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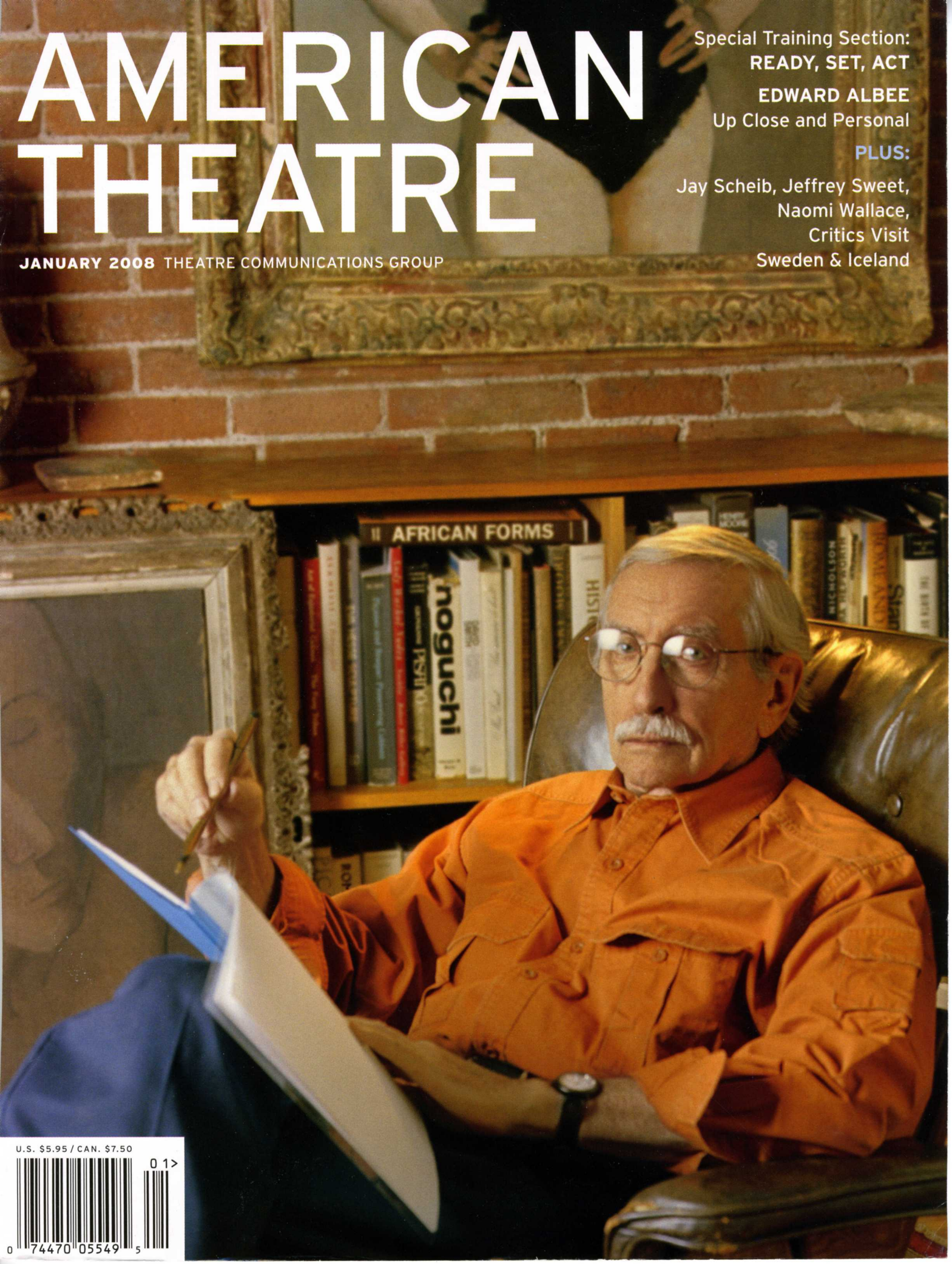

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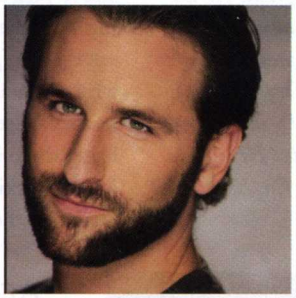


