

CHAPTER ONE  
THE PERSONAL SCENE

*"One of the things I like about acting is that, in a funny way, I come back to myself." - Bill Murray*

*"A role has to feel personal, because you do your best when you feel the role in your bones." - Sophia Loren*

The script. Even if you're a new actor you know what a script is. Whether from a movie, play or TV show it tells a story by the characters' dialogue and actions. Here's an excerpt of a script, from the movie *Sideways*:

INT. BREAKFAST CAFE - DAY

Jack sucks his teeth for a moment searching for the right words. Then the dam bursts.

JACK

I am going to get my nut on this trip Miles. And you're not going to fuck it up for me with all your depression and anxiety and neg-head downer shit.

MILES

Oooh, now the cards are on the table.

JACK

Yes they are. And I'm serious. Do not fuck with me. I am going to get

laid before I settle down on  
Saturday. Do you read me?

MILES

Sure big guy. Whatever you say. It's  
your party. I'm sorry I'm in the way  
and dragging you down. Maybe you'd have  
a better time on your own. You take the  
car, I'll catch the train back.

JACK

No, see, I want both of us to get  
crazy. We should both be cutting  
loose. I mean, this is our last  
chance. This is our week! It should  
be something we share.

In this scene, Jack, the handsome playboy about to get married, is terrified about his impending nuptials and desperate to have one last fling. In order to do so, he has to persuade his buddy, the brooding, depressed Miles to go along but Miles has his own fears and insecurities preventing him from having a good time. Or simply - it's two friends clashing because they want different things in that moment.

Can you relate? Of course you can. You've had a friend, lover, spouse, sibling, child or co-worker that you've clashed with. So you'd think that anybody could pick up this script and bring it to life. But such is usually not the case.

Why? After much deliberation and meticulous research I've decided that the script has evil powers.

The act of picking up a script can turn an otherwise charming human being into a robotic humanoid. In the early days of my classes my new actors would handle dialogue like a succession of lines to be regurgitated on cue when the other actor stopped talking, moving stiffly about the stage as if riding bareback on a rusted chain saw, and as soon as the last word left their lips would shoot me a look begging to be put out of their misery.

Even though I tried to explain to my students that the script is merely a roadmap to human behavior, the point wasn't getting across. They couldn't grasp that concept on a visceral level. So, how to get my actors to *connect*?

Several years ago I had a student whom I'll call Rick (and for the rest of the book, all students' names have been changed.) Rick was in his early 20's, had some modeling experience but had never taken an acting class before in his life. When he was on stage performing a scene, he had a perpetually frozen, embarrassed smile on his face and was constantly sneaking peaks out at the audience to gauge their reaction to him. No matter how many notes I gave him, his performance didn't improve after weeks in class.

My actors choose their own scenes. I've found that actors have a genius for choosing material that they know will best help them, at least on a subconscious level. Rick brought in a scene from *Good*

*Will Hunting*, about the emotionally scarred young math prodigy who at first has a contentious relationship with his therapist. The scene was the confrontational climax between the two men.

I noticed a little less of the frozen smile in this scene and a little more of a glimmer of a connection in Rick. We stopped the scene and I asked Rick if he felt this scene was similar to other contentious relationships in his life.

His eyes welled with tears and I realized we were on to something. He revealed that his father had abandoned him at an early age and that he had spent his life squelching and covering the pain. On the spot I had him improvise what he would say to his father if he were to show up today.

And then it was like watching Rick come alive. His stiffness melted away, his face had color, his eyes were on fire, he wasn't worried about his "lines" - all he cared about was confronting his father. When he was finished, the class was stunned, as if we had all witnessed the same miracle. Where had this guy been all these weeks?

When he went back to the actual script of the scene it was like watching a completely different human being. He used this newly established emotional *connection* to merge with his character and the result was riveting. But the amazing thing was, every scene he tackled thereafter was completely transformed as well. Rick had experienced unbridled freedom on stage, with his own truthful experience from his life, and now understood to merge that same

feeling of freedom and connection with every *scripted* scene moving forward. This happened a while ago but to this day the students who witnessed Rick undergo such a seismic shift in one class still talk about it.

Prior to this I had been using improvisation and other random exercises as a way to help my actors find the truth in their scene work. But because of this particular revelation, the Personal Scene is now the first scene every student does in my studio regardless of previous training, and becomes a baseline of reference for future scripted scenes.

