

## THE CRAFT by Jean Schiffman

# By the Book

L.A. teacher Stephen Book's Improvisation Technique challenges accepted Method acting assumptions.

I don't know if I'd want to call Los Angeles teacher Stephen Book's approach to acting revolutionary, but, in adapting improvisation exercises to script work, he challenges some of the received wisdom of modern American training and offers a practical method to infuse your performance with spontaneity.

For example, actions and objectives are among the many tools available to play a scene—but, for Book, not necessarily the most important ones at any given moment. And some of his exercises sound suspiciously like playing for result, playing attitude, and working from the outside in—until you understand them in the context of his carefully organized system.

Book first learned improvisation skills from famed improv guru Viola Spolin, and his professional relationship with her continued over the years as he directed and taught acting. He explained to me that when he opened his Hollywood workshop for professional working actors in 1985, he realized that actors need to give a spontaneous, opening night performance on their first day on the set and be prepared to go with whatever changes the director wants. At that point, he began to formulate improvisation technique for script acting. He recently published *Book on Book: Improvisation Technique for the Professional Actor in Film, Theater & Television* (Silman-James Press, Los Angeles, 2002, \$24.95).

Like most contemporary teachers, Book believes that “acting is doing,” but he adds, “and there's always more to do.” What does he mean by this? “In the old days, when [‘acting is doing’] came into being, it referred to playing an action,” he explained. “I've expanded it so it's not just that.” For him, *doing* means choosing a particular acting tool that serves you as an actor—and also serves the script—in the moment. The various tools help you engage in conflict, create a character, “arc” (move through levels of) or switch an emotion, and much more. “There's always more to do” is Book's way of emphasizing that, “the minute you think there's *not* more to do, you set your performance... and that's the beginning of the decline of acting.” Thus, noted Book, the thing to do is choose to focus on something brand-new in each successive rehearsal or performance or each successive take: “actually, literally doing something new every time.” It could be a subtle, barely detectable change of focus—but it's new for you and keeps your performance fresh. Choice are of course not arbitrary but based on careful script analysis.

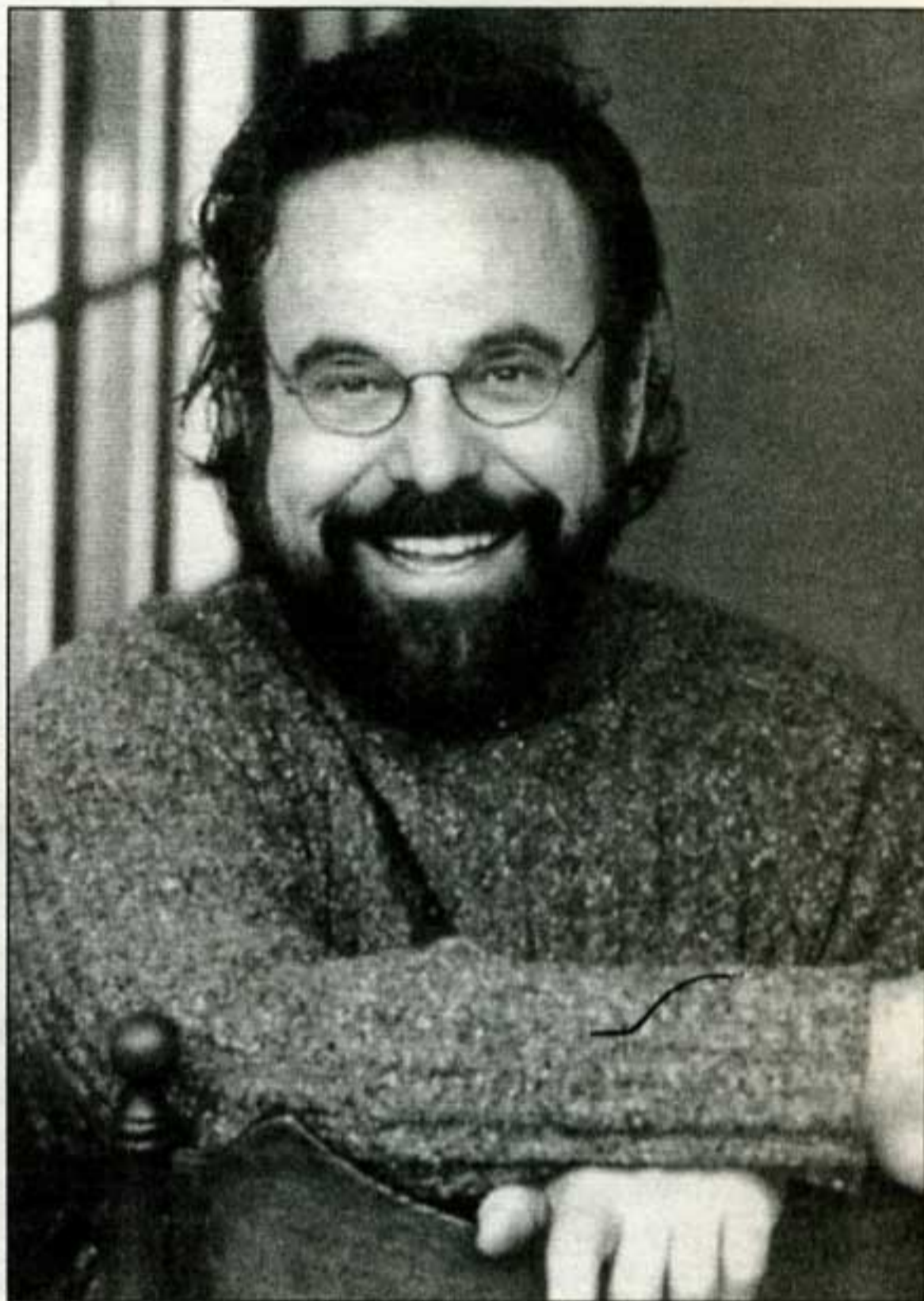
A very important part of Book's training is in physicality; “Physical Doing” is one of the earliest chapters in the book, a way of grounding yourself for the workouts that follow. “Improvisation Technique puts the doing in the body, not in the ‘problem-solving’ head,” he writes, and he provides exercises that go far beyond the “symptomatic gesture” and other commonly taught forms of bodily expression.

