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Building a Foundation: The Reality of Doing

MEISNER: What's the first thing that happens when they build the World Trade Center—you know that building?

MALE STUDENT: They dig a hole.

MEISNER: Well, of course they dig a hole. They don't glue it to the sidewalk! [Laughter.] What's the first thing they did when they built the Empire State Building?

FEMALE STUDENT: They had to put down a foundation first.

MEISNER: They had to put down a foundation on which . . .

FEMALE STUDENT: . . . they built the building.

MEISNER: . . . they built the building.

September 29

"The foundation of acting is the reality of doing."

It is the first moment of the first class of the semester, and without delay Sanford Meisner states and restates this seemingly simple theme. "Wait a minute, let's say that again. *The foundation of acting is the reality of doing.* The reality of doing. Now, how do you know what that means? I'll clarify it." After a brief pause he asks, "Are you listening to me? Are you really listening to me?"

The students respond in chorus, "Yes, yes."

"You're not pretending that you're listening; you're listening. You're *really* listening. Would you say so?"

"Yes, yes."

"That's the reality of doing. Let there be no question about what I'm saying here. If you do something, you really do it! Did you walk up the steps to this classroom this morning? You didn't jump up? You didn't skip up, right? You didn't do a ballet pirouette? You really walked up those steps."

He pauses to adjust the small microphone attached to the left temple of his eyeglasses. "How many of you are listening to me now?" Sixteen hands are raised obediently. "Now, listen to me for a minute. Just for yourselves, listen to the number of cars that you hear outside. Do that."

The students, eight men and eight women in their twenties and early thirties, lean forward, straining to hear the sounds of New York City traffic filtering through the whir of the air-conditioner. After a moment some close their eyes. A minute passes.

"Okay," Meisner says to a young man with a neat brown beard, "how many cars did you hear?"

"None," the student replies. "I heard a plane."

"A plane is not a car. You heard none. Let me ask you this: did you listen as yourself or were you playing some character?"

"As myself."

"What about you?" he asks a thin, dark girl who looks like a model.

"At first I was listening as a student."

"That's a character—"

"And then I was confused because I couldn't hear a car, and the sounds were confusing. Then I heard what I'm pretty sure was a car, and then I got bored, and then I heard another car. So I heard two cars."

"We won't discuss the boredom." The class laughs. "Were you, as you said, listening—what's your name?"

"Anna."

"Were you listening as Anna?"

"At the end."

"So part of your acting was legitimate and two-thirds of it was pretending."

"Yes."

"How many cars did you hear?" The question is directed

to a woman in her late twenties with luxurios dark hair.

"I couldn't be sure which sounds were cars."

"Were you really puzzled, or were you puzzled in character?"

"I don't know. It felt as though I was not quite doing something all the time."

"So you were half an actress." Then, to a young man in a plaid wool shirt and jeans, "How many cars did you hear?"

"None."

"None. Did you listen as—"

"I listened as me, just as John."

"That's what I want to know. It's a nice feeling. Okay, now choose a melody that you like and sing it to yourself—just to yourself, not out loud. Clear? Do it."

Again some students close their eyes, and after a few seconds of concentration heads begin bobbing, marking time to melodies only individually heard.

"How many people were doing it?" Meisner asks. "For yourselves or theatrically? Who can answer that?"

"Half and half." It is the young woman called Anna.

"You have a problem. What's your problem?"

"I was very aware of being in a room filled with people consciously listening to different melodies. About halfway through I got so upset with myself that I was able to forget about it."

"And sing?"

"Yes."

"That's when you were good."

"That's when I enjoyed it, I don't know if I was good."

"It's always enjoyable to be good." He pauses a moment and shifts his gaze to a stocky, blond, boyish young man in the front row. "What about you?"

"I was singing to myself."

"Like Hamlet?"

"I was trying to enjoy the melody."

"You were? For yourself, not as Hamlet?"

"For myself!"

Next Meisner asks the class to count the number of light bulbs in the room. The answers range between twelve and sixteen,

depending on whether one includes the red bulb over the fire-escape exit sign or excludes the three unlit floodlights angled down from a beam in the middle of the ceiling. The answers are unimportant; what is crucial is the doing of the task, the *counting* of the light bulbs, not the results. "Did you count in character —theatrically," Meisner asks, "or did *you* count?"

"Nine hundred and thirty-one times eighteen—try to do that in your head," he goes on. "Nine thirty-one times eighteen." The correct answer is 16,758, and no one even comes close to figuring it out. Again, that's not the point. "You may be right, you may be wrong," Meisner says. "That's like life. People come to different conclusions. That's why some are Democrats and some are Republicans. But how many *tried*? You know, it's all right to be wrong, but it's not all right not to *try*."

