



PHOTOFEST

From l to r: Polly Bergen, Ralph Bellamy, Kitty Carlisle, and Hy Gardner were regular panelists on the classic game show *To Tell the Truth*.

# How to tell the truth

*An acting game that teaches lying for the stage*

BY BRUCE MILLER

**H**arold Clurman, the great director and theatre critic, once referred to good acting as “lies like truth.” He even named a book of essays on theatre and acting by this title. When asked about his acting process, Spencer Tracy said he “just looked the other actors straight in the eyes and told the truth.” It’s interesting to note that of all the great actors of the thirties, it is Tracy whose style never changed in movies as he grew older, because it never had to.

The words of Clurman and Tracy capture the spirit of what good acting is all about. Acting is indeed about lying truthfully. After all, the actor is given fictional lines to say, fictional situations to play out, and fictional places to enact these lies; but when done well, the audience believes the actor completely. Just like successful liars in life, the successful actor is so believable that her lies do indeed become “lies like truth.”

It’s ironic, then, that beginning actors, even the ones known to tell a successful lie or two in life, often fall into the trap of “acting” onstage. Acting in this context refers to behaving onstage in a performed manner, one that immediately tells us that the actor is performing rather than doing. Quite often the actor moves and speaks in a manner that, as Simon Cowell would say, “if we were being completely honest,” we would never confuse with real-life behavior. And yet, at the high school level, this mode of performance is sometimes considered the benchmark of good acting. If the actor shows energy and charisma, many high school directors, parents, and peers are willing to accept as believable work that would never pass on the professional stage or even on the college level. Yet it is also true that even in this venue, where overacting is sometimes an accepted coin of the

realm, there is also the natural who seems as real as we could possibly want, with no less energy. And the audience is always able to single out this kind of actor, even while praising the work of others, who are really putting it on thick.

The idea here is that it’s possible to train our students to keep it real even while meeting the performance demands of a large space or the energy levels required by an upbeat 1930s musical. This training begins with an awareness of the difference between performing and behaving in a realistic manner; or, the difference between lying badly, and lying like truth. If we can get our students to recognize that difference, they will come to appreciate it. And if they come to appreciate it, they will make it a goal in their own work. As teachers we must point out the difference and begin to find ways to get them to “lie like truth.”

Here then is a game that is all about lying like truth, that can easily be played in the classroom. If you are in your forties or older, or you watch the game show cable channel, you may already be very familiar with *To Tell the Truth*, which had a long prime-time run on network television in the 1950s and 60s. It is a perfect game to develop the skills required for delivering lines and performing a role believably.

### Preparing to play

For those who may not have seen the original show, *To Tell the Truth* had a basic gimmick: a row of regular panelists would decide which of three contestants was telling the truth about himself. The host would read aloud an “affidavit,” a story about one of the three players. The contestants would then appear, introduce themselves with the same name, and answer questions from the panelists, who would then vote for the person each panelist believed was telling the truth. The game would end when the host asked, “Will the real Bruce Miller (or whoever) please stand up?” and the contestant with the most votes would win.

Obviously, the game will need to be modified for classroom use. First of all, you as the teacher will act as the producer and will solicit stories from the students to serve as affidavits. This can be done as homework or an in-class assignment. Either way, you should ask your students to write a first-person affidavit. This story will need to be clear in the writer’s mind so that he or she can coach the imposter with solid details and be ready to answer their questions without having to say “I don’t know” or “I don’t remember” too often. The story may be funny or serious, but it must be clearly written and leave enough information out so that finding questions to ask will not prove to be an overwhelming challenge for the student-panelists.

For example, here is an affidavit in the style of the original show:

*I, Bruce Miller, was once saved from drowning by an angel. This divine intervention occurred while I was vaca-*

*tioning in Europe. A friend and I were rafting in extremely rough waters when the current overtook us and began pushing us toward a mountainous reef of sharp coral rock. We had to swim constantly against the overwhelming current in order to avoid being flung to our deaths. After more than an hour of fighting the waves and current, we were at the point of exhaustion and ready to meet our fate. We held onto our rafts and prepared to use them as our only protection against the razor-like coral. When we looked up toward the rock face above us, our prayers seemed answered. High on the cliff stood a large winged angel silhouetted against the sun. He was waving his arms, signaling us to drift around to the far side of the reef. Having no other choice, we followed his instruction. We soon discovered that the waves and current were less severe on this side, and we survived the waves that flung us onto the mountain of coral. Moments later a group of locals climbed down to pull us from the rocks that had impaled us. When we asked what had become of the angel, our rescuers laughed. They told us we had been blessed with a miracle. “No one,” they said in Spanish, “ever survives the reef once caught as you were.” We later found out that the beach from which we swam was known locally as La Playa del Muerto—the Beach of Death. If it hadn’t been for the angel, we never would have thought to try the far side.*

*Sincerely,  
Bruce Miller*

Note that the affidavit ought to be an account of something that actually happened (as is the case here), even if there are elements that might seem extraordinary.

