

2

IDENTITY

IF WE ARE NOW in agreement and have taken sides with the actor who presents rather than *represents*; if we understand the necessity for developing an organic inner technique as well as our outer instrument; if we are convinced that a deep sense of ethics, a development of our best character elements is essential for us to become fine artists who can serve and enlighten an audience about the human experience, then the question can be asked: "Where do we begin?"

First, you must learn to know who *you* are. You must find your own sense of identity, enlarge this sense of self, and learn to see how that knowledge can be put to use in the characters you will portray on stage. I assume that most of you are, at this point, *theoretically* on my side, even though, through your previous training and experience as both actor and audience, you are still caught up in the mistaken notion that you are a human being in the wings and an "actor" on stage. You have a tendency to copy what you have seen others do on a stage, rather than to search within your own life experience to bring forth a new human being on stage.

Let us assume you are cast as Horatio in *Hamlet*. At the

Identity

mere mention of the part, each of you already has a ready-made image based on other Horatios you have seen. I doubt that it is a Horatio who has ever eaten, slept, washed, or gone to the bathroom. This doesn't mean that your Horatio will necessarily do any of these things during the course of the play—but he should be considered as a human being, not as a rubber-stamp copy of another actor.

Think of all the classical plays that have been almost buried for contemporary audiences by bad traditional acting. Why should every lady-in-waiting move like a ballet dancer? Why should every spear-carrier stand as rigid as cardboard? Why should the king and queen intone like bad opera singers without music? Where are the real human beings in these plays? They are lost behind ready-made, false forms.

But if we accept that the reality of these characters is not arrived at through the memory of other performances or through cliché generalities—royalty is imperious, courtiers are graceful, jesters are comic, spear-carriers are erect—we must also accept the converse, that realities often relied on by the supposedly "modern" actor, such as Brooklyn speech, head scratching, belching, and blue-jean postures, will not bring about a Horatio who is a close friend to a prince of Denmark, who attended the University of Wittenberg centuries ago, who is accustomed to life at court, etc. Since we cannot find reality in either of these directions, we must admit that we have not learned enough about human beings, or about *ourselves* as human beings to bring about a genuine life for these characters.

We also seem to find cliché forms for contemporary characters. We shuffle and mumble and imitate the "naturalistic" actors of today who have made a success. We look for the ordinary rather than the extraordinary in our daily lives, and so the explorations of ourselves become smaller and of less importance as we go along. We pigeonhole and charac-

terize our behavior until our very self-image becomes as much a cliché or stereotype as does our preconception of the characters we want to play.

Our sense of reality is limited. We look at our daily lives for convenient, recognizable behaviorisms to transfer to the stage. Yet, every day some incident occurs that causes us to say: "Wow! If you saw that on a stage you wouldn't believe it." Or you, yourself, will do something unusual, and also remark, "If I did that on stage, no one would believe it." And so we water down the truth to make our stage life "natural"—whatever that's supposed to mean—even as we admit that two truck drivers, cutting in on each other and leaping to the street to have it out, are often more dramatic than Macduff besting Macbeth.

My own self-image in a given situation, who I think I am, is not always what I really am, consequently the inner image of myself in that situation may differ from the outer image I present. I think I'm a child of nature, open, frank, impulsive, generous, compassionate, bursting with humor, tender, brilliant, and noble. This inner image is accompanied by an image of how I think I look. I see myself striding through the countryside, shiny, with flying hair, wide-eyed, and expectant. Yet, if I walk down the street and inadvertently catch a glimpse of myself reflected in a store window I am appalled at what I actually see.

Obviously, if the inner and outer images we have of ourselves are each as one-sided as these, we will believe that we cannot find the necessary components of another character in ourselves. We will be convinced that we can only play characters, who don't fit these images, by *illustrating* them. The more an actor develops a full sense of his own identity, the more his scope and capacity for identification with other characters than his own will be made possible.

If I compare myself to a large, meaty, round apple, I

discover that my inner and outer cliché image of myself is only a wedge of it—possibly the wedge with the rosy cheek on the skin. But I have to become aware of myself as the total apple—the firm inner flesh as well as the brown rotten spot, the stem, the seeds, the core. All of the apple is *me*. The more I discover, the more I realize that I have endless sources within myself to put to use in the illumination of endless characters in dramatic literature; that I am compounded of endless human beings depending on the events moving in on me, my surrounding circumstances, relationships with a variety of people, what I want and what's in my way at a given moment: all within the context of my unique identity.

