

'A Practical Handbook for the Actor' was written by Bruder, M.



'A Practical Handbook for the Actor' was written by Bruder, M. et al. and published in 1986 by Vintage Books in New York City. As the introduction to the book, David Mamet states that the book was the best book to be written in the past twenty years. In the book, the author fronts a technique of acting of using Practical Aesthetics and gives an in-depth description of the theory, however, too technical for amateur actors. I feel that it should be more verbose on most its advocacies so as to be well understood and to avoid being misquoted by beginners in the acting profession. The technique which Bruder advocates for is based on the trend of breaking down a scene into four steps of analysis. The steps include: the literal which is specifically based on the ideal description of what is taking place in the play or scene. The second step is the want, which is all about the character's ultimate desires. The third step is referred to as the essential action, which is usually an evocative and relevant description of what the actor wants the scene to appear like. The last step relates the essential action with the actor's real life situations (Bruder et al. 15).

In a nutshell, the technique fronted by Bruder is aimed at making the

acting experience entirely based on the will of the actor. It compels the actor to commit his or her will to the pursuit of an action while considering the other actor in a play as the action goes on. It is, therefore, paramount that every actor possesses this book. It offers great insight as far as the analysis of a script prior to the action on stage is concerned.

The first chapter of 'A Practical Handbook for the Actor' has been entitled 'Physical Action' in which the assertion that physical action is the most important aspect of acting has been fronted. The author says so because it is the only thing that an actor can do frequently while on stage. For that reason the author opines that Physical Action is the main building block for acting. In the chapter, the author introduces the requirements of a good action and notes that a good action must be physically capable of being done (Bruder et al.73).

Bruder says that as an actor trying to enact a scene of a play, for the scene or action to be a good one, the actor should be able to act it anytime anywhere. The author, however, warns actors and playwrights that an action which is physically capable of being done is one with which anybody can identify. It does not, however, imply the notion of intense physical activities; something can be accomplished even while a person is seated. This first quality of a good action applies to most of my acting appearances. Sometimes I could find myself pursuing an unachievable dream in a text and I could feel quite weird. Sometimes also, I could be assigned roles that I know nothing about at all. For example, there was a time I was supposed to plead for financial assistance from well wishers. I



did it perfectly because it was within the scope of my knowledge and seemed common knowledge to most of my audience. However, when I was supposed to accomplish my American dream, it was really difficult to convince the audience through my actions; they simply knew nothing about the vision I was enacting. It was not such a good experience and I did not like it at all (Bruder et al. 16).

Furthermore, the author tries to bring out the importance of fun in our day to day lives. Having fun does not mean the ability to laugh, rather it refers to something really compelling to the actor. The actor has, therefore, to choose the scene with which he or she needs to associate him or herself. It is important because they are the ones to act the scenes out for quite a long time during rehearsals and actual action on stage. The actor has the right to choose the scene to appear in without pressure from the director. Despite the author's insistence on the action being fun to participate in, I strongly feel that some questions are left unanswered (Bruder et al. 44). What if the actor is not compelled to take the action but the action is able to be done? Will the actor refuse being part of it because he or she does not like it? There are times that I have been assigned roles that were difficult to execute. These are roles that I cannot associate with outside the theatre. However, I willingly took them and played them to the satisfaction of my director and ultimately, my audience. I, therefore, do not hold the same opinion as the author does albeit to some extent the assertion holds water.

In addition, the chapter fronts the idea of being specific. Actors should



avoid generality. The author borrows from Stanislavsky that '*generality is an enemy of all art*'. Being specific provides one with clarity and specificity of a path to be followed in acting a scene out. I have once been fronted with making a decision between a cheap answer and a complicated one through beating about the bush. I realized that I was degrading my personality as an actor since I did not give a direct answer, which could have been specific (Bruder et al. 86).

The chapter also exemplifies the significance of keeping a close eye on fellow participants on stage. Sometimes actors can be selfish and too conscious of themselves while on stage to the extent of forgetting their core purpose. To avoid this, an actor should keep watch of his or her partner and this way he can tell from their reactions, whether you are playing your part right. From the reactions, one can tell whether the other is falling in to the persuasions of the script. When an action does not have the sense of the other actors on stage, the goals of the play will not be achieved. The play, therefore, becomes a failure. Sometimes, while on stage, I realized that my co-actor provides incomprehensible answers to my questions on stage. For instance, I asked 'what sort of ancestor is your father's grandfather?' he replied with nothing. I asked, 'do you think you deserve my mercies if you cannot answer a simple logical question?' he replied, 'yes'. He should have at least provided even a one sentence explanation to his 'yes' had he been with me in the action. I, therefore, felt incapacitated in a way as I could not compel him to stick with me in the action. The action, as Bruder argues should indeed have its test in the other person. From the face of my co-actor, one could tell that he was



lost.

