THE CRAFT

Cry If You Want To

by Kimberly Lewis

Picture this scenario: Your agent calls and says, "Hey kid, I got an audition for ya." (About time, you think.) "You're a shoo-in. They're not just looking for your type—they're looking for your exact height, weight, and astrological sign. Believe me, kid. This one's in the bag!"

Then the other shoe falls.

"By the way—You *can* cry on cue, can't you?"

"Sure," you say. "As long as the 'cue' is a punch in the nose."

One of the most vexing and intimidating challenges for an actor in any medium is the necessity to call up tears at a predetermined moment—and do it night after night or take after take. Seeing the dreaded word "cries" in a script direction can be enough to inspire trepidation and insecurity in any young actor.

Short of working onion-chopping into every teary scene, are there practical processes an actor with unreliable tear ducts can use? The good news is yes. The bad news is that there are no shortcuts. Eminent L.A.-based acting teacher Stephen Book makes sure to include in his ongoing workshop for professional actors a project devoted entirely to crying on cue.

All choked up.

"In this technique, the way we handle emotions across the board is very relevant to handling crying," explained Book, whose 28 years of teaching includes long stints at Juilliard and USC. "We deal with creating emotions through a process called physicalization," which essentially involves training the actor's body in certain physical behaviors that correlate to specific feelings.

Script call for tears? Take a deep breath.

It starts with script interpretation, according to Book. "Most of the time when a script calls for an actor to cry, you'll notice it happens under the specific condition of the character finding out some major truth about him or herself," he said. "When they find out this truth, it's usually devastating to them, because they've been living their whole life avoiding it."

Once the actor identifies this truth, the next step is to "list a sequence of emotions a person goes through upon having this large moment of truth hitting them." Then comes the task of correlating those emotions to physical actions. According to Book, the key here is breathing.

"Every emotion has its own unique breath pattern, and they're universal," he said. "If you get angry, you're going to breathe in a specific pattern. And that pattern is the same exact pattern you will breathe every time in your life you are angry. Each emotion has its own pattern, and when you learn the patterns, you can then use them to complete the process of physicalization."

With script breakdown in hand, an actor can then "rehearse and/or perform the physicalizations of those emotions, in sequence, with or without text. And their body will be led to crying all by itself."

It's clear, of course, that a discussion of crying on cue can't be separated from addressing an actor's overall approach. Book's behavioral approach—what he calls working from the "outside in"—places him clearly in the "anti-Strasberg" camp, which he characterized as having "inside-out" approach.

"The problem with inside-out," said Book, "is you can't count on it." A vivid example illustrates his point with frightening immediacy: "Suppose you're on a set and you've got the last shot of the day before the sun goes, and the scene is you and Jack Nicholson. And the scene calls for you to cry on cue. And there's only one take because of time. When you go inside-out, it doesn't always happen. And if it doesn't happen, what are you going to do? Turn to Nicholson and say, 'I'm sorry. I just don't feel it'? When you go outside-in, you can do it every single time."

Book underscored that in this highly competitive and expensive business there are no excuses, and no second chances. "An actor has to be able to do it the first time out, any time, anywhere. That's almost the definition of technique." To those actors who cringe at any approach that feels "inorganic," Book offered this interesting paradox: "The more you physicalize and show an emotion, the more likely you'll actually feel it."

Actress, director, and teacher Caryn West concurred that, when all else fails, an actor can "do the behavior and the feelings will follow." In fact, she described a "sob mechanism" in the diaphragm that, when properly employed, can take an actor where they need to go physically and emotionally.

West cautioned, however, against placing too much, if any, emphasis on the end result of crying. " 'I must cry' is a trap," she warned. "It's one of the actor's biggest preoccupations, when in fact the less you concern yourself with it, the easier it is."

West, who teaches an audition skills class locally, takes a kinder view of such Strasberg techniques as emotional recall and sense memory, advocating that an actor create for herself a "catalog" of emotional triggers that work for her, citing other such examples as substitutions ("It's *as if* my boyfriend died"), or listening to a particular piece of music that opens the actor up right before a take.

"You're scratching a scab off, essentially," she explained, suggesting that the actor, not the coach, is most qualified to judge how best to detach that scab (and heal it back).

But West does agree that it all comes back to breath technique.

"When you're playing the action and you're really steeped in the circumstances, you will be affected—especially if you're really breathing deeply. That's where all your primitive impulses come from."

In audition situations, in particular, she said, "breath is your salvation." Because auditions trigger a "fight-or-flight" response, actors tend to stop breathing without realizing it. "Consciously feel yourself breathe low," she advises, "and you'll stay loose, well-oiled, open, and vulnerable."

So what if I've done my homework, and I know my circumstances, and my stakes are high, and my body is free, I'm breathing—and my eyes are still absolutely arid? As Lenny in the Broadway and touring productions of *Crimes of the Heart*, West was called upon to burst out crying five times in the course of the play. After nearly putting herself in the hospital trying, she realized, "There was no way I could make myself cry five times a show, eight times a week, for 16 months." One approach that occurred to her was to view crying as an action, not just a reaction; a character may use tears as an active way to go after what she wants.

The bottom line, really, is that an actor to have a solid foundation of technique that works for him with any emotion he may be called upon to play. That way, Book said, "If it's a bad day for you, you may not feel the emotion, but you can still act it. After all, you are an actor."

And when all else fails, pack an onion. **BSW**