You spontaneously play a variety of different roles in life. Imagine yourself attending a cocktail party given for producers, agents, directors, all in a position to employ you. How you feel, how you dress, how you behave will be a you that is different from the you who goes to a party of friends and colleagues in a loft where you sit guzzling wine and beer, and munching on pretzels. Or the you who attends a children's birthday party, or a party given by your parents for their friends. In each situation your very idiom changes, your self-image changes.

Assume you are at your desk writing a letter. The doorbell rings. Your self-image will change depending on whom you expect to be there. A fellow actor (which particular one?), an old friend from your home town, the superintendent, the laundryman, a parent, your agent—for each person you will present a different you.

Previous circumstances and existing circumstances will bring about a different you: whether you had a good night or a bad night, whether it is hot or cold, whether you are in a tidy or a messy state. Even something as elementary as the clothes you wear can make you feel (and then behave) old or young, a slob or elegant, awkward or in command, snobbish

THE ACTOR

or humble. A confrontation with the same person, depending on your immediate desire, can make you stubborn or giving, vicious or kind, courageous or cowardly. We must learn to understand and accept the facets of ourselves which we don't wish to recognize—shyness, selfishness, greed, envy, panic, lack of control, stupidity, etc.—and, in admitting to them, enlarge our capacity for identification. Above all, we must become self-observant enough not only to recognize our needs and define our feelings, but to connect them to the behavior which ensues.

If we get into a violent argument with a bus driver, we know how we *felt*, but we rarely know how we behaved. In an encounter with a lover, we can describe our feeling of tenderness and such obvious behavior as an embrace, but the small actions that surrounded it are forgotten.

If I am to play a silly, fluffy creature, and I think I am not such a person, I cannot use myself. I mistakenly believe I can only *indicate* what *she* would do. Yet if I watch myself greeting my dogs with gushes of baby talk and little giggles, *I* am silly. If I talk to a scientist, even to an electrician, *I* am stupid, though my cliché image tells me I am brilliant. If a drunken, bigoted doorman gives me a hard time, I appear snobbish and I pull rank, though my self-image tells me I am a humanist, a liberal at all times. I think I am fearless, yet you should see me with a mouse.

The continuing job of learning to find out who you *really* are, of learning to pinpoint your responses—and even more important, the myriad, consequent behaviorisms which result—will help you begin to fill your warehouse with sources upon which to draw for the construction of a character (the new *you* selected for your character on stage). The Object Exercises, from chapters 11 through 20 are designed, among other things, to help you develop this self-awareness.

Many doubts continue to arise in both the young and

Identity

older professional, as well as in the learning actor for whom the concept of using himself primarily as the source for the stage character is relatively new. A prominent film actress, whom I was once helping with a role, was thrown by the fact that her part was just an ordinary American woman like herself—same age, background, schooling, emotional problems, etc. She felt she had nothing “to act.” Her previous orientation to acting consisted of finding a mask to hide behind. She believed that the outer dressing of the part—age difference, historic difference, national difference—contained the real essence of acting. For her, acting was only a craft when it was miles away from her, and when it was used to illustrate something totally different from herself. She knew so little of herself and her own behavior that she was unable to make any use of her *self*, to strip to her soul. She had only one wish: to put on a mask, to disguise herself.

To seem to want or need a mask behind which to bury one's self often comes, not only from an incorrect concept, but from a distrust in ourselves. We harbor the suspicion that we ourselves are boring, and that only the character in the play is sufficiently interesting to hold an audience.

I like to make the example of observing a live animal on stage. Even though the actors are in the midst of strong dramatic action, the audience will be riveted on a cat, sitting quietly in a chair, following a bit of blowing lint with its eyes. Now, a cat cannot be as fascinating as a human being! But the cat's sensory apparatus is more powerful than a human's, and it is more single-minded in its purpose, with no mental distractions to blur its instincts. The cat really exists with strong, spontaneous, forward-moving attention, and so it can surpass the actor, who is predictably busy with his stage life.

