

## THE CRAFT by Jean Schiffman

# Book Chat

The second part of a discussion of Stephen Book's non-Method method.

In the last "Craft," we discussed some of the acting techniques taught by Stephen Book, a Los Angeles teacher who runs workshops for professional actors who want to learn how to infuse their work with spontaneity. Book, who recently published *Book on Acting: Improvisation Technique for the Professional Actor in Film, Theater & Television* (Silman-James Press, Los Angeles, 2002, \$24.95), applies techniques of improvisational acting to scripted acting. (By the way, apologies to Book for getting the title of his book wrong in my last column.)

As Book explained to me in a phone conversation, the important thing about his method is that it gives the actor a variety of choices as to what to focus on in any given acting moment.

"From a technique point of view, in the past those choices had been somewhat limited to playing an action," he said. "I found that you could expand what the choices are and give a much larger tool bag to actors so that this tool works best in this situation, and that tool works best in that situation. As long as they focus on the tool, they will automatically be spontaneous."

When you focus on something—be it an action, an objective, whatever—this prevents you from, as Book says, taking "side trips to trouble." Your mind is otherwise engaged and therefore unavailable for nervousness, judgment, need for approval, and all those self-destructive and self-inhibiting thoughts and feelings.

But Book found that playing actions was not always the best choice of a focus. "If you focus on other tools, you automatically get the same goodies [as with playing actions]," he said—"spontaneous involvement and behavior, no side trips to trouble."

So I want to describe two of the many tools Book offers that I think are particularly intriguing: nailing your character's *attitude*, and thinking your character's *thoughts* so that you're improvising new thoughts for each take, or exploring new thoughts in each performance—all, of course, within the context of the script and its requirements. I should add, too, that Book's approach to spontaneity is very much grounded in physicalization.

### New Attitude

In his book, Book says that characters have a basic underlying attitude toward life. "If you don't play your character's attitude," he warns, "you are polluting the chemistry of the scene." For example, he suggests that Blanche DuBois's attitude is one of entitlement.

Book's students mostly discover their characters' attitudes through careful script breakdown, which we won't go into here, but ultimately, according to his method, you must physicalize the attitude in order to truly inhabit the character. "Unless you spiritually embody that attitude in your whole being, which must start with the body, you won't capture it in those lines that are seemingly off the subject of attitude," he writes. He suggests, among other exercises, animal characterizations and finding the character's body center as ways of approaching this type of outside-to-inside work.

Book compares attitude to body armor, as per psychologist Wilhelm Reich, explaining that we all form attitudes early on in response to living in the world—attitudes that are manifested in our body—and we wear that "armor" ever after. A really good actor is able to remove his or her own personal armor in exchange for the armor of the character.

If you play a character's life attitude, that doesn't mean your character doesn't change. In a good script, in fact, your character *does* change, from moment to moment and from beginning to end—but always within the parameters of the established attitude. In other words, your character's behavior is always inherently colored by his or her life attitude. I think this is very similar to what is often called knowing your character's "spine," but Book offers specific exercises to experience attitude viscerally. Also, attitude need not incorporate an overall objective, which the concept of "spine" does. Keep in mind that the character doesn't know his or her own attitude. It's you, the actor, who identifies it.

To make your character's attitude personal and immediate, Book recommends verbalizing it for yourself, preferably in the first person, as in "I'm impatient." Indeed in the back of his book he has an appendix of several hundred "sample attitude lines," from "Be careful!" to "Why me?"

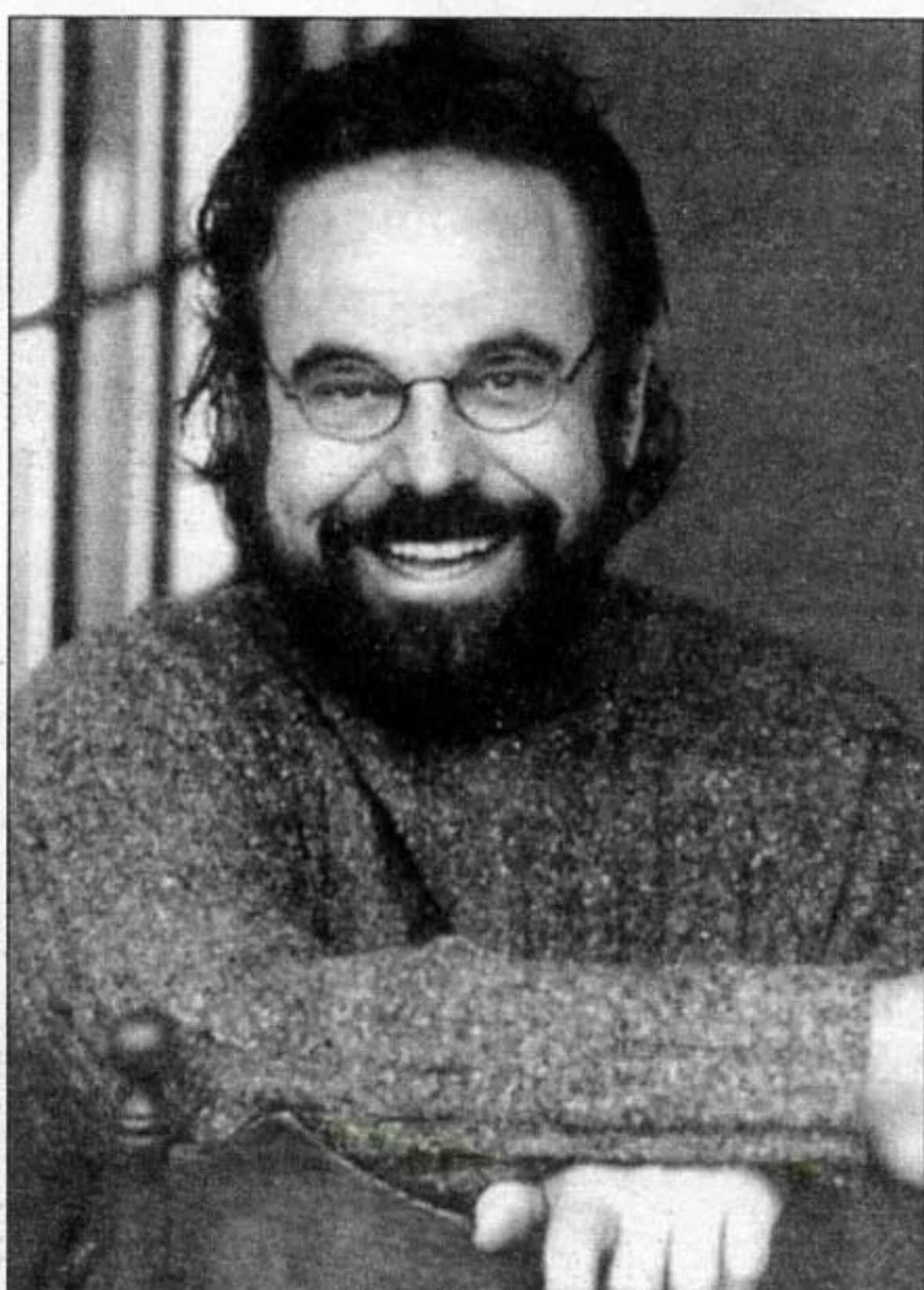
I, for one, was taught *not* to "play an attitude"; by playing a generally "happy" or "angry" character, the tendency is to become generically happy or angry.

