



Acting

The First Six Lessons

Richard Boleslavsky

**Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details**

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THE FIRST SIX
LESSONS

RICHARD BOLESLAVSKY

A THEATRE ARTS BOOK

ROUTLEDGE

NEW YORK AND LONDON

A Theatre Arts Book
Published by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001
www.routledge-ny.com

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE
www.routledge.co.uk

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis
Group.

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis
e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of
Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of
thousands of eBooks please go to
www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

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publishers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication
Data

Boleslavsky, Richard, 1889–1937.
Acting : the first six lessons/Richard
Boleslavsky.

p. cm.—(A Theatre Arts book)
ISBN 0-87830-000-7 (alk. paper)
1. Acting. I. Title. II. Series.
PN2061 .B55 2003
792'.028—dc21
2002153023

ISBN 0-203-49288-9 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-59119-4 (Adobe eReader Format)

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INTRODUCTION

The *Way of the Lancer* brought immediate literary acclaim to Richard Boleslavski, spelled with an “i” after the manner of his Polish ancestors. The book was variously called a work of genius, the best human document of the events preceding the Russian Revolution, a masterly narrative biography, a new writing of history. But no matter what else critics said of it, they almost invariably added that it was intensely dramatic, obviously the work of a mind trained in the theatre. As rightly they might say, for the uniform of an officer of the Polish Lancers and the change from “y” to “i” was no disguise for Richard Boleslavsky, an actor of the Moscow Art Theatre, Director of the Moscow Art Theatre Studio and, in America, Director of the Laboratory Theatre, of many successful plays on Broadway, of films in Hollywood.

What many of the critics seemed to miss, however, in this splendid book and its sequel, *Lances Down*, was the fact that

Boleslavsky's style and point of view, dramatic as it undoubtedly was, had little to do with the art of the writer of plays. *Way of the Lancer* was not the product of a dramatist's mind, turned narrator, but of an actor's mind. One is almost the converse of the other. The actor is usually word-shy and inarticulate. Often he does not know what it is he does or how he does it, that makes him an actor. Even when he knows, it is difficult for him to say it or write it. He can only express it in action. His language is a language of movement, of gesture, of voice, of the creation and projection of character by things done or left undone. The dramatist, on the other hand, works easily with words, writes fluently, interprets character, situation, and events, manner and method in his own terms. So far as the art and the craft of acting have been written of at all, it is usually the dramatist or the critic who has written of them. That is why there is so little in print really to explain the actor to himself and to his fellows.

Talma, Fanny Kemble, Coquelin and, among the moderns, Louis Calvert and Stanislavsky stand out as actors who have tried to interpret acting. But Stanislavsky's fine contribution is welded into the text of his autobiography, *My Life in Art*, and all the rest are, generally speaking, an effort to create a philosophy of acting rather than to analyze the elements of the art of acting or to establish a technique for the player.

Must an actor have experienced an emotion to portray it; will he portray it better if he actually renews the feeling every time he assumes it; shall acting be far removed from life, or as close to it as possible? Such are the problems these actor-philosophers set themselves to solve. And with the illustrations drawn from high experience, their writings have greatly illumined the field. They have clarified the fundamental laws of the art for many artists. But they do not help an actor to learn the elements of his craft.

So that, in a way, these essays of Boleslavsky's, these *First Lessons in Acting*, in dialogue form, stand alone in their field. Gayly as they are told, there is not a word in any of them that is not seriously to the point, that is not calculated, out of long years of work and study as an actor and as a director in the professional and in the art theatre, to help a young actor on his way. They actually select his tools for him and show him how to use them. And that is a grateful task. For while an actor's tools are all within his own body and mind and spirit, they are by their very nearness harder to isolate and put to special use than tools of wood and iron. Concentration and observation, experience and memory, movement and poise, creation and projection—an actor must make them all the servants of his talent.

In an article he wrote some years ago on the *Fundamentals of Acting*, Boleslavsky himself defined the field he covers here. "The actor's art," he said, "cannot be taught. He must be born with ability; but the technique, through which his talent can find expression—that can and must be taught. An appreciation of this fact is of the utmost importance, not only to students of acting but to every actor who is interested in the perfection of his art. For, after all, technique is something which is perfectly realistic and quite possible to make one's own."

The basis of this technique, the mere development of the actor's physical resources, although he recognizes and stresses its importance, is not what Boleslavsky calls "technique." The training of the body he likens rather to the tuning up of an instrument. "Even the most perfectly tuned violin," he goes on to say, "will not play by itself, without the musician to make it sing. The equipment of the ideal actor...is not complete unless he has...the technique of an 'emotion maker' or creator; unless he can follow the advice of Joseph Jefferson to 'Keep your heart warm and your head cool'. Can it be done? Most certainly! It is merely necessary to think of life as an unbroken sequence of two different kinds of steps.... Problem steps and Action steps.... The first step is for the actor to understand what the problem is that confronts him. Then

the spark of the will pushes him toward dynamic action.... When an actor realizes that the solution of a certain part may consist merely in being able first, to stand on the stage for perhaps no more than one-five-hundredth of a second, cool-headed and firm of purpose, aware of the problem before him; and then in the next one-five-hundredth of a second or, it may be, five or ten seconds, to precipitate himself intensely into the action which the situation requires, he will have achieved the perfect technique of acting."

