

Script analysis

An acting teacher returns to the stage, part three

BY BRUCE MILLER

Last spring veteran acting teacher Bruce Miller returned to the stage as a professional actor for the first time in fourteen years, appearing in a play called White People by J. T. Rogers at the New Theatre in Coral Gables, Florida. "My return to the stage started out less than joyfully," he says. "My excitement was compromised by the fact that I was scared to death. I was petrified at the possibility of failing, or embarrassing myself, and especially of looking bad in front of my peers, colleagues, and associates. I had worked hard on my teaching and directing in the years since my last venture on stage, and a part of me feared I could destroy a reputation established through years of committed work."

As he worked on the role, though, Miller gradually learned that the body of acting craft he had acquired in fourteen years of teaching was equal to the challenge. In our summer and fall issues he wrote about memorization, relaxation, and emotion as observed through the prism of his work on White People. In this article, the third and final one in this series, he discusses how the experience gave him an opportunity to apply script analysis, an element of craft that is central to his teaching.

The acting process must always begin with the script.

I am happy to report that script analysis served me extremely well in my return to the stage. For those of you who are familiar with my writing and teaching, you know that my emphasis has always been on the actor's responsibility for telling the story the playwright has given us, believably and compellingly. In order to accomplish this goal, I have always stressed that it is essential that the actor first be able to analyze the script meaningfully and accurately, and then be able to make and execute a series of choices that will tell the story based on that analysis. Instinct and intuition come later. Of course the actor must be believable as well, but she can only complete her mission by making choices that are clear, compelling, and in line with the script. When an actor does this, she insures that her work will be exciting, but never at the expense of the overall intentions of the playwright. This is how I teach and this is how I approached my own responsibility in the production I was about to become a part of.

White People by J. T. Rogers is a full-length play without intermission. It is populated by three characters who never interact with each other on stage. Each of the characters speaks for about thirty to thirty-five minutes, addressing the audience but never each other. Though each of their long monologues is actually in continuous time, their speeches have been broken up by the playwright and divided into six or seven sections. Each of the characters speaks in five- to seven-minute chunks; at the end of each speech another character picks up where he or

she previously left off. Each of the character's monologues is linked to the others only by the general themes of the play and by the fact that the focus for each character derives from a problem related to a son or daughter.

In the case of my character, Martin Bahmueller, a son has committed a violent hate crime on a young black couple. As a result Martin, a high-powered corporate lawyer, is forced to leave his job and confront, somewhat obliquely, his own veiled prejudices and his indirect complicity in his son's actions. Each of the other characters confronts the terrible residue of his or her own beliefs as well, and as more and more of the truth of their situations is revealed, each tries desperately to come to terms with the pain and grief caused by their beliefs.

Let me say that the preceding paragraph was a difficult one for me to write. Without going into a lot of detail, I wanted you to get what the play is about, how it works, and who my character is, and give you enough to understand the comments on analysis I will soon be making. I had to select a set of core items to share with you from the large volume of information that's available to me. If I told you everything, you would have been overloaded and not known what is important. If I told you too little or the wrong things, you would not understand what will soon follow. The point here is that if I have been successful, it is because I understand what the play is about and how it works—through its themes, its action or story, and its characters and dialogue. This is exactly the kind of process an actor must go through when he prepares a role, I believe, and it is this approach I try to teach my students.



EILEEN SUAREZ

The author in the New Theatre production of *White People*.

The good news for me was that the necessary analysis came fairly easy to me, much more easily than it might have fourteen years ago. I believe this to be the result of my years of teaching analysis as part of the acting craft. As I have already pointed out in the previous articles of this series, mastery of the elements of craft come more easily when you are responsible for teaching it to others. You really have to understand it to teach it effectively.

There is no doubt that knowing what to look for, knowing how to find it, and knowing how to use what I found made my early work on the script both economical and effective.

In the previous two articles of this series I noted how the memorization process, relaxation, and emotion affected my ability to first come to terms with and then execute a series of choices that would ultimately lead me to my performance. Each of these items, not normally topics in my teaching toolbox, proved to be essential in the crafting and refining of my work. As I explained in those earlier articles, my actual rehearsals with the

director and other members of the cast would consist of only one week, including all run-throughs and dress rehearsals.

