

Would you eat them for a scene?

Sam-I-am in acting class

BY BRUCE MILLER

THE STUDENTS in my B.F.A. acting program spend hours every day for four years developing their craft. Yet I still find that many of them have trouble mastering the analysis and synthesis of a script before graduating. Since this is one of the most important skill sets a young actor should acquire during training—if not *the* most important one—it troubles me that so many of my talented students leave unable to work as independently as I'd like.

Finding the meat and potatoes of a script and creating ways to bring it all to life is what an actor is called upon to do at every audition. When an actor gets a set of sides and heads off to the casting agent's office, he or she had better be able to read the script effectively and make choices that will bring the character to life. That means playing the psychological and physical actions in a way that reveals the character to the audience. Your students will need to figure out what objectives to play and then carry them out through the way they deliver their dialogue and execute their physical choices.

The usual way of developing these skills is through scene study with scripted material, and it's how my classes and I spend most of our time together. It's hard work. I tell my students that, like broccoli, it's good for them, but I have also found that it helps keep them engaged to vary the menu sometimes, and serve snacks and dessert once in a while to keep it



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fun. I used to use improvisational games and exercises for this kind of relief, but increasingly I feel like class time is so precious it ought to be spent on more meaningful work.

What's really great is when I can serve up something fun and delicious that is loaded with acting vitamins and protein. For my beginning actors, a meal of *Green Eggs and Ham* is the perfect menu offering. It covers most of the basics actors face when confronting a play, yet at the same time is straightforward and accessible, and offers up a host of possibilities for learning and building a successful little theatrical production.

Setting the table

In the exercise, groups of about a half-dozen actors are assigned to use the text of Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* to create a scene. This exercise will help your students define and exe-

cute many analysis and synthesis skills, including the following:

- Determining a play's conflict.
- Establishing character objectives.
- Determining a play's arc.
- Using operative words effectively.
- Hearing and executing dialogue with a sensitivity toward its music, tempo, and rhythm.
- Finding moments in a script and creating moments on stage.
- Developing listening and reacting skills.
- Discovering and maintaining an effective world of the play (its style).
- Finding and executing clear physical choices consistent with the character, situation, and world of the play.
- Learning to work as an ensemble.

Divide your students into groups appropriate for the size and make-up of your class. You will need to consider how many groups will be able to perform the text of *Green Eggs and Ham* during a particular session and how many sessions you will want the exercise to go through. You will also want to allow time for discussion and perhaps some reworking of the presented material during each session. My own class time runs for about an hour and twenty minutes. I most recently divided my class into three groups of six, and was able to watch all three groups and give notes during a single session.

I use two sessions, reserving the second for redoing the performances

after I've given notes and the students have worked them into the script. Depending on how fast you work and how much class discussion is appropriate for your needs, you may want to devote more or less time to the exercise.

Your students will work from the published text. You will be surprised how many of them have copies of the book at home, either a tattered and much-loved specimen from their own childhood or one that belongs to a younger sibling. Or it's available in bookstores for about \$9.

(You're on solid ground, in terms of copyright law, adapting a published text like *Green Eggs and Ham* for a classroom scene exercise. What you cannot do without permission is make photocopies of the book. You also can't legally present the adapted work to an audience outside the classroom.)

It is difficult to ignore the charms of the Dr. Seuss illustrations, but you should urge your students to try. The scenes they'll be preparing should be based exclusively on the text. Ask them to read it with particular attention to the images it evokes and the musicality of the language.

With my college freshman B.F.A. class, I simply tell my teams that they will get one class session to prepare and rehearse a production of *Green Eggs and Ham*. I warn them that it will likely take more time than that, but the rest of the necessary rehearsal will have to be done outside of class and on their own. That means that all of the members of each group would have to agree to and commit to the time demanded by each production.

I tell each group that they are to produce an entertaining story that is clear and compelling. How they choose to divide up the script is entirely up to them, but all cast members must have a significant role in the production. Each cast member is expected to have all lines memorized, and all blocking should be clearly learned and executed for storytelling clarity and effectiveness. No element of the production is to be improvised. The concept each group comes up with for their production is entirely up to them, but

it has to serve the script's themes and story, and it has to work. I strongly suggest that each group stick with a simple idea.

As to directing, I tell them to discuss the concept and execution as a group and see who emerges as the group leader, or who has the best grasp of the working concept. Costumes and props are encouraged, but only if they are manageable and serve the script and concept. The bulk of the production's success should rely on the acting, not on spectacle or production pyrotechnics.

