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SENSE MEMORY

SENSE memory, the recall of physical sensations, is often easier for the actor than the recall of his emotions. If we as actors have any occupational hazards, hypochondria is perhaps one of them. Most of us are interested in our sensations, and examine and discuss them and on occasion make more of them than may be normal for a nonactor. It's all right as long as we remember that these sensations can be usefully expressed. Some actors are so highly sensitized and suggestible that a mere conversation about a pain, a chill or an itch will convince them that they are similarly afflicted. Those actors are the exceptions. Most of us have to learn a correct technique for producing sensations so that they will be readily available to us on stage.

Since the body has an innate sense of truth, we must learn some physiological facts to help us avoid the violation of the physical truth. Sometimes, by a mere incorrect bodily adjustment we can shatter our faith in a whole sequence of our stage existence. It always irritates me when a director or teacher or fellow actor commands me to relax, or concentrate, or use my imagination when my failure in these areas

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springs from a lack of understanding of the given task. If a playwright or director specifies that I should be sound asleep and then wake up at the play's opening, and I haven't learned what is physically entailed in sleeping or waking up, I will probably lie down and fight for relaxation while, actually, my muscles tense up and my nerves tingle with anxiety. I will fight for concentration as my mind races to inconsequentials because no one has told me on what to concentrate, and my imagination fails me completely in the premise of sleeping or waking because no one has told me down what paths to send it. Even my sensory memory doesn't help unless I were to be allowed an hour or so, and then I might actually fall asleep which, in turn, would not help me to wake up on cue.

It's a relief to discover what the simple physiological process of sleeping and waking entails, and to find out how I can reproduce it in a matter of seconds; how I can execute it quickly, even after running from my dressing room after a quick costume change, jumping into the bed on stage as the curtain rises and the lights come up, and convince myself and the audience that I have been deep asleep and am now waking up. To do this, settle your body snugly into the bed, concentrating on only one area—the shoulders, or the hips, or the feet, for example. Now, close your eyes and center them straight ahead under your eyelids which is the true sleep position (not downward the way they usually are positioned when we first close our eyes). Then direct your inner attention to an abstract object not connected with the given circumstances of the play—a leaf, a cloud, a wave. Now, direct your inner attention from the abstract object to something in the given circumstances—What time is it? Have I overslept? What must I do today? etc. *Then* open your eyes, sit up and pursue your objective. Your eyes will feel heavy, your body

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slowed down as if after a deep sleep, and by reflex your entire behavior will be influenced for the ensuing activities.

If you are supposed to yawn, you must learn that the physical reason for yawning is a need for oxygen in the brain. Most of you open your mouths wide and exhale, and then jump to another action because it felt so peculiar. Instead, you should *inhale* deeply as you push your jaw down and back *until* the mouth opens, and you continue to pull the air deeply into your lungs before forcing it up into your head as you exhale. You can create a yawn at will in this way so that your eyes may even water.

You can fumble about on stage and believe it is very dark when there's actually enough light for the last row of the balcony to see you, once you understand that when you actually are in the dark your eyes are wide open and the muscles around the eyes are expanded until the eyes feel almost glazed. (I used to think this occurred because I was trying to see better in the dark. Then I realized the converse was true: eye perception was deadened even more by this muscular expansion than by the darkness, but my sense of touch and sense of sound were heightened. Concentration was focused on the feet, the fingers and the ears.) Experiment with this and you will discover that through the one correct adjustment of the eyes you can actually believe that it is dark. Your hands and feet will truly grope for a path through the furniture, and there will be no embarrassing indication of stumbling around.

Bringing about physical sensations for the character's stage life is fraught with many of the same pitfalls as the reproduction of emotional sensations. The actor's tendency is to *think* hot all over, to *think* cold, tired, headachy, sick, and then to wait anxiously for sensations while nothing happens. Or sometimes he waits and is amazed when, by accident, something does happen. If you are supposed to be hot, you

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must first ask yourself where on your body you are the hottest. Localize one area; for example, under the arms. Remember a sensation of stickiness, of perspiration trickling down, and *then* search for what you do to alleviate this sensation. Raise your arm slightly, see if you can pull your shirt or blouse sleeve away from the underarm to let in a little air. In that moment of adjustment, or attempt to overcome the heat, you will have a sensation of heat. The rest of the body will feel hot, too.

You are to be cold. Do not think cold all over. Localize one area you remember most vividly; for instance, a draft on the back of your neck. Try to recall the sensation and then immediately hunch up your shoulders and stiffen your back a little, even make yourself shiver if you like, and you will have a sensation of cold. (We often shiver on purpose, not only involuntarily, because shivering increases the circulation.) The body will respond to the point where you may end up hopping from foot to foot and rubbing your hands in an effort to get warm (although it might actually be a very warm day).

Fatigue is a condition called for in endless scenes. How often have you seen the entire action dissipated and out of focus because the actor was dragging about and generally trying to feel tired *all over*? There are so many varieties of fatigue. Ask yourself why you are tired, and where. Suppose you have been typing for hours. There is fatigue and tension in your back, across your shoulder blades. Now get up and stretch your back, put your head back and try to relax the shoulder muscles. You will feel exhausted.

Or remember your fatigue on a hot day in August when you walked for hours in thin-soled shoes, and your feet were hot and sore and more tired than the rest of your body. Try to walk gently on your heels to alleviate the soreness and burning under the balls of your feet. Your whole body will

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follow suit and be accompanied by a strong sensation of tiredness.

