two men were still talking, my attention went with the woman as she approached the table and on the table, a tray with a bottle of brandy and four glasses. When she arrived and began to reach for the brandy, she had a most wonderful, authentic moment (the only one in this play) of sheer terror as she discovered that the three glasses were already filled! She froze in a state of panic as she tried to think of a way to handle the situation. She finally picked up the bottle and proceeded to tilt it just enough over each glass so that it would look like she was really pouring. Now wouldn’t it have been much simpler to notice that the glasses were already filled and then to simply serve them?

  \item Isn’t it so much \textit{simpler} and doesn’t it make so much more sense when reading a letter on stage to \textit{actually read that letter} rather than to pretend to read a piece of paper with squiggly lines on it. With squiggly lines you must remember to move your eyes in the correct manner to make it look like you are actually reading. Why not actually read? Less to think about and much less effort, your eyes will look like they are reading because they are
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reading and you don't have to work at making the audience believe you. You know what? You can never make an audience believe you, you can only invite them to share your experience.

These examples are useful to illustrate, at a very basic level, this thing called the reality of doing. When you do something, you don't pretend to do it, you really do it. As I said earlier, this is the underpinning to all our work, for ultimately when we are supposed to be madly in love in a moment of the play, we must BE madly in love in that moment. When we are supposed to be enraged, we must actually be enraged. (Of course, you might ask about stabbing the hero, watching a distant sunset, or getting drunk on stage. I'm sure you've already determined that we don't actually do these things on stage. It is when we have made the meaning of these acts extremely personal and specifically meaningful that we are able to accept them and live them out as if they are real. With this acceptance, the impact they have on us, IS REAL!)

And though many directors are concerned with projection, not many are aware that it is only, I'll say that again, it is only with the actors actual experience on stage that we reach every seat in the house, reach every person where they live. I know this is true. As Sandy told us, it is never about being bigger, it is always about going deeper.

I want to give you a very simple experience of the reality of doing. Look at the following two numbers than close your eyes and in your minds eye, not on paper, multiply the two numbers. The two numbers are:

7948 X 6988.

Do it now and then read on.
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when you can’t bare it any longer, keep it going. Then, at some point, stop and read on.

I want you to do it again and this time I want you to know that your mission is to become like one person telling a story. That means that you must take out all the pauses between each person. So let the story whip around the circle. This requires that you not try to take the story but that you allow the story to take you. Also, you may find the story very funny at times. (Did you all end up on the floor laughing?) Great to have a response to what is happening but when it gets in the way of what you are trying to accomplish, not so great. So, this time take out all pauses and become like one person telling a story. Go ahead and do that for about ten minutes.

Try it one more time with two additions. First, the story must include two main characters. You will discover them as you tell the story. Second, tighten up your circle, get real close and this time I want you to do it with your eyes closed. Go ahead and do that now and then read on.

To achieve your goals in this game, what does it require of you? Well, what happens if you try to prepare with a word when the story is on the other side of the circle or, in other words, try to make the story go where you want it to go? By the time the story gets to you, your word might not fit anymore, isn’t that true? So, a big part of this game is about a giving up of control isn’t it? Also, not anticipating, because in this game you really cannot prepare. In fact the more you prepare, the less you are able to tell the story! It’s only in that moment, when the person right next to you gives you their word, that you will discover what comes out of your mouth.

What then must you be doing? You must be listening and you know what? The more you are listening the less you will be preparing, controlling. The success of this game comes from really listening and taking what you get. The more you can do this, the more you will trust that a word will in fact come out of your mouth and that with that word, you will tell the story.

Having said all that, give it one more try with eyes open and then read on.

REPETITION
The First Step

Our working definition of acting is, “Acting is living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” Living Truthfully. After the years I have spent working in the theatre, I keep coming back to the profound power and beauty of this very simple phrase. It is the core of our work together.

More of our acting comes from our true listening (another way of saying that is being fully available) than from anything else. Our fuel on stage is our partners, the other actors, so that we must be open and receptive to them at all times. Even in the midst of the most extreme and heightened moments, it is imperative that we be present to our partners and our environment in every moment (the stage is a dangerous place!). Isn’t this great! If I turn myself over to my PARTNER and instead of pushing, give up control, I get everything I need (like a good relationship). Yet most actors make acting very effortful, doing it on their own in spite of their partners on stage, isolated in their own private experience (like bad relationships).
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Now, with our first step, “repetition”, we are going to bring this whole thing called acting down to its simplest level. In doing so, I am going to take a number of things away from you. Just as in the scales for a pianist, many of the keys cannot be played. The musician is not playing ANYTHING, he’s playing THIS SCALE. It is by the specific structure or boundary of the scale that ultimately he is set free. The scales will disappear and what remains is the musician IN the music. Same thing with repetition. I will give you some specific rules to follow, a structure which, down the road, will disappear and what will be left is you in your acting.

Today, I will also give the first instructions to the “Observer.” Very simply, the Observer will be assisting and supporting the Partners who are at work in the exercise. Many times, those who are working will be unable to “see” the things they are doing, or not doing, that are getting in the way of their own progress. The Observer’s main job will be to help each partner become aware of what is happening. Change begins with awareness! As your skills grow as you actually do the acting exercises, you will also grow in your effectiveness as the Observer.

