more on the trouble with meisner

By far the most popular post on this blog is from nearly a decade ago: the trouble with meisner. In that post, I acknowledge that Meisner training can be very valuable and effective, and is a good way to learn certain things.

However, it has some limitations, as I outlined in my previous post on the subject. In the interceding years, I’ve had a few more thoughts on the subject, which I thought I’d outline here.

The centerpiece of Meisner technique is the repetition exercise. This involves the repetition of a pair of phrases between two actors:

A: Your shirt is blue.
B: My shirt is blue?
A: Your shirt is blue.
B: My shirt is blue?

The phrase is allowed to change occasionally, and only occasionally. The exercise is intended to teach actors to tune into the behavioral cues from the partner, and to allow those cues to shape the delivery of the next phrase. It also helps to strip away affectation, which gets tiring to maintain over time, so that the actor is merely responding to the prompts from the partner, and not “adding” anything from an idea about how the lines should be spoken. All of this is what is meant by listening, a word that is given a talismanic significance in Meisner technique training.

And listening is important for acting, no two ways about it.
It’s one of the most important elements of any performance. An actor who is not responsive to what her partners or offering her is dead in the water. So learning to be attuned to the partner is very valuable.

However, there’s only so much that can be taught about listening without entering into the question of who is listening and what they are listening for. In other words, to character. And character arises from circumstances: among other things, it arises from what has happened to someone (like how they were treated by their parents or their peers, but not limited to this, at all), and from the choices they have made (about where to live, who to marry, how to earn a living, and how those choices have panned out, but again, not at all limited to do these things). You cannot begin to listen deeply as someone in particular without taking account of these things.

Now, in a two-year Meisner program, such elements are generally taught in the second year. In reality, not everyone ends up doing a two year program. Not everyone even undertakes to do two years of Meisner training, and even when people set out to do so, not everyone crosses the finish line. So not everyone gets exposed to these important matters. And my sense is that even for those are who are, a prejudice against thinking too long on these things gets acquired, as is attested to by the email I received that I quoted in my previous post on Mesiner:

I’m a Meisner-trained actor looking for a scene study class with a minimal focus on technique. Coming from a Meisner background, I want the class to be more about the interaction between the actors, and staying truthful moment-to-moment and less about script analysis.

As important as the moment-to-moment responsiveness is,
without serious consideration of the circumstances and the priorities of the character that emerge from these circumstances, this moment-to-moment responsiveness risks remaining in the shallow end. Without a significant effort to enter into the circumstances and priorities of the character, the listening risks remaining superficial, and even glib. To achieve deep listening, listening that happens in the visceral core of the actor, the circumstances and priorities have to be studied and embraced fully and painstakingly.

Part of the appeal of Meisner, I think, is that the course of the typical training regimen postpones this focus on circumstances and priorities, which involves a deep engagement with the text and the actor exercising her analytical faculties, among other things, so that for the first six to twelve months of training, the actor doesn’t need to be bothered with all that studying and thinking and puzzling over objectives, and she can just focus on repetition work, which may ask to be practiced but doesn’t require the effort of thought. (“There is no expedient to which a man will not resort to avoid the real labor of thinking.”–Joshua Reynolds) The focus is heavily on execution, and preparation is put off for later. This appeals to many aspiring actors, who are used to seeing actors executing in their favorite films and prestige television shows, but haven’t seen all the blood, sweat and tears that went into making that execution possible. In other words, intentional or not, structuring the training in this way amounts to a kind of pandering to the aspiring actor’s notions of what an actor’s day-to-day work is like.

That’s one issue. Another is this: on the execution side, the heavy emphasis on listening in Meisner, on receptiveness, as valuable as it is, may mean that the importance of assertiveness, of tenacity in going after the priorities of the characters, of what in my tradition is called playing to win, may get short shrift. Receptivity to the partner is very important, but there is an active principle to acting as well:
the actor needs to fight for the character’s priority, to move the ball down the field, to claim territory, physical and psychic. When the focus is so heavily on how the partner’s volleys are being received, and allowing those volleys to condition the actor’s response, it’s easy to lose sight of the fact that the character that the actor is playing is heavily invested in proactively seeking to transform her circumstances. She is not merely answering to prompts of the partner, but is looking to impact her world in significant ways, to bring it into accord with her own vision. She is asserting herself. The opposing-yet-complementary principles of assertiveness and responsiveness are important for any actor.