BY CHARLIE HENSLEY

FRANCHELLE STEWART DORN

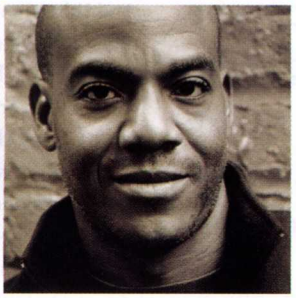
JORDAN LAGE

BENJAMIN BAUMAN

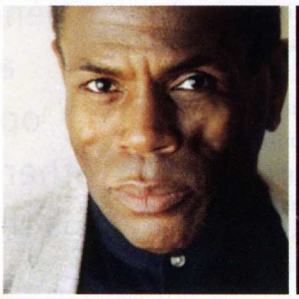
SEAN DUGAN

ELLEN LAUREN

JOHN EARL JELKS



ANDRÉ DE SHIELDS



LAGE: ERIC ANTONIOU / HUNTINGTON THEATRE COMPANY; DE SHIELDS: LIA CHANG

ACTORS IN SEARCH OF THEIR DISTINCTIVE VOICES CREATE

There is no more exhilarating or powerful feeling than being in The Zone, where the actor's work pours perfectly, effortlessly onto the stage in a consummate alignment of moment, performer, role, craft, heart and audience.

No matter how fine the actor, The Zone is an elusive place to find night after night. Housing sucks, parents get sick, babies cry, cell phones go off, props fall apart, concentration breaks, lines go awry—and the actor starts chasing, rather than driving, the play. In rehearsal, too, a fence can suddenly appear, and it must be scaled or jumped or knocked down for the work to go forward.

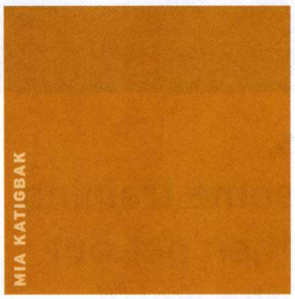
Once, even the most rudimentary public education in America included Latin, Greek, rhetoric, memorization, elocution and an immersion in classical literature. Armed with these, any ambitious young actor could go on to learn the elements of stagecraft in the company of more experienced, professional colleagues.

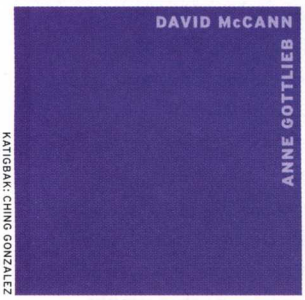
Today, artists must seek out a conservatory or university even for the basics, or they face a far tougher curriculum at the School of Hard Knocks. One invaluable reading in this regard is *Training of the American Actor* (TCG Books), a survey of 10 acting techniques articulated by their founders or torch bearers, edited by Arthur Bartow.

Americans seem never to have found an idea they couldn't, or wouldn't, adapt for their own uses, and actor training is no different. In the 20th century, the influence of Stanislavsky and the enormous might of his American descendants (Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner) certainly made believers of a vast number of American stage and film actors—and audiences. As Bartow puts it, "The acting techniques that arose in America were designed either to emphasize certain aspects of Stanislavsky's work or to react against it."

Recently, several actors of varying ages and backgrounds were asked what they use to reach The Zone, sustain a career and achieve Meisner's dictum of "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances." They talked about the very personal, individualized practical application—and adaptation—they've made of their training. Like all good actors, they just want every available advantage when their cues come…or don't.

ACTORS, READINESS IS ALL





KATIGBAK: CHING GONZALEZ

A NEW BREW FROM INGREDIENTS THEY'VE GATHERED OVER TIME

Is acting technique a philosophy or a process?

André De Shields, a veteran New York–based actor who this past year received an Obie award for sustained excellence in the theatre, says, "The term 'acting technique' conjures images of alchemy, the process of transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary, the prosaic into the exceptional, and the commonplace into holy ground." Anne Gottlieb—an actress who is co-creating and producing, and will perform in, a new play based on the letters and diaries of the Dutch Jewish writer Etty Hillesum—says she believes that technique is "a place to start, a leaping-off point to fire the impulses and the imagination."