It was, therefore, incumbent on me to arrive at my first official rehearsal memorized and having already made the bulk of my acting choices. There would be no time for casual discovery and refinement with a director. My analysis choices, by necessity, quickly merged with my memorization process, and my memorization process merged with my process for making physical choices. Physical action helped me memorize and at the same time helped me find and more clearly define acting moments that my analysis might have already suggested. When I was relaxed, everything came to me more readily, and my imagination and my in-the-moment sensibilities helped make creative and useful things happen. In turn, my personal rehearsal process further helped me discover what I had to that point missed in the script, and then translate any new discoveries into the final choices I would be bringing to my first official rehearsal.

The reviews are in

At the risk of seeming immodest, I want to share with you now what the critics had to say about the play and my work in it.

“[*White People*] is, by turns, funny, sad, disturbing and terrific,” the *Miami Herald* said. “In another strong production from Coral Gables’ New Theatre and director Rafael de Acha, three fiercely powerful actors are illuminating the lives of people who have little more in common than the hue of their skin and a racism that they struggle to express, suppress, shape or justify.”

The *Sun Sentinel* called us “an engrossing experience that deliberately sneaks up on you, and leaves you arguing with yourself long after it’s over.”

New Times recommended the play as “[a] chance to catch three fine performances in what really could be termed a spoken opera. The cast is strong, but Miller is outstanding. He plays the attorney in a fast-talking monotone, managing the difficult feat of making a humorless character seem very funny, but when the scarier aspects of the lawyer’s tale are finally revealed, Miller really grabs you by the throat.”

“And there is Martin Bahmueller (Bruce Miller),” the critic for the *Palm Beach Post* wrote, “an attorney who recently moved from the Northeast to St. Louis, in part for the safety of his family, which he seems to find in the racially homogeneous suburbs. If Miller stands out among [the cast], it is because his button-down, smug, almost overtly racist character could easily drift into caricature. He keeps the guy grounded in reality, even as the rug gets pulled out from under him.”

During my years as a professional actor, experience taught me not to read what critics had to say, but this time around, since I was told that all the criticism was positive, I decided to indulge. I'm including those quotes here not to brag but to make a point. What the critics are really referring to with their kind words to me is the craft that I applied in the preparation and performance of my work, mostly a result of script analysis and synthesis. I have never considered myself a great actor, but despite my nerves, despite my lack of confidence, I had never felt so literally able to craft a performance, all based on what I had learned about using a script specifically and efficiently during my years of teaching.

With that in mind, let's take a closer look at the process I took myself through before actual rehearsals began.

The steps of analysis

What exactly was the story I was going to be telling? That was the question with which I began my analysis. For many actors, especially student actors, finding the essential story is no easy task. In the case of *White People* it is particularly elusive, because the playwright's device is to mask the important story threads for as long as possible for each of the characters. In my seven speeches, the first three offered no direct information about the specific problems in my character's life or the driving conflict for him. Only at the end of the fourth speech does he directly admit that there is a problem between his son and himself. Only in the fifth does he begin to reveal that he is pained and troubled by his own place in the world. And it is not until the sixth and seventh speeches that the awful truth of his situation becomes graphically clear. Yet it is these late-inning revelations that fuel the character through the entire play, and that have given him the overwhelming need to speak to the audience from his first moment on stage.

Once the mechanics of the script had become clear to me through my analysis, the breadcrumbs that had been dropped by the playwright and his character in the earlier speeches

made themselves apparent. And once I understood the overall idea of how the plot worked, I was ready to go back and chart it specifically. I would need to find the cause-and-effect step-by-step progression of the character through the story, no easy matter since the playwright had intentionally hidden so much beneath the layers of my character's self-denial, righteousness, and ego. But I knew if I could find and map my journey through the story, I would have a clear arc or throughline to enact for an audience.

Mapping the throughline or story arc would, to a large degree, evolve from being able to identify and isolate any big moments that my character has. These moments would be the stepping stones for a clearly rendered dramatic progression that an audience could see, even if they didn't realize it at the time. I would need to find moments of victory and defeat, moments of discovery, and any other moments that might cause my character a change in direction, emotion, or intent. These moments, when linked together, would provide me with a connect-the-dot picture of my story arc—in each of the speeches individually, and throughout my character's journey, speech by speech.