I refuse to let a cat win! I know I am more interesting, but I can learn from the cat to develop my sensory apparatus,

THE ACTOR

and that I should aim for the same unanticipated involvement of the moment—will I or won't I pounce? It sounds simple, but the *art* is that I can aim for that cat's spontaneity and execute it by design. What is boring is *not* the real you in action, but the *mechanical* execution of a task—whether it be overdimensional or tiny.

"If I must use myself, won't I be the same in every part I play?" The question calls to mind the "personality" actor who is *really* the same in every part he plays. Examples of this type clog the stage, screen and television. Because they are always the same does not mean that they are truly using themselves. They are simply playing the identical few notes in themselves over and over again without a real search or selection from themselves. Often, after an initial success, these "personality" actors simply copy from themselves, imitating moments and effects which have worked for them before. They rely on a quality which they feel has worked with an audience, and end up playing "the manner of" themselves in as tiresome a way as another actor playing "the quality of" the character.

One of the greatest compliments I ever received was from someone who had seen me in about ten plays, in parts as different as Saint Joan, Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and Natalya in Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*. He wanted to meet me because he couldn't figure out what I was really like. He thought I was so different in every part. And yet, while playing, after having discovered myself in the part, I always felt that it was *me* on stage in the given circumstances, not *she*.

In an interview, Ingrid Bergman once stated that when she played *The Visit* she was faced with a vengeful character whom she understood, but that vengeance was not a part of her own personality. That might be true and accurate in her private life where she has learned to control it. But it's also

Identity

true that any child has experienced a sense of vengeance, even expressed it against a parent or another toddler. That your need for vengeance may not have the consequent actions of the lady in *The Visit* is not important, but that you are aware that you have experienced the need for it *is*.

Someone working on Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* will state flatly, "But I've never been shy." I have only to suggest a time when she may have been to a high school dance with a big pimple on her chin, and the memory will turn the unshy actress into a blushing wallflower.

Your own identity and self-knowledge are the main sources for any character you may play. Most human emotions have been experienced by each of us by the time we are eighteen, just as they have been by all human beings throughout the ages. That you gain control and understanding of them as you get older, that they may ease or intensify is self-evident. We do not have to get psychoanalytical or delve into Freud, Jung, Reich or Adler to learn to understand ourselves and others to be healthy artists. We have to be truly curious about ourselves and others!

Other questions which arise on the subject of our own limited sense of self and self-expression come from our social backgrounds, particularly middle-class America. In sections of the country we are shaped by a society which is ashamed of spontaneous emotion: "Don't cry," "Don't laugh so loud," "Don't hug me in public," "Don't scream," etc. So, obviously, when we want a genuine emotional release on stage we have a harder time uncovering it than someone who comes from a so-called "lower" class where spontaneous emotion is allowed a free reign.

The sense of identification with history is almost nil in America because history and heritage are so little respected. The Mark Twain house in New York City is pulled down and replaced by a steakhouse because our opulent society

THE ACTOR

can't seem to raise the \$20,000 needed to maintain it as a museum. Something similar occurs in the nation every week. This lack of respect for the past and seeming worship for innovation is a detriment to the actor. Our imagination is not stimulated by our past. (Not even by nature or the very earth we walk on.)

But if we visit England, or any other European country for that matter, we start to identify with another century on the very cobblestones. It's hard to visit the Tower of London without becoming acutely aware that those strange lives in history books lived and breathed—still seem to—in every cell, corner, and courtyard. The actor's imagination is stimulated into identification with country and period.

Historic distances fade, seemingly fictional facts become a reality if one is as lucky as I was at the age of nine to spend a summer in a medieval castle on the Rhine. The fantasies I experienced amidst towers and turrets, a real moat and a drawbridge, dungeons, ramparts—the works—allowed me to believe that I had lived for a short while in the Middle Ages.

If you can't go abroad, or even visit places like Independence Hall in Philadelphia, or Salem, Massachusetts, or other historic spots to find a variety of historical experiences, you can still read biographies and histories. Read them until you *know* you've lived in those rooms with those people, eaten that particular food, slept in that strange bed behind those curtains; danced, jostled and tilted with the best of them. (Read *Walden* and you'll understand pollution.)