The approach I teach shares the emphasis on imaginary circumstances and focusing on the partner with Meisner, and to the extent that it teaches these things, Meisner is a valuable course of study. The approach I teach begins with the leap into the character’s world through an immersion in the text, rather than with the basic fact of a partner who is to be responded to, which is Meisner’s starting point. The approach I teach also emphasizes the simultaneity of the assertive and the receptive principles: the actor needs to be fighting for what she needs at the most visceral level possible, and be responsive to her world from that visceral place moment-to-moment. It’s bringing these values into harmony that makes for the most compelling and memorable work.

not you as the character, but
the character as you

The other night, I was saying goodnight to a student who was leaving class. This was her first acting class, and she hadn’t yet put her scene up. She mentioned that she and her scene partner had done their scene for someone else, a third person, and she had asked that third person whether or not it had seemed like she was a different person when she was acting, whether she had “become the character”.

I didn’t want to detain her from getting home, so I didn’t take the matter any further at that point. But I subsequently sent her an email in which I gently explained that thinking about “becoming the character” was not really the thing that she should be worrying about in the moment.

I once heard the following piece of advice: Don’t try to see yourself as the character. Try to see the character as you.

I remember the first day of acting class at Yale. Someone was doing a scene from Three Sisters, playing Masha. Earle, the teacher, said to the student: Masha lives in you. He was trying to tell her that she didn’t need to “become someone else” to play the role; he needed to bring herself to the role.

The lay person believes that “becoming the character” is what actors do, and in a sense, of course, that’s true. But only in a sense.

I don’t teach Meisner technique, but I know enough about it to know that the regimen of repetition exercises is about getting people to simplify what they are doing, to strip away the affect, to get out of their heads, and to respond as simply and authentically as they can to the partner.

In other words, it’s not helping them to become someone else. It’s helping them to allow themselves to show up.
My approach goes about achieving that in a very different way, but the goal is the same: you, the actor, are bringing your own passions and vulnerabilities to the character, channeling them appropriately, so that the words of the writer arise from “an authentic place”.

This is a really challenging point for a lot of new actors: they want to think about the character and what “he (or she) would do”. But you don’t have to think about what he or she would do; the writer has already provided that! You need to find the need in yourself to do those things.

Of course, people sometimes do play characters who are very far from who they are as people, and a transformation is required for them to do that. But that transformation cannot eclipse the actor’s own self or humanity or vulnerability: that is always going to be a part of any successful performance. That’s kind of an advanced challenge, to be able to change voice and body dramatically, without compromising the actor’s investment in the character’s needs and priorities.

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the truth is not what you think it is

The word “truth” is something actors hear a lot about. Meisner’s famous formulation that acting is “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances” is invoked again and again, by me and many other acting teachers, whether they teach Meisner or not. Actors come to understand that truth is synonymous with good acting. But is that really saying anything?

What is truth, anyway?
I think a lot of people equate truth with believability. But this is begging the question. What makes an audience believe something?

The answer that I think most people walk around with in their heads is that a performance has to have the appearance of real life. It has to look like real life. It has to be life-like. It has to be natural. It has to appear real.

But let’s think about that for a minute.

A few observations:

- I ran into some recent grads from the acting program at the Yale School of Drama not too long ago. I asked them about the curriculum there (it’s been a couple of decades since I walked the hallowed halls there). I was interested to learn that while they were introduced to a number of movement modalities during their time there, the only one that they were required to study for all three years while they were there was the Alexander technique. And what is the Alexander technique? Well, in a nutshell, it’s a practice of bringing an awareness of the design of the skeleton and muscles to everyday life, so that as we move through our days, we do so with less effort and greater ease than we would otherwise employ. Of course there is a lot more to it than that, but that’s my nutshell description. Anyway, Yale requires all actors to study three years of it, and that is the only movement form that actors are required to study for three years. Why? Because actors who make use of it are just better than they would be otherwise. Alexander work has a dramatic effect on a performer’s work. BUT, in real life, most people are going through their days without any awareness of the Alexander technique, so they are just using their habitual ways of moving, all of the ways of moving that the Alexander technique
teaches them to leave behind. So how is this life-like? The Alexander technique helps actors to appear more “real”, more “natural”, more “life-like” than they otherwise would, anyone who has witnessed its effect on actors can attest to that. But yet people in real life have all of the constricting bad habits that the Alexander technique is meant to help people to overcome. Is a puzzlement, as the King of Siam would say.

