

SIX LESSONS

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An Excerpt

adapted from:  
Richard Boleslavsky's  
*Acting: The First Six Lessons*

by  
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### Characters

The TEACHER, an acting teacher, 38  
The STUDENT, a female actor, 18  
The AUNT, The Student's Aunt Mary, 40  
The DOORMAN, a former actor, late 60's

### Setting

In New York City:

Scene 1 -- The Teacher's office  
Scene 2 -- Same as scene 1  
Scene 3 -- A park  
Scene 4 -- Backstage at a theatre  
Scene 5 -- A room in The Aunt's home  
Scene 6 -- The observation deck of The Empire State Building

### Time

From 1927 to 1929

ACT I

Scene 1 - CONCENTRATION

The Teacher's office in New York. It is spring 1927.

TEACHER sits reading. Enter STUDENT. SHE knocks at the door

TEACHER  
Hello.

STUDENT  
Hi, may I come in?  
(Enters room)

TEACHER  
Well ...

STUDENT  
I hear you teach art -- dramatic art.

TEACHER  
No, I'm sorry ...

STUDENT  
I want to be an actress on the stage.

TEACHER  
You do?

STUDENT  
I want to be a big star!

TEACHER  
Indeed.

STUDENT  
Oh yes! I just love the stage! Absolutely love it -- don't you?

TEACHER  
Well ... won't you come in.

STUDENT  
Yes, thank you.

TEACHER  
I don't think I can help you. Art can not be taught.

STUDENT  
Can you teach me all about Realism?

TEACHER  
I don't believe in Realism.

STUDENT  
I heard you did. Then what do you teach?

TEACHER  
I'm sorry, but one needs to have talent. Good day.

STUDENT  
No, wait. I have talent.

TEACHER  
You have talent?

STUDENT  
Yes, I do, I know I do.

TEACHER  
Many people think they have talent --

STUDENT  
But I do, I really do. I know I'm young, I know it. But I know I have talent too.

TEACHER  
Some of them, very few of them, I can help.

STUDENT  
Can you help me?

TEACHER  
I help actors develop and educate themselves.

STUDENT  
That's what I want to do. I'll work really hard -- I will.

TEACHER  
It also takes time, a great deal of time.

STUDENT  
I don't care how long it takes or how hard it is.

TEACHER  
You don't?

STUDENT  
No, I don't. I just want to be on the stage!

TEACHER  
Doesn't everyone?

STUDENT  
Yes, of course. Would you please help me?

TEACHER

Come back next week. Thursday afternoon would be best and we can talk about it then.

STUDENT

But I won't be here next week!

TEACHER

Why are you here?

STUDENT

I'm only in New York for another week. My family is moving away, far away.

TEACHER

Then I don't see how I can possibly help you.

STUDENT

My Aunt Mary said I could stay with her, but my parents say I have to have a teacher, a real teacher -- or I have to move with them. Oh please, please help me -- I just really love the theatre!

TEACHER

Everyone loves the theatre, but few can give what it asks.

STUDENT

What does it ask?

TEACHER

To give all of your thoughts and emotions.

STUDENT

Okay -- I can do that.

TEACHER

To devote your entire life, your entire being.

STUDENT

Got it. Is that all?

TEACHER

To suffer, to sacrifice and to get nothing in return -- that's what it asks.

STUDENT

I already know all that. I acted at school.

TEACHER

Yes, at school.

STUDENT

I know theatre brings suffering. I'm not afraid, really I'm not. I only want to act and act and act.

TEACHER  
Suppose the theatre doesn't want you to act and act and act?

STUDENT  
Why wouldn't it?

TEACHER  
It might not find you talented.

STUDENT  
But when I acted at school --

TEACHER  
And what did you enact at school?

STUDENT  
*King Lear.*

TEACHER  
A trifle. Whom did you play?

STUDENT  
Why King Lear himself.

TEACHER  
You played King Lear?

STUDENT  
I did. All the boys were really upset. Some said they wouldn't come see the show.

TEACHER  
Did they see it?

STUDENT  
Well, not the first night, but after that my performance was all anyone talked about.

TEACHER  
I see.