Franchelle Stewart Dorn and David McCann are just ending nearly five months of rehearsing and performing together as the Turkish empress and emperor in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and in *Edward II*, both at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. McCann defines technique as "the ability to get your body, voice and spirit to go wherever you ask them to go and, sometimes, to be so free that they take you somewhere you never imagined. Then, of course, you have to be heard and seen—and, hopefully, you're not bumping into the furniture."

For Dorn—whose teacher, the legendary Bobby Lewis, imparted the basics of "objective–action–obstacle"—technique is vital as a support for the characters she creates. "Those basics, I realize, are how I live my life," she says. "We get up in the morning, see things we want or need, then we go out and get them. Actors tend to think the words on paper have to *mean* something or *do* something on their own, but you have to get past that to the connecting. That ability to connect with another actor—in that moment on stage—is the gift, the one I'm most interested in. You use breathing, inflection and all your tools as an actor to sustain that moment."

Mia Katigbak, a stage actor who is the artistic producing director and co-founder of the 19-year-old National Asian American Theatre Company of New York, says, "I equate 'technique' with mechanics, like being able to be proficient with scales in music, or barre or floor work in dance. It's always been hard for me to come up with equivalents in acting, aside from vocal or physical work, that is. Those are

more concrete and tangible, but analyzing a script—does that fall under technique? I tend to scour and read and re-read passages for any sort of clues to character. So I hesitate to say I have a technique, but I am comfortable saying I have a process. If I were to try to define 'technique' it would be: a disciplined way to work on a play, with basic rudiments and an arsenal of tools at my disposal to open channels, with an always-tuned instrument that can play a range of repertory."

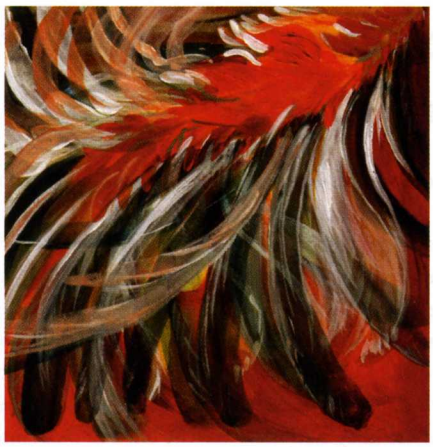
Sean Dugan, who frequently works with New York Theatre Workshop and American Repertory Theatre, thinks of technique as "the ability to reliably do what you do over and over again, eight times a week. Technique allows you to 'get it up' for the audience (and yourself) when you don't feel like it." Moreover, he adds, "Technique serves the purpose of making you, as one of my acting teachers called it, 'director-proof.' There are directors who expect that the actor will simply do in the rehearsal room exactly what will be done on stage. That's just stupid. The whole point, the luxury, of rehearsal is to have the freedom to screw up. So when you have a director who thinks that way, having technique allows you to do what you need to do in order to get to the performance phase."

However, defining technique as that which an actor falls back on when the rest isn't working—when you aren't "feeling it"—may contain negative connotations, suggests SITI Company member and Suzuki method teacher Ellen Lauren. "It's not as if technique replaces something deeper and truer," she elaborates. "Technique is objectivity, and it gives you the ability to shore up what's not going well in any given moment. That might be a physical sensibility or a psychological one. Technique is not separate from feeling or intellect or taste or breath control. It's the root base; it's not something placed upon the self from the outside; it is a lens through which to see what's occurring inside and outside the actor."

For Peter Francis James, who in 2006 won Obie and Lortel awards for portraying Colin Powell in David Hare's *Stuff Happens* at New York's Public Theater and last year played opposite Maggie Smith in Edward Albee's *The Lady from Dubuque* in London, technique means two things: "It's some kind of systematic approach to solving an acting problem (though usually instinct works!), and something that allows you to deepen and broaden what comes instinctually and naturally."

Craft differs from technique, James avers. "Technique is the application of craft," he continues. "Craft is the practice, the discipline. Why does the musician play scales? Not because he's afraid he's going to forget the scales. Craft is sharpening the chisel. It's about preparing; technique is the doing. It's too late to apply craft when you're in the moment. When he's in front of a canvas, Picasso can't think about how to hold the brush, he has to think about where the paint wants to go. You've got to be ready, not prepping."

