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SUBSTITUTION

THE EXPRESSION "to lose yourself" in the part or in the performance, which has so often been used by great artists in the theater, has always confused me. I find it much more stimulating to say that I want "to find myself" in the part. To oversimplify, these artists obviously meant that one should reject the desire to show off, that one should not wallow in one's own ego, that one should not trade on personal tricks. Instead, one should become involved with the performance without concern for its outer form, pyrotechnics or personal sale.

Once we are on the track of self-discovery in terms of an enlargement of our sense of identity, and we now try to apply this knowledge to an identification with the character in the play, we must make this transference, this finding of the character within ourselves, through a continuing and overlapping series of substitutions from our own experiences and remembrances, through the use of imaginative extension of realities, and put them in the place of the fiction in the play.

Webster defines substitution as "the act of putting a person or thing in place of another serving the same purpose;

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to take the place of." A young actress working on the part of Manuela in *Children in Uniform* was having difficulty with the moment when Fraülein von Bernberg, the teacher she loves and admires, confronts her with her torn chemise and says, "This will never do!" Manuela must react with deep shame and humiliation. The actress could not make this moment meaningful. Neither the garment nor the actress playing the teacher seemed to matter enough to her. Accidentally, I supplied her with a stimulating substitution for both teacher and chemise. I said, "What if Lynn Fontanne had a pair of your soiled panties in her hand and showed them to you?" The actress turned beet red, snatched the chemise from her Fraülein von Bernberg and hid it frantically behind her back.

Many of you are familiar with substitution as it applies technically to an individual moment in a play when the given material fails to stimulate you sufficiently, and you must search for something which will trigger an emotional experience (as in the Manuela incident) and send you into the immediate action of the play. I use the word *substitution* in a much broader sense. In fact, I could even prove that substitution can be used in every moment of the actor's homework and throughout the rehearsal period for every stage of the work. Consequently, it can have its effect on every moment of the actor's life on stage. I use substitution in order to "make believe" in its literal sense—to make *me* believe the time, the place, what surrounds me, the conditioning forces, my new character and my relationship to the other characters, in order to send me into the moment-to-moment spontaneous action of my newly selected self on stage.

In putting himself into the circumstances of the play, a talented amateur (as well as a genius actor) often makes substitutions intuitively. If you ask me if it is necessary to make a substitution for something that is already real to you,

my answer is NO. If it is real, you have already made the substitution. You tell me you believed it was raining when you looked from your stage window into the wings. Obviously, you took a specific rain (there are numerous types of rain: drizzle, splashy, gentle, torrential, pelting, etc.) that you have experienced in your life and put it into the play at this moment.

An actress told me that Blanche DuBois' young husband was very real to her when she described his death in *Streetcar*, and challenged the necessity of making a substitution for him. It was apparent that she had instinctively made one, otherwise he would have stayed a fiction on the page for her.

At eighteen, when I played Nina in *The Sea Gull* with the Lunts, many elements of the part existed for me in life. Nina is a young, unsophisticated, middle-class girl from the country who is thrown in with a famous actress of whom she is in awe and a famous man (a writer in the play) whom she hero-worships. That *was* my relationship to the Lunts, so I was able to use them head-on.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Martha is the daughter of a professor whom she adores; she lives in a college town; and as the play opens, she and her husband are returning from a faculty party. I *am* the daughter of a famous professor whom I adored; I *was* raised in a university town; I *did* attend many faculty parties. Consequently, those things were real to me and directly usable for that particular aspect of my work on the part. However, these moments where an actor's life and the playwright's created life mesh are rare, and so the process of substitution must be thoroughly understood, developed, and practiced until it becomes an ingrained work habit.

Every stage of the search for the part needs endless substitutions from life experience (this includes reading, trips to museums, art galleries, etc.). Even *bad* films can be of service

if the locale has authenticity for you to the point where you can believe you were there. No director can help you with your substitutions since he has not been a part of your life experience. He will help you with the character elements he is after, dictate the place, the surroundings, the given circumstances, and define your relationship to the other characters in the play, but how you make these things real to yourself and how you make them exist is totally private work.