"Look," Meisner says, "examine the partner sitting next to you. And give me, when I ask for it, a list of what you observe." Sixteen heads turn to scan the person now called, for the first time, "the partner."

When she is asked, the blond girl in the second row says about the young man seated to her right: "I observed red hair. I observed a soft green shirt which had pink and gray and beige stripes and that was a size medium. I observed a rash on his neck. He has blue eyes and short, thin, lighter-colored eyelashes. Small hands. Kind of burly. Leans over a lot. Stocky. Green pants. Brown shoes—leather, with rubber soles, I think. Clean ears and clean fingernails. Small lips that stay closed and mostly turn under—"

"Okay. Was this observation done by you or by some character out of a play?"

"I don't know the answer. In honesty, I can't quite distinguish which is which."

"Are you talking to me now, or is Lady Macbeth talking?"

"I'm talking to you."

"That's you. That's you in person. Your observation was straight, unadulterated observation. What you observed, *you* ob-

served, not a character in a play." He asks John, the young man in the plaid shirt, "Are you looking at me now?"

"Yes."

"As Othello?"

"No."

"As who?"

"As myself, I guess."

"That's right. Can you hold on to that?"

"I want to ask you a question and I want you, please, for your own sake as well as mine, to tell the truth. How many people in this class can hear very well?" After a moment's confusion, sixteen hands are raised. "Now listen, I'm holding you to something. Everybody says he or she can hear. You can hear? You can hear me?"

They answer, "Yes."

"I want to ask you another question, one a little more difficult. You say you can hear. That's good. Can you *repeat* what you hear absolutely accurately? I'm talking simply. I don't mean the Declaration of Independence. I mean, 'Do you drink coffee?' Can you repeat that?"

"Do you drink coffee?" asks a young woman with short, brown, layered hair.

"You did that, so you can. Now, do you know what you're telling me? First of all, you said you can hear. You also said you can repeat what you hear. You can take it back if you want to! All right, I accept."

"We can repeat the words," says a dark, broad-shouldered young woman.

"That's all I ask—not the spirit, just the words."

"No," says the woman. "I meant we can't repeat *exactly* what we hear. We can only repeat our own representation of the words."

"You can repeat exactly what you hear. Want me to prove it to you?"

"I believe you."

"What's your name?"

"Rose Marie."

"Rose Marie, why should you believe me? Your hair is long.
Repeat that."

"Your hair is long."

"So you can do it! You see, I did not recite the first act of *Uncle Vanya*, which perhaps you have never heard before. Now, who's your partner?" John, the young man in the plaid shirt, raises his hand. "Now, look at her. What do you observe about her? Not her spirit, but something about her that has some interest for you."

"She's very . . . I was going to say she's very fresh and open."

"That's an emotional observation. I'm not quite that smart. I see that she has a pink sweater."

"Okay."

"I'm going to tell you something. You're a thinker."

"I know," John says, "that's why I'm here."

"Then stop immediately!" The class laughs. "Do you see that she has a pink sweater? Do you see that her hair needs combing? Do you see the color of her slacks?"

"Yes."

"Now, you told me that you can hear and you told me that you can repeat, which means that, starting with something that exists in her, you should find what interests you and make a comment. Then, Rose Marie, you repeat exactly what he says, and you, John, repeat exactly what *she* says. Do this until I stop you."

"Your hair is shiny," John says.

"Your hair is shiny," Rose Marie repeats.

"Your hair is shiny."

"No," says Meisner stopping them, "you're making readings in order to create variety. Don't. Do it again, using another observation."

After a moment John says, "Your earring is small," and Rose Marie says, "Your earring is small." They repeat the sentence five or six times until Meisner stops them.

"Okay, now I believe that you can both hear, and I believe that you can repeat what you hear. It's not the whole story, but it's the beginning of something. You observed her earrings. You commented on them. You repeated what you heard. So far you were listening to each other and were repeating what you heard. That's what I asked you to do."

The students pair off, and the exercise, which Meisner calls the Word Repetition Game, is performed again and again. The boyish, blond young man, whose name is Philip, becomes the partner of the brunette with the layered haircut, whose name is Sarah. They repeat his comment, "Your eyes are blue," over and over until Meisner stops them.

"All right," he says. "This probably seems unbelievably silly, doesn't it? But it's the beginning of something. Are you listening to each other? Are you repeating what you hear? You are."

After another couple repeat "You have bright earrings," he says, "It's mechanical, it's inhuman, but it's the basis for something. It's monotonous, but it's the basis for something."