Throughout the book, I will be giving the Observer specific things to be watching for as well as ways to interact with the partners who are doing the work. You may be uncomfortable playing the Observer, giving feedback when you don’t really “have it all down yet” yourself. That’s great. What a great space to be in. What a great place for true learning to occur! Listen, will you make mistakes? Probably. Is it okay to make mistakes? Absolutely! If you simply say what you see and stick to your own simple truth, you’ll do just fine. So, be honest and be direct.

Session One

Exercise 1. MECHANICAL REPETITION

1. Take two chairs and place them facing toward each other.
2. You and your partner each sit down in a chair so that you are both facing each other. Have a little room between the two of you.
3. Pick one person to start the exercise. We’ll call you Partner A.
4. For Partner A:

First I want you to turn your head away from your partner. (who we will call Partner B).

*To the Observer: After you read through to Step 5, when Partner A has turned his or her head away, you will take a moment and then say “Begin” or “Go” to start the exercise. The Observer will continue to do this throughout today’s Session.

Partner A, when you hear “Begin” or “Go” from the Observer, turn your head back and say out loud the very first thing you ACTUALLY NOTICE over there on your partner. This must be a physical observation. (For example, if the first thing I was aware of as I looked at my partner were her eyes, I would say “eyes” or if it was her green sweater I would say “green sweater.”) Again it is whatever you ACTUALLY notice and not what you might conjecture. So you would not say, “You had a bad day” or “You don’t like me” and so forth.

5. Go ahead and try that a few times, waiting for the Observer to get you started. Then switch and Partner B try that a few times. Then read on.
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What you just practiced was something called *taking the first thing*. It is an extremely important element in our work. When you look over at your partner, you must say the very first thing that you are aware of. You also must become aware of when you don't do that. What I mean is that you must notice when you see something and you don't say it and then look for something else to observe so that you can say that. This usually happens very quickly, so quickly that you might not be aware of it. So now, I am asking you to bring it into awareness. Are you saying the very first thing that you notice over there?

*To the Observer:* You must help them here by pointing out to the partner who starts when they did not use the very first thing they were aware of. Stay relaxed in your attention, what I mean is, don't strain to see if it happens, trust that you will notice it if it does. When you do notice this occurring, simply say, “Start again and take the very first thing you are aware of.” Do this throughout today's session.

Try Step 5 again with this information. You might start to overly watch yourself for a few moments, that's OK for right now. Go ahead and each of you try Step 5 a few more times and then proceed to Step 6.

6. The next step:

Now, start again with Partner A making the physical observation. After Partner A begins, I want Partner B to repeat what you hear. So if Partner A says “green sweater,” Partner B will say “green sweater.” Then Partner A, I want you to repeat what you hear, “green sweater,” and now Partner B, you repeat what you hear, “green sweater,” and you keep going, *always repeating what you hear.* Simple, right? Yes it is. Simply repeat what you hear, do nothing else. Now put Step 5 and 6 together. Partner A starts and makes the observation which begins the repetition and then you continue repeating, *always repeating what you hear.* Also, ONCE YOU BEGIN, KEEP THE REPETITION GOING AND DO NOT DROP OUT OF THE REPETITION UNTIL THE OBSERVER SAYS TO STOP! NO MATTER WHAT!

*To the Observer:* You will tell them when to stop. Keep varying the length of each exercise so that those working won't begin to anticipate when it is getting near the end. Sometimes it might be painfully long and other times a number of seconds. And anywhere in-between. As they are working, the partners may begin to have all kinds of responses to the work. Certainly allow the repetition to continue through these and see where it leads.

Go ahead and give it a try, each partner having a chance to start the repetition at least three times. Do it now, then read on.

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Some things to be aware of at this point:

While working, did you notice the word changing at all or did your partner add another word or even a sound to what was being said? Did any mistakes occur to the word you started with as you were repeating? You know what, THERE ARE NO MISTAKES. (It's the same on stage—there are no mistakes, you must accept and embrace everything that happens!) The rule is: Take what you get from your partner and repeat exactly what you hear. So if your partner changes “circle on the shirt” to “shirkle on the cert” you must repeat “shirkle on the cert.” Do you then work your way back to “circle on the shirt?” No, what is in the past is over and dead, all you have is what is happening right now and you work from that.
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*To the Observer: if either partner does not repeat exactly what the other person just gave to them, stop the exercise and ask if they were aware of what was just said to them. If not, tell them what they missed and then begin again. Also, alternate who starts the exercise.

How will you know if they heard it and didn’t repeat it? Because you heard it. You see, from your seat, you are really doing repetition with both partners. (Not out loud, of course.) Make sure they are precise in repeating exactly what was given to them.

Listen, this is new for you too, you may miss some changes. That’s OK, do the best you can, right? Your awareness as the Observer will continually grow. Also, this does not mean they should be repeating a cough or a laugh, this gets you more into the area of mimicking, which is talked about in the next pointer.

Important note: When you were repeating, were you copying your partner? In other words, were you mimicking how your partner said what he or she said? If so, don’t. It’s not about copying the quality of how it is said, it is simply about repeating what you hear. How it comes out of your mouth, leave alone. That’s a lot simpler, isn’t it?