STUDENT  
All my friends, my literature professor and even my Aunt Mary told me how talented I was.

TEACHER  
Yes, your friends -- I'm sure they did, and they're connoisseurs of talent?

STUDENT  
Well, maybe not my friends, but my professor's very strict. He worked with me himself on King Lear.

TEACHER  
Yes, and your Aunt Mary?

STUDENT  
Oh, she met Mr. Belasco personally.

TEACHER  
Well ... um. Let's try this -- how did your professor want you to play the line: Blow winds, and crack your cheeks. Rage. Blow.

STUDENT  
Do you want me to play it for you?

TEACHER  
No, please! Just tell me how you read the line. What were you trying to convey?

STUDENT  
To convey?

TEACHER  
Yes, what were you trying to convey?

STUDENT  
Um, to convey, really. Well ... I uh,  
(Clears throat)  
I, um, stood ... like this, with my feet together and my body inclined forward. I lifted my head. I stretched my arms out. Then I shook my fists at the heavens. Finally, taking a deep breath, I burst into sarcastic laughter -- ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! And cursing the heavens as loud as possible, I'd say:  
(Plays)  
Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!

TEACHER  
Thank you, that's, uh ... that's quite enough. Would you do me one more favor?

STUDENT  
(Speaks)  
Oh yes, anything, anything you want!

TEACHER  
Would you say the line once cursing the heavens and then once without.

STUDENT  
Okay.

TEACHER  
But keep the sense of the phrase, only its thought.

STUDENT

Well, when you curse the heavens, it's like this:

(Plays)

Bloooooow wiiiiinds, aaand Craaaaack yourr cheeeeks, Raaaaage  
Bloooow!

(Speaks)

And without cursing, it's ... um -- really?

TEACHER

Keep the sense, please. I simply want the thought.

STUDENT

Well then, uh okay. The thought, sure, really, I can do that.  
Well it's, huh. I'm not ... I'm not exactly, ah yes, I've got  
it -- how about this:

(Plays)

Blowwindsandcrackyourcheeksrageblow.

TEACHER

Isn't that strange.

STUDENT

What?

TEACHER

You curse the heavens without hesitation, but you're unable  
to speak the words simply.

STUDENT

Well I wasn't really quite sure of --

TEACHER

To convey?

STUDENT

Well, I um ...

TEACHER

You want to play a Chopin Nocturne. However, you have no idea  
of where the notes are!

STUDENT

Well, I, I um --

TEACHER

You grimace! You mutilate the words! You mutilate the  
emotion!

STUDENT

But I'm --



TEACHER

You don't possess the most basic quality of a literate person -- the ability to express the thoughts, the feelings and the words of another logically and simply!

STUDENT

Uh, can't I just explain about --

TEACHER

What right have you?!

STUDENT

I was just trying to --

TEACHER

How dare you say you've worked in the theatre!

STUDENT

If you'll just give me a --

TEACHER

You don't even realize you've destroyed the very essence of the theatre!

STUDENT

But you can't mean --

TEACHER

Leave New York, please. Move with your family!

STUDENT

No, you, you can't mean it?

TEACHER

I mean it.

STUDENT

So you're saying I can't act -- ever?!

TEACHER

And if I say never?!

STUDENT

I, you can't mean that -- you can't!

TEACHER

Save me and all of New York -- go with your parents!

STUDENT

Well ... I am going to act! I don't care what you say! I don't care who you are! I don't care what you teach! I am going to act and you can't stop me!

TEACHER  
There! That's it!

STUDENT  
What? What did I do?

TEACHER  
You suffered -- you felt deeply.

STUDENT  
I did?

TEACHER  
Yes, you did.

STUDENT  
Oh, that was easy.

TEACHER  
But you didn't even know you did it.

STUDENT  
Well I. What I mean is ...

TEACHER  
Yes?

STUDENT  
I, I don't think I ever felt like that before.

TEACHER  
Good. If you don't suffer, if you don't feel deeply, art is impossible. Especially the art of the theatre.

STUDENT  
So ... that's the price?

TEACHER  
Yes, that's the price, if you want to bring a new artistic value to life.

STUDENT  
This isn't really what I expected.

TEACHER  
Most people don't.