I am emphasizing the adjustments to overcoming the sensations because I believe that the sensation occurs most fully at the moment when we are occupied with the attempt to *overcome* it, not when we wait for it while trying only to imagine and remember it. Nor do I mean that you should jump to an outer indication of the adjustment without faith in the cause, or that you should concern yourself with a desire to *show* that you have the sensation. Sometimes you question whether the sensations and consequent adjustments you make will communicate directly enough: Will the audience know that I'm tired?, etc. If on the street you see people without knowing the circumstances of their lives, it may look to you as though the person with a headache is tired, or that the person who has a headache is hot, or that someone with a backache is chilly. However, in a play your conditions are backed up by the playwright and other actors; your headache will be referred to, the heat will be shared by others, the nausea will make you ask for a doctor, etc. The concern for *showing* the condition *must* lead to indication and falseness. It is not your responsibility to show the condition, but to *have* it so you believe it, and deal with it in terms of the play's action.

Even the old cliché of wiping the sweat off the forehead to illustrate heat can become new and valid if you stimulate the remembrance of the sweat, the prickling and trickling down from your hairline so that you *need* to wipe it off with the back of your hand.

If you require a cough, find the exact spot in your throat where you remember a tickle or scratch, and you *must* cough to relieve it. If you want a head cold, a stopped-up nose, localize the sense of swelling in the uvula (the soft lobe hanging down at the back of your soft palate) and try to swal-

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low as you contract the uvula. Suddenly, your nose will feel stuffy, and if you blow it you might even produce mucus.

For nausea, pinpoint the queasiness of the stomach, inflate your cheeks slightly, wait for saliva to gather. Breathe deeply and you'll be convinced you feel sick.

For headaches, recall a specific one in a specific spot. For example, directly over the right eye. What kind? Throbbing. What can you do to ease it? Slightly push into it? Rise above it? Pull back out of it? These are tiny adjustments, but after stimulating the imagination to the remembered feeling, they will bring it into the present for you.

For a burn, recall the thin, tight feel of the skin on your fingertip, and how it aches. Then blow on it, flip your hand back and forth to ease it, and you'll be convinced you just burned it.

Sometimes it's only the oozing blood which frightens you when you cut yourself, but remember when it hurts and what you do as you dab the wound with iodine.

Drunkenness, which crops up in countless tragic and comedic scenes, seems to be one of the most difficult to make specific, and traps even fine actors into a series of clichés. Perhaps it is because in this state, with its endless variations from slightly tipsy, to staggering, to thick speech, we have the hardest time remembering. To find it specifically entails the same steps you have used in the search for other physical sensations. First, localize the most suggestible area of your body, give in to it, and then attempt to overcome it. In my case, it is wobbly knees, a loose, weakened condition which I attempt to correct by straightening and strengthening the knees. The other sensations of dizziness, lack of eye-and-manual focus seem to follow. My tongue seems fat and swollen so that I have a wild need to overarticulate. When I am tipsy it usually manifests itself in a psychological need to

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talk too much, and an assumption that everyone is interested in anything I have to say.

Sometimes you ask, "What if I work for a headache and it stays with me?" I can only answer, "Work for an aspirin." Remember the sensation when the headache eases off, when you hold yourself very still as the tension leaves, and even the back of your neck relaxes as you realize the pain is gone.

This technique—recalling a localized sensation and finding a physical adjustment to alleviate it—is applicable to any condition you may be called upon to play. The accumulation of a lifetime of sensations should be sufficient with our newly acquired technique to serve us for any condition or combination of conditions demanded by the playwright. Even if we are to portray pregnancy or labor and haven't had a baby, or are called upon to have consumption or a heart attack, or to be stabbed to death, or any sensation which, except for having a baby, we hope we won't ever experience, we can still find them within our command if we apply these principles, coupled with a little research on the medical manifestation of the condition. Use the knowledge of substitution to bring bronchitis or pneumonia or a simple chest cold to Camille's consumption; the remembered giddiness from too much cough syrup for a feeling of drunkenness in case you have never had a drink; or the moment when you stayed under water too long and came gasping to the surface as a substitute for strangulation, etc., etc.

To all this, add the magic "If" of imagination to help tie it all up. *If I were dying! If I were in labor!*

I trust that you now have sufficient examples to help you find your way for any sensory problem which might arise for you.

Let me warn you of some common errors and misunderstandings in the use of sense memory. The sensations of heat, cold, headache, drunkenness, nausea, and illness, etc., are

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conditions of the scene; rarely is the scene about the cold or the headache. The discovery of the sensations and how they influence you is there to condition your actions truthfully in the scene, and with sensory accuracy and faith, but it is not the final aim just to be cold or have that headache on stage.

Furthermore, you are dictating the sensations—they are not dictating you. You will have the sensations to further the actions but not so that they will take over and put you out of control. In line with this, let me state that if a dangerous or unpleasant sensory condition exists for you in your real life, at the same time that your character should have it on stage, avoid it at all costs. If you are really nauseated at the time of having to be nauseated in your stage life, simply avoid the condition or the curtain may have to be rung down. If you really have a headache over your right eye, work for a headache at the back of your head, otherwise the real headache may take over and put you out of control, unable to fulfill your stage life. If you are to be drunk, don't get drunk to be real or the play will turn into something other than the author intended.

In summation, let me state the opinion that a correctly functioning actor should, ideally, be the healthiest, least neurotic creature on earth, since he is putting his emotional and sensory life to use by expressing it for an artistic purpose. If he is employed in the theater, he has an opportunity of making use of his anxieties, hostilities, pent up tenderness through an artistic expression. I think that perhaps the people who call us neurotic or vain or exhibitionistic are unaware how many talented actors are that way only because they are without work opportunities, and therefore release their need for expression in alcohol or unreasonable behavior—or perhaps these people are jealous that when we do function we can do what they only dream of doing.