"Yes, get some training, but then get out into the world. Read books, protest the mess our country has become, listen to music, fall in love."



Forging a technique of one's own

Every actor interviewed for this piece agreed that the search for a distinctive voice is inextricably linked to the challenges of the parts they have agreed to portray. While just about everyone received at least one formal kind of training, most respondents say that they have developed an individualized method of working on roles. A few, such as Jordan Lage—a founding member of the Atlantic Theater Company who last year appeared in the Tony-nominated Broadway revival of *Inherit the Wind*—find that there is a single approach that seems to work best for them. "I'm partial to the training taught at the Atlantic Acting School here in New York," Lage says. "Prior to training with David Mamet and William H. Macy at New York University, I studied acting at several places around the country that I found, in the end, to be rather wanting. David's approach made the most clear, logical sense to me, because it was based on a few fundamental suppositions that simply rang true."

In the heady days of the early '80s, according to Lage, Mamet articulated his technique of script analysis, the "Method of Physical Action," which would become the cornerstone of the Practical Aesthetics curriculum. It was based on Stanislavsky's later teachings under the same rubric, Mamet's experience as a student under Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse, and his own musings on the subject. "The attention of the actor should be outward-directed, towards the person or persons from whom one is trying to get something, not inward-directed, to the self, in an attempt to remember an incident in order to conjure up what is perceived to be the appropriate emotion in order to play a scene. What's most compelling to an audience is witnessing a person in single-minded, absolutely determined pursuit of an objective."

Others tread a different path. "I consider myself a Michael

CONTINUED ON PAGE 131

Chekhov actor," says Benjamin Bauman, who appears in Mira Nair's film *The Namesake* and in the soon-to-be-released Christopher Grimm film *Goyband*. "Lenard Petit's work with the Chekhov technique has changed my life as a performer. I was trained in more traditional American approaches to acting, which I always found disturbing and difficult to work with. In conservatory I was often told to use my own emotions pasted—artificially, I felt—onto the character. This always made me feel uneasy. When teachers would get the actors irritated and raw for the sake of acting, it just didn't make sense to me."

Gottlieb is featured as one of seven actors in the DVD series "Master Classes in the Michael Chekhov Technique." "I've done quite a bit of moment-to-moment work—Meisner, Stanislavsky training, objectives and obstacles and so forth—what seems to make up the basis of most American acting training," she says. "These techniques are the bones, the skeleton, the basis, and, for me, the Michael Chekhov work is the blood, the color, the hard and soft tissue. The psycho-physical connection (I guess there is no better term for it than this) is what makes this work exciting. Metaphors become literalized through the body—through thought and energy."

Having performed scores of roles over the past 35 years, McCann is a devotee of a process of a different stripe. "This may come as a surprise, since it's not an acting technique, but I'd have to say the vocal work from Kristin Linklater's *Freeing the Natural Voice* has had the most impact on me. The breath, relaxation and connection work she lays out so clearly informs every aspect of my work as an actor," he says, "not just the vocal work. If you can connect, and breathe, and remain relaxed, the rest just flows. And John Barton's 'Shakespeare Sessions' with actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company opened my eyes like nothing else. A lot of my work with both of these 'ideas' came after I'd finished school and was beginning to work as an actor. But I have to say I'm still learning it."

When actors take their own course

Several years ago, I was co-producing a show with an artistic director I admire. During a casting session, as he leafed through actors' résumés, he remarked, "I get so many of these every week, but I won't even see an actor without a master's degree." As one whose training was more dinner theatre than Dartmouth, I was horrified, but came clean: "For God's sake," I cried, "I'm *directing* this play, and I never finished my bachelor's! I want trained actors, too, but an MFA's not what makes an actor."

With a delightfully throaty laugh, De Shields talks about the present he received from his sister Carmen on his 60th birthday. It's a baseball cap that reads "De Shields University." "When people ask me if that's where I went to school, I just smile broadly and say, 'Yes!'"

De Shields says his learning was "all instinctual, based on the dreams of a young child. I grew up in the late '50s and early '60s, so there weren't many opportunities for a young 'colored boy' to receive formal training. I think of it as 'B.D.' and 'A.D.'—before

Denzel, there were artists like Sammy Davis Jr., who learned from doing, and after Denzel, you could go to Yale."

