

INTRODUCTION:
DISCOVERING THE DREAM

The summer I was eleven years old, I rode my bike every Saturday in the blazing heat to the El Portal Theatre in North Hollywood for the first matinee. I couldn't wait to get inside the theater, where I knew I would be cool and buy my popcorn and sit, as I always did, on the aisle halfway down. I was always alone. I don't mean that as sad; I liked it; it was an adventure. I never knew what I was going to see and it didn't matter. I was in my world: the movies.

One Saturday, after the newsreel and coming attractions, an explosion hit the screen—Elia Kazan's *East of Eden*, the story of a lonely outcast who desperately needed his father's love, whose brother was the special one, whose mother had vanished. As the film continued, I saw this kid's life, searching, desperate, heartbroken, mean, haunted, confused. I wasn't in a movie, I was in my life. *I was this kid*. He cried, raged, was romantic, weak, uncertain, vengeful, and ultimately, brave. When the movie ended I was shaking all over. It was freezing from the air conditioning, but that wasn't the reason I was shaking.

As I walked out of the theater in shock, I was hit with hundred-degree heat, and I almost passed out. I had just seen my life on the screen, but it wasn't my life, it was John Steinbeck's, and Elia Kazan's, and James Dean's, and Julie Harris's, and Jo Van Fleet's—great artists. I cried for days. I woke up in the middle of the night, every night. My heart was so full, I was so alive with ideas, and with hope. After that blistering day in North Hollywood, my life was never the same. I was connected to a dream—the dream of becoming an actor.

When I was fifteen the explosion happened again, only this time it was in live theater. I read a review in the paper that said there was a searing performance by a brilliant New York actress that should not be missed. The reviewer seemed to be so excited by what he had seen that I felt propelled to get on a bus and take the long trek downtown to see *The Far Country*, starring Kim Stanley. The play is about the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, and his discovery of the cause of hysterical paralysis. At the end of the second act, Freud tells a young woman that the reason she can't walk is that the night her father died, she did not go upstairs to give him the medication he needed because she was tired, and that somewhere within her she wanted him to die so that she could be free. Sitting in the front row of the theater, I watched Kim Stanley's cheeks turn bright red; then suddenly tears shot out of her eyes so fast and in such torrents that I clutched the edge of my chair. At that moment, the curtain started coming down as Ms. Stanley screamed with everything in her, "No, it's a lie!" And when the curtain hit the stage floor, she continued screaming in the darkness.

Thirty seconds later they brought the house lights up, and the theater went mad. People started talking to each other, grabbing at each other, for they had just witnessed a great actress give a performance that didn't seem to be a performance at all but a trauma in a real person's life that we shouldn't be allowed to watch. And yet we were. Once again, I walked out of the theater in a complete daze. I was deeply moved by the character's journey and by Ms. Stanley's amazing performance, and I was overwhelmed with curiosity as to how a human being at a given moment could demand such intense emotions as Ms. Stanley did night after night.

The need to know how she did it kept haunting me and made me see every live theater production that Los Angeles had to offer during those years. And there were many, because, luckily, at that time the great theater actors, after making enormous hits on Broadway, traveled the country with their plays for at least a year. My experiences of watching great

actors continued to excite me but they also confounded me, because it seemed incomprehensible to me that these actors could bring such powerful feeling, beautiful voices, fascinating physical behavior, and spontaneity to their performances on demand.

When I was nineteen years old, embarking on my life as an acting student, I went to an art museum in Washington, D.C. It was the first time I'd gone to a museum on my own to observe paintings, and as I looked at the collection of Impressionists, I suddenly stopped in front of a Van Gogh, the first I'd ever seen in person, and became transfixed. The painting was of a farmhouse with a rickety fence surrounding it. What amazed me, and seemed to awaken me, was that every slat of the fence was a slightly different shade of brown, from the lightest beige close to white to light brown to medium brown and on to the darkest brown close to black. I could not walk away. The fence seemed to be alive with energy and with what I realized later were the artist's *choices*: Van Gogh's impression of light and shadow, Van Gogh's interpretation in color, texture, and form. Van Gogh's "simple" fence spoke to me of transition and subtlety and boldness. I knew intuitively that what I was seeing was deeply connected to acting, but it took me years to understand exactly how.

At that point in my life, music, dance, film, theater, and literature had become my salvation, my life's blood, my reason to live. I was all feeling, all desire, but with no concrete way to express all this drama within me. I had just begun to study voice, dance, acting, script analysis, and my own inner world. I became obsessed with learning; if there was a way to answer the questions I had about acting, I had to know it. After much tumult in my life, many mistakes, and much avoidance of responsibility, I finally learned that there were answers to my burning questions about acting as well as about life.