When the affidavits have been turned in, it will be your job to decide which ones will make for the best rounds of the game. You may want to ask for some rewriting or do some editing yourself. If you solicit the rewrites from your students, you will need to do so in a way that does not reveal who has been selected. The length of your class and the amount of time you allow for each round will determine

how many letters may be read in a particular session; in a forty- to fifty-minute class you are likely to get through two or three.

Each round will require three contestants, a host, and four questioners, if you use the show’s model. You can also solicit questions from the class, or if there is a lull, ask questions yourself. (Be careful not to usurp the game from the students, if you do so.) In my experience, using a panel of questioners for each round is the better way to go. This way, four students are specifically invested in getting to the truth, and are more likely to apply themselves. Those not playing in a particular round will observe and try to figure out which methods for questioning (and lying) work best. They will also try to figure out who the liars are.

Once you have decided which stories you want to use, select the imposters to work beside the truth-teller. If the story is gender-specific, you will need to select groups with that in mind. If the story requires physical derring-do, you will need to cast the imposters who look like they could do the required tasks. Or, you may want to cast against type. Ultimately, your job as producer is to make for a good show, and a good show is one in which the questioners and audience are not sure who the real person is—or better yet, when they are sure and turn out to be dead wrong.

After you have divided your class into groups, each team of contestants will need time to do their research and prepare. Again, this can be done as homework, or you can give students class time. It will be up to the truth-teller to fill in as much information as he or she can muster, but the imposters will need to ask lots of questions to make sure that they have the information at their fingertips. Encourage them to question each other in the manner and with the questions that the panelists might ask them. Like a candidate preparing for a debate, the contestant groups should role-play together, so they are totally warmed up and prepared for the actual game in class. Recommend that they take notes and do some memorization.

Of course, the imposters may choose the strategy of lying when they don't know an answer, or simply lie because they want to. But a string of lies is always more difficult to maintain and keep consistent. The truth, on the other hand, can simply be reported, even if it is someone else's truth. Winging it by making up answers out of laziness (rather than creativity) does not reinforce the basic idea that it is an actor's responsibility to tell the best story possible.

A little time should also be spent on the big revelation moment when the host asks the big question, "Will the real Bruce Miller please stand up?" In the original show, that moment was always one with dramatic tension and laughs. The contestants can add considerably to the climax of the game, as well as enjoy the opportunity for some suspenseful but realistic acting.

When the teams have completed their preparation and rehearsal, they are ready to play the game. Ideally, the playing area should be set up as an actual game show stage might look, which will help even the more giddy students to take the game seriously. You could try seating the panelists and contestants on two upstage diagonals facing each other and the audience, with the host in the middle or off to the side.

In practice, the game can run much like the original show would. The contestants will enter, and the host will ask, "What is your name, please?" Each of the contestants will give their own name rather than that of the truth-teller. The host will read the affidavit, objectively but with expression—meaning the host will need to rehearse the reading in advance as part of the host's acting work.

Next, the contestants should go to their seats, and the first panelist begins his or her questioning. Your or the host should allow each panelist only a set amount of time, or only a set number of questions, to be determined beforehand. In the sample affidavit above, notice all the basic information that the document has left out. Where does the story take place? What city? What was the body of water? With

whom was Bruce Miller swimming? Why were they there? When did this happen? Is Miller religious? What details can be shared about the angel? And so on.

When all panelists have asked their questions, the host will say, "Now it's time to vote." The host will call on each panelist in turn, and ask them who they voted for and why. When the panelists have completed voting, the host will say, "Will the real so-and-so please stand up?" Since the host cannot use a single name here, he or she should substitute a phrase that captures the essence of the affidavit. (With my affidavit, for example, the host might say, "Will the real person saved by an angel please stand up?") The question will be followed by the prepared moment of revelation.