Awarded an Emmy in 1982 for his performance in *Ain't Misbehavin'* and nominated for Tonys for *The Full Monty* (2001) and *Play On!* (1997), De Shields never studied music, dance or acting. "My proofing has been by fire, not by scholarship, not by apprenticeship," he says. "But it would be disingenuous for me to say I have had no training after a lifetime in the business. What I did was study myself in terms of the fabric of America. That is the catalyst for brilliant art: the idea that cruelty has a human heart, each of us working from a vast pool of sorrow. Anything else is pretend."

Obviously, his course is his own. "The methodology fundamental to my technique is Extreme Performance," De Shields states, explaining that this is "a self-generated process requiring dynamic repose—a golden triangle, if you will, of mind, body and spirit. The combination of rigorous physical, mental and emotional discipline liberates the actor from his addiction to the five material senses, while invoking the more visceral faculty of intuition, making possible the inhabiting of any character regardless of gender identification, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity or perceived disability."

It's worth noting that De Shields's concept of Extreme Performance, initially designed as an interdisciplinary arts workshop for NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, has since been embraced in workshops and master classes by universities and colleges nationwide, including Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Kansas, New Hampshire's Keene State College, City University of New York–Hunter College and State University of New York–Buffalo.

John Earl Jelks, a 2007 Tony nominee for his performance on Broadway in August Wilson's last play, *Radio Golf*, came to the theatre not with a lifelong passion for the art, but because a beautiful young woman had caught his eye. "I got my first acting experience at City College of San Francisco, under Gloria Weinstock, my first teacher. I was chasing this girl who went to sign up for an audition for Charles Gordone's *No Place to Be Somebody*, and I sat in the house while she got ready for the audition. Gloria came over and said, 'Don't you want to audition? I think you'd make a wonderful Johnny.' I didn't get the girl, but I got the role."

Jelks was only there for six weeks, but that first course was "all the 101 stuff: stage right, stage left, relaxation. Right after that, I got my first professional role. I just kept working." The ensuing years have brought him together with gifted actors and directors who, Jelks says, gave him the education he needed. "I've worked with great directors—Marion McClinton, Claude Purdy and Kenny Leon, among them—who taught me a lot."

Amplifying an actor's voice in the real world

There are times, of course, when actors find themselves working with directors or other actors who don't share their particular training or vocabulary. Sometimes the show at hand may ask for a more limited or specific set of skills. So how do actors get the work done in such instances? Does their training equip them to deal with challenging situations, either artistically or in that scary world we call "the marketplace"? Does it sometimes leave them feeling inadequate?

"Feelings of inadequacy are always present for me," Katigbak confesses. "I think it's the norm that various companies will have very different approaches, different languages. But the common purpose becomes a good guide. It may sometimes seem like we're saying different things when in fact we're trying to arrive at the same place. And the different ways of getting there can actually make for exciting dynamics."

As an actress in the regional theatre for more than 30 years and currently the head of the acting program at the University of Texas–Austin, Dorn addresses the problem simply. "My training has led me to approach the work every day in this way: This is what I think I do *at this moment*. I can't be thrown by how another actor does the work. I demand that you interact with me. If you don't, I'll be all over you. I'll be in your face and under your clothes, if you're not going to play."

She says there have been unexpected advantages to her training. "I've had a fairly substantial voiceover career. The first time I got such a job I realized, 'They are going to pay me a substantial amount of money to

read.' I developed those skills in voice class, and, of course, every time we did a scene, I was preparing for this career. I didn't know that at the time."

Lage agrees, adding, "The technique I use doesn't require that anyone else speak the same language. But when I work with colleagues who *do* use the same technique, we use a sort of shorthand that cuts to the chase." When working outside his home base at the Atlantic, Lage says he responds to challenges as a thinking actor. "The method of Physical Action comes in handy," he says, "when a bad director tells you to do something that is literally, physically impossible—be more 'blue,' for example. You can then translate the note into a legitimately accomplishable task."

Dugan is also well-known for his work on HBO's 1997–2003 series "Oz." "Technique is absolutely essential in television, where you are completely on your own in terms of rehearsal and character creation. There's simply no time to do what we consider bare necessities in theatre. So technique is vital. As is discipline, but that's another question."