Let me illustrate some of the substitution areas and approximately how you must deal with them (even though you will be dealing with similar problems throughout this book). Suppose I am going to work on the part of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I have to hunt for an understanding of—and an identification with—the character's main needs: a need for perfection (and always *when* and *how* have I needed these things); a romantic need for beauty; a desire for gentleness, tenderness, delicacy, elegance, decorum; a need to be loved and protected; a strong sensual need; a need for delusion when things go wrong, etc.

If I return to my cliché image of myself—the earthy, frank, gutsy child of nature—I'm in trouble and there will be an enormous distance between Blanche and myself. If, on the other hand, I remember myself preparing for an evening at the opera (bathing and oiling and perfuming my body, soothing my skin, brushing my hair until it shines, artfully applying makeup until the little creases are hidden and my eyes look larger and I feel younger, spending hours over my silky elegant wardrobe, and a day over the meal I will serve before the opera, setting out my freshest linen, my best crystal and polished silver among dainty flowers); if I recall how I weep over a lovely poem by Rilke or Donne or Browning, how my flesh tingles when I hear Schubert chamber music, how tender I feel at a soft twilight, how I respond to someone pulling out a chair for me at the table or opening

car door for me or offering me their arm for a walk in the park—*then* I am beginning to find within myself realities connected with Blanche DuBois' needs.

I was not raised on an elegant plantation like Belle Reve, nor have I lived in Laurel, Mississippi, *but* I have visited elegant mansions in the East, I have seen many photographs of Faulkner country and estates, I have toured some of the South, and from a conglomerate of these experiences I can now make *my* Belle Reve and start to build a reality for my life there before the play's beginning.

Unfortunately, I have never been in New Orleans or the French Quarter, but I have read a great deal, seen many films and newsreels. I have even related the French Quarter of New Orleans, in a way, to a little section of the Left Bank in Paris where I once lived to make it real to myself.

The Kowalski apartment itself, which is dictated for me by the playwright, the designer and the director, must, nevertheless, be made real to me by substitutions from my own life. It is *I* who must make the sense of cramped space, the lack of privacy, the disorder and sleaziness, the empty beer cans and stale cigarette butts, the harsh street noises all move in on me chaotically and frighteningly. Each object or thing that I see or come in contact with must be made particular so that it will serve the new me and bring about the psychological and sensory experiences necessary to animate my actions.

To find a reality for the fatigue, the heat, the oppression, I will have to examine my own life and senses. In *my* relationship to Stella, Stanley, Mitch, their friends and neighbors (as well as to my young husband, my parents and relatives, and the traveling salesman, all of whom *I* talk about but who do not appear in the play), I will have to do a backbreaking job if I am to bring them to a full reality for myself through substitutions and combinations of substitutions.

I never had a sister, nor did I have a relationship with

another girl which was psychologically identical to Blanche's with Stella. I may put together my relationship to a girl who "felt" like a younger sister (of whom I expected respect and attention, whom I enjoyed bossing and giving advice to, and whom I loved) with a relationship to a friend upon whom I felt dependent for love and comfort. I may even use a dozen elements from a dozen different relationships from my past and put them together to build this new relationship with my stage Stella, endowing her at different moments in the play with these borrowed qualities. I must follow an identical procedure with each of the other characters in the play.

Let me emphasize that this process is in flux from the beginning of my homework until the rehearsals have ended. The example of Blanche was given to show you a variety of areas in which you must hunt for substitutions and to give further reasons for the necessity of your understanding this hunt. But there are many more aspects of the work not yet touched upon, which when put together should result in the action for the character, what the character will do. To *do* is a synonym for to *act*. At this point, we are nowhere near the acting; I am still in the process of building a sense of reality and faith in my character.

When an actor has difficulty in finding a substitution for the content of a given scene as a whole, he can usually find the root of the problem in the fact that he's being too literal. Many actors take the outer event and the outer words at face value. For example, the character says, "I hate you" under circumstances where he is actually crying out for attention from someone he loves. But the actor works only for the hate.

Faced with Othello's final scene with Desdemona, an actor may protest, "But how can I find a substitution when I've never had the desire to murder anyone?" Or the Desdemona may complain, "I know I should be terrified, but no

one has ever threatened to kill me!" In both instances my answer would be, "I hope not!" But, if at this late stage in the events of the play the actors have not acquired sufficient nourishment to supply a reality for their immediate state of being and consequent needs, they must search for the psychological springboard which will send them into the immediate events. They must hunt out the psychological objective of the scene, and for that they *can* find the substitution.