With a close study of my script, I was eventually able to identify many of these moments. It would next become my job to find a way to emphasize these points, where necessary, for the audience. The audience would need to be able to recall these nuggets later in the play when their importance would be made clear, without being invited to dwell on them before that time. This would be a delicate balance. The trick, I determined, would be to be able to lay them out clearly without drawing undue attention to them.

By the fifth of seven speeches, the still-scattered patches of jigsaw parts that make up the script start congealing, and begin to suggest a picture that is both dramatic and ugly. The more my character talks, the more closely the pieces of the picture move toward each other and toward a clarity that precedes the climax. The accumu-

lated suggestions provided in the script should trigger the imagination, so that the audience will be able to fill in much of the rest when the time comes.

As one of the critics mentioned, I chose to deliver much of my earlier stuff in a rapid-fire, confident manner that bordered on funny. Though I felt the importance of all of what I said as a character, as an actor I realized that the playwright had provided in the lines of his script most of what was necessary, particularly in the early going. I needed no extra mustard in the delivery. Coming to understand when to sell and when to lay back is a matter of understanding of the mechanics of drama, something that a skilled actor must develop. This, too, must become part of the overall analysis process.

It is my belief that getting actors to be able to tell the story effectively should be one of the primary goals, if not *the* primary one, in the teaching of craft. Unfortunately, this is not an opinion held by all, and in many acting classes this kind of work is not emphasized, or emphasized enough. Many acting teachers feel analysis is a part of the analysis class, and only the moment-to-moment interaction linked to the playing of selected actions should be the focus in scene study. I disagree. I believe that when the student is left to master analysis outside the acting class, it seldom happens.

There is an analogy here to the student who never learns to read properly in elementary school. This lack of skill will continue to haunt him, even as the teachers he deals with avoid the problem because they think it's somebody else's responsibility. I believe that learning how to read a script is a core skill that must be taught in the acting class. The actor must discover how the playwright lays out his story and then find ways of providing the physical enactment of this story through what he does, physically and verbally.

Being able to do all this independently allowed me to begin my first rehearsal well prepared to work because I already understood what I needed to do. Ultimately, every actor must be able to do this because there is

never a guarantee that a director will be able to provide him with what he needs, or that a rehearsal schedule will provide the time and opportunity to find all the ingredients necessary for producing the level of work the actor wants and is expected to achieve. It certainly didn't in my case. That is why so much of my own work was done before I stepped into the rehearsal studio for the first time.

All right; the story was now clear to me, and I could isolate what I considered to be its most important moments. It then became my responsibility to define each of those moments more specifically through how I would say and color the lines, how I would fill them emotionally, and by the physical actions I would ultimately select and execute. As I described in the first two articles in this series, the more I learned about the script, the more I reshaped and edited my performance.

I should mention here that all of my preparation time was challenging, fun, and exciting. Even the memorizing, once I got past my early anxieties, became an adventure. If our students don't feel the same way about their work, they are probably spending their time in the wrong place, and I think it is important that we make sure they understand that. Too often they feel they have an obligation to pursue their acting, even when it doesn't make them feel good to do so. Theatre is just plain too hard if the actor's not motivated by love and joy. Young actors to be aware of this and make their plans for the future accordingly.

What was it specifically that I did to define and refine the lines I would be saying and the story I would be telling in performance? First, of course, there was the kind of analysis I discussed above. There was also the music of the lines. The playwright's use of tempos, rhythms and vocabulary specific to each character was very helpful, and since I recognized it, I was able to use these elements to build and shape my work. Then there was the breaking down of the lines themselves, looking for operatives

(that is, words that would help me communicate my objective, or that I needed to stress for clarity) and clues to character, and a shaping of the speeches to insure they had beginnings, middles, and ends with appropriate dramatic builds. As one critic noted, there was an operatic quality to Rogers's writing. The actors couldn't ignore these aspects of the script.

After all this, of course, there remained the task of relating the script to the choices I would need to make on playing objectives and physical actions—a subject that I will go into more deeply in a few moments. In another kind of play, where I would be sharing the stage with other actors rather than dealing with solo monologues, the issues of objective playing would probably have been dealt with earlier in my process. But, since I would be working in *White People* alone, mastering the words on the page and how they would be used on the audience was the primary task. As I had no audience to rehearse with, the normal order of preparation was, by necessity, altered.

