



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

# Remembering how and what

*An acting teacher returns to the stage*

BY BRUCE MILLER

I have been teaching acting on the high school and college levels for the past sixteen years. During that time I have written two books and close to eighty articles on the subject. I have also directed scores of plays and coached and watched hundreds and hundreds of audition pieces. But since the late eighties I have acted only twice professionally: once, close to fourteen years ago, and again this past spring in a production of *White People* by J. T. Rogers, at the New Theatre in Coral Gables, Florida.

For the most part, I have been quite content training others for acting on the stage and screen without doing it myself. Part of the reason is that directing has effectively filled any void left by no longer acting. Occasionally I have seen a role played by another actor that I would have liked to have attempted, and there have been moments when the thrill of an enthusiastic audience response has made

me long for the good old days. But, generally, living without the nerves and insecurity that I felt when I was an actor more than compensated for any missing pieces of my creative life.

Things changed this past semester, however, when I began my first university sabbatical after nine years of teaching on the college level. My game plan was to travel a bit, do a lot of reading, work on the two books I am writing, and, if possible, find an acting job. Though I had been quite comfortable without stepping on stage in a performance situation, I felt that as part of my sabbatical I should try to re-experience what my students go through every day. I was fairly sure that the memories of my years as a professional actor and my graduate school acting days had kept me reasonably sensitive to what my students go through, but I also realized that through the years I had changed a lot

as a person and as an actor. For one thing, teaching had forced me to become far more articulate about the craft and what I thought were its most important elements. It would be great, I thought, to have the opportunity to experience what I teach to see if what I sell is as good as I think it is, and to find out whether or not I could actually practice the things I preach.

Toward the end of January, while on a trip to the Dominican Republic, I got a call from my wife. A highly regarded Miami-area Equity house had phoned, wanting to know if I'd be interested in doing a role in their upcoming production—a last minute replacement for its scheduled show. “Sure,” I told my wife to tell them. This would be perfect. A nice small role at a reputable theatre. I was vaguely aware of the play and remembered it had had a short run with Robert Sean Leonard and was somewhat controversial. When I got home, I called the director to find out when he'd like me to come in and read for the role. To my surprise he said that it wouldn't be necessary. I already had the part. He would send me the play overnight and I could take a look. He was as good as his word, and the following day the package arrived.

I was shocked to discover that the role was not small at all. *White People* turned out to be a three-character play consisting entirely of monologues. Each of the three characters took turns talking directly to the audience in five-to-seven-minute bursts for a total of about thirty to thirty-five minutes each. Though the three characters shared the stage, they had no interaction with each other. In other words, after fourteen years away from the stage I would be required to memorize pages and pages of dialogue and do the most difficult kind of acting. There are no safety nets with monologues, no fellow actors to save you when you're drowning, no partner to play off of if words fail you; it's sink or swim alone. I was immediately petrified. And I realized that my sabbatical game plan had completely changed the moment I ripped open the thick Fed Ex envelope and confronted an avalanche of words.

So I packed away my travel plans. Starting the last week of January I would have to start memorizing. I had to be totally ready by April 1. The show was to open at the end of the first week of April, and there would be only one week of actual rehearsal. I would need to have the lines down so cold that even nervousness wouldn't rock me. I would have to make all the acting choices myself, leaving only blocking detail and pacing to the director. There wouldn't be time for more during our truncated official preparation. Could I do this? Would the technique I teach to others work for me? Would my nerves prevent me from doing good work? Would I be able to memorize the lines after ne-

glecting those muscles for so many years? Would I be able to meet the emotional demands of the role as well as its intellectual ones? Could I serve the play, and the playwright (who was coming during the opening weekend) as well as my character? Would I be any good? And most importantly, could I fool the audience even if I wasn't? For the next six weeks I could not sleep past six a.m.—my nerves wouldn't allow it. Too many questions, too many fears.

Let's table for a moment the questions posed above and skip over the outcome of my tale. Instead, I'm going to focus, at least for now, on my artistic journey—an odyssey that consisted of two months of self-preparation, one week of actual rehearsal, and twenty-five performances over a five-week run. What I'd like to share with you specifically are some of the things I learned from my experience, and how the reality of my experience compared to what I have been teaching about acting over the years. Perhaps what I have learned as a result of my journey will be of use to you in your own work with your students. And perhaps, after reading this, you might feel the urge to embark on your own personal artistic adventure.