Did you notice anything happening with you as you repeated? Did you laugh or want to laugh or did you both laugh together? Any other responses? If so, what did you do with your experience—did you try to get yourself back together so that you could do the exercise right? The rule here is to have whatever experience you have and repeat. If you start laughing, great—laugh and repeat. If you’re bored, be bored and repeat. By the way, do you have an idea as to where your response came from? If you said the other person you are correct! What was happening with you came from your connection with each other, a connection which occurs as you really listen to each other.

( Remember, listening is doing.) Also notice how naturally, simply, and on their own these responses happened. That’s GREAT!

*To the Observer: Your job here is to keep the repetition going. Whatever response the partners have to repeating with each other is fantastic, AND, do not let them give up the repetition. For example, Partner A may laugh so hard that she has a hard time speaking. Help her to have her response and to repeat, allowing the words to come out however they come out AS SHE LAUGHS. Do you get that? You can yell something like, “DON’T DROP THE REPETITION!” And if it takes yelling to be heard, YELL! Make sure you are heard! Also, watch for, if in the midst of a large response like this, this partner drops out of listening to the other person. You can say, “Put your attention back on your partner and repeat!”

When the Observer interacts with those of you who are working, do not come out of the exercise. Simply take the note the Observer just gave you, keeping your attention on your partner, and keep going. Remember, never drop out of the exercise until the Observer says to stop.

Never do anything more than is actually happening. What I mean is, be aware of any desire to be interesting. Do not purposely do anything with the words. Leave yourself alone and repeat what you hear. Your attention must be over there with your partner.

As soon as you hear what you hear, repeat what you hear. Take out any pausing that might be occurring between hearing what you hear and your repeating it. This is not technical, it is not about “pacing,” it is simply, there is nothing to think about so when you hear what you hear, repeat what you hear. This does
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not mean rushing. You must not be “topping” what your partner is saying or in other words, repeating what he is saying before he has actually finished saying it.

Why do you think this is important? If you jump in too soon, you are working from the assumption that you already know what your partner is going to say. You are assuming that what has happened before will happen again. (Like in life when we “already know them” the relationship is dead.) Do you see that? She may have said “curly hair” the last twenty times but isn’t it possible, isn’t it POSSIBLE that this time she will say something else? (Though your father has always put down and mocked psychotherapy, is it possible that today he will have a session with a therapist? Yes it is. It is possible.) An actor must never assume anything! You never know what your partner will say until they have said it. So don’t wait and don’t rush, simply repeat what you hear when you have heard it.

*To the Observer: The partners who are repeating may not be aware that they are pausing or that they are topping each other. Help them take the pauses out by saying, “As soon as you hear it, repeat it” or “Take out the pauses.” If they are topping each other you can say, “Don’t rush, really listen!” or “Partner B you’re topping her, don’t work so hard!”

7. Go ahead now and do some repetition. Work for about twenty minutes with each other and then read on.

How is that feeling for you? Let me tell you a few keys to all of this work:

Don’t do the repetition, let the repetition do you.

Stay relaxed and don’t try so hard to get the exercise right. In fact, trying to do the exercise right is not doing the exercise right! It is the TRYING that creates a tension which will shut down your true availability.

There is no need to keep the exercise on track because there is no track.

There is no where to get to so you might as well be there. Do you see that? There is truly nowhere to get to! Isn’t that a relief? How much of our lives are we trying to get somewhere else? When I do this or that I will have arrived! How often am I actually right where I am? How often am I right here, right now? You see, acting must always be: right now, right now, right now, right now, right now, right now, right now…each “right now” taking us forward. How magnificent when we can stand fully in RIGHT NOW!

We are making acting very simple. You don’t have to be a “great actor” to do this, do you? You don’t have to be “interesting.” In fact, if you are in any way trying to make the exercise interesting, you will be unable to really do it. You know, Stanislavsky said: “...you are more interesting than the greatest actor that ever lived!” The audience doesn’t need another Robert Duvall, we’ve already got a GREAT ROBERT DUVALL! What they need is a fully authentic, fully alive YOU! I’d like you to do something I do with my “in person” students. Spend a few minutes with your eyes closed, repeating the following three words to yourself, “I am enough.” Go ahead, take the time to do that now. OK. Leave it all alone now. Go play some basketball.

Don’t do the repetition, let the repetition do you.
Session Two

Point of View

WARM UP

Do repetition for about fifteen minutes and then read on. (When I give you a length of time, that is for each pair of partners in the group.)

INTO LANGUAGE

We are now going to take a next step with the repetition. For no better way of saying it, I call this step, “putting into language.” It is a simple new element in the work and it will raise a few very important issues. It works like this: As I turn to my partner and see her green sweater, rather than saying “green sweater,” I might say, “You have a green sweater” or, “You're wearing a green sweater” or whatever words come out of my mouth as I notice the green sweater. So as compared to “green sweater” this is now more like real talk—it is real talk! How you say it is not important, it's however it comes out of your mouth as you notice the first thing. So I might have said, “green sweater on you there” or, “sweater, green sweater you got on.” It’s however I discover I am saying it as I say it.

Now, with this new element in the repetition, go ahead and do some. Each partner start two times, then come back and read on.

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Now there are some things to talk about.