The overriding point here, if it's not already obvious, is that script analysis was the source of all of my work and of my ability to work efficiently on my own. Though I was operating under special circumstances for this production, my return to the stage reinforced my belief that the ability to use a script efficiently is the cornerstone to a reliable actor's craft. My experience as an actor reconfirmed that we as acting teachers must teach the subject of script analysis, giving the subject the kind of weight it deserves.

Action and objective

Now let's take a closer look at my use of one of the most basic tools of the craft, and certainly a major ingredient in my own teaching—the playing of actions or objectives. Objectives refer to what a character needs and should be trying to attain at every moment of his stage time. Since this need is derived from the conflict the playwright has provided, it follows that the need or objective can only be obtained from another character sharing the stage at any particular time. That character will

be holding up his end of the conflict by trying to fulfill his own need. In the usual play, the formula is *find the conflict and determine the objective*.

The problem in *White People* is the fact that each character is alone on stage. There are no other characters to provide obstacles and conflict. There is only the audience and what is going on inside each of the characters individually, intellectually and emotionally. But since the play is written with the convention that the characters are actually talking to the audience *as the audience*, the question became: why is the character doing that? And what does the character need from that audience?

In some plays, and often in monologue work where the actor finds herself addressing the audience, that audience is being used as a stand-in for a listening friend, the psychiatrist, the character's mother, etc. This is an awkward device where the actor has to imagine someone who really isn't there and send it out through the audience who isn't really there for the character. This is not the case in *White People*. Each of the actors is actually using the audience as the audience, a suspension-of-disbelief convention that one can only get away with in the theatre. But during my preparation, obviously, I had no audience to work with, so I had to imagine what their reactions might be, and make my responses to their reactions based on my inferences. There was no guarantee that what I imagined was what I would get in performance. I would need to be ready to make in-the-moment adjustments when I finally did get to work in front of an audience.

What I could do in the meantime was try to determine what it was that I wanted from the audience during my journey through the play, and how I could attain that goal through the delivery of my lines. Since the play centers on the prejudice that is a central part of each of the characters, it would be a logical jump to think that these characters might be looking for approval, or trying to prove the virtue of their beliefs, or at least trying to get the audience to understand where they are coming from. But each of the characters in the play treats the audience

as though everybody in the room already agrees with their belief system. As a result, none of these choices would work. Ultimately, I determined that what my character wanted to do overall was to get the audience to help him understand why his son might have done what he did, and to get reassurance that he was not responsible for his son's actions. Since my character spends so little time actually talking about his son, getting the audience to see how great Martin is (according to Martin) was a tactic I used much of the time in shaping my role. Asserting and justifying my ego was something that I could build on. It was also consistent with the script.

There was danger in this approach, however. I would be building a character who is not likable. Would the ending of the play be emotionally powerful if the audience didn't like Martin? How much did the audience need to like him to make the play work? How would the choices I made affect how the audience thought of Martin, and how could I monitor the effectiveness of my choices without the benefit of an actual audience? I realized that while working on my own, I would not be able to determine an audience's reaction, but I knew that my character, even as written, was not likeable. I also realized that I would have to find a way to give the audience enough to care about me whether they liked me or not. Since I was using ego as a central character choice, I decided I would have to temper his off-putting qualities with other, more positive ones. I settled on giving him a sense of humor and a love for his family that could be demonstrated throughout the performance. I found many places in the script where I could do these things, so demonstrating these qualities to the audience became part of my objective. I knew, of course, that all my choices awaited the eyes of a director, whose function, among others, would be to represent the audience. I would need him to tell me whether I had found enough balance in my character for there to be a dramatically appropriate payoff at the climax of the play.

Making these kinds of character choices, psychological and physical, is where the actor adds to what is given him on the page and where his own creativity comes into play. All of these creative choices, however, are still based on and consistent with what has been provided by the script and must be used to serve it. Here follow a few notes on my process for finding physical choices.