### **The work of memorization**

Memorization—the first and most formidable hurdle I faced after so many years away from acting—is a task that all actors must face and handle effectively. Yet, for the most part, we do it in a private and individual way. Though it is a major step in every actor's preparation, it is topic that gets little or no attention in class. For that reason, we will begin there.

I have never been a great memorizer. I have always marveled at those who can read the words on the printed page, say them once or twice and parrot them back. I am even more amazed by those who can do that and retain them after a few moments have passed. My daughter is such a person. She can read a page of script once or twice and have it memorized. What a gift! It is such a benefit to an actor to not have to trip over words, to not have those words standing between you and the ability to listen and be in the moment. What an asset when an actor can immediately focus on the other actor and the task at hand rather than on trying to remember the words he is responsible for saying next.

I have never been such a person. I have always had to spend an inordinate amount of time working on the text in order to get to the point where I would be able to focus outside myself. For some reason, I have never been able to easily retain dialogue either. I have tried getting up early when my mind is fresh, I have tried going to sleep reciting the words. I have used tapes of myself saying the

words to accompany myself when memorizing. No matter what I do, it is still a slow, grueling process for me. And, of course, it was especially difficult at the beginning of my recent acting job. I was using mental muscles that I hadn't exercised for years. The process did get a lot quicker as I continued to do the work of memorizing because I was better able to connect the process to my overall acting tasks. But I literally spent hours every day doing the necessary work.

There are many kinds of memorization that our minds do—sense memory, auditory memory, kinetic memory, etc., and I have learned from experience that the more kinds of memorization I use, the more efficient I get. For instance, during my years as an actor, I learned that I memorized much faster when I was saying the lines while being physically active in rehearsal for a play or while working on a scene. Very often when acting with a scene partner, for instance, I would discover after a few times moving through the scene and executing business that I actually knew the words as well as my blocking. Somehow I connected movement at a particular time with what I was saying at that moment and the two kinds of memory reinforced each other.

I also found while working on *White People* that a thought association at a particular time helped me remember the words. For instance, when as my character, Martin Bahmueller, I looked at a photograph of my wife and daughter, I would always see an image of how my daughter (and I mean my character's daughter) Mary Esther looked walking through the school yard as I dropped her off in the morning. This thought always triggered the next set of lines I had to say which actually concerned Mary Esther walking through that school yard toward her classroom. Since I already had the image going, I never had to think about the words during that section. They just came to me.

I also found that saying the words aloud from the beginning of the memorization process helped me considerably. Not long after I began working on my script, I realized that when I said the words only in my mind, I got tripped up and lost much more easily than when I said them aloud. This makes perfect sense. When I vocalized the words I was getting the memorization process into my muscles. My lips and tongue were working, my facial muscles were working, my body was getting integrated, and I heard the sounds as well as felt them. Rogers is wonderful with dialogue. His monologues, not unlike a musical score, had melody, rhythm, and musical crescendos. When I said the words aloud, I began hearing this music more specifically than I did when I ran the lines in my head.

Fairly quickly, these memory devices started working together and reinforcing each other. The

feel of a word or phrase or image would begin triggering the memory to the lips, and the feel on the lips would prompt the actual next thought. As I worked through my memorization over the weeks, I discovered more and more the synergistic relationship between these aspects of my body and mind, and my memorization truly became more efficient.

I also discovered (or rediscovered, because I probably knew this way back when) that learning the ideas as well as the words expedited the memorization process enormously. For instance, take the following lines that refer to my character's wife and daughter:

"I call them the Mayflower twins; those green eyes and beautiful blond hair that babies are born with and somehow the two of them kept."