I asked Book about that, and he said, adamantly, "Attitude makes the actor more *specific*! Attitudes are intended primarily as a character-building tool, not necessarily something you might use in a beat. They absolutely always make someone who's doing general work more specific.

"Let's take *Seinfeld*," he continued. "Each of those characters is based on an attitude line. Kramer's line is, 'I'll try anything.' From that attitude you can then create a physicalized character that is a complete embodiment of a person who has that kind of attitude. Elaine, her attitude is probably, 'My way.' Jerry's is, 'I'm suspicious.' Would you call those actors generalized?"

Of course not. Those are superb comic actors.

"It's a specific tool," reiterated Book. "I talk [in the book] about six or seven tools to use in creating a character." Attitude is just



Stephen Book.

one among several.

In the book, Book reminds us, "It's in the doing that the character manifestations are revealed. How does someone with an angry attitude make coffee?" Clearly, the key to avoid playing a cliché, or an intellectual, generic idea of how an angry person would make coffee, is in the physicalization process, which leads to an internalization of attitude. "When you allow the attitude line to affect you one body part at a time, you create a brand new character," Book writes.

### Whatcha Thinkin'?

Let's talk about specific ways to keep your inner life fresh as you go through take after take, or performance after performance. A multifaceted tool Book offers is called *traveling*. One exercise, "Question & Answer Railroad Tracks," could work whether you understand the entire method that he teaches, or so it seems to me.

As Book explains in his book, people—and the characters actors play—have hidden agendas: plans, schemes, and, importantly, questions. Book suggests that at any given moment in a scene, your character has internal questions. We're talking about subtext, but in the form of a question that leads to another question and thus keeps you on your toes, alive on the inside.

Here is an exercise example Book gives: You might wonder, in a scene, What does she want from me? And once you have a possible answer to that internal query—say, She wants my money—you formulate yet another question: Do I want to give it to her? If your internal answer—that is, your character's thought—is no, the next question might be, How will she feel about that? Book calls it a railroad track because you travel through the scene and through your character's thoughts as though along the ties of a railroad track. You pursue an internal query to the end of the line—then get off the train and hop on a new train of thought. Book's exercises demonstrate how much farther you can go, imaginatively speaking, when acting.

Once again, Book emphasizes the need for your body to be involved in the subtext in deep ways (no "indicating" involved) and offers exercises toward that end. And naturally while all this internal stuff is going on, you're saying your lines and doing your blocking, hitting your marks. I think the performer must be the ultimate multitasker.

Another similar inner-traveling exercise is related more closely to what you observe in the moment: You allow your (character's) thoughts to pick up on the things you notice (in yourself and in the other characters)—anything from, as Book suggests, realizing that your fingernails are dirty (When did I turn into such a slob?) to an element of the set.

"Traveling opens subtextual doors you did not previously consider," Book writes. "Unlike traditional subtext, which is always related to the text, this is character subtext because everything about it is informing your character." In shooting multiple takes, especially for close-ups, you can choose a general area of subtext that you want to explore, then, within that general area, improvise new, specific subtext for each take—that is, travel down different thought tracks for each take. That way, he explained, "You are always doing it for the first time, even though it is the third take. And no one need know what you are doing. All the director sees is someone who is so spontaneous that there are subtle differences in each take." Certainly this would also work well in stage performances.

Book told me that once you learn his improvisation technique, which involves not just your head but also your entire body, your body will spontaneously and intuitively select a tool upon which to focus in any scene, beat, close-up, take, etc. The body, as we all know, has a mind of its own. It's a matter of toning it up and learning to trust it.