After Anna and her partner repeat "Your shirt has bright pink lettering on it" a dozen or more times, he says, "Yes, that's correct. It's empty, it's inhuman, right? But it has something in it. It has connection. Aren't they listening to each other? That's the connection. It's a connection which comes from listening to each other, but it has no human quality—yet. If you want to take notes, write down 'This is a Ping-Pong game.' It is the basis of what eventually becomes emotional dialogue."

Meisner pauses for a moment. "Now I'm going to show you where the trouble comes in." He turns to a young woman wearing her brown hair in a thick braid. "You have an embroidered blouse. Is that true?"

"No."

"Then what's the answer?"

"No, I do not have an embroidered blouse."

"That's right!" he says. "That is the repetition from *her* point of view. Immediately it becomes a contact between two human beings." He says to Sarah, "You're carrying a pen."

"Yes, I'm carrying a pen."

"Yes, you are."

"Yes, I am."

"That's right! Already it has become human speech, hasn't it? First, there's the mechanical repetition. Then there's the repetition from your point of view." He looks at the young woman with the luxurious dark hair. "You curl your hair."

"Yes, I curl my hair."

"Yes, you do."

"Yes, I curl my hair."

"I said, 'Yes, you do.'"

"Yes, I do."

"Yes, I can see you do."

"Yes, you can see I do."

"Let it go at that. That's the Word Repetition Game from *your* point of view. That's already human conversation, isn't it?" Then, to the young man whose shirt has bright pink lettering on it, Meisner says, "You're staring at me."

"I'm staring at you."

"You're staring at me."

"I'm staring at you."

"You admit it?"

"I admit it."

"You admit it."

"I admit it."

"I don't like it."

"You don't like it."

"You don't care?"

"I don't care."

"You don't care?"

"I don't care!"

Meisner sticks out his tongue at the young man, and he and the class laugh.

"That's the Word Repetition Game. It mustn't go too far; I won't let it. Now, when you work together at home, do the exercise mechanically, the way you started it. Then practice doing it from your point of view."

"I started this class by saying that the basis of acting is the reality of doing. How does that definition compare with what we've been doing?"

John says, "If we simply do it, we're not focusing on ourselves."

"You're attached to something outside of yourself," Meisner adds. "What else?"

"If you're really doing it, then you don't have time to *watch* yourself doing it. You only have the time and energy to do it," says Ray, the young man with the neat beard.

"That's very good for your acting. Anything else?"

Sarah says, "They all seem to be very concrete, 'do-able' things."

"Everything I've asked you has been concrete and 'do-able'? What about that word 'concrete'?"

"Well, it's tangible. You can look at somebody and actually count their eyelashes or you can count the light bulbs."

"Something that really, *really* exists specifically," Meisner says. Now, what does 'the reality of doing' mean?"

An intense-looking young man who has not spoken before says, "When you do something you really *do* it rather than pretend that you're doing it."

"And you *don't* do it like a character. When you play the piano, do you open the lid first, or do you just play it closed?" Meisner asks. "Well, musically speaking, the opening of the piano is similar to the reality of doing. Are there any questions here?"

"You gave us things to do that you can really do, like observing another person or listening to cars," says Ray. "And if you're really concentrated on just listening to cars or looking at a person, you don't have to worry about being a character. You have one thing to do and concentrate on."

"That *is* the character."

"That's the character?" Ray asks.

"Yes."

"So you don't have to play at being the character, it's right there in your doing it."

"Right. Do you understand that? Every play, whether it's by that comedy writer—what's his name?"

"Neil Simon?"

"Yeah. Every play is based upon the reality of doing. Even Lear's shaking his fist at the heavens—that's based on the actor thundering against fate. Can you see that?" He pauses. "This will go further in you than you may suspect at the moment. That's all right. It will unveil itself. It will reveal itself gradually. It is the basis, the foundation of acting."



"Another beginning. You'd think I'd quit!" Meisner says to his assistant, Scott Roberts, as they wait for the elevator which will take them to Meisner's paneled office one floor below the classroom. "Somebody should shoot me as they do aged horses."

Scott nods and smiles.

"But, you know, this class is an attractive group, and full of promise. The question is, how many of them will learn to act?"

Scott nods again and pushes the button for the elevator one more time. In the basement an electric motor drones into life.

"I've been teaching for over fifty years and in that near eternity I have attempted to teach literally thousands of young people how to act. And I haven't done too badly. I did well with you, for example."

"Thank you," Scott says.

"But if I chose to dwell on my overall success rate, I'd probably give up, so I don't."

The elevator arrives and they enter it.

"Acting is an art. And teaching acting is an art too, or it can be. Ultimately it's a question of talent—of theirs meshing with mine. So time will tell. But I must say, it's good to begin again!"