When I consciously forced myself to picture my character's wife and daughter at the moment when my character says those lines, the images and words would reinforce each other. The more specific the image, the better it stayed in my mind. If, for instance, I made a mental movie of my baby with magnificent emerald eyes, and beautiful silky blond hair fighting a set of gnarled arthritic hands trying to rip her hair off, the image became permanently fixed in my brain. As I worked on my script, literally hundreds of these images actually began developing in my head. Not only did these images crystallize, they began to take on emotional connotations as well—connotations that helped me remember the lines, and more importantly, say them with particular colorations. This again helped me with the memorization process and solidified my acting at the same time. The power of that gnarled arthritic hand in my mind's eye cannot be disputed.

As I continued to work, I began to look for how all these idea units connected with each other, idea by idea, line by line, and they started to become stepping stones through the entire monologue that created a dramatic progression. Since there is not the same kind of give and take as there is when acting with another on-stage actor, these connecting idea units became like buoys marking a channel or like the dots in a connect-the-dot drawing—each one linking to the next and ultimately creating a recognizable picture that I could remember. The difference was that here, instead of a literal picture, I was creating a connect-the-dot story. Better yet, each of these stepping stones became its own little island of acting—individual moments that I could discover and deal with in my ongoing arc or storyline.

Before long, in addition to individual idea units, I was putting the story together piece by piece for myself as well as the audience. Again, not only was this process reinforcing the memorization, but it was actually leading me toward acting moment by mo-

ment, and helping me find and relate the story in a clear and compelling way.

I also discovered that finding the next idea to say as an actor struggling with his memorization had tremendous ramifications. I realized that this process is closely related to the process we all go through as human beings when we try to find the next verbalized idea that will accurately communicate what we are thinking and feeling. Very often as actors, once we get comfortable with the words, they come cascading out of our mouths and, over time, we forget that our characters are searching for and discovering what they are thinking and feeling at the same time that the audience is hearing about it. As human beings we are also constantly searching for the words that will accurately express these thoughts and feelings. When we forget this fact, our work loses the sense of spontaneity it once possessed. My own struggle to find the next idea in the memorization process reminded me to keep that sense of searching, finding, and reacting to the discovery of words and ideas throughout the acting process, from early self rehearsals all the way through the final performance.

So what does all this tell me about memorization as it relates to the teaching of acting? Quite a bit,

actually. Perhaps it is not too hyperbolic to say that how an actor memorizes is so important that we should not leave it totally, as most of us do, to the private domain of actors. Perhaps there is stuff to be taught here rather than self-learned. As I pointed out earlier, memorization is not a separate domain from the rest of the acting process. In fact it is just the opposite; how we memorize is closely related to the acting itself and can contribute greatly to the work that is produced. With that in mind, on page xx is a series of memorization exercises that you might want to tackle in class with your students as part of a unit on memorization.

### **Memorization and your students**

If memorization is a legitimate part of the acting process and an integral part in the development of a performance, then it is ironic and destructive if we permit students to leave memorization to the last minute, or allow them to begin a run without ever having learned their lines accurately. I have seen and heard student actors invert cues, invent their own dialogue, and bowdlerize the script simply because they have never spent the necessary time learning what that script actually says and what it means for them in the building of their perfor-

### **Some memorization exercises**

Here are some exercises you can try with your students. Though getting the words in the memory bank is the primary focus here, like the acting process itself, the exercises are connected to the overall goals every actor must pursue at all times.

**1.** Assign daily short memorization tasks that require students to perform their memorized work aloud—a short poem one day, a song lyric the next, a news item on the third, a narrative paragraph on the fourth, and a piece of dialogue on the fifth, for instance. Given the task of memorization on a day-to-day basis, your students will quickly develop some memorization tricks on their own, and discover how they best learn lines efficiently.

**2.** Have your students play the game “I went on a trip and brought with me a \_\_\_\_.” (An apple, banana, churchkey, deck of cards, etc.) Students should play the game first with just straight memory. Then have students play the game with a physical action or gesture associated with each item they add to the ongoing list. Repeat the exercise by having students associate each item with an emotional connection or sense-memory association, etc. You get the idea. Have your students explore all their association possi-

bilities to test for the most effective mnemonic devices.

**3.** Have students discuss and share the mnemonic devices that have worked best for them, including image association, as well as idea and emotional connections, etc. as described in the second exercise.