Like a physical workout that addresses multiple muscle groups, the Personal Scene achieves miraculous results with just about everyone. It taps into your deepest emotional connection, usually with one of your personal cast of characters in your life which going forward we'll refer to as one of your Hot Persons. It also is likely one of your Hot Situations (both will be explained in the next chapter.) This emotional connection will establish a muscle memory that you can call upon at any time in scenes with a similar theme.

It will bring you back to the Place where this event happened, Place being an important tool to bring to every scene that you will act in from this day forward.

It helps you embrace the improvisational nature of good acting - which at its best has a spontaneous, unpredictable quality and leaves us on the edge of our seats, wondering what's going to happen next.

It demystifies the script and gets you to recognize it as a living, breathing *roadmap* to a human experience, rather than just lines in a row to be memorized. So rather than letting the script have power over you and letting the tail wag the dog - you now understand that you are the one with the power.

Finally, it gives you a feeling of success and catharsis. There's no way you can fail doing this scene - it's your life! And catharsis, because when you are finished you will feel freer due to this wonderful release you've just experienced. When we watch you, we also experience catharsis. You have just helped us get in touch with our humanity.

That's the beginning of what great acting is all about.

### **THE PERSONAL SCENE EXERCISE**

Here are the steps of how we approach the Personal Scene in class:

Think of a time in your life when you were deeply, emotionally connected to a person or event or both. It could be a loss, a trauma, a confrontation, an embarrassing event - it could even be a joyful experience. It could also be a conversation/confrontation that did NOT occur but you wish had. How many times have you walked away from a situation muttering to yourself all the things you wish you had said? For example, one of my students chose a fantasy confrontation with his college football coach after he felt he was

wrongfully cut from the team.

One or two events may pop up immediately - if they do, choose the one that's the hottest for you, that gets your insides percolating. It's rare when an actor can't think of anything. If that's true for you - take a walk, go to the gym, soak in the tub, eat some chocolate - anything to get your subconscious working for you. Something will come up.

Here are examples of what came up for my students:

- \* Betsy confronting the hospital staff for their shoddy treatment of her husband

- \* Alicia saying goodbye to her father on his deathbed (some students have also done fantasy versions of the deathbed scene in case they did not get the chance to say goodbye to a loved one)

- \* Debra's fantasy confrontation with the realtor who took her to court

- \* Sheila's birth of her child

- \* Gary telling his son he needed to grow up and take responsibility

- \* Brianna apologizing to her ex for her bad behavior

- \* Greta's fantasy confrontation with her cheating ex-husband

Simply tell the story of this event, ideally in an acting class but if you're not in class to a fellow acting student, your acting coach, a trusted confidant, or as a last resort, just sit alone and say what happened out loud. I suggest you record it. It's important that you do not try to act this out now or attempt to do dialogue - just

describe what happened in chronological order, as if you were simply reporting the facts.

The act of talking about the event out loud is very important because it will start your visceral connection. You will probably recall bits and pieces of what was said, if not entire conversations verbatim, and you will be emotionally transported to the place where the event happened. Like all other strong memories, this will take on a three-dimensional quality so tangible you will feel as if you can reach out and touch it.

Here's an example of the first part of this exercise. A while back I had a student who I'll call Debra, who was naturally shy and unused to talking about her feelings publicly. She was formerly a realtor and told the story of showing a house to a client in which he had shown no interest, and subsequently bought another house. Case closed, so she thought. When she and her husband ended up purchasing that aforementioned house, the client then sued her (for buying the house he didn't want...) and the case went all the way to court, which resulted in a judgment against her. She never was able to tell this former client how she really felt but had deep unresolved feelings. At the end of telling her story Debra had tears in her eyes from this event that had happened seven years earlier.

Now you will write the scene. In my class, the student and I decide what the scene is. The actual scene should be pretty clear, but if it's not, ask yourself, when I'm telling the story during what piece of it do I feel the most connected - as in angry, sad, or otherwise



emotionally invested? For example if the story took place at a parent's deathbed and the actor recalls what was said at the deathbed and events at the funeral afterwards, which of those was more potent? The scenario itself is not important and doesn't have to be groundbreaking or original - what's important is your personal connection.

The scene will take place in the location of the event and include the dialogue that actually did take place, or the fantasy version if it's an unresolved issue that you'd love to have a second chance at tackling. When you write the scene, you will write it just like any script - what you say, and what the other person says, stage directions, etc. (If you have never seen what a movie or TV script looks like - there are many examples on the internet. One that I use is [writersstore.com](http://writersstore.com). There is also a free formatting tool called Amazon Storywriter and more resources listed in the Appendix.)