- Perennially, in class, I see people in scenes shift their weight on to one leg or the other, so that their hip is “popped”, like a teen-ager. By asking them to shift their weight so that their weight is evenly distributed over their two feet, their performance immediately improves. I could talk about why this is (the hip-popping is a stepping out of the physical attitude of engagement and confrontation, that is, of relationship, it’s a signal that says “I am not a threat” to their scene partner), but that’s not really material here. What is material is that standing with the weight evenly distributed invariably makes their work better. And yet, people in “real life” sometimes to pop their hip and shift their weight on to one foot. In fact, I just recently heard an Alexander teacher explain to people why that wasn’t a good thing to do. And she wouldn’t have had to explain it if people didn’t do it. So what gives? Standing “over the center” makes people more engaging to watch, as well as, somehow, more real to watch, and yet people in real life do stand with their weight not over their center, but rather shifted to one side.

- Another one: eye contact. Actors often want to disengage visually from their partners before they start to speak. Often, this is about trying to remember their line (the eye contact is distracting and makes it harder to concentrate on recalling the line), and then there is also the matter that if I am looking into someone else’s eyes, they are looking into mine, which is scary,
because of that business about the eyes being the window of the soul, and all that. It’s intimate. So it’s less scary, in the moment when starting to speak, to express one’s self, to look away. Here’s the thing: when I stop said actors from doing this, when I ask them to always make eye contact with the partner before starting to speak, and then I insist on it, and stop them every time they don’t do what I’ve asked and call attention to that, until they make the shift into eye-contact-when starting-to-speak, their work gets much better! Again, I could get into the reasons for this (they are finding the impulse to speak in the partner by looking at them when starting to speak), but that’s not really the point. The point is that they get indisputably better, more engaging to watch and more authentic, when they submit to this discipline, and yet, and yet, people in real life look away when they start to speak. They do it often! So, again, what gives?

In all three of these cases, a technical, physical adjustment was requested of actors, and the adjustment made them better, more engaging, more real. And yet, the habits they were letting go of were things that people do in real life! How can that be?

In the history of people thinking about art, there was a dispute about whether art was like a mirror or a lamp. Prior to the late eighteenth century, art was (grossly speaking) understood to be a mirror: it showed you what life was like. It reflected the surfaces of life. It reproduced life.

But in the era of Romanticism, this was broadly challenged: the Romantic ethos looked at art as more like a lamp, as something that was a source of illumination, something that allowed us to see something not normally visible, something beneath or behind the surfaces of life, something that the surfaces ordinarily conceal.
The notion of truth that most people walk around with, I think, is based on the idea of “believability.” Believability asks: do I (in the audience) believe this? Does this look enough like life that I can suspend my disbelief? Has the actor successfully reproduced the surfaces of life in such a way that I accept what she is doing? This is the actor as mirror: have I made my performance look enough like real life so that it is believed?

But what the examples above suggest is that there is another criteria for truth, which we might call expressive power. An actor who can, while reproducing the surfaces of life, also reveal the depths, has this expressive power. All of the adjustments I talked about above make it more possible for us, as the audience, to experience what is happening in the core of the actor, in ways that we don’t really even realize as we watch (mirror neurons!). We can see into the actor. So acting is not just reproducing the surfaces of life, but doing so while simultaneously letting us experience the depths. A friend of mine, a very good actor and a playwright as well, once said she thought that a good actor was someone who could make themselves transparent. I remember being surprised by this at the time, but now I know exactly what she means.

Real people aren’t transparent in everyday life, in the way that a great actor is in enacting a life prepared by a writer. The actor is a lamp, not a mirror. He lets us see something ordinarily invisible.

I think this helps us understand what Stanislavsky meant when he said that acting is “the life of the human soul receiving its birth through technique.” Most of us don’t walk around being aware of our own souls, or anyone else’s, all the time. That’s what art and spiritual practice help us to recall and reconnect with. What Stanislavsky was saying is that the actor is someone who, as she enacts a story, pulls back the curtain and gives us an experience of her soul. She shines a light.
the trouble with “method” and emotional memory

Most people, actors or not, I’d venture to guess, are familiar with the basic idea of emotional memory: an actor tries to relive an episode from his or her own life in order to conjure the emotional state called for in a scene or even a moment.

It’s an idea that’s fairly simple to grasp, and seems intuitively appealing: why shouldn’t the actor be able to make use of her own experiences in realizing the emotional life of the role? And in fact it became the basis of the Method, as evangelized by Lee Strasberg.