First this example to illustrate:

I came to work with my partner today. I am wearing jeans and a grey shirt. She has on black pants and a red shirt. We sit down to do repetition and she begins. She looks over at me and says, “You're wearing a grey shirt.” Repeating what I hear, I say, “You're wearing a grey shirt.” She says, “You're wearing a grey shirt.” And on we go.

As we move into real talk or really talking to each other and in beginning our movement away from mechanical-land, we have to deal with one, what's happening and two, our truthful point of view. Both of these lead you to the first changes that must occur within the repetition.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

Let's look at the example I just gave. Who's shirt was my partner talking about? She was talking to me about my grey shirt. That is what was happening in the moment. So I must now repeat what I hear and include what is happening right now.
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She said “You’re wearing a grey shirt,” so I would now repeat, “I’m wearing a grey shirt.” I repeated what I heard and I changed the “You’re wearing...” to “I’m wearing...” to keep the truth of what was happening, which was about my shirt. (Explaining it is making it sound more complex than it really is, as you will see when you do some more repetition. Let me make a few more points before you work again.)

TRUTHFUL POINT OF VIEW

As I said earlier, all that we have to work from as actors is our truthful point of view and we never give it up. So when I respond to my partner and I repeat, saying “You’re wearing a grey shirt” what does she know to be true? She knows that she is wearing a red shirt. What must she then repeat to keep her truthful point of view? She repeats what she heard and changes the repetition to “I’m wearing a red shirt” or, “I’m not wearing a grey shirt.” The repetition is changing because IT MUST CHANGE. It changes as she holds on to what she knows to be true. ALWAYS! (And what if you really believed that her shirt was grey? What would you have to repeat back to her?)

Here are a few examples to demonstrate how this makes very simple sense. If my partner has her hands on her lap and I say, “You have your hands on your lap” and then she moves her hands somewhere else, the repetition must change. She might then say, “I don’t have my hands on my lap” or “I had my hands on my lap.” Let’s say my partner has on glasses and I don’t. I start with, “You’re wearing glasses” and he repeats back to me, “You’re wearing glasses.” What would I have to say? Well, something like, “I’m not wearing glasses.” Got it?

So you see, the repetition can change now. It changes not because you want it to change or you feel like changing it but because it must change as you work from what is happening and from your truthful point of view. Now do some repetition and work with this new information. Each partner begin five times and then read on.

Other things to be aware of now:

As we bring the repetition into language you are going to come up against some life conditioning. First, your partner may say something to you and you may find yourself pausing to consider. Know that this is the mind’s habitual response out of the need to be right. The mind’s function is survival or in other words, being right.

At this point in your work it is vital to repeat immediately, as you hear what you hear. In this way, if you allow it to, the repetition will take you to what you know to be true, rather than you figuring it out. Figuring it out puts you right in your head. (And being in your head is the death of your acting.) Example: My partner says to me “You look like a bullfrog.” In my mind, I pause to consider, “A bullfrog? What does she mean by that? Oh God, do I look like a bullfrog? Hey, I don’t think I like that she said that...oooh, is there something in my nose, and so on. If I repeat immediately, and keep in the repetition with my partner I will not be able to think about it, and may suddenly discover what I know as I hear myself say, “I DON’T LOOK LIKE NO BULLFROG!”

As opposed to what most people think, what we know, takes no thought. An infant communicates to us very specifically and with no thought. “Yeah, but that’s instinct!” you may be saying to me. EXACTLY!! EXACTLY!!

*To the Observer: When you work again, watch for these pauses of thought and tell the person when it happens. It is so much a habit
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and it happens so quickly that it is often hard to notice. All of you must become aware of when you do this. By stopping the exercise and letting the person know they are pausing to think, they will soon let go of this old habit, simply out of the new awareness. Change begins only with awareness.

Right now, you may encounter resistance to saying the first thing. In other words, you are censoring your first response. My partner might look at me and see “big nose” but not want to say it for fear of hurting my feelings. It’s not nice to say “You’ve got a big nose” and it is urgent that she does! Why do you think? In our acting, we must get beyond the act you and I have so carefully mastered in life. This is not a good/bad thing and it’s not a criticism. It’s survival. Most people speak of me as “a very quiet and intense guy.” Is that all I am? Of course not, I am all kinds of things, as are you.

In our work together, the beginning of becoming the full expression of ALL that we are, starts with saying the first thing and dropping the nice routine—and I’m not saying don’t be nice. You must give up being nice and I AM NOT SAYING DON’T BE NICE. Do you get that? Acting has no room for niceties, reasonableness or “being appropriate.” (When you are really living in the present, you are always appropriate!) Also you must realize that saying the truth to our partners is a gift, always! They now have something real to respond to, OH BOY! They are real with me and I have a real response to that. As opposed to most of life where very little real communication EVER HAPPENS. Why are so many relationships dead or dying? Why are so many employees having heart attacks? How many times have I spent a week going over in my head what I “SHOULD HAVE SAID!” I love what David Mamet says, that people go to the theatre so that they can see that real communication between human beings is still possible. Oh, one more thing. When we don’t tell the truth on stage, the audience knows. No matter what you may think, they know!