The chapter also outlines the need for plays not to be based on an errand. Good action should not be based on errands (Bruder et al. 16). An errand is an action which cannot be tested through another actor on stage, which impact cannot be explained by looking at the other actor. They may also include those scenes which pre-empt an actor's roles in the play so that they remain purposeless for the entire play and remain 'dead' for the rest of the play. When such happens, one feels useless because they chose roles and scenes in which to feature carelessly. As already illustrated from in the paragraph above, it is indeed clear that an actor's co-actors play a pivotal role in the success of a play. However, this point seems unsatisfactorily phrased due to the fact that sometimes an action can accomplish the playwright's intentions without necessarily being seen on the other characters on the stage. Sometimes, too, ironies can be presented and the reactions of characters could be different from what actually happens on stage. Could we, therefore, say that the action was not good because of differences in reception by the actors? For this reason, I believe that the case must be revised.

More so, the chapter teaches that actors should not presuppose any physical or emotional state. The only best thing for actors to do is to create a partner's confidence while on stage. Actors are discouraged to take scenes where they are supposed to fake emotions and states such as, anger, joy, or drunkenness among others. This is because they would be lying and such acting could probably lead to one focusing on *'lying'*



and maintaining the *'lie'* and end up forgetting the intentions of the scene. The actor's objectives will, therefore, not be accomplished. *'The person you are is a thousand times more interesting than the best actor you could ever hope to be'* – Stanislavski. By this quote, Stanislavski, one of the greatest teachers of acting intends to urge his students to try and discover his own true ideas and values and understand them as they could give him or her a basis to express him or herself as an actor (Bruder et al. 18). I remember one incidence, while acting out as a mad woman, I forgot the intentions of the scene and concentrated on being nuts instead of propelling the play forward. This affected the play as it had to be cut; thank God it was only but a rehearsal. I do not know the guilt I could have carried had it been the real action.

Additionally, the book highlights the importance of not being manipulative. Actors and/or directors of plays can sometimes be manipulative. This happens when they force other actors to follow a certain chain of action while targeting a certain outcome. For instance, an actor may rehearse a scene together with the expected outcomes not allowing the partner to react and respond naturally. Instead of acting out a scene with pre-judgments which may end up bearing no fruit, it is advisable to allow actors the freedom of responding to situations without manipulations of any type so as to produce more honest responses. Naturalism also matters as it allows the actor to act naturally and achieve the desired outcome without manipulation. When one is under strict direction to achieve a certain outcome, the opposite is likely to be the result. This has once occurred to me; I was under strict instruction to



make the audience laugh during a play. Because I knew that if I could not make the audience laugh then the director was to be indeed mad, I ended up messing the whole scene and nobody laughed (Bruder et al. 17).

Bruder defines a cap as that specific thing which an actor seems to search for in a scene and wishes to accomplish through his or her action on stage. Upon accomplishment of that particular thing, the actor considers his or her desires achieved. The actor can easily determine the impact of his or her action by clearly observing the receiver of the action. If there is the desired impact such as crying, laughter or befitting words, then the actor considers him or herself successful. For example, if the partner forgives the actor, after a pleading for forgiveness scene, then that actor considers himself successful (Bruder et al. 15). Sometimes, the cap is never achieved and this can be seen through the other characters on stage. I was once told that if I notice that what I am in search of during an action is not forthcoming, I am free to change my tactics. This is what I often do when I seem to be failing. For instance, I once wanted to make my co-actor weep on stage but he could not simply give in to my maneuvers as I tried to belittle him. I simply changed my tactic and employed sarcasm, praising him for his good deeds while I meant the opposite. The trick worked out for me and I felt a winner.

Besides, the play teaches that actors should be in line with the intentions of the playwright. Playwrights usually have certain intentions for writing a play down. They do not dedicate their precious time without a viable reason or intention which accomplishment during action makes them



satisfied. The actors must, therefore, use the most applicable scenes to ensure the accomplishment of the playwright's intentions. The intentions of the playwright are usually presented in the form of stage directions. The director usually follows these directions to the latter due to the fact that they convey the author's desires of how the play should be directed. Going against the intentions of the playwright is, therefore, a crime in theatre to the playwright. I could be associated with this failure when I went contrary to the directions during a rehearsal and the director had to cut the play and stress on the direction that I already knew but wanted to go my own way. Without any shadow of doubt, it was an embarrassing moment.

As a final point, the book 'A Practical Handbook for the Actor' states that acting, as a craft, is essentially a technical toolbox, which needs the application of its proper tools while one analyzes, interprets, and ultimately presents in a performance the dictates of a script or scene. For example, if one wishes to make his or her co-actor provide a straight answer to some enquiry, the tool could be either to reason with the partner, to threaten him or her, to demand for the answer or even to intimidate the fellow. Chapter one concludes by stating that after the analysis of a scene in a script, the actor needs to list down all the tools to be used in the physical action so as to achieve what is desired in the scene and this could, to some extent, be dictated by what the other actors do on stage (Bruder 24). To note but a few things about the chapter analyzed above, the outlined factors of action are but the basics of physical action. They are the basic qualities which are solid indicators of what the



audience could find more interesting in an action on stage. As many critics of the play have asserted, the qualities outlined herein are far enough to get an actor started and eventually established in the basics of an action for the theatre. As I read the book, I most sincerely want to concur with the popular majority that the book is a real kick start for actors and is a must-have book for any actor.

