

# 4

## EMOTIONAL MEMORY

EMOTIONAL memory or emotional recall deals with the problem of finding a substitution in order to release that big burst of tears, the shriek of terror, the fit of laughter, etc., demanded by the playwright, the director or by yourself as interpreter when the given circumstances of an immediate event in the play (something done to you by something or someone) fail to stimulate you sufficiently to bring it about spontaneously. Sometimes the direct substitution (Lynn Fontanne for Fraülein von Bernberg) is not suggestible enough to bring about the desired result. Then the hunt must go deeper in the search for the memory of a big emotional moment.

Occasionally, the term "emotional memory" is interchanged with "sense memory." To me, they are different. I link "emotional memory" with the recall of a *psychological* or emotional response to an event moving in on me which produces sobbing, laughter, screaming, etc. I use the term "sense memory" in dealing with *physiological* sensations (heat, cold, hunger, pains, etc.). Of course, it is true that a physical sensation such as heat or cold can produce emotions

### *Emotional Memory*

such as irritation, depression or anxiety; likewise, an emotional response can be accompanied by or produce physical sensations (such as getting hot or goose-pimply, becoming nauseated).

In life, an emotion occurs when something happens to us which momentarily suspends our reasoning control and we are unable to cope with this event logically. (This is not to be confused with hysteria, a state in which one is flooded by uncontrollable emotions, becomes illogical to the point of losing awareness of and contact with his surroundings and sense of reality, a state to be avoided by the actor at all costs.) At the moment of the release of the control, plus our adjustment to an attempt at control, we are *overcome* by tears, by laughter, or we rage, we bang our fists, or melt with pleasure, to mention only a few results. As pleasurable as the idea of a big emotion may seem to an actor, human beings do not want this loss of control and usually make an attempt to cope with the emotion as it hits them.

If we realize that we did not want this emotion, this loss of control in our real lives at the time when it occurred, we can see how difficult a process it must be for the actor who must now attempt to *recall* the emotion and experience it all over again. This time it is recalled in the service of the play as a genuine revelation of a human being, *not* for any kind of self-indulgence or wallowing about. (If the *character* the actor is portraying is self-indulgent emotionally or caught by hysterics, the actor's selection must still be made to serve the play, not his *own* need.)

To bring about tears, the beginning actor's tendency is to think sad things, to pump for that mood or that general state of being, to try to remember a sad occasion, the story of that occasion, and then pray to God that somehow he will be catapulted into an appropriate emotional response somewhere along the way. I used to make all of these mistakes and

could never understand why once in a while, somewhere along the line, something *did* indeed happen to me. But I must emphasize that it happened only once in a while, not inevitably, and it usually took a long time before it occurred. Sometimes I managed to work myself into a near trauma offstage, which brought me on with the sensation of moving in glue. After a few years, I discovered intuitively that what sent me correctly was a tiny remembered object only indirectly connected with the sad event: a polka-dot tie, an ivy leaf on a stucco wall, a smell or sound of sizzling bacon, a grease spot on the upholstery, things as seemingly illogical as those. I used these small objects as stimuli successfully and questioned their logic only in discussion.

Later, I learned from Dr. Jacques Palaci, a close friend trained in psychology, psychiatry and human behavior, that this little indirect object was the *release* object, a release of the censor which moves along with us and says, "Don't lose control." This apparently insignificant object had been unconsciously perceived and associated with the original emotional experience.

To experience for yourself what I am speaking about, tell a friend the story of an unhappy event in your life: tell him, for example, about a time when your lover walked out on you, blaming you unjustly for infidelity. Now tell your friend what surrounded the event; describe everything you can remember about the weather, the pattern of the drapes, a branch brushing against the window, the rumpled collar of your lover's shirt, the smell of the after-shave he was wearing, a frayed corner of the carpet, the tune that was playing on the radio as he left, etc., etc., etc. One of these objects will suddenly release the pain anew and you will weep again.

The consequence of this discovered procedure is endless. You will learn to build your own storehouse of little trigger objects. In rehearsal you will not spend endless time on

digging for past *events*; in performance you will avoid "leaving the stage," so to speak, while your mind wanders through a series of past adventures hoping that you will find a specific stimulus. You should have found and filed away many, many specific objects, one of which you will now connect and make synonymous with the event, the person, or the object of your stage life to trigger the response you need.

As for questioning the logic of the object you use from your own experience to take the place of the one you need on stage, let me give an example (especially for the literal-minded student, which, I assure you, is not intended to be facetious). Suppose you are working on *Uncle Vanya*, and you need a big emotional response for the moment when *Uncle Vanya* surprises *Yelena* in the arms of *Astrov*, a moment when rejection and a sense of loss storm in on him. Suppose then that you have isolated a red apron from an experience in a kitchen when your girl friend's aunt, wearing a red apron, rejected you and turned you out. How do you know that *Vanya* himself didn't link the moment with *Yelena* with his *own* red apron, his own sudden recall of a moment of betrayal with his own early rejection? After all, all of our emotional reactions are based on a kind of pile up from our past.

I must warn you, at this point, to avoid the examination of any past experience which you have never talked about or wanted to talk about. Here you will be on dangerous ground because you will not know what can happen to you, and without an understanding or a degree of objectivity to the experience it is useless to you artistically. There are teachers who actually force actors into dealing with something buried (their response to the death of a parent, or the trauma of a bad accident). What results is hysteria or worse, and is, in my opinion, anti-art. We are not pursuing psychotherapy. If you feel mentally sick or disturbed and in need of it, by all means

go to a trained doctor or therapist, but *not* to an acting teacher.

When I say that you must have distance from the experience you wish to use as an actor, I am not referring to time, but to understanding. In 1938, I had an experience with the death of someone I loved deeply which I still cannot fully cope with or discuss, and therefore I cannot use as an actress. Yet, I have also had an experience in the morning which I was able to digest and put to use by evening.

Actions themselves, verbal and physical, can generate strong emotions and can sometimes be as stimulating to an emotional release as any remembered inner object. (By inner object I mean an object not outwardly present but an object existing and represented in one's mind only.) The simple act of banging my fist on the table can bring about a feeling of rage. A logical reason or motivation for doing so can load the action for me. Motivated pleading with someone for forgiveness, and sending a verbal or physical action of begging, stroking or clutching may produce a waterfall of tears. The act of tickling someone gently can make me join in a fit of giggles. I don't mean to recommend that you make a practice of predetermining the expression of the action to find the emotion *but* there is a continuous feeding of the action by the sensation or emotion, and the emotion is furthered by the action.

When you claim that an emotion or a recalled object is wearing out for you by repetition, that it has lost freshness, you are failing technically because of a number of possible reasons:

1. You are stopping to demand that you feel, because you have not made your object synonymous with the one on stage.

2. You are anticipating how or at what second the emotion should manifest itself.
3. You have dwelt on the emotion for its own sake, rather than for furthering your stage action.
4. You are weighing the degree of intensity of previous use of the emotional experience.
5. You are fearful that the emotion will elude you, etc. etc.

Is it not monstrous that this player here  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul so to his own conceit,  
That from her working all his visage wanned;  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit?

[*Hamlet* 2.2. 535-541]

(Conceit means concept here, not vanity, and this is still what it's all about, don't you agree?)