In a moment, you will do some more repetition. If you are working in a group, those who are watching should start to notice what is going on with the partners who are doing repetition. (I’m planting a seed here!) As the partners repeat, what responses are they having and how would you describe what you see happening with them? (Is something making them excited, or are they bored stiff? Are they relaxed and calm or filled with anxiety?)

*To the Observer: At times, when you are aware of something specific happening with one of the partners, stop the repetition and let the group members who are not working, each say what they saw happening with that person, in that moment. Do not discuss it, simply have each person state what they saw happening from their own point of view. (“You got mad” or, “That made you uncomfortable” or, “You really enjoyed that,” and so on.) Then have the partners who are working jump back into repetition. By the way, are all of you right in your observations? It’s not about being right, it’s about what you got from where you are sitting, what you know from your point of view. (Like the twenty witnesses at a bank robbery who have twenty different stories.)

Go ahead now and each do a good ten minutes of repetition. When you have finished, stop. Go get some great Mexican food.

. . . . . . . . . .

HOMEWORK

Before Session Three, meet with a partner a minimum of two times and at each meeting do at least twenty minutes of the repetition.
Irrigation may be a form of super-consciousness, or perhaps of subconsciousness—I wouldn't know. But I am sure it is the antithesis of self-consciousness.

—Aaron Copland

**Session Three**

**What's Happening**

**WARM UP**

Begin today with twenty minutes of repetition and then read on.

**THE THREE MOMENT GAME**

I want to work with you now on this thing called "What's happening." To do this, I will give you a game to play, a game which is artificial but is useful in that it will serve as a bridge. A bridge which will take us from where we are now to what is next in the work. Here is how the game works: (Read the following and then I'll have you do it.)
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- Partner A: In your mind, you will make up a provocative question that you really want to ask your partner. Provocative in the greater sense of the word. The more provocative the better. Then, you will ask your partner the question.
- Partner B: You will repeat the question, just as you have been doing in the repetition, immediately. IMMEDIATELY! And allowing yourself to have, as best you can, whatever response you have to the question. Do not try to have a response, simply allow whatever response you have to the question as you repeat it.
- Partner A: You will then stop for a moment and describe as best you can what you saw happening over there. What did his or her behavior "say to you." Something happened with your partner as he or she repeated the question and it is your job to say what the behavior was, from your point of view. Grapple with this out loud and when you have narrowed it down and made it specific, you will state it to your partner directly. That's the end of the game, three moments. One, the provocative question. Two, the response as you repeat the question. Three, stating to your partner what his or her behavior said to you.

Three moments, you see? Here's an example:

Partner A: Does anyone really love you?
Partner B: Does anyone really love me? (As she repeated the question, her eyes looked away, she smiled and giggled.)
Partner A: (Working out loud...) Well there was a gleam in your eyes, but you didn't want me to see it. Your face got red, it's still red. I think the question really embarrassed you, yeah, that was the strongest thing I got. (He ends with a simple, direct statement to her...) That embarrassed you.

End of game. Now the other person asks the question.

Go ahead now and play the Three Moment Game with each other; each partner ask five questions. Take your time and have fun. Then let's talk about it. Now play, then read on.

Here are some important things to notice and to be aware of as you do this game. See if any relate to what just happened as you played:

Sometimes you may find yourself, in the third moment, stating back to your partner what you think the answer to the question was.

Partner A: Do you like cleaning toilets?
Partner B: Do I like cleaning toilets?
Partner A: You really don't like cleaning toilets!!!

We are not interested here in the answer to the question. What we are interested in is what the behavior said to you. So in this example your statement to your partner might have been, "That made you ill!" or, "You wanna puke!" or whatever it was to you. If you find yourself stating back what you think the answer to the question was, stop and try to figure out what happened with your partner— what was in their behavior that gave you the answer.

Do you find yourself using words like "seem" or "look like" as you tell your partner what their behavior said to you. "You seem pissed" or "You look like you want to scream." You must take "seem" and "look like" and any other modifiers out of your acting vocabulary. Do you have a hunch why this is important?

You know it's a risk to say what we believe to be true. Horrific consequences are possible! The other person may not like us! Or, she may disagree. Or tell us we are just plain wrong. In life "seem" and "look like" and all the others are buffers, a way out.
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In our acting we want to take away from ourselves any way out, any safety net and we want to say exactly what we mean. So start catching yourself as you do this and stop, then say it over, tell your partner what you got from their behavior without the buffer word.

*To the Observer: If the partners working use the words “you look like,” or “you seem” and so on, stop them and tell them so that they can begin to take those words out of their acting vocabulary.

You may be finding, at times, that when your partner repeats your question, you think there is nothing to describe because very little is happening. Listen, THERE IS NEVER NOTHING, THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING! (It's like your best friend calling you up late on Saturday night and saying, “Hey, I just went on that blind date you set me up on and boy did that girl have no personality!” That really isn't true is it? Isn't there really no such thing as “no personality?” There is always some kind of personality, you see?) All you can do is take what you get and work from that. So if your partner just looks blank to you, you might say, “You're blank” or, “That doesn't do much for you” or whatever words you find.

Did you find this difficult? Are you finding it hard to “read” your partner? It is difficult! We are stretching new muscles here! What I want you to know right now is that what you get from your partner is not simply what you see with your eyes. Sometimes you may get something and not really know how you got it, yet you have a hunch about it. TRUST THAT HUNCH. We'll talk more about this later, now I want you to do some work.