One reason, articulated by Stanislavsky and by Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, is that the emotional memory takes the actor out of the present moment of the scene he is attempting to play. If he is focused on something that happened years ago, he is not relating to the actors he is in the scene with. Actors everywhere understand that it’s important to be in the moment, and so this explanation of why emotional memory is problematic carries some weight.

I think there is another, very important reason that emotional memory is problematic. And that is its superficiality. Let me explain.

We’ve all had the experience of having a fight with someone close to us. When we’re in the throes of the fight, we can feel righteous anger coursing through us: this person has failed us in some absolutely egregious way, and the anger we
feel is vigorous, often overwhelming.

Then, time passes. Some hours. A day. A few days. A week. A month. We begin to feel something else towards this person: a mixture of regret at having fought, sadness at feeling disconnected, and some measure of tenderness towards the person in question.

Now, if that moment, someone said to us, “Well, what about the anger? What happened to that?”, we would likely just shrug our shoulders and say “I was just mad. It passed.” And then if we’re asked, “So which is the truer, deeper reflection of how you really feel about this person, the anger or the emotions you’re feeling now?”, we would almost certainly say the feelings we are feeling now are truer and deeper. And I think we can recognize that the emotions we are feeling now, some distance from the fight, don’t just feel truer and deeper because we happen to be feeling them now: they are our deepest, truest feelings about the person in question.

So what we can see here is that our emotional life has two layers, or it appears to at least: one, the in-the-moment, transient emotional states that arise and vanish in the rough-and-tumble of a day in the life. And then the deeper layer, where we can sense the true significance that people have for us, their true importance for us as ongoing partners in the pursuit of connection and satisfaction.

Emotional memory deals only with the surface emotional states: I’m mad, I’m joyful, I’m worried, I’m confused, etc. It doesn’t touch the deeper layer that is the source of feeling in the superficial layer. We get mad at someone BECAUSE they are someone we count on and have been supported by in the past, but in THIS moment he or she is failing to have our back or letting us down or betraying us, etc.

The deeper layer is what is known by psychologists as attachment. We become attached to people as ongoing sources of
good stuff in our lives. We can have a range of emotions about someone in any given encounter, but none of that changes deeper way in which we recognize them as important sources of value for us.

The approach to acting that I teach attempts to bring the actor into connection with the deep attachment to the partner. This attachment finds expression through need, or what we call underlying objective. The actor attempts to be in touch with the deep need for connection that is the basis of the attachment. Then, as the partner is encountered in the scene, and sh*t goes down in the crucible of encounter, a whole host of feelings can arise and transform from moment to moment in response to those developments, and they arise organically from the deep sense of connection we have in the relationships in our lives.

With emotional memory, the actor has to come up with one memory for one section of the scene where jealousy is called for, and another where fear is called for, and another where arousal is called for, etc. This is an entirely inorganic process, where the actor is manipulating her own emotional state based on what she thinks the scene should look like, as considered from the perspective of the observer. It’s not a performance that arises organically from the give and take with the partner or from a connection to the essence of the relationship itself.

Which brings us to a basic truth about drama: it’s about what happens between people, not about what happens inside the actor. Emotional memory focuses entirely on what happens inside the actor, and disregards relationship as an essential, defining component of drama.

There may be specific kinds of challenges for which emotional memory is useful (“He enters, weeping.”), but as the basis of an actor’s process, it misses the mark. Entirely.
leaving the comfort zone

I’ve been at this, teaching acting, for seven years now. I feel very fortunate to have been initiated into the methodology that I teach in my classes. When I look at acting around me, in the theater or on a screen, I often see work that is responsive, free, and spontaneous. (I often see work that isn’t those things, but we’ll leave that for the moment.) But even in this free, responsive, and spontaneous work, there is often a dimension missing: call it true vulnerability, exposure, deep investment or visceral engagement, but there is often a lack of the depth that makes something transporting and memorable.