Feeling that he has generally been well served by his training, McCann believes "most directors are willing to allow you to translate their method-speak for yourself, into words that work for you. I have rarely run into a director who insists on a vocabulary. In those cases," he says, "I nod, and then find my own way through. Most actors who have had more than one or two jobs know that you can't force a scene partner to do something. You both agree to disagree, and get on with the job at hand. There may always be something you can learn from another way of working—try it, you might like it! When that's not the case, you do your own work, and remember that the mortgage is getting paid, and the insurance weeks are piling up."

As for confronting the challenges of the marketplace, McCann believes that "the failings of my training have to do largely with the business. I came into the world almost totally unequipped to deal with the business part. A lot of young actors today seem to be the opposite: They are very business savvy, but seem unable to negotiate their way around a stage."

James contends that "actors create 'society' very quickly in rehearsal, like dogs sniffing each other's behinds. I think 95 percent of actors will negotiate with the others to give and get what's needed. The other 5 percent just can't play, or get stuck when a director is afraid of losing control of the process so he doesn't know how to allow actor input early on. For instance, with *Stuff Happens*, there were 25 actors on a bare stage, a smorgasbord of actors, supported by the director, Dan Sullivan. He allowed the kind of work where actors could get up and exchange their work for minutes and minutes before he would say anything. He would let them find it and then use it. It's rare, but it's better when the director is brave—when he sends subliminal signals to the actor that he or she is trusted."

Lauren, as a SITI member, lives in a world somewhat apart. "I'm a bit of a strange bird," she admits. "I live as an actor sharing my time with either Anne Bogart or Tadashi Suzuki—for over 15 years I have not worked with other directors. It's a bit outside the system here in the U.S. It's not better or worse, but it's the fact. I have a deep, ongoing conversation with two extraordinary theatre artists. They have each influenced theatre training enormously, independently and collectively. They have done that through the bodies of a band of actors. I have been one of those actors."

Though she may seem to have lived a hermetically sealed life in the theatre, Lauren actually began the Suzuki work at the urging of John Dillon, former artistic director of Milwaukee Repertory Theater, back when she was a member of the Wisconsin company. "Training isn't meant to wall you off from others," she says. "Everyone shares time and space together in the process. Those are the real issues being discussed in the rehearsal room, whatever language is being spoken." She does have a sense of humor about her relationship to the market, though. "Recently I was asked to audition for a show Off Broadway. I didn't know how to do it. I was terrible. I didn't know how to relate to the situation. I was rehearsing. In the end I was told they wanted a woman who could climax simply sitting in a chair. What a great problem! I thought to myself on the way out, 'My training sucks.'"

Jelks says he tries to keep the greater purpose in mind when entering a room to

work with those whose methods differ from his. "It's like bringing more than one god into the room: If you've got a group of Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims and Christians in the circle, what are you going to do? You're not going to say the same prayer, but you're all talking to God. I've worked with an actor who stays up drinking and smoking all night long. It's not my method, but it sure seems to work for him."

Jelks also uses his technique to make it through the kind of challenge that we all fear. While in rehearsal for Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* on Broadway, his wife died. "During the time of my wife's death, because of my training, I had the discipline to keep getting up every day. As difficult as it was artistically, I knew I couldn't give up. I just wanted to quit the race, but I owe it all to August and the team that was so supportive. August brought in material, one particular blues song called "Death Letter," that's about not being at home when there's a death. In my case I got a phone call; in the song the character gets a letter. If you lose someone, you've got to heal. This work was so healing. You never want to be unsure in this business. Once you say you can't do it, you can't do it."

Managing the longer journey

Actors are snowflakes: All are beautiful, no two quite alike. "We're really all so different," confirms Dorn, with a laugh. "We come to the theatre at different times in our lives, sometimes young, sometimes late in life after other careers. I don't think I was grown up enough to take on this business until I was in grad school. There is a maturation process. Some are innately gifted artists and come to it more readily."

Though Dorn says there is no such thing as one definitive training ground for an actor, she is sure of some things. "It doesn't matter where you learn, necessarily. But you have to be smart, and observant, and you have to want it a lot. Then you can figure out how to do it. I know that I need to be with people who are endlessly curious—who want to learn how the theatre works."