I want you to play the Three Moment Game for twenty minutes. Then read on.

Session Three

Back to repetition: I now want you to take something away from your repetition. You no longer need to look away from each other to start the repetition. Now, you will sit down facing each other and begin. Who begins? You'll find out as you sit down. Whoever begins, begins. There is nothing to wait for! Whatever is the first thing you get as you sit with each other, is the thing you start with. So the looking away business, to get the first thing, served its purpose and is no longer needed. What I'm saying is, we are through with it so don't do it anymore. (That's very much how this work goes. We are always moving forward, never going back.)

*To the Observer: Once the repetition has begun, you will call out the partners' names to have them work from a new observation. Now, the repetition will not stop but will be continuous. So, let's say the repetition is under way and you say, “Nancy Go!” Nancy will immediately say whatever she's aware of over on her partner, in that moment, and the repetition continues—the partners working from this new observation. Then, at some point you say, “Bill Go!” Bill will now immediately say what he observes in that moment and onward they go. And so on... You will continue to do this throughout the exercise. Have fun and be tricky (call the same persons name three times in a row, and so forth) so that the partners cannot anticipate the changes.

Now do ten minutes of repetition for each set of partners.

HOMEWORK

Between now and Session Four, meet at least twice with a partner and at each meeting do twenty minutes of the Three Moment Game. Then do ten minutes of repetition.
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CLARIFICATION

You may have a question here about how, when you are working on your own, to start from new observations while the repetition is going. Well, as you have just learned, you both sit and one of you will begin. Then, as you are repeating, at some point, the other partner jumps in with their observation and then you both repeat that. Then, at some point, the other partner jumps in with a new observation and so on.

Are you wondering how long you should keep repeating before someone throws in a new observation? Please, don't worry so much about doing this right, remember? Explore! Whenever one of you has a strong impulse to change the repetition because of something you just observed, SAY IT! See where that takes the two of you.

See you at Session Four!

Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what, next or how. The moment you know how, you begin to die a little. The artist never entirely knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark.

—Agnes De Mille
Session Four

Working-Off

WARM UP

Do ten minutes of the Three Moment Game and then read on.

THREE MOMENT GAME: PART II

You know, what we are doing with the Three Moment Game is crucial. We are isolating this thing called behavior. We are zooming in on behavior and strengthening our ability to really see it. (And I don’t mean just with the eyes.) As actors, we really must get on intimate terms with the domain of behavior...

Now, I want you to do the Three Moment Game in the following way. Everything stays the same except for the third moment. Now the third moment must happen immediately. So take out the thinking about what you get from your partner’s behavior as they repeat the question and tell them what you got immediately! Then, let that third moment lead you into repetition. Here is an example:

Partner A: Do you stuff your face when nobody is looking?
Partner B: Do I stuff my face when nobody is looking?
Partner A: (immediately!) Ooh, that struck a nerve!
Partner B: Ooh, that struck a nerve?
Partner A: Ooh, that struck a nerve!
Partner B: Ooh, that struck a nerve.

And so on, and so on...

As you let the third moment lead you into repetition, continue repeating for seven or eight moments only. Do not go on at length as you have done before. OK, you can go ahead now and do the Three Moment Game in this manner for twenty minutes. Work now and then read on.

How does that feel? In the third moment, did you find that sometimes you knew that you got “something?” from your partner but you could not immediately find the words to describe it? That’s OK. If you don’t have the words you must still respond to what you got from your partner, so, respond in some way. You don’t have to say it good and it doesn’t have to make sense! So if your partner screams in delight your immediate response might be “WOWEE WOW WOW WOW!” You see, it is better to respond immediately, than to stop to “Get it right” or “Say it well”, ALWAYS!

I want you to read on into the next section now, as we bring the next element of the repetition into play.
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REPEITION: WORKING-OFF

I want you each to try something right now.

Do the Three Moment Game as you have just done it, the third moment leading you into repetition. Now as you are repeating, when you are aware of something happening over there, something that you get from your partner, you can say it. I am telling you that now, as you are aware of things happening with your partner, you must respond to that—which means that the repetition will now have changes in it. Give that a try and once your into the repetition, don't stop for a while. Simply allow the repetition to change when you are aware of something going on with your partner. Do it now one time and then read on.

Going back to the example I used before, here is an example of what we are working toward at this point:

Partner A: Do you stuff your face when nobody is looking?
Partner B: Do I stuff my face when nobody is looking?
Partner A: (immediately!) Ooh, that struck a nerve!
Partner B: Ooh, that struck a nerve?
Partner A: Ooh, that struck a nerve!
Partner B: Ooh, that struck a nerve.
Partner A: Yeah, that struck a nerve!
Partner B: Oh you think you got me.
Partner A: Oh I think I got you!
Partner B: Yeah, you think you got me.
Partner A: Yeah, I think I got you!
Partner B: You're proud of that.
Partner A: I am proud of that!
Partner B: You are proud of that?
Partner A: I am proud of that!!