I firmly believe that the teachers I encountered at Yale were visionaries in terms of defining the need for this level of investment and creating tools that helped actors achieve this depth of expression. I see students, even first time actors, make extraordinary strides in their work by making use of these tools, even inside of one ten-week cycle. But here’s the thing, and I am getting very honest here: most of them need my help to get oriented properly and use the tools effectively, even after several cycles of the class. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of students who have really internalized the framework I present to the degree that they can implement it themselves, and implement it successfully. Why is that? Well for one thing, it has to do with the true complexity of the activity of acting. To act any role well, there is a lot to master. But it also has something to do with the nature of the methodology: this methodology is about using the mind, particularly the imagination and the analytical faculties, to help the actor enter into and live in the imaginary world of the play. Now, my mind is very analytical:
I had finished calculus as a sophomore in high school, and majored in math in college. Analytical thinking is second nature to me. But I don’t think it is to a lot of actors. Everyone has analytical ability, but I think people are drawn to acting from a desire to be seen, to engage in playful interaction with others, to express themselves. “I’m very analytical; I should try acting!” is not a familiar train of thought to many. People are often able to mobilize these analytical abilities to a degree when they learn that the task requires it, but it’s often not second nature, and will only take them so far. That’s part of why we have directors: the director (hopefully) can help the actor understand what is essential to a role or a scene, and help them mobilize that understanding in their work.

So am I saying that I think what I teach is of limited value? No, decidedly not. But its greatest benefits are reaped by those who are willing to apply themselves most strenuously. For those without that plucky resilience, the technique has limits because it will only take actors as far as they take it. But make no mistake: even those who never acquire that deep mastery still benefit from exposure to it. I know this because of how often students tell me war stories about their auditioning and how the feedback that they get is that they are extraordinarily well-prepared. So even if a student doesn’t acquire the ability to fully wield the technique independently, they still have learned some very important things. A red belt is not a black belt, but it’s better than a white belt.

But this perception, that a student’s relative comfort with analytical thinking would define how far they would go with this technique, was troubling to me. I wanted students to have full autonomy, as I knew there was no way I could always be there to point them in the right direction, even if they wanted me to be. I felt myself longing for a way to cut through all the analysis, and to bring people into a more
directly physical relationship with their work.

Meisner repetition work has a similar goal, as I understand it. The actor is taught to allow himself or herself to respond spontaneously to what she receives. In full-blown Meisner technique, analytical tools are layered on top of this, so this repetition is not the whole story it’s sometimes presented as. But as much respect as I have for Meisner, I have watched enough Meisner-trained actors in my time to know that while the Meisner-trained actor may be responding authentically, there are different degrees of authenticity, different depths from which the impulses may originate, and that few Meisner-trained actors (in my experience) learn to listen and respond with their cores, with the deepest parts of themselves, and that is what I am after.

At various junctures in my training and experience, I had encountered actors who were trained in Grotowski’s techniques, and I found them to have this ability to engage viscerally without the analytical apparatus of a Stanislavsky-based approach. I have never formally trained in Grotowski, but I have done a good deal of work that I think is comparable, including Suzuki, Butoh dance, rigorous Pilates, and capoeira, all disciplines that involve extreme levels of physical engagement, pitting the will and the body against their respective limits. So, when I saw a series of exercises described that were based on Grotowski’s plastiques in a book about acting that I came across recently, I was intrigued. I decided that in the cycle of my Advanced class that started in September, we would spend part of our time exploring these exercises.

I hesitated, because I knew there would be some difficulties. There would be varying levels of comfort with being instructed to perform various movement and assume various physical attitudes. Even though I think there is value in warming up, I forego any kind of warm-up in the Essentials class because there is something about this that takes people back to junior
high school gym class, and people feel they are giving up some of their autonomy as adults in going through such regimens. But I hoped that in my Advanced class, working with students with whom I had some history, and presumably some reservoir of trust, that we could get past that hurdle.

So I forged ahead, and we worked our way through some introductory stretching and breathing work and into the exercises based on the plastiques. I am not going to describe in detail what we did right now, but suffice to say that there was a fairly complex sequence of movements that involved moving the body and making sound at the same time. Each week we added a bit more, and then one week we were ready to put the whole sequence together. We did it simultaneously, and it involved all of us moving and making sound together and separately, following a basic structure but with plenty of room to find our own path through the structure.

At the end of the sequence, the five of us gazed at each other in astonishment. “That was so cool!”, someone said, although none of us could have said precisely what had happened or what had been cool about it. But I felt totally sure that through this process, we had all begun a journey towards a new mind-body integration, the goal that was Grotowski’s as well. This was only a first step, but it was a decisive one.

In other words, I had seen a need to step out of my comfort zone, I had found a roadmap for doing so, and I had brought along some intrepid acting students as I ventured forth. And it paid off, I feel certain, for all of us. Not right away; it took faith to keep going. But in the end, this risk bore fruit. We all experienced something altogether new.