When it comes to values instilled by training, Lage speaks with pride of "an iron-clad work ethic." "People can think I suck as an actor, but they can't denigrate my work ethic," he says. "It's helped me to develop a set of aesthetic criteria to help guide me." Katigbak says she's learned "attention and reception—observation, especially of human behavior, but also how environment can be informative. Distilling lots of information to deliver work with simplicity and economy." Aside from gaining an education, she believes in "living with open eyes, ears and heart."

Gottlieb, too, believes training should be "wholly unique for each person." Even so, she notes, "I do think it's useful to travel, to train and work in other countries." She believes her work has taught her "respect, playfulness, courage, the willingness to look stupid sometimes in the service of getting to something that is *not* stupid, going for something with your whole heart, learning how to collaborate."

McCann's sense of values is practical and performance-oriented: "*Warm up*! That was beaten into us by our teachers, and I'm grateful every day. They also stressed that while it would be lovely to feel something, it was my job to make the people in the seats feel. And that if they couldn't hear me, it didn't matter what I was doing."

McCann also says, "I've never thought that acting could be taught. Skills, yes. But I firmly believe you are an actor or you aren't. So I would also say, don't stay hidden in school forever. Yes, get some training, but then get out into the world. Read books, protest the mess our country has become, listen to music, fall in love, pay your bills, argue politics late into the night. Shakespeare told us to hold the mirror up to nature, not to hold the mirror up to the mirror. Bring something into the theatre besides the theatre. We'll all be better for it."

Jelks knows he's taken a very singular path to his successful career, but "I really like the journey I've taken. There are some brilliant children out there who can't afford these big schools." He also reminds us, "There's a big world out there to learn from. If you commit to a job, it will make you a better actor. Commit fully."

For Lauren, long-term study "cultivates a basic foundation of respect and stamina. By this I mean respect for the others and for the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 137

FOR WORKING ACTORS, THE READINESS IS ALL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 134

space, and a perseverance to make those relationships extraordinary. Art is not a mother tongue. It demands deep commitment and study. Anyone can have a good day and be wildly effective. But to sustain a life in the theatre takes constant practice."

Just having finished a run in Langston Hughes's *Black Nativity* at Classical Theatre of Harlem, the veteran De Shields retains the passion of youth. "My training has instilled the following values: fearlessness, the thrill of being perched capriciously on the precipice of the abyss, the refusal to be satisfied with theatre as a way *of* life, but rather to pursue it as a way *to* life, to take my place on the world stage, and to be my authentic self by getting out of my head and into my gut.

"The greatest achievement," De Shields maintains, "is to see theatre as an infinite, not a finite, journey. You learn to love that life on the precipice and to jump—you either sprout wings and soar, or the net will appear. Failure is only known by those who do not jump."

For more than 30 years Charlie Hensley has been a working actor, director, artistic director and teacher. An internationalist, he has worked in Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Central Europe.

MADNESS IN THE METHODS?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 58

Lynn jokes. Despite this, various institutions have courted Rude Mechs, asking its members to teach classes and workshops. Thus far they've demurred. "We kept going back to our own process for playmaking—or rather, our *lack* of a singular process that we can easily articulate," says Lana Lesley, another artistic director. One of the collaborators' concerns, which can be seen in their construction of Stella Burden's individualist "legacy," is the "institutionalized misinterpretation" of a guru's teachings—which, as Lesley puts it, results in "a mass of acting students literally performing their training on stage (as opposed to using that training as a tool to create their performance)." She concludes, "This kind of codification also results in a disturbing singular style among students today."

Not unlike Rude Mechs, MITU's inception as ensemble in 1997 began with a sense of wonder over the impossible. "The initial hope was to conceive ideas [for productions] that we had no clue how to act, direct or design, knowing that this impossibility would lead us onto new ground," Polendo says. Lately that's changed for the group—there was a feeling among its members that they had fallen into a rut of "A + B = C"—and the hunger to challenge itself anew and create "Z" pushed MITU into making *DRC*. As for training, the company's actors have a motley mix of undergraduate and masters degrees. Polendo trained as a biochemist, spent time in India studying religious ritual and later received an M.A. in non-Western theatre at Lancaster University in the U.K. and an MFA in directing from University of California–Los Angeles.

MITU has embraced pedagogy: Along with workshops, classes and intensives