**4.** Have students write a summary paragraph of a short monologue they are working on, written in terms of its cause-and-effect linkage (this happened and then this happened, etc.). The paragraph should be structured in terms of events in chronological order. Students will then be able to visualize their speeches in terms of their chronology. Students should then memorize the monologue using the cause-and-effect mnemonic device. Discuss the results.

**5.** Have students memorize sections of a poem or children’s picture book after reading aloud in class and discussing its built-in rhythms and tempos, and highlight selected word choice by the author. Discuss the results.

**6.** Have students circle operative words and underline all specific dramatic moments they find in a speech they will develop. Ask your students to visualize specifically these words and events before memorizing. Discuss the results.

—B.M.

mance. I have seen students (not my own, I assure you) going in to dress rehearsal still not knowing their lines. I have seen students ignore deadlines for memorization and proceed without consequences. I have heard teachers make idle threats to unmemorized students, only to relent again and again as deadlines come and go.

Unlike in a movie, where a script is often no more than a starting point, the script of a good play is sacred. Playwrights are artists who choose their words with great care. Their plays are written the way they are written for a reason. It is our responsibility as actors and as teachers of actors to make sure our students give the words the respect they deserve, and to teach them the skills necessary to understand that the words as written can help them do the best work they possibly can. I can think of no cases where an actor improves on a good play by replacing the playwright's words with his or her own. When J. T. Rogers watched the opening weekend of our show, he had line notes for each of us every night. He knew his play by heart, word for word because, as he told it, he said it so many times in his head trying to get the words exactly, *exactly* right. Often, his notes to us were small ones, but in each case, there were reasons for the way he wrote something. Invariably, his writing revealed some specific detail precisely because of how it was phrased, and the line always sounded better when delivered exactly as he wrote it. In a well-written play, there is no room for sloppy memorization.

Two of the most important skills we can teach our students in the drama class are self-discipline and responsibility to the group. This is not only a theatre skill. It is a life skill as well. Memorization requires a great deal of self-discipline and when we allow our students to not take it seriously, we are telling them that knowing the script as the playwright wrote it is less important than their blocking or their energy or their charisma. By doing so we are giving our actors all the wrong messages—for the stage and for life. There is no excuse for leaving another actor in a fix because you have not properly learned your lines. There is no excuse for moments failing to come alive because lines are needlessly blown or moments are not made clear. There is no excuse for a lighting or sound cue to be missed because an actor cannot say her lines correctly. There is no excuse for the pacing of a scene to be compromised because an actor can't get out his words efficiently or with the necessary affect resulting from improper memorization.

I recently watched a middle school production that was bumpy all through dress rehearsals, but the adrenaline of opening night sharply improved the energy of performance. I overheard a parent saying with delight, "I knew in the clinch that these kids

would come through; they always do at the last minute." I held my tongue, but I thought to myself, what is the message here? This is not proper training. Those kids were capable of doing far more before the eleventh hour; but no one required it of them and so they didn't. The next night, by the way, with the adrenaline much diminished, so was the product the audience saw. Words dropped, cues missed, pacing non-existent. The discipline necessary for excellence was nowhere to be found—all because lines were improperly learned, or never learned at all. The teacher had spent a lot of time looking the other way because he was preoccupied with other issues.

But teaching our students the ethics and responsibilities of their job is one of the most important things we can give them. We must teach what are considered in the field to be fundamental elements of the theatre's ethics and practice. And we must teach our students why they are essential as well. We must be responsible for seeing to it that our students live up to the expectations demanded in the field.

In the next installment of this piece, I will focus on two other subjects that were closely related—relaxation and emotion. While I have spent little time on each of these in my own classes, each of these proved to be critically important in my recent onstage work.

In the meantime, just in case you were wondering, our show was a major success. The production was highly praised, as was the work of its three cast members and director. My peers, colleagues, and students who attended the production were all duly impressed. I am happy to report that I can still hold my head up when I walk the streets or the corridors of the theatre department. More importantly, by the end of the run, I was thrilled to again be able to call myself a professional actor. In fact, I would absolutely consider a role in another play, particularly if it was one without extended monologues, particularly if it gave me the opportunity to talk to other actors on stage. In fact, if the play was one that employed a fourth wall, I might be willing to sign on without even reading it.

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