At that point the game can be considered to be over, and you can begin a discussion on the game's effectiveness, what worked, what didn't, and why or why not. Though no money will be awarded in the class game, a good grade for effectively fooling the panel and class can certainly be substituted for cash.

You should encourage and remind all players to take the game seriously as they would a part in a play. Side-commenting or grandstanding can dilute the intensity of the game, and the parallels between acting and the game will be lost.

### **What students can learn**

Anyone who has ever been duped by a good liar knows that to tell a good lie, one must pretend to be telling the truth. That is how liars suck us in. The best actors will also lie like truth, convincing us that the lines they say, the actions they take, and the emotions they conjure are absolutely real, and not just imitations.

In this game, each team of contestants must be able to convince their audience that they are telling the truth as they respond to the panelists' questions. The liars must be as convincing as the one who tells the truth—perhaps more so. The real Bruce Miller in the example above need not work as hard as the liars. After all, he does not

want to be selected, because each vote he gets is essentially a loss for the team. Therefore, he and his fellow conspirators must find an intensity level that makes them all indistinguishable. Even the liars must not work too hard to convince—or overact.

As I said earlier, the contestants need to prepare very well. They will need to know the answers to all the questions likely to be asked, and the more details they know, the more convincing they will be. Of course, these details will need to be slipped in naturally as part of their story. If the contestants pile on the detail as though they are trying to be impressive, they will fail. But the well-placed, naturally understated detail is likely to draw the votes.

Their ability to lie believably hinges on how specific the truth-teller can be during preparation. Some of the actual storytellers may advance this kind of detail on their own, but others will need to be drawn out. The teams preparing together will have to work hard to figure out what is likely to be asked and what makes a good answer.

Getting the contestants to explore their "character" seriously will provide an excellent analogy for the kind of work they need to do when working on a script. In a sense, they are making choices when they respond to the questions. What if I told you that the Bruce Miller's raft was made of canvas, not plastic? What if I told you that it had a rope that ran all around the perimeter that enabled him to hold on even as the waves propelled him onto the rocks? That it was this rope that let him hold on for dear life as he awaited his rescuers? What if I told you that Miller had hundreds of razor sharp cuts all over his body caused by the sharp coral rubbing against his skin? You get the idea. The contestants' process of preparing their answers is not unlike taking the information they get from a script and building a believable character from there.

The panelists will be looking for details that only the real person can provide, and they will be looking for a delivery that sounds real versus a delivery that does not. If the contestants can sound truthful and give those spe-

cial details that seemingly only a truth-teller would know, then they will have the game licked. There is an analogy here, of course, to acting. That special moment or action that is so truthful, so seemingly spontaneous is often one that seals a performance in a audience's mind and heart. The liars in *To Tell the Truth* will hopefully hit on such a moment or two as they prepare, and as a result, learn a great deal about "lying like truth" from the game experience. It will be up to you as the teacher to help them make the connections.

Another analogous note on the game compared to acting onstage: some beginning actors only act when they are delivering lines. This is a neon sign pointing to bad acting. In life, we are behaving at all times, and it should be the same way in the game or onstage. The way the contestants listen to each other and to the panel, even when they are not being addressed, can give off vital information about whether they are lying or telling

the truth. Strategic reactions to what others say can be as effective as giving the right answers, but these reactions must be every bit as believable as the things the contestants might say when solicited.

It is the same when acting on the stage. Those who simply count lines forget that every moment spent on stage, with or without dialogue, requires that the actor is present and reacting at every moment. Action and silence tell compelling stories as much words do.

Effective panelists, on the other hand, will play their roles with equal seriousness. They have an objective: to discover who is telling the truth. Listening carefully is a skill that the good actor absolutely needs to possess, and only by listening closely, and analyzing comparatively and objectively, will they be able to determine the single player who is obligated to tell the truth.

The panelists are also responsible for challenging and keeping the con-

testants off-guard with their questions. Doing so increases the conflict in the game, in the same way that a character in a play feeds the conflict and moves the plot forward as he pursues *his* objective.

For the beginning actor, the game serves many purposes: character research and building, acting as a team, listening as an actor, and focusing on one's objective are all major aspects of acting reinforced by this role-playing. Hopefully, your students will recognize that the sort of acting they need to do in actual performances—whether it's a realistic play or the wildest *commedia dell'arte*—must be honest and believable. It needs to seem just like truth.

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