If I am Desdemona in this scene, I should see that I want to cope with a foreboding of an unspecified disaster. I want to rid myself of a sense of mounting terror. As illogical as it may sound, I can use an experience of waiting in a hospital room prior to surgery, even a dentist's office prior to a tooth extraction. The fears that rush in on me are larger and less static than some fictional, preconceived fear for *a* Desdemona.

If you misunderstand me and again think too literally that during the performance, while lying in a bedroom in Cyprus, you should be imagining yourself in a dentist's office you have skipped the inevitable step of taking this substituted psychological reality and transferring it to the existing circumstances and events in the play: transferring the *essence* of the experience (not the original event) to the scene.

Othello, in turn, should look for the psychological need for retribution, for having to fulfill a great obligation which tortures him and gives him pain. The actor is stopped over and over again by his sense of hunting for a similarity of events in the play and in his own life, rather than a similarity of psychological experiences (for example, the need to punish a child) which then should allow him to accept the events with faith.

Relatively easier to understand and apply are those substitutions used to find a given moment or task in the events which seem insufficiently real (the previously mentioned scene between Manuela and Fraülein von Bernberg). An-

other kind of example occurred when I was working on the monologue of Mistress Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. She has just received a love letter and gradually realizes it is from Sir John Falstaff, which outrages her. As I was isolating the monologue from the play for an exercise, I had no actor to endow with the necessary realities of my Falstaff. The cliché image of Falstaff with his wide-brimmed hat, puffy red cheeks, mustaches turning upward, pointed beard and bushy eyebrows, and high ruff around his fat neck didn't help me at all. Then I thought, "What if I read this letter and discovered Sidney Greenstreet or Jackie Gleason had written it to me?" Suddenly, the contents of the words in the letter moved in on me strongly and made me laugh, outraged me, amazed me, etc. I had worked with Sidney and knew him personally and adored him, but even if I hadn't, my knowledge of his work in films might have stimulated me similarly, far more than the conventional image of *a* Falstaff.

In *The Country Girl*, there is a point where Bernie Dodd calls Georgie Elgin a "bitch." This should act on me as deeply wounding, insulting, and produce a shocked gasp. But the word itself does not mean much to me. I substituted another word. What if he called me a ". . ." ? That word does shock and wound me. I imagined that Bernie hurled that word at me, and it drove me up from my chair.

In the same play, there was a moment when my husband, Frank Elgin, betrayed me with a lie and I had to swallow it. My next given action was to take him to the sink in his dressing room and get him a glass of water. I was able to receive the betrayal correctly, but somehow it didn't seem to make the consequent dealing with him specific enough. But what if I thought of myself as a put-upon mother with a naughty child? How would I then deal with my own daughter? The moment I applied this substitution to my Frank, I discovered the *how* of taking his hand, the *how* of almost

pulling him along with me, the *how* of giving him the glass of water; these actions became specific, in fact, loaded. And I must give special emphasis to the fact that Frank was, at this moment, like a child to me, and something brand new happened between me and the actor. I *no longer* needed to use my daughter. I *had used* her to find *this* reality on stage.

In each example I have made I have also spelled out the action which resulted from the substitution: Manuela grabbed the chemise and hid it; Sidney Greenstreet made me throw and kick Falstaff's letter; my substitution for Bernie Dodd's word made me leap from my chair; my daughter made me pull my husband to the sink. I have *completed* my substitutions by making them synonymous with the actor on stage, the object, the word, the event of my stage life and found a consequent character action. I have used the past to make the present real. I am not playing in the past, but *now*. I have looked for substitutions to believe the now, to feel the now; and done both, in order to find a spontaneous action for now. I will probably repeat this a hundred times because it is so often misunderstood, but your substitutions are complete *only* when they have become synonymous with *this* actor, *this* play's events, *these* objects you are using in your stage life and produce a significant action. You may even forget your original source—*fine!*

I'm certain you have seen an actor on stage with real tears streaming down his face. If your only response was, "Oh, look, real water!" this actor was going to his original substitution, was doing his homework on stage and was failing to connect it to his stage life. Consequently his tears could not move an audience or allow them to have genuine empathy for the character they were observing. To work for an involvement for its own sake on stage bogs down the movement of the play, disconnects you from the play, makes you blind and deaf to the play. Beware.