Does Book's method work? Michael Ness, a Los Angeles stage, film, and TV actor who responded to a query I posted online, thinks so. He has been studying with Book for three and a half years, and he told me that, despite graduating from a university drama program and taking independent classes that used Uta Hagen's techniques, he never felt he had a reliable way to break down a script and make choices. “I used to read scripts from my ‘character's’ point of view and make choices based on, ‘How would I respond if I were this person under these circumstances?’” he e-mailed me. “Now I read scripts from the writer's point of view and make choices based on facilitating the writer's vision of what is being dramatized.” Improvisation Technique has also helped him get his performance into his body, and, as he explained, to act spontaneously, “nailing all the beats, whether I'm acting opposite a tired casting director or an award-winning actor.”

Book's book is structured as a series of layered exercises to be led by a colleague/coach, the idea being to organize your own group and train yourselves. Given that the book is 622 pages, including appendices, and that it describes a technique that Book developed over the course of 30 years of teaching, I can't hope to do it justice here. However, I am publishing some of Book's remarks on various aspects of the system, culled from a phone conversation we had, and supplementing them as needed with italicized quotes from his book—unavoidably, more or less out of context—and some explanation of my own (in brackets). If, like Ness, your system doesn't meet all your needs, Book's may be well worth exploring.

### On Playing Emotions

Book writes: “Emotion work is a substantial part of Improvisation Technique, but from a whole new approach. Once you train in it, you can play any emotion you want at a moment's notice without dwelling on subjective history or affective memories. Once you know how to physicalize an emotion [exercises in the book show you how to choose an emotion and feel it in different parts of your body]... you simply select a preplanned emotion based on the script, and you know how to press a button on the body, and you're there. And



Stephen Book.

if you're not doing a preplanned choice, you have a body so tuned up that it's completely open to the arrival of some spontaneous feeling....

“There are very few classes that train actors in what to do with the emotion after it arrives—how to ‘arc’ 25 basic emotions, let's say: *The traveling of emotion through gradations of intensity is an emotional scale.... The proficient actor not only seizes any opportunity presented in the scene to climb the arc but also has the skill to initiate his own movement up the arc.*

“Or how to do emotion switches: *If a character is in a scene for more than one beat, that character goes through emotional changes, or should. Changing from one feeling to another may be improvised or preplanned and is easily accomplished through an emotion switch.*”

### On “Result” Acting

“Somewhere along the line a cliché was arrived at that started as truth: You can't play the result. It's absolutely true. But somewhere along the line the word *result* got confused with the word *choice*. If someone were to pick up my book without reading it and turn to the section on script breakdown, they'd see that in this beat you play happy, in this beat you play anger, and they'd go, ‘Wait a minute, that's result playing.’ It's not; it's only a choice. If you can press a button and play anger, what's the problem in playing an anger arc from the top of the page to the middle of the page?”

### On Being in the Moment

“Being in the moment is not the end, it's the beginning. Lots of people can train and do exercises and be in the moment and go with the flow, but are they in fact, while doing that, interpreting and exploiting—and I use that word in a good sense—the script? Are they bringing out what the author intended the script to do at that moment? Or are they reducing the script to a playground for them to be in the moment?”

### On Conflict Scenes

When you talk about an actor who is just in the moment, totally skilled at that only, or at playing an objective only, they miss the technical tools like conflicts. Scripts are structured in such a way that when you have a beat in a scene around conflict—and not every scene is around conflict—the scene was designed by the author to occur in a certain fashion.... Actors who don't understand the technical features think that conflict is just about getting what you want, which somebody else doesn't want you to get.... [But] there are many variations of that, and how you do that is indicated by the text, which gives you hints as to what level of intensity or volatility should take place.... You can play the same conflict with five different intensity levels simply by having a different focus on each one, and at the same time, improvisationally spotting when you've been scored on, let's say. [That could lend itself to using a tool called Playing the Loss.] *A loss is when you feel hurt, your heart aches or breaks, or you are stopped in your tracks by something the opponent says or does. For that moment, they have won.*

“Another technique is called Going in for the Kill. *Most of us in real life do not go in for the kill when our opponent is experiencing pain and suffering a loss,... however, in a dramatic conflict, unless the script indicates otherwise, when your opponent plays a loss, you must go in for the kill.... Conflict is about confrontation.*”

In the next “Craft” I'll describe two of Book's tools that I think are particularly intriguing: creating your character's *attitude*, and thinking your character's *thoughts* so that you're improvising new thoughts for each take.