Because I have done this exercise several times over the years, I know the script pretty well, and I choose to let my beginning students do their own analysis. They have been in class for well over a month when I do the exercise, and have been drilled in basic storytelling concepts. They know about conflict as the engine of drama; they know that objectives come from the established conflict. They know a story must have an arc—it starts somewhere and ends somewhere else—and the bigger the arc the more interesting the journey. They also know that characters have arcs and actors must determine what that arc is and be able to play it through. They know that a script has built-in moments that must be executed, and that these storytelling moments are the stepping stones or connect-the-dots map of the story. They know that the higher the stakes, the better the story. They know they must play actions physically and psychologically and they know that the physical and psychological choices they make must come from the script. The choices they make must be reflected in the way they deliver their lines. Finally, they know they must be able to listen and to react on stage. My students know all this—at least in theory—by the time they do this exercise. So I send them off to turn theory into practice.

You might, and for good reason, choose to spend a session or two analyzing the script with your students as a classroom activity. Though the story is not deep, it definitely contains all

the elements found in a conventional playscript.

Briefly, for those of you who haven't had occasion to read *Green Eggs and Ham* recently, the book opens with a gentleman declaring he does not like "that Sam-I-am," who, it develops, is eager to share some green eggs and ham. Sam-I-am suggests various places and circumstances where the breakfast might be consumed—in a box, with a fox, in a house, with a mouse, and elsewhere—and meets with strong sales resistance. But ultimately the object of Sam's attention capitulates, tries the food, and of course likes it.

The story is centered on a conflict that is established early. The characters are furnished with well-defined objectives and tactics, and the story is chock full of visible transitional moments that can be fully played. (Just in case you are unfamiliar with this acting terminology, an objective is the need an actor as character must pursue at all times. A tactic is a particular device an actor as character uses to fulfill that objective. A transitional moment is the point at which an objective or tactic is given up and replaced by another. This happens when a character gets what he needs—a victory—or fails to get what he needs—a defeat—or makes a discovery that changes his need, or is interrupted by a new obstacle or distraction that must be faced immediately.) These big moments in the script are easily recognizable, and pointing them out to your students will help them later to build the arc of their story toward its climax.

The language will also provide you with an excellent opportunity to discuss operative words—words that must be emphasized to make the story clear and compelling and help the characters get what they need. In addition, in the case of Seussian verse, hitting the right words will help make the script funny, delightful, rhythmic, and musical. A failure to address the language issue will bury its beauty, a gigantic mistake when attempting to make any word-centered script successful in production. Teaching your students about the importance of using language ef-

fectively in a language-based script that is easily accessible will help them later when they might have occasion to tackle the far more difficult challenges of Shakespeare, Shaw, Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, Paula Vogel, Caryl Churchill, or David Mamet.

Many students think that phrasing comes naturally out of situation, and they're partially right. Scripts that have no particularly strong language component, scripts that sound like the way ordinary people speak, might be handled without much forethought in terms of shaping—if the actor is particularly talented—but this is almost impossible when the material is poetic in any way. Moreover, there is a science to handling word comedy, from Shaw to Simon. Words are put in apposition, phrases are setups for punchlines, and lists build in color and intensity. This is as true for Dr. Seuss as it is for Dr. Shakespeare. Learning to handle language is an essential part of an actor's skills, and *Green Eggs and Ham* makes for an excellent primer in this area.

Whether you choose to work through an analysis with your students or send them off to do their own, adapting the material into an on-the-feet production will provide them with many lessons about theatre, acting, and working together, as well as offering a framework for a great deal of fun. Finding the concept, then finding ways to maintain that concept, will prove difficult. But the process will help your students understand how maintaining the world of the play is absolutely necessary, and that all elements of the play from costume to movement must be consistent if the production is to work. Your students will also need to make blocking choices—movement, gesture, and business. And all these choices and their execution will need to be believable, and help tell the story.

In the end it is the story that must come through. Dr. Seuss has provided a terrific story with plenty of conflict to keep it interesting. As in most of his work, there is also a significant message behind the story. Can your students use the conflict, the language,

their blocking, and the concept they come up with to tell that story? Can they provide a framework that will allow the message to come through clearly and effectively? Can what they put together both entertain and enlighten the audience? If it does, then this exercise will have been far more than snack food.

Three meals, three plays

The three groups in my freshman class this year came up with three very different versions of the *Green Eggs and Ham* story.