These scenes should never be longer than three pages. That's usually plenty of time to get to the heart of your personal connection and this is not meant to be a mini-series. If it's just one or two pages, that's fine.

A note about writing your scene: Do NOT write the intellectual sanitized version. Debra, the former real estate agent, wrote her fantasy confrontation about the client who took her to court. While she told the story in class she became extremely emotional and angry, but when she went home to write it she backed away from her anger - perhaps afraid of this newfound power within her. The scene she

brought in was written like a slightly unfavorable Yelp review: "You know, I was disappointed that you chose to sue me. It really wasn't very nice." But what she really wanted to say was, "You BASTARD! You lying cheating BASTARD! You ruined my life, you almost gave me a heart attack and I hope you burn in HELL! FUCK YOU!"

My favorite way to avoid the stiff writing trap is to walk it and talk it. Walk around your room and recreate the conversation as it happened, then transcribe it. Rather than writing it as you *think* it should be with a pretty little bow on top, you'll write it as it happened - down and dirty. Same concept applies if you decide to write a fantasy confrontation - imagine the conversation with that person as if it's happening now and write it immediately while it's fresh.

Here's an excerpt of a personal scene that happened in class as a fantasy confrontation:

ACTOR

Dad. I need to talk to you.

DAD

What do you mean you need to talk to me?

ACTOR

I've got a couple of things that you need to hear.

DAD

I don't have time for that now.

ACTOR

I know. Exactly. You don't have  
time. You have always  
treated me like I don't matter.

DAD

You better watch your tone  
when you talk to me.

ACTOR

You watch YOUR tone when  
you talk to ME! If you want to fight  
now I'll fight you. Say the word  
and I will kick your ass, just  
like you always kicked my ass.  
And then I will...I will...  
walk out this door and  
never come back.

(Note: This scene continued and the Actor finished what he wanted to say to his father. There were no blows exchanged, nor should there be. No actor should ever get physical in any scene without the full knowledge of the scene partner and should include rehearsal and fight choreography.)

Now you will perform the scene. Ideally in an acting class, but you can also get a group of other interested acting students or friends, and again as a last resort you can do this alone if it's a monologue. When my students bring the scene to class I don't require them to be memorized. As a matter of fact, I recommend you *don't* memorize. I

want you to have the feeling of having the script in your hand the first time around. One or more actors will be reading the other part or parts as needed.

Depending on your experience, the first time you perform this scene you will notice you may be looking at your script to grab a line here and there. I've noticed many beginning students have their eyes glued to the script as if it's a lifeline to save them from drowning in the ocean - even though it's a scene that they've written!

When the scene is over, take a gut check. Did you feel the same or similar connection as when you were retelling the event? Make a mental note of how you felt.

Now you will put the script down and perform the scene again. Don't panic - you will remember it because this is your life! You may not say the words as precisely as you wrote them but I can almost guarantee whatever comes out of your mouth will be more authentic than the first version. The lines may actually take on a more unpredictable, improvised quality, as if it's happening for the first time. *You are now recreating the scene not tied to your script but connected to the event, to your memories and to your emotional truth.*

If this is a situation like Debra's where the written script doesn't match the truth, I'll have the actor throw the script away and direct them to speak the truth, from their gut on the spot. In Debra's case, she found her voice the second time around and spoke (screamed) all the unsaid things she wanted to say to the client. It was not

only an amazing cathartic experience for all of us in the room but I saw seven years of grief lifted off her shoulders.

Most students feel somewhat connected during the first performance of this scene. During the second version I can safely say that almost everyone experiences an amazing transformation. They lose their self-consciousness because they have a true personal connection to the script. They forget to worry about the "lines" not only because they are the author, but also because they now realize that the scene is about the relationship with the other actor and to truly go after what they want. *The lines are just the vehicle they use to get what they need from the other person.*

Let me be clear about the intention of this exercise. This is not about being self-indulgent or to imply that good acting is always about summoning up tears or having a screaming match. But it is our job to tell the story of our characters truthfully and some characters may experience one or many strong emotional moments. I have found this exercise to be the most effective way to not only reach those moments organically but to achieve total freedom on stage.

Imagine if you felt that kind of freedom and connection with someone else's words? Now you can. This exercise is just the beginning of how you will connect with scripts, with roles large and small, whether you have one hour or one month to prepare. And it only gets better after this.