First to know rightly what to do, and then to do it rightly. That is all. It seems little enough. But it is not by chance that Boleslavsky puts the visits of *The Creature*, who is the subject of these lessons, months, sometimes years, apart. He is thinking practically, not wishfully. He knows the length of the road she will need to travel between lessons. He knows that in acting more than in any other art a little less than good is worlds away from good. An actor cannot be made between luncheon and dinner. He accepts the fact that the profession may take a lifetime of work and that it is a profession well worth the work of a lifetime.

EDITH J.R.ISAACS

THE FIRST LESSON

CONCENTRATION

Morning. My room. A knock at the door.

I: Come in. *(The door opens, slowly and timidly. Enter a Pretty Creature of eighteen. She looks at me with wide-open, frightened eyes and crushes her handbag violently.)*

THE CREATURE: I... I... I hear that you teach dramatic art.

I: No! I am sorry. Art cannot be taught. To possess an art means to possess talent. That is something one has or has not. You can develop it by hard work, but to create a talent is impossible. What I do is to help those who have decided to work on the stage, to develop and to educate themselves for honest and conscientious work in the theatre.

THE CREATURE: Yes, of course. Please help me. I simply love the theatre.

I: Loving the theatre is not enough. Who does not love it? To consecrate oneself to the theatre, to devote one's entire life to it, give it all one's thought, all one's

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emotions! For the sake of the theatre to give up everything, to suffer everything! And more important than all, to be ready to give the theatre everything—your entire being—expecting the theatre to give you nothing in return, not the least grain of what seemed to you so beautiful in it and so alluring.

THE CREATURE: I know. I played a great deal at school. I understand that the theatre brings suffering. I am not afraid of it. I am ready for anything if I can only play, play, play.

I: And suppose the theatre does not want you to play and play and play?

THE CREATURE: Why shouldn't it?

I: Because it might not find you talented.

THE CREATURE: But when I played at school...

I: What did you play?

THE CREATURE: *King Lear*.

I: What part did you play in this trifle?

THE CREATURE: King Lear himself. And all my friends and our professor of literature and even Aunt Mary told me I played wonderfully and that I certainly had talent.

I: Pardon me, I don't mean to criticize the nice people whom you name, but are you sure that they are connoisseurs of talent?

THE CREATURE: Our professor is very strict. He himself worked with me on *King Lear*. He is a great authority.

I: I see, I see. And Aunt Mary?

THE CREATURE: She met Mr. Belasco personally.

I: So far, so good. But can you tell me how your professor, when working on King Lear, wanted you to play these lines, for instance: “Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!”

THE CREATURE: Do you want me to play it for you?

I: No. Just tell me how you learned to read those lines. What were you trying to attain?

THE CREATURE: I had to stand this way, my feet well together, incline my body forward a little, lift my head like this, stretch out my arms to heaven and shake my fists. Then I had to take a deep breath and burst into sarcastic laughter—ha! ha! ha! *(She laughs, a charming, childish laugh. Only at happy eighteen can one laugh that way.)* Then, as though cursing heaven, as loud as possible pronounce the words: “Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!”

I: Thank you, that is quite enough for a clear understanding of the part of King Lear, as well as for a definition of your talent. May I ask you one more thing? Will you, if you please, say this sentence, first cursing the heavens and then without cursing them. Just keep the sense of the phrase—only its thought. *(She doesn't think long, she is accustomed to curse heaven.)*

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THE CREATURE: When you curse the heavens, you say it this way: “Blooow wiiiiinds, and Craaaaack your cheeks, Raaaaage Blooow.” (*The Creature tries very hard to curse the heavens but through the window I see the azure heavens laughing at the curse. I do the same.*) And without cursing them, I must do it some other way. Well...I don't know how...Isn't it funny? Well, this way: (*The Creature becomes confused and, with a charming smile, swallowing the words, hurriedly pronounces them all on one note.*)

“Blowwindsandcrackyourcheeksrageblo w.” (*She becomes completely confused and tries to destroy her handbag. A pause.*)

I: How strange! You are so young; you do not hesitate a second before cursing heaven. Yet you are unable to speak these words simply and plainly, to show their inner meaning. You want to play a Chopin Nocturne without knowing where the notes are. You grimace, you mutilate the words of the poet and eternal emotion, and at the same time you do not possess the most elemental quality of a literate man—an ability to transmit the thoughts, feelings, and words of another logically. What right have you to say that you have worked in the theatre? You have destroyed the very conception of the word Theatre. (*A pause; the Creature looks at me with the eyes of one*

innocently condemned to death. The little hand-bag lies on the floor.)

THE CREATURE: So I must never play?

