

– a dialogue sample from –

SIX LESSONS

An adaptation of
Acting: The First Six Lessons
by Richard Boleslavsky

by

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CHARACTERS

TEACHER, an acting teacher, male, 38

STUDENT, an actor, female, 18

AUNT, The Student's Aunt Mary, female, 40

DOORMAN, a former actor, male, late 60s

SETTING

New York City:

Act I:

Scene 1 – The Teacher's office

Scene 2 – Same as scene 1

Scene 3 – A park

Act II:

Scene 1 – Backstage at a theatre

Scene 2 – A room in The Aunt's home

Scene 3 – The observation deck of The Empire State Building

TIME

From 1927 to 1929

ACT ILesson 1 - CONCENTRATION

Teacher's office in New York

TEACHER reading. Enter STUDENT. SHE knocks

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

TEACHER

I help actors develop and educate themselves.

STUDENT

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

TEACHER

It takes time, a great deal of time.

STUDENT

I don't care how long it takes or how hard it is. I just want to be on the stage!

TEACHER

Doesn't everyone?

STUDENT

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.

TEACHER

Then I don't see how I can 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. Oh please, please help me! I really, 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

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 is what it asks.

STUDENT

I already know all that -- I acted at school. 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 enough.

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

Not the first night, but after that my performance was all anyone talked about. All my friends, my literature professor and even my Aunt Mary told me how talented I am.

TEACHER

Yes, your friends, I'm sure they did and they are connoisseurs of talent?

STUDENT

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

TEACHER

Yes, and your Aunt Mary?

STUDENT

Oh, she knows Mr. Belasco personally.

TEACHER

Well ... how did you 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, body inclined. I lifted my head, stretched out my arms -- then shook my fists at the heavens. Finally, taking a 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

However, 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 Bloooooow!”

(Speaks)

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

TEACHER

Please, keep the sense. 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

(Speaks)

What?

TEACHER

You don't hesitate to curse the heavens, 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 Chopin, but you've no idea 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?! How dare you say you've worked in the theatre!

STUDENT

If you'll just give me a --

TEACHER

You've destroyed the essence of theatre! Leave New York, please. Move with your family!

STUDENT

But you can't mean -- no, you, you can't mean that?

TEACHER

I mean it.

STUDENT

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

TEACHER

And if I say never?! Save me and all of New York -- go with your parents!

STUDENT

I, you, no, you, you can't mean that! I'll show you -- I am going to act! I don't care what you say, who you are or what you teach! I'm going to act and, 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

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

Have you ever seen a specialist at work? A biologist, an architect or maybe an 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

That's because he was concentrating.

STUDENT

Concentrating?

TEACHER

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

STUDENT

You make it sound important.

TEACHER

I know a fisherman caught in a storm, who didn't leave his rudder for forty-eight hours.

STUDENT

Forty-eight hours -- that is concentration.

TEACHER

It's the fundamental quality of every artist. You must find it and develop it.

STUDENT

How do I do that?

TEACHER

Ah, a scientist has a microscope, as an object of concentration. What does an actor have?

STUDENT

Uhhh, the role?

TEACHER

Correct, the role. First you study and rehearse, then you begin to create. Or let us say in rehearsal you create searchingly, but in performance you create constructively.

STUDENT

This is acting you're talking about -- right?

TEACHER

It is. How would you define acting?

STUDENT

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

But you won't have it, until you understand it. Until it becomes a visceral part of you.

STUDENT

I don't understand your meaning.

TEACHER

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

STUDENT

Then I'll have it?

TEACHER

Yes, 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 of yourself, down to the core of your being.

STUDENT

That sounds 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 with Chopin.

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. Concentrate on your senses. Learn how to use them.

STUDENT

Are you saying I 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

Why don't we try this. Listen to a mouse scratching in the corner.

STUDENT

Where's the audience?

TEACHER

Never mind the audience. Please -- a mouse.

STUDENT

Okay.

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

TEACHER

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

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

Rigorous daily exercises. I can give you dozens, but you'll need to invent others.

STUDENT

Yes, yes I will, I will. I'll learn, I'll learn, I promise. I'll do everything you tell me.

TEACHER

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

Your education is in three parts. The first educates your body -- 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

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

STUDENT

What's the second part?

TEACHER

The second part is intellectual and cultural. Know the world's literature. Be able to discuss Shakespeare, Moliere and Goethe. Know the history of painting, sculpture and music. Understand motion, human anatomy, psychology, the expression of emotion, the logic of feelings. These are your tools. Know them and 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. You'll have to complete every action and change the playwright needs. There is no great actor without such a soul.

STUDENT

Not one?

TEACHER

No, not one. This part of your training is long, hard and difficult. 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 and of will power; the

TEACHER (cont'd)

development of the ability to give variety in the expression of emotion; the development of the sense of humor and the development of the sense of the tragic. Nor is this all.

STUDENT

What's left?!

TEACHER

One thing remains, but it can not be taught -- talent!

STUDENT

Isn't that where we started?

TEACHER

Talent can be developed, nurtured and cultivated -- but talent 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, you said you didn't believe in realism.

TEACHER

Realism, true realism doesn't belong on stage.

STUDENT

Then what belongs on stage, if not realism?

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. This is what belongs on stage.

END OF SCENE