Physically serving the story and the character

I knew from the outset that I would have very little space to work with in performance. The New Theatre is a tiny space. I also knew that the director had two options; one would be to have all three characters on stage all the time. The other would be to have them come and go to deliver each monologue. If we would be on stage the whole time, each of us would have one third of a small space. If we came and went, set pieces would have to come and go as well. Either that or, if they stayed throughout, the small stage would again be divided into three smaller playing spaces. So, under any circumstances, there would be no need of major blocking. There simply wouldn't be enough space to do any.

Nonetheless, the three characters were clearly defined in the script in terms of their space and their costuming. The differences would require each character to have a specifically designed space to play in. My space, clearly indicated by the script, would be in Martin's office in a skyscraper high above downtown St. Louis. The setting automatically suggests certain things—a desk, a chair, perhaps some bookshelves still partially filled as Martin packs up. Maybe a window, since Martin refers to the outside several times. One speech in particular begins with his looking out at the Mississippi River.

I also knew Martin must be well dressed. He makes many direct references to his clothing and to the attire of others. I would have to be dressed in appropriate lawyer threads, top of the line.

The logical deductions I had made based on my script analysis gave me a

framework to use as I would rehearse myself on my feet. Since blocking consists of movement from place to place, gestures appropriate to my character, and any ongoing business that my character might engage in, I already had an arsenal of basic ideas to work from. As I built my character physically I would work from the fact that I had on a suit and tie with an expensive shirt with French cuffs always down (which came directly from the script). I could use that. I had a desk with all the things that might be on it, a chair that would give me positioning possibilities and could make me look and feel powerful, and I had the fact that I would be packing as an ongoing activity. There was also a window and a bookshelf to go to and from as well as all sides of the desk to circumnavigate or lean against. My playing field and uniform were now defined and ready to use.

I built my physical story organically. If, for instance, I refer to a letter, I would go to the letter and find a way to use it for emphasis. If I referred to clothing, I modeled mine to emphasize the point, making sure not only that what I did fulfilled my objective, but that the manner in which I did it showed something about me, too. I got a lot of mileage out of looking at pictures of my family. Like my French cuffs, the pictures are referenced specifically in the script, but I was able to use them to show how I felt about my wife, my son, and my daughter. I could show love, anger, and or disappointment simply by how I handled these items and looked at them.

Since I had determined that my character was notably self-assured and egotistical, I asked myself what gestures would demonstrate that, and when I found myself gesturing organically, I modified my natural movement in accordance with what I knew about Martin. I also began to make a study of powerful and egotistical people in my life and on television—politicians, for instance—and stole some of what they did physically for my character. I modified the way I stood, the way I walked, the way I got up and sat down, using my imagination, or what I

had picked up from observation, or both. Molding and melding how I did an action with the when and where I chose for it helped me tell the story of the play even as it helped me reveal my character.

I also looked for and found ways of using my physical space that would amplify what was going on in the story and with my character. In my fifth speech, for instance, the playwright provides a mood change. My character goes from bombastic to reflective. The speech starts with Martin commenting on how he likes to watch the Mississippi River late at night and what the river has meant to him. Ultimately, I began the section being drawn past the window to the river. I slowly get up, move to the window still glued to what I see beyond it, and eventually lean against the wall, my focus still on the view in the distance. This reflective sequence of actions set a tone for the scene, and strongly affected the way I delivered my lines. It gave me a starting point in the speech that would arc beautifully into a very powerful ending several minutes later. But the mood and the work grew out of my physical choices. In a later scene I pounded the arm of my chair in a way that reflected the manner in which the police had pounded my door in the middle of the night. The noise of the action shocked the audience and energized me in a way that helped me feel the emotional circumstances that fueled my character at that moment of the play.

By the end of my pre-rehearsal work I could check off the following items:

- I understood the script.
- I had made choices intended to serve the play and reveal my character.
- I could say the words and deliver the actions in a manner intended to make my part in the play clear and exciting.
- I had attempted to serve the play, my character, and the playwright in all my efforts.

The questions remained as to whether my director would agree with my assessment and choices, and whether it would all ultimately work for the audience.

There could be no question, however, as to whether I would begin my return to the stage prepared to do so. In spite of still being scared to death at the prospect, I knew I was prepared and ready, come what may, to hit the beach.

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