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THE FIVE SENSES

AS A NATION we have evidently become so desensitized that encounter groups, an essential part of whose programs seems to be *learning* to touch each other, have sprung up all over the country. The daily hue and cry about an inability of human beings to communicate with each other means that not only do we not reach out to touch, but that we do not contact each other visually or auditorially. Our perceptions are dulled. Full human contact employs all the senses, the more intense they are, the more highly they are developed, the more available is the potential of the actor—his talent. As I have said before, this area of high sensitivity is where true talent lies, and what we make of this sensitivity determines whether or not we can call ourselves artists.

A great danger is to take the five senses for granted. Most people do. Once you become aware that the sources which move in on you when you truly touch, taste, smell, see and hear are endless, you must also realize that self-involvement deadens the senses, and vanity slaughters them until you end up playing alone—and meaninglessly.

There is an amusing story about John Barrymore and the

time he was acting with his brother Lionel, whom he adored. They were supposed to be enemies in the play, and John found it difficult to execute the required actions because whenever he looked into Lionel's soft brown eyes he melted with brotherly affection. It seems that John detested the smell of musk oil, a perfume base, so he secretly sprinkled a little of the oil on his brother's costumes. Whenever Lionel came near him on stage, John was filled with loathing.

I am not recommending this going to an outer reality for help when other substitutions fail, but am simply making an example of the power of smell as a stimulant. A particular odor of leather can send me to a shop on a quaint street in the Tyrol, and I feel the same excitement and romance as when I was there. Think how the scent of cologne or soap can affect you if it comes at you from someone you love. Think how that same scent will affect you by association as it wafts toward you from a casual passerby; how the smell and sound of sizzling bacon can produce a feeling of well-being. An unpleasant smell can be just as suggestive psychologically.

Taste, whether it be of a kiss, or of unpleasant medicine, or something delicious to eat, or strong liquor, is not only important but must be fully explored because in most instances on stage you won't have the real thing, nor will you want it. Liquor should suffice as an example. If your taste buds were alert when you took a slug of bourbon or brandy you will recall what happened to your mouth and throat and stomach. If so, you will be able to endow that slug of colored water on stage with the same properties.

If I have to peel and chop an onion on stage, I will probably use an apple or a potato since the real onion might take over and put me out of control. It won't be difficult to endow the potato with the elements of the onion if I have discovered and been alert to the smell, the consequent congestion in the nose, and the sting in the eyes which makes me cry. Suppose I

have to bite into the onion or suck on a lemon. I want a powerful sense of taste so that when I substitute another object for them on stage I will have similar sensations and adjustments.

Explore the endless variations of a simple handshake: if you really make contact, if it is something other than a mechanical, social expression, whether you shake hands with a friend or an enemy, or if it is an introduction to an attractive member of the opposite sex. Alert yourself to the texture of the skin when you make contact with it, the warmth or coolness of the hand, the dryness or dampness, the hardness or softness of the skin, the pressure or the lack of it in the grip.

Start to become more aware of texture, not only of the flesh but of cloth, wood, silver, glass—anything you contact physically, pleasant or otherwise, during the course of your day.

Few people are lucky enough to have all five senses developed with equal intensity, but the actor must hope and pray and work for maximum visual and auditory receiving. The visual contact we make with another human being or with something in nature can act on us like a stroke of lightning if we really open ourselves up to it. If you *really* see a delicate white birch or a giant redwood tree you might weep. If you *really* look at a wave breaking on the shore with the sunlight shining through its crest and its foam, or a black cloud overtaking a little puffy white one, your heart may begin to pound. The same *real* taking-in visually of a human being can produce, "But soft! what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!"

The contact our ears make with sound, with words, with melody and tonality are just as crucial to the development and enrichment of our total instrument. To really receive the nuance of verbal action and tone of voice rather than merely

factually clicking it off with our auditory sense makes the difference between a fine actor and a hack.

Many of you make some common technical errors in looking and listening. An actor says, "I have such trouble really listening on stage." He is making contact with the individual word that is being sent to him in the mistaken notion that concentration on each word alone will allow him to hear better. Words are sent actively with content. You must listen for the *intent* of the words in order to receive them, giving the words meaning not *only* from their intention, but from your own point of view and expectation.

I don't recommend that you make a rule of this or an excuse for this in your stage life, but in *real* life we don't hear everything that is being said to us. If I propound a long theory on acting and I am *lucky*, you will really hear about three-quarters of it. You will be weighing what you hear against what you already know or think you know, and your attention will often pursue your own paths, formulating the ideas in your own way. Something I have said ten times during a term will arise anew, and an actor's face will light up. "I never heard that before!" His assumptions have changed, and he hears it now in the new framework of understanding. So, on stage, if you particularize the content and intent of what is being sent, and hear *that* under the given circumstances, listening should no longer be a problem for you.

We also "listen" with our eyes. Our eyes, as well as our ears, evaluate and interpret. We interpret content and intention from an expression or movement which the action has given to the words. "You're full of baloney!" sent aggressively with a smirk might infuriate me. The same words sent with a grin and a pat on the back might send me into gales of laughter, depending on who has done what to me.

In the same way that I do not contact the individual,

isolated word while listening, so I do not fasten my eyes to a partner without letting go in order to really receive him while I'm talking. Looking, as well as listening, hinges on needs. Seeing is also balanced against expectations, immediate needs, and your past knowledge of the object.

I sometimes laugh when an actor fixes his partner endlessly during the scene and claims he is working for "eye contact." Try telling someone about an event that just happened to you, and force yourself to keep looking at him while talking. Probably, halfway through your first sentence you will want to look away—not because you don't want to see him, but because while really seeing him you lost contact with the inner objects you were talking about, and so you will forget what you are saying.

Actually, while we talk we look intermittently at the person to whom we're talking in order to see how they react to what we're saying, to see if we have their attention, to see if they get the point, etc. What we see in them at these moments conditions how we continue our tale. In between these moments of eye contact, we contact the inner objects we are dealing with, and our outer, secondary focus is on something inconsequential in the place. Listening and looking are certainly not mechanical processes, but are linked to the center of our psychological and physical being. Simulated looking and listening must produce bad acting.

Because of the enormous importance of the five senses, there should be continuous work on heightening and sharpening them. Anything dormant which you might awaken through daily concentrated attention to your senses will add to your growth as an actor. Unclutter yourselves. Open yourselves up to your fullest capacity—to give meaning to what you *receive* when you see, when you hear, when you taste, when you smell, when you touch.

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THINKING

YOU ENTER, stop to flick on the lights, take two steps into the room, and *then* the lights come up. The audience bursts into laughter. Such disasters have happened to us all. If you attempt to verbalize all of the things you *thought* about in the seconds that it took from the flick of the switch to the laughter of the audience, it would probably take you half an hour. Thought moves with such lightning rapidity that any attempt to slow it down is inaccurate, and so must bring about false behavior on stage.

I have often seen an actor sitting on stage, strangely knotted with tension, making faces—frowning his brow, then smiling, then making a pensive expression. When I ask, "What were you doing?" he answers, "I was thinking." Feeling obligated to illustrate thought, bodily or facially, comes from the mistaken notion that the character's thoughts manifest themselves in an organized progression like dialogue, complete with stage directions like a script. Sometimes the diligent actor mistakenly goes so far as to write out his character's thoughts as if they *were* indeed dialogue. *Real thinking precedes, is accompanied by, and follows action.* Real thinking is active.