I: And if I say *Never?* *(Pause. The eyes of the Creature change their expression. She looks straight into my soul with a sharp scrutinizing look, and seeing that I am not joking, clenches her teeth, and tries in vain to hide what is happening in her soul. But 'it is no use. One enormous real tear rolls out of her eye, and the Creature at that moment becomes dear to me. It spoils my intentions completely. She controls herself, clenches her teeth, and says in a low voice—)*

THE CREATURE: But I am going to play. I have nothing else in my life. *(At eighteen they always talk that way. But just the same I am deeply touched.)*

I: All right then. I must tell you that this very moment you did more for the theatre, or rather for yourself in the theatre, than you did in playing all your parts. You suffered just now; you felt deeply. Those are two things without which you cannot do in any art and especially in the art of the theatre. Only by paying this price can you attain the happiness of creation, the happiness of the birth of a new artistic value. To prove that, let us work together right now. Let us try to create a small, but real, artistic value according to your strength. It will be the first step in your development as an actress. *(The enormous, beautiful tear*

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is forgotten. It disappeared somewhere into space. A charming, happy smile appears instead. I never thought my creaking voice could produce such a change.)

Listen and answer sincerely. Have you ever seen a man, a specialist, busy on some creative problem in the course of his work? A pilot on an ocean liner, for instance, responsible for thousands of lives, or a biologist working at his microscope, or an architect working out the plan of a complicated bridge, or a great actor seen from the wings during his interpretation of a fine part?

THE CREATURE: I saw John Barrymore from the wings when he was playing *Hamlet*.

I: What impressed you chiefly as you watched him?

THE CREATURE: He was *marvelous!!!*

I: I know that, but what else?

THE CREATURE: He paid no attention to me.

I: That is more important; not only not to you but to nothing around him. He was acting in his work as the pilot would, the scientist, or the architect—he was concentrating. Remember this word *Concentrate*. It is important in every art and especially in the art of the theatre. Concentration is the quality which

permits us to direct all our spiritual and intellectual forces toward one definite object and to continue as long as it pleases us to do so—sometimes for a time much longer than our physical strength can endure. I knew a fisherman once who, during a storm, did not leave his rudder for forty-eight hours, concentrating to the last minute on his work of steering his schooner. Only when he had brought the schooner back safely into the harbor did he allow his body to faint. This strength, this certainty of power over yourself, is the fundamental quality of every creative artist. You must find it within yourself, and develop it to the last degree.

THE CREATURE: But how?

I: I will tell you. Don't hurry. The most important thing is that in the art of the theatre a special kind of concentration is needed. The pilot has a compass, the scientist has his microscope, the architect his drawings—all external, visible objects of concentration and creation. They have, so to speak, a *material* aim, to which all their force is directed. So has a sculptor, a painter, a musician, an author. But it is quite different with the actor. Tell me, what do you think is the object of his concentration?

THE CREATURE: His part.

I: Yes, until he learns it. But it is only after studying and rehearsing that the actor

starts to create. Or rather let us say that at first he creates “searchingly” and on the opening night he begins to create “constructively” in his acting. And what is acting?

THE CREATURE: Acting? Acting is when he...acts acts...I don't know.

I: You want to consecrate all your life to a task without knowing what it is? Acting is *the life of the human soul receiving 'its birth through art*. In a creative theatre the object for an actor's concentration is the *human soul*. In the first period of his work—the searching—the object for concentration is his own soul and those of the men and women who surround him. In the second period—the constructive one—only his own soul. Which means that, to act, you must know how to concentrate on something materially imperceptible,—on something which you can perceive only by penetrating deeply into your own entity, recognizing what would be evidenced in life only in a moment of the greatest emotion and most violent struggle. In other words, you need a spiritual concentration on emotions which do not exist, but are invented or imagined.

THE CREATURE: But how can one develop in one-self something which does not exist. How can one start?

I: From the very beginning. Not from a Chopin Nocturne but from the simplest scales. Such scales are your five senses:

sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. They will be the key of your creation like a scale for a Chopin Nocturne. Learn how to govern this scale, how with your entire being to concentrate on your senses, to make them work artificially, to give them different problems and create the solutions.

THE CREATURE: I hope you don't mean to say that I don't even know how to listen or how to feel.

I: In life you may know. Nature has taught you a little. *(She becomes very daring and speaks as though challenging the whole world.)*

THE CREATURE: No, on the stage, too.

I: Is that so? Let us see. Please, just as you are sitting now, listen to the scratching of an imaginary mouse in that corner.

THE CREATURE: Where is the audience?

I: That doesn't concern you in the least. Your audience is in no hurry as yet to buy tickets for your performance. Forget about it. Do the problem I give you. Listen to the scratching of a mouse in that corner.

THE CREATURE: All right. *(There follows a helpless gesture with the right and then the left ear which has nothing in common with listening to the delicate scratching of a mouse's paw in the silence.)*

I: All right. Now please listen to a symphony orchestra playing the march from *Aida*. You know the march?

THE CREATURE: Of course.