The first group developed a *Mean Girls* concept set in a high school cafeteria. In their version Sam is an out-cast nerd with his belt far above his waist, pocket protector loaded with pencils, and windshield glasses. After being stared at and laughed at he makes a peace offering by trying to share his green eggs and ham. Though absorbing endless bullets of ridicule, he persistently and good-naturedly continues to try to get the cool kids to take a bite. When one of them finally gives him credit for his persistence and agrees to sample the food, the others, one at a time, also try it and are ultimately won over, and the lesson is learned. All of the cool kids' movements were coordinated and stylized, heightened gestures, each a variation of the one that came before, each showing the importance of following the herd while putting on a stamp of individuality. As Sam's pressure on them to try his eggs and ham grew, their response gestures increased in intensity and tempo. It was beautiful choreography that really worked. All cool-kid dialogue was split nicely so that each of them had several individual moments to react and show their own personality. All of the cool kids employed a similar sarcastic tone, but each actor had an individual pitch, rhythm, or distinct vocal mannerism. When each of them at the cafeteria table pulled out their individually decorated lunch bag, we had a moment of brilliance. The play worked beautifully. The stylization was clever, consistent, and satirical.

The second group came up with a similar concept for the basic conflict, but created a far different world. This time, the nerd with the pocket protector and beltline pulled up to his arm-pits was pitted against an army of bling-bling rappers and the whole piece was set against a pulsing rap beat created vocally by the cast, who ambulated in totally stylized rapper moves, except, of course, for the nerd who couldn't keep the beat. The rhythm and tempo were completely musical and the piece was a world of dance, except when the actors were punctuating a big moment. At those moments the music would stop, change tempo, or be accentuated by a scratch beat that sounded like a turntable but was actually a vocal impression. The silences and beat changes were always accompanied by some movement, group gesture, or individual physical punctuation, sometimes in isolation, sometimes in a sequence. These were always well chosen, clever, and funny. The world that was created consistently walked the line between self-aware satire and winking to the audience, but never went beyond the tease. The costumes matched the concept. Some characters wore panty hose on their heads, suggesting the ears of Seuss characters. In combination with the movements and the overall bling impression, the piece was somewhere between OutKast and Whoville. It was very funny, yet the story came through.

The third piece was more problematic. It was set in an almost realistic world—a restaurant where the waiters were all pushy Sams foisting their menu choices on an unwary couple who were attempting to get engaged. Because of the semi-realistic approach, moments needed to be defined and executed with realistic beginnings, middles, and ends. But the couple failed to clearly establish through specific physical action the romantic step-by-step of the engagement process—getting the ring, showing the ring, offering the ring, reacting to the ring. Complicating matters, the wait staff soon interrupted with their own agenda, trying to make the couple order

their special, which was of course green eggs and ham. Before long, the conflict between the couple and the pushy wait staff was engaged, and the give-and-take was reading clearly to the audience. The waiters pushed their agenda while the couple tried vainly for privacy. The situation kept escalating. But this meant that each new tactic would require a realistic response, and the responses had to keep getting bigger. After all, the wait staff was interrupting the romantic moment of a lifetime.

The couple did become adversarial to the waiters, but unlike in the other pieces, which had a single protagonist, they also needed to become a team working together against a common enemy. The arc of this development would need to be clearly rendered. They had expectations of each other, and each of them did not always rise to the occasion in an appropriate or meaningful way. This should have caused a parallel conflict between them. That dynamic also raised many storytelling and reactive moments that the actors did not always grasp or use. The wait staff fell into the same problem. Though they had a shared goal, their tactics did not always work in tandem. They approached winning the couple over individually, but that individualism sometimes stepped on moments being created by the other waiters. Sometimes their simultaneous attacks made sense, but they did not always seem to be aware of what the other waiters were doing. This led to an artificial quality in which all were trying to be funny, but the lack of interaction made it seem less than believable.

After each presentation, I gave notes and the class was invited to make comments. Each acting team was given one week to integrate the notes into their performance and modify their production. They were told to get together right away before the notes became too fuzzy to remember and use effectively. No more class time was allotted for rehearsals. The groups would have to work together outside of class.

Exactly one week from the original presentation, each team redid their

work. All were excellent—a beautiful integration of building on the notes given and taking the work further. Sometimes, groups get off track in their redo, because they try to add in too much and get away from what worked so effectively the first time. But that was not the case this year. Even the third group, who had the most adjusting to do, brought in a very funny and seemingly realistic piece of work. In spite of the ridiculousness of the situation, the cast played each moment as though the storyline were based in reality. The combination of absurd and real made for a truly satisfying piece. Even the dialogue managed to sound as though it were spontaneously born of the moment.

Dessert

As I said at the outset, I prefer to spend most of my class time doing with my classes what actors do most—taking apart a script, making choices, and learning to execute them effectively. But even my seniors say to me every once in a while, after a round of Ibsen, for instance, “Why can’t we play one of those great games we did freshman year?” My reaction to this kind of question is always complex and mixed. On one hand, I’m happy that what we did three years ago stays with them. On the other hand, I ask myself, “Would they really rather play games than do the work?” Of course, I know and understand the feeling, but at least with an exercise like this one, I can think to myself:

“I do so like
green eggs and ham!
Thank you!
Thank you,
Sam-I-am!”

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