STUDENT  
This is so ...

TEACHER  
Yes, isn't it.

STUDENT  
Yes, indeed it is.

TEACHER  
Now, together let's create a small, but real, artistic value.

STUDENT  
Ah, are you --

TEACHER  
If you want to?

STUDENT  
Yes, of course, of course I do.

TEACHER  
Then let's begin. Have you ever seen a specialist working on a creative problem? A biologist, an architect or maybe a great actor?

STUDENT  
My Aunt Mary took me to see John Barrymore once -- *Hamlet*.

TEACHER  
Did he do anything you didn't expect?

STUDENT  
Well, yes but ...

TEACHER  
But what?

STUDENT  
Um, uh -- he upset me.

TEACHER  
How?

STUDENT  
I wanted to talk, but he didn't pay any attention to me.

TEACHER  
Did he pay attention to anyone else?

STUDENT  
No, no I don't think he did.

TEACHER  
Do you know why?

STUDENT  
No, I don't.

TEACHER  
He was concentrating.

STUDENT  
Concentrating?

TEACHER  
Yes, to focus all of your energies toward one object and to continue that focus for as long as you want.

STUDENT  
You make it sound important.

TEACHER  
It is important. I know a fisherman who was caught in a storm and didn't leave his rudder for forty-eight hours.

STUDENT  
Forty-eight hours. Oh my, that is concentration.

TEACHER  
It is the fundamental quality of every artist. You must find it and develop it.

STUDENT  
How do I do that?

TEACHER  
Um ... a scientist has a microscope, an external object of concentration and creation.

STUDENT  
Yes, okay.

TEACHER  
So what is an actor's object of concentration?

STUDENT  
Uhhh, the part?

TEACHER  
Correct, the part. First you study and rehearse, then you begin to create. Or let's say in rehearsal you create searchingly, but in performance you create constructively.

STUDENT  
This is acting you're talking about, right?

TEACHER  
It is. So how would you define acting?

STUDENT

Oh that's really easy, acting is when you ... well you act, of course, and you act when, its ... well acting is -- oh, I'm not sure of anything anymore.

TEACHER

How can you devote your life to something, when you don't even know what it is?

STUDENT

Well, what I thought you meant was --

TEACHER

Acting is the life of the human soul receiving its birth through art.

STUDENT

(To Self)

The life of the human soul ...

TEACHER

Receiving its birth through art.

STUDENT

Receiving its birth through art ... receiving its birth through art ... the life of the human soul receiving its birth through art.

(To Teacher)

Okay, I've got it.

TEACHER

You don't have it.

STUDENT

Yes I do, I'm a quick study.

TEACHER

You've memorized it.

STUDENT

That's what I said -- I have it.

TEACHER

You won't have it, until you understand it.

STUDENT

But --

TEACHER

Until it becomes a visceral part of who you are, of how you express yourself.

STUDENT

I don't ... understand your meaning.

TEACHER

Visceral. It needs to be a visceral part of you -- in your gut, in the marrow of your bones.

STUDENT

Then I'll have it?

TEACHER

Yes, but it takes time and energy. In a creative theatre your object of concentration is the soul -- your soul.

STUDENT

My soul. How do I do this?

TEACHER

You'll have to look deep inside yourself, into the core of your being.

STUDENT

That sounds really difficult and ... maybe a bit scary.

TEACHER

You're right on both accounts.

STUDENT

So how, where do I begin?

TEACHER

From the beginning, from the simplest scales, not from a Chopin Nocturne.

STUDENT

What are my scales?

TEACHER

Your five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell.

STUDENT

That I understand.

TEACHER

Your senses are the key to your creation. Concentrate on your senses. Learn how to use them.

STUDENT

Are you saying I really don't know how to listen or how to feel?

TEACHER

In life you may know --

STUDENT

But not when I'm on stage?

TEACHER  
Here, let's try this -- listen to a mouse scratching in the corner.

STUDENT  
Where's the audience?

TEACHER  
Never mind the audience. Please, do the problem. A mouse.

STUDENT  
Okay.

STUDENT "acts" with her right ear and  
then her left

TEACHER  
Uh-huh. Now, listen to a symphony orchestra playing the march from *Aida*. Do you know the march?