Partner B: You are proud of that??
Partner A: You're angry.
Partner B: I'm angry.
Partner A: You're angry.
Partner B: I am angry!
Partner A: You admitted it.
Partner B: I admitted it.
Partner A: You admitted it.
Partner B: So I admitted it!
Partner A: You are really defensive.
Partner B: I am really defensive.
Partner A: Yeah, you're defensive.
Partner B: I'm not defensive.
Partner A: You are defensive.
Partner B: I'm not defensive.
Partner A: You are defensive.
Partner B: Sticking to your guns, huh.
Partner A: Sticking to my guns, huh?
Partner B: Sticking to your guns!
Partner A: Sticking to my guns?
Partner B: You don't understand.
Partner A: I don't understand.
Partner B: You don't understand.
Partner A: I don't understand!
Partner B: You admitted it.
Partner A: You really mean that.
Partner B: I do mean it.
Partner A: You do mean it.
Partner B: You do mean it.
Partner A: You are really taking me in.
Partner B: I'm really taking you in.

What we are getting into now is working-off, becoming available to what is happening with our partner and being in
response to that. I want you each to do twenty minutes of repetition now, working-off your partner.

*To the Observer and All Group Members: You all must now be active participants, working in your seats. You must, at all times, be “working-off” the two partners who are doing repetition, sitting on the edge of your seats improving your own ability to work-off behavior. You must not be sitting passively waiting to be entertained! The question is, what are you getting from where you are?

Work now, twenty minutes for each set of partners and then let’s talk.

As you did the repetition, did you find periods of working with each other where the repetition went on for a long time and it didn’t change? Do not worry about that at this point. It is better for that to be happening right now than to be looking for the next thing or trying to make the repetition change. You see, this is all very new to you right now, so you will be missing moments, not getting all that is coming your way. Your work, as you keep doing the repetition, is to become more fully available to each moment as it happens.

How do you do that? Let me tell you something, you cannot MAKE yourself more available, you can only invite it and encourage it to occur. The repetition is your vehicle. It will take you there if you do the things I have told you. Again, work consistently and “Don’t do the repetition, let the repetition do you”, which, right now means: Repeat immediately and keep your attention on your partner. In this way you cannot get ahead of yourself and you will discover when the repetition must change rather than trying (efforting) to find the things to change it to.

Did you find that, at times, you were aware of yourself having thoughts during the repetition? A lot of times these thoughts are the very thing you could have said to your partner but didn’t, so you end up thinking about it. For example: You feel that your partner is “taking control” and you hear yourself repeating automatically (like a robot) for a good many moments while in your head you are thinking, “God, he’s controlling this thing!” There are two things to do:

First, you must begin to allow that voice in your head to be expressed to your partner. “God, you’re controlling this thing!” You see, that’s the repetition!

Or second, if the moment has passed, you must bring your attention back to your partner and what is happening right now.

So if you’re thinking “What a great smile” and by the time you realize you’ve been thinking this for a while she’s looking very serious, you work-off right now “You are very serious.”

Listen, the mind is extremely seductive, so you must bring it to awareness when you are getting lost in thought and out of sheer will, bring yourself back to your partner. It’s hard work now, but ultimately, it will all be like tying your shoes—you won’t have to think about it!

Each person do another ten minutes of repetition and then call it a day.

...
Chapter One
setting the stage

FREEDOM.
Let's take a look:

case
openness
spontaneity
liberation
unconstrained
unobstructed
unfettered
unimpeded
unconfined

Great words for actors, don't you think?

Continuing from where we left off in Workbook One, we are now going to address — very directly — emotion.

That's a big deal for us actors, isn't it. Let's include acting teachers here as well, because this is precisely where many teachers are crippling, even damaging their students, by encouraging various forms of psychological warfare in the classroom. In my experience of working with actors and acting students around the country, the "emotions" are certainly an area of confusion as well as a source of tremendous frustration.

We will be exploring here the part of the Meisner Approach called "emotional preparation." Many people, exposed to only isolated portions of this or that part of the Meisner Approach, have thought that Sandy's use of emotional preparation was simply about getting emotional. Of course, if you take this aspect of the work out of context, that is what it would look like. But it's important to remember that each part of this approach is another building block; we are building something here. And you'll really start to enjoy living in the house when all of the bricks are in place (and like the third little pig, the wise one, let's go the extra mile and build it well.)

What I know is that emotional preparation, in the bigger picture of the actor's craft, is not really about "being emotional" — it is about deepening the actor's availability and connection to what has profound meaning to him or her. And for what purpose? So that we are prepared and ready to take action! So that we know in a very clear and personal way WHY we are taking action! Remember, acting is doing. Acting is not "talking about" and it is not "feeling about," it is doing something. Acting is doing — doing with meaning. We do not go on stage to emote, we go on stage to accomplish something against all odds; we go on stage to fight for what we know is true and right and necessary.
Now in life, what is it do you think that gets us to take action when it is not easy or within our comfort zone to do so? Isn't it always because we have a very strong and personal need? Isn't it always because our feelings about that particular thing run deeply, so deep that we move ourselves past all the head's cautions to wait, to be careful, to do it tomorrow, to leave it alone, that it's not that important anyway, that we're better off where we are, that people may not like us if we follow our impulse to do this thing?