Customs, architecture, fashion, social needs, politics—all change, all come and go, but throughout history people have breathed, slept, eaten, loved, hated and had similar feelings, emotions, needs. Anything which allows for a realization of this by the actor is vital. It must be grasped fully so that if, on stage, you live now or at any other time in history, you will

Identity

be able to put yourself there rather than be reduced to an illustration of doing what "they" did then.

Lately, through biographies, I went to the block with Marie Antoinette in *The Fatal Friendship*. I was married to Kaiser Franz Joseph in *The Lonely Empress*. I prepared myself for the block, dressing all in red so the blood wouldn't show, as Mary, Queen of Scots, and I had all of Queen Victoria's endless children. (I also built myself a cabin in Concord!)

Keep pace with the present. Take a trip to the moon. Envision the future.

When you look at paintings, put yourself *into* them instead of looking *at* them.

The normal procedure of identifying with observed events which we went through as children should not ever stop for the adult actor. When, as children, we visit sick persons and put ourselves into their bed, fantasize their agonies, are brave and enjoy their flowers, we are simply extending our own experiences imaginatively. If we peek into a tenement window and see a drunken father abusing wife and children, we *put* ourselves there to take abuse with courage. As an adult, don't con yourself out of these fantasies. Anything which strengthens your faith that it happened to you is of use.

We must overcome the notion that we must be *regular*. ("Be like one of us." "Don't put on airs." "Don't get so fancy.") It robs you of the chance to be extraordinary and leads you to the mediocre. This insistence on conformity, on being like everyone else, often prevents us, for instance, from potentially training something as practical as our speech. Our friends and relatives castigate us as our speech improves and we try to lose dialects and regional speech hang-ups. ("What's the matter with you? You talk so stagey.") When our need to express ourselves verbally, to *truly* communicate,

THE ACTOR

goes *beyond* "Cool, man!," "Wow," "Out of sight!," "It's heavy" or whatever the current slang, we are accused of artificiality. But if we listen to our friends and relatives, and stay "regular," when we approach plays of language—Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Fry, Shaw—we find an unfamiliarity with the verse, and the idiom makes us feel "affected." We must learn to balk at this social dictum in order to enlarge our imagination and our use of self. (Remember that vowels and consonants spat out represent our wishes.)

There is a decided difference between the self-awareness that is vital to the theater artist and the self-consciousness that is ordinarily applied to the awkward or affected person. To become aware of usually subconscious and intuitive, spontaneous behavior in order to make use of it for creating a character in a play *will not* make you self-consciously affected or unreal. Nor will it, as I have been asked, block intuitive or spontaneous behavior in our daily experiences. I am not a scientist, a psychologist or a behaviorist, but I *know* this is true.

If you are affected in your daily life, calculatingly self-aware in your relations with others, you will undoubtedly be a bad actor, because your attention is narcissistic. If you have acquired these affectations in your teens and have not shaken them by the time you are twenty, you are in trouble. After all, if you possess borrowed behavior in life and focus on *it* rather than on others, how can you be really active on stage?

When I speak of copying or imitating what you have already seen, there is a point in the life of any young artist in any art form when someone he comes in contact with, whom he idolizes, influences him so strongly that the need to emulate is almost a reflex, almost a subconscious procedure. This is true of the most gifted artist, and I suppose one way in which the finger of genius touches the next generation. This passing on down of our gifts, which we have been given by

Identity

those before us, is not to be belittled or minimized. We must pray that we are influenced by the best. But try to inherit the inner work and not the outer shape (the concept, not the form). We must pray that our intuitive taste and judgment will allow us to copy—however, only temporarily—a master rather than just a momentary box-office success. Mozart was influenced by Haydn, but Mozart went on to become Mozart, and I recognize him no matter what new musical invention he has made. Beethoven was influenced by Haydn and Mozart, but found his own expression, so I recognize him in quartet, mass, or symphony. Can't we aim for that as actors? Even as *re-creators*? In finding and strengthening our own identity, can't we develop our capacity for identification to the point where we will be able to put it to service by revealing the human being in dramatic literature?