STUDENT  
Yes, of course.

TEACHER  
Please?

STUDENT "acts" with her ears again

TEACHER (cont'd)  
You seem to be aware of your helplessness.

STUDENT  
Well ... I, um um, I ...

TEACHER  
Is it easier to curse the heavens in *King Lear*?

STUDENT  
No ... no it isn't.

TEACHER  
You don't know how to create the smallest, simplest bit of life with your soul.

STUDENT  
I don't?

TEACHER  
You don't know how to concentrate spiritually.

STUDENT  
But I don't --

TEACHER

You don't know how to create feelings or emotions. You're not aware of your own senses.

STUDENT

I'm not? I'm not.

TEACHER

No you're not. And if you want to learn this --

STUDENT

Oh, I do, I do, I do, I really really do.

TEACHER

It takes rigorous daily exercise. I can give you dozens of these exercises, but you'll need to invent more on your own.

STUDENT

Yes, yes I will. I'll learn, I'll learn -- I promise. I'll do everything you tell me. Will I be an actress then?

TEACHER

No, not even then. To listen, to look, to feel isn't enough. If you're supposed to hear a car driving away, everyone in the theatre should feel you're the most important person in the world.

STUDENT

How do I do that?

TEACHER

Talent and technique. Your education is in three parts. The first educates your body -- its every muscle and sinew.

STUDENT

Okay, so how long does it take?

TEACHER

At least an hour and a half a day.

STUDENT

Oh my.

TEACHER

You begin with the following exercises: gymnastics, rhythmic gymnastics, classical and interpretive dancing, fencing, breathing exercises, voice placing exercises, diction and singing. An hour-and-a-half a day for two years will make you an actress pleasing to look at.

STUDENT

What's the second part?



TEACHER

The second part is intellectual and cultural. You'll need to be able to discuss Shakespeare, Moliere, Goethe and Caldron. Know the world's literature. Know the history of painting, sculpture and music. You should understand motion, human anatomy, psychology, the expression of emotion and the logic of feelings. These are your tools, so you must know how to use them.

STUDENT

And the third part?

TEACHER

That we've started today. The training of your soul.

STUDENT

My soul?

TEACHER

Do you remember the definition?

STUDENT

I think so. Acting is ...

TEACHER

The life.

STUDENT

Acting is the life of the human soul receiving its birth through art.

TEACHER

The soul is the most important element in dramatic action. An actor can not exist without a well-trained soul.

STUDENT

This sounds really important.

TEACHER

It is. You'll have to complete every action and change the playwright asks. There's no great actor without such a soul.

STUDENT

Not one?

TEACHER

No, not one. This part of your training is acquired through long, hard work. You must develop the following: the complete possession of all five senses; a memory of feelings; a memory of inspiration; a memory of imagination and a visual memory.

STUDENT

But I've never heard of any of this!

TEACHER  
But, they're as simple as cursing the heavens.

STUDENT  
I'm sorry about --

TEACHER  
The development of faith in imagination; the development of the imagination itself; the development of naiveté; the development of observation; the development of will power; the development of the ability to give variety in the expression of emotion; the development of the sense of humor and the sense of the tragic. Nor is this all.

STUDENT  
What's left?!

TEACHER  
One thing remains, but it can not be taught.

STUDENT  
And what's that?

TEACHER  
Talent!

STUDENT  
Isn't that where we started?

TEACHER  
Talent must exist -- it can be developed, but it can not be taught.

STUDENT  
This all sounds so ... big, so important ... so very very ...

TEACHER  
It is very very.

STUDENT  
When, when I came in, I asked you to teach me about Realism.

TEACHER  
I don't believe in Realism.

STUDENT  
That's what you said before.

TEACHER  
Realism, true Realism doesn't belong on stage.

STUDENT  
Then what do you believe in? What does belong on stage?

TEACHER

Acting must be truthful, not realistic. I believe in theatricality, with a sense of being real.

STUDENT

But Realism --

TEACHER

There can be elements of Realism, but not total Realism. True actions draw out true feelings -- that is what belongs on stage.

END OF SCENE