And let's face it, you and I are emotional beings. We are born fully alive emotionally. As infants, we are not only utterly expressive of what's going on with us, we are much more aware of and responsive to the inner state of the people around us — what's actually going on with them — than the words they speak. As adult actors, we must re-open ourselves to that kind of emotional availability because it is true on stage as well, that the words are never really telling the whole story. If the play is to live, we must be aware of and responsive to what's really going on with our partners on stage in each moment.

Also, it is vital that we are able to "realize," to fulfill, the emotional demands of the script. We don't have a violin to play — we are the instrument, and so we want to be able to "play" the full range of our own unique notes; not only the limited range of notes we play in our day-to-day life, the entire range! Now, as we work together, we will be doing some "getting emotional." For a while, you may even become overly "emotion conscious." I find that to be par for the course in this aspect of the work because we are specifically isolating this thing called emotion and putting it under the microscope. Unfortunately, many actors don't then deal with the more advanced and essential aspects of interpretation, and they become trapped in a haze of emotional self-consciousness. (Which is why this is book two of my four book series on the Meisner Approach. Books three and four will be dealing with the acting tools of working with text and interpretation.)

Going back to the violin analogy, if you were a violin student and you worked long and hard enough on the scales, at some point your fingers would go to the rite you want to play without having to think about it. Same thing here. I have found that, out of dealing with emotion directly and discovering ways to work with ourselves in a deeper way, and as we learn specifically where to channel all that we are feeling, we eventually become much less concerned with emotion. And so, ultimately, through this very demanding portion of the Meisner Approach, you will develop a more expansive and richer acting instrument and you will experience greater freedom in your work. Greater freedom. Sounds good, right?

This would be a good time to introduce you to emotional preparation and explain more specifically what it is.
Chapter Two
about emotional preparation

Let's say that you are in a play and you are playing the part of a married gal who is coming home from a bowling tournament. It is the first scene of the play and you have to make your entrance. You are walking into your living room where you discover your husband dusting the furniture. The director has told you that he wants you to do a little celebration dance as you enter. Here are the first three lines of the play:

Wife (you): Honey, you are looking at a bowler here!
Husband: Wow, you are on top of the world!
Wife: We won, babe, we won the tournament big time!

Now, after reading those three lines it is clear and obvious that, as the wife, you are going to be required to make your entrance in an emotionally alive place that will not only make sense of what you say and do when you come in, you must also make it possible for your partner on stage to say his line, “Wow, you are on top of the world!” You have got to come into the scene ON TOP OF THE WORLD! Well, how do you go about getting yourself into that kind of triumphant, joyous state while you are off-stage? Remember, in our work, we don’t pretend and we don’t fake. This means that when you make that entrance, you must not be acting triumphant and joyous – you must actually BE triumphant and joyous.

This is what emotional preparation is all about. It's what you do before you enter so that when you do enter, you are emotionally alive. And as you see from my example, the nature of the preparation you do is dictated by the demands of the play. “But,” you say, “I don’t give a damn about bowling or winning a bowling tournament. How am I going to get truly excited about that?” Great question! You have brought up an amazing and fantastic part of the acting process. Here I am the actor and over there is the playwright’s play. It is now my job to take the words given to me by the playwright and invest them with life. You get that? INVEST THEM WITH LIFE! Now there’s a juicy statement that turns me on. And invest them with whose life do you think? The character’s life? What character? Is the character going to act this part? No, you are. You will invest the words with your life! Now, I get excited when I think about sinking myself into the puzzle, the mystery of creation as an actor. And you know, that's what it's all really about. Do you think all this acting technique stuff is so that you will end up with some sort of “one plus one equals two” kind of formula? Forget about it! All technique is about one thing: making you strong and willing and able to allow the mysterious to occur. Remember, great acting only occurs in the territory of the unknown. Us actors must
always return to the land of not knowing because that is the only place it is possible to actually discover anything.

I didn’t really answer your question about getting truly excited because of the bowling tournament, when you could care less about bowling. Well, I’m not going to answer that question now. The ways into the very personal solutions for that challenge will be revealed as we work together on the exercises in this book and in my following two books. Let me also note that not every entrance you make in whatever play you are working on will be as heightened emotionally as in the exercises we will be doing together. But in all great plays the stakes are very high and you will be called upon to take on the most extreme circumstances imaginable. So it is vital now, in our exercise work, that you reach further and dig deeper than is comfortable or reasonable to do. As Sandy used to say to us, “I’m not interested in training actors to bunt, I want to train actors so that they can hit home runs!”

THE EXERCISES

In our work on emotional preparation, we will begin by doing some new exercises in which you work without a partner. Then we will come back around to the kind of exercises you learned how to do in the first book on this approach using repetition, activities and relationships. As we return to those exercises, we will add new elements, as well as raise the emotional stakes in the way you set up the exercise. You will also see that the activity, which in the previous exercises always had a physical difficulty, takes on a new dimension.

One other thing. Emotional preparation is probably the most elusive part of this whole approach, it is certainly the most personal. What I mean is that, no one can really teach it to you. As we go through the exercises, you will actually begin to discover and develop your own ways of working. I think that’s great news, don’t you? Listen, as I have said before, I’m not interested in you becoming a great “Meisner actor.” What I am interested in is giving you some specific ways to strengthen your own individual craft of acting as you become the most passionately authentic actor you can be. And, as you know, I certainly believe the Meisner Approach is the best way there!

So, let’s get to it.