

the scene partner experience



I read a nonsensical post on an industry website telling actors they should be afraid of classes that make them work with scene partners (the HORROR!), because their scene partner will flake on them, and also because partnering people to work on scenes is a scam acting teachers use to double their class sizes and profits. I'm not going to link to this disquisition, for reasons which I hope are obvious. But I was provoked by it into articulating what is valuable about working with a scene partner. Valuable, and often deeply satisfying. So, let's get to it!

- Learning to act is learning to get your attention off of yourself, and *onto another person* (a scene partner!). This was Stanislavsky's fundamental insight, and it is crucially important to this day. People enter acting classes thinking that what they will be doing in their work is *showing emotion*, and, not surprisingly, that's how they go about the work. A good teacher, regardless of the technique taught, will challenge this misconception at every turn, and help students understand that they must learn to put their attention *on their* partner, and keep it there. This is not easy, because it means giving up the ability to manage your own self-presentation. You can't pay attention to your partner and watch yourself at the same time. It's an act of surrender, and requires courage and faith. And guess what? Having a partner to focus on helps with this process. That's why every acting class I was in at the Yale School of Drama taught acting using two-person scenes, not monologues! And this is why I think it's pedagogically suspect to teach acting using monologues.

It's not that it can't be done, but it's a very tricky business, since with monologues you're trying to get someone to put their attention on someone who isn't even there! A scene, any scene, is about [a relationship](#).

Having a partner is helpful in exploring having a relationship. Capiche?

- Film, television and theater are [collaborative art forms](#). In rehearsing with a scene partner, you are practicing your skill at collaborating. We all need to learn to balance our own needs and impulses with those of others. This is a lifelong learning process that we all have to continually practice and refine. Having a scene partner allows us to work on that.
- With a partner, you have accountability. As creative people, we all face resistance at various points. "The price an artist pays for doing what he wants is that he has to do it", the writer William Burroughs said. We don't always feel like doing it. We don't always want to do it. We procrastinate. We forget. We avoid. And all of this keeps us from moving forward, in our craft and in our career. Having a partner, for whom we have to show up each week, and to whom we have to respond, helps us to keep ourselves honest. A class where everyone works on monologues? I am guessing there will be a whole lot of procrastination going on. Why work by yourself, when you can wait for the teacher to spoon-feed you instructions about how to do the monologue?
- A scene partner can be a sounding board. You don't want a partner who is bossy or overbearing, but someone who you can bounce ideas off of or ask for feedback when you feel like you want it is a good thing.
- When you work together with someone on a scene in a committed way, chances are good you come out of it having made a friend. We can all use another friend. Maybe you don't feel you need to go to acting class to find that, but it doesn't hurt. And you never know when that friend is going to say to their new agent or

manager: hey, I have a friend you should meet! I imagine that such friendships in a class centered on monologues are a bit more...rare.

Like any partnership, scene partnership has its challenges, and can go south if both parties allow it to. As a teacher, I make it very clear that I want the partnerships in the class to work, and I want to know as soon as problems arise. I won't necessarily get involved immediately; I think it's best when partners can solve problems between them, but I can coach the partner experiencing the difficulty on how it might be productively addressed. If that doesn't work, then I am more than willing to intervene to help partners get things on track. But mostly, people are able to work things out between them. It's when one person is falling short, and the other stays silent about it, that the partnership ends up not working. But in most cases, people work together successfully, learn from each other and support each other, and perhaps complete the experience with a solid new friend. So what's so awful about that?