There is still another kind of substitution which I find important in my own work. It is even less literal than those I have already described and less parallel to the character. It is even more personal and private but may be suggestible and stimulating to the actor in addition to his direct life experience. I refer to such intangibles as colors, textures, music, elements of nature. I must admit that I do not know how to teach this, and I assiduously avoid teaching this. I can only make you aware that these "essences" can be valuable sources and warn you to keep them to yourself, as I do myself.

If a new character has, to me, elements of light blue, a field of clover, a Scarlatti sonata, a toy poodle, a shiny blue pond, a piece of cut crystal—these essences may be of value to my sense of self, my particularizations for my character. But if these highly personal concepts are brought out into the open by the director or by me, they always become a hindrance to me. (I have heard a well-known director complain to an actor, "I asked for October tones; you're playing in November tones." What is the actor supposed to do with *that*?) If the director tells me, "I want this character to be like Scarlatti, like a poodle, like a field of clover," I feel swamped by a generality. I question what his statement means to him, and I head straight for general, quality playing, rather than specific character action. I start illustrating a prancing poodle with sharp little Scarlatti-like tones, and I look to the director for approval: "Is it tinkly enough? French enough? Can you smell the clover?" The essence stops functioning for me altogether.

Even the playwright can do a similar thing to you. Tennessee Williams says of Blanche DuBois that there is something about her "that suggests a moth." This image of his blocked me so that I saw myself with fluttering arms on tippy-toes banging into a light bulb larger than myself. I had a hard time overcoming it.

There is much in a creative process that is almost intangibly real and mysterious—why compound the felony and make it more so?

Please remember that in any example I have given you or substitutions, I was only making my own examples. You must find your own substitutions if they are to be of real value to you. If an example I have made has stirred you, it was an accident, or you simply took mine as a suggestion and found your own—possibly a similar one. *Find your own substitutions*—a warehouse full of them.

And let me warn you of the great trap of sharing your substitutions with *anyone*. Don't fall victim to the temptation of revealing your little goodies to your director or your fellow actors ("Do you know what I'm using here?" etc.). The minute others are in on your source—and they will probably be extremely interested in knowing what it is—they become an audience to your source and evaluate its consequent action accordingly, rather than finding their *own* relationship to the action. You have truly let the cat out of the bag. Your substitution will be gone for you, unusable from then on.

Substitution is *not* an end in itself, not an end to involve you for self-involvement's sake without consequent action. Let me state strongly, in case any of you have misunderstood, that substitution is the aspect of the work which strengthens your faith and your sense of reality in each stage of the total work on character. It is a way of bringing about justified, personal character actions.

Particularizing or to make something particular, as opposed to generalizing or to keep general, is an essential for everything in acting from identification of the character right down to the tiniest physical object you come in contact with.

I use the term *particularization* so often that it deserves a little time and space.

I can make an object, a person, a circumstantial fact, etc., particular by examining what is *there* and breaking it down into detail. As a simple example, let me take an ashtray. On occasion, the ashtray given me by the prop man will be, under examination, exactly the sort of ashtray called for in the play. Instead of simply saying, "It's an ashtray sitting on the table in this Greenwich Village garret," I will see that it is tin sprayed to look like copper, probably came from the dime store, has two grooves to hold cigarettes, is shiny with a few cigarette stains in the bottom, is lightweight, and I can deal with it correctly under the given circumstances. I have made what is *there* particular rather than just assuming any ashtray.

Now, this same ashtray sits on an elegant marble table in a Park Avenue penthouse. It is supposed to belong there, and from the audience may even pass for elegant. I will make it particular by endowing it with qualities it does not possess by substituting from my previous knowledge of elegant ashtrays. Now, I turn it into real copper, assume it comes from Tiffany, and is heavier than it looks, and would look even better if it were buffed up with polish. I can make it even more particular, if necessary, by finding psychological endowments or substitutions: My husband gave it to me last week for a sentimental occasion. I had wanted it for a long time, and now it sits proudly on my coffee table. Obviously, the simple act of flipping an ash into this ashtray will be influenced by the way in which I have made it particular to me in my character in the play.

Every detail of place, objects, relationships to others, my main character needs, my immediate needs and obstacles must be made particular. Nothing should be allowed to remain general.