I think that what I want to communicate here is that it’s imperative that we all pay attention to the voice that emerges from time to time that says: I am going to have to leave behind what is familiar to get what I need. Heeding this voice is truly the only way that anything new ever happens.
the trouble with Meisner

UPDATE: See also this recent post, which extends the discussion presented here.

A while back I received an inquiry about my classes which contained the following:

I’m a Meisner-trained actor looking for a scene study class with a minimal focus on technique. Coming from a Meisner background, I want the class to be more about the interaction between the actors, and staying truthful moment-to-moment and less about script analysis.

This person’s Meisner teacher had instilled in him a suspicion, a fear, a paranoia even, of “technique” and “text analysis.” The first thing to say about this is Meisner is itself a technique. Techniques are nothing more than ways of approaching things, and they are nothing to be afraid of.

But beyond that, this teacher had imprinted upon him a prejudice about text analysis that is more disturbing. I once spoke to one of my mentors at Yale, Evan Yionooulis, about Meisner. Evan chaired the acting program at Yale for five years, and she still teaches the last year and a half of the acting curriculum there. What she said is that Meisner is great for learning to “take it off of the other person”, but not so great for learning organizing principles of working on a scene or a role. “Organizing principles” has an abstract sound to it, but what she meant by that term was this: a set of priorities, when approaching a scene or a role. Or, a set of questions which point you toward the significant and urgent elements of the character’s situation, elements that will
unquestionably impact how you play the scene, such as: what do I most need? What do I expect to happen next, best-case and worst-case? What are my strengths? What are my vulnerabilities? What are the greatest losses or failures I have suffered? Who is the person I am interacting with to me? etc. As we address ourselves to these questions in scene work, being able to frame things like who you are in a scene, what you expect, and what happened in the past in a compelling way are critical in rising to the challenge presented by any scene.

The phobia about "text analysis" bespeaks the actor’s perennial fear of being “in her head”. And certainly, text analysis undertaken wrongly, as, for example, an exercise in literary criticism, will land an actor in her head. But that is exactly why it is appropriate for an actor’s training to include a procedure for how to approach the text involved in a scene and a role, and how to work towards identifying what is essential to it.

I have had students in my class who are either taking Meisner classes concurrently or have taken them in the past. They sometimes complain about the way in which certain words are used in Meisner classes almost talismanically, without explanation, like “listening” or “doing”. The idea is that a good actor “really listens” and “really does”, but to say more about what is meant by this is to betray or profane a sacred mystery. Some students are fine with refusal to explicate, and can learn what is meant by these terms by following the way an instructor praises or doesn’t praise students’ work in the repetition exercises. And to be fair, the teaching of acting is always going to be in part an experiential affair: no one is going to be able to explain everything about it. All acting classes rely to some extent on what is seen and experienced rather than on what is explained. However, there is more to be said about listening that simply that you should do it. You need to know what you are listening for, and for that, you
Another quagmire that can develop in Meisner classes is that as the repetition exercises unfold, INITIALLY the emphasis is on receiving from the partner and answering him or her, but then, as the weeks go by, a premium starts to be placed on repetition exercises where an emotional escalation takes place. Students then begin to work for this type of display, and the focus becomes totally wrong. Any acting teacher worth his salt, Meisner or not, will tell you that the emotion in an actor’s work is a by-product of engagement with others. When the emotion experienced by the actor becomes the focus of the actor’s attention, she is experiencing HERSELF having the emotion, rather than experiencing the partner and the scene. The histrionic displays can be impressive, but they are a colossal red herring. That is just not what it’s about.

Meisner is a great approach to study, no two ways about it. Properly taught, it is a great way to learn to put your attention on your partner. However, it has limitations and dangers, like any technique, and in the hands of an untalented teacher, it can be worse than no technique at all.

I met a Los Angeles talent agent not long ago who said that he didn’t need his people to be good, he just needed them to be able to “carry on a conversation in front of the camera”. That was what it took to get work in the acting chops department. And Meisner can be a great way for people to learn to talk and listen naturally. But there is a lot more to acting than talking and listening naturally. You don’t get memorable and inspiring performances without a solid measure of boldness, insight and imagination as well. What is needed is a technique that helps orient the actor toward the secrets of the scene carefully planted by the writer in plain sight, and invites the actor to use these secrets to enliven his imagination, helps her become not just a credible presence in front of the camera or on stage, but a luminous one.