I want this book to help you in your journey as an actor. In it I have distilled the important techniques and tools that I learned and have taught in my thirty-two years as an acting teacher and coach, and that I've seen work for many of my students who have gone on to have significant careers. Whether you are a beginner or a more advanced actor, I want to give you specific meat-and-potatoes ideas that you can bring to your work today—right now—as if you were sitting in my class and I was working with you directly. Some of the ideas are simple and some are more complicated. Read the book slowly and demand of yourself that you do all the tasks and the homework that I give you. Read the plays and

watch the videos of the films I use as examples. Do the exercises—and do them as fully as you can. I promise you, it will pay off.

One of the most important things I've learned about acting is that you can't separate how you live your life and how you practice your art. For that reason, I'm also going to share with you what my life experience has taught me about aiming high and believing in yourself and not allowing anything or anyone—not even yourself—to stand in the way of your dream, which in Chapter Two you'll find is your superobjective.

I call this book *The Intent to Live* rather than *The Intent to Act* because great actors like James Dean and Kim Stanley don't seem to be acting, they seem to be actually living. You know you're in the presence of the best actors when you forget that you're sitting in an audience watching make-believe and instead you are catapulted onto the screen or stage and blasted into the lives of the characters. I want to pass along to you what I've learned about *living* in a role. A huge part of this has to do with interpretation, which, I now understand, is what Van Gogh's fence was speaking to me about. A picket fence isn't just a picket fence—not to an artist. Because an artist says "I'm going to use these specific colors to bring this fence to life as I see it, fully, with emotion and character." That's what we do as actors as *we bring a script to life*.

I want to tell you another, more personal reason for the title of this book. When I was a young actor, I had many negative feelings about myself and about my life. I made a decision not to destroy myself but to understand and heal the pain that at times seemed so overwhelming. In other words, I made a decision to live. And one of the things that helped me was learning the craft of acting.

I was not at first encouraged to be an actor. The first musical theater teacher I had informed me in front of the entire class that I had "the worst singing voice" he had ever heard. Needless to say, that felt horrible and humiliating. And, as you will read later, my first acting teacher, Sanford Meisner, told me that I had no ability to act or react with any truth whatsoever. But my desire was greater than my humiliation, and I kept studying and exercised my voice two to four hours every day. By the time I was twenty years old a raw talent that had been lurking beneath the surface, unable to reveal itself because of fear and lack of technique, emerged. I actually began having a career as an actor and I achieved a dream—working on Broadway. I was still in many ways unformed, but I had acquired enough technique to be considered a professional actor for hire while I continued to learn.

Sometimes we feel we have a gift to give that no one can see because we don't have the tools or the confidence to reveal it. Sometimes we have a raw talent that comes out every now and then, maybe even brilliantly, but because we lack technique we don't know *how* to consistently give the gift to its greatest effect. That is simply a lack of education about how to do the job technically—whether we feel like it or not, whether we are terrified, intimidated, or emotionally blocked. I have experienced all of this so I understand the journey, a journey I am still taking. I hope that this book will inspire you to apply and dedicate yourself to learning the craft of acting and to have faith that if you persevere and you love the craft, you can become the kind of actor who lives on stage and screen.

When you do this, you can affect people in ways you may not ever imagine or know about. One night at a midnight screening of Steven Spielberg's film *ET*, I watched a very angry, lonely teenager sit down in front of me, sink way down into his seat, and look at the screen with complete contempt. His vibrations were so powerfully violent that I wanted to move, but by that time the theater was full. At the start of the film, the teenager shifted noisily in his seat, but soon he stopped moving completely. I saw him go from disdain to amusement to surprise to awe and, finally, to unashamed weeping. Just as the movie was ending, he ran out of the theater, embarrassed to be so moved. He didn't want anybody to see how vulnerable he really was. As vulnerable as I was at eleven when I watched James Dean. That's what our work can do: we remind people that things can change, that wounds can heal, that people can be forgiven, and that closed hearts can open again.



GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES:
BUILDING FROM THE GROUND UP

Eighteen years ago I was invited to a dinner that was given expressly to introduce me to the legendary acting teacher Stella Adler. It was a small, elegant gathering of eight at which everyone was dressed up, no one more than Stella, who appeared in a floor-length red gown with jewels adorning the famous Stella Adler cleavage. I'd already studied script analysis with Ms. Adler for three years. But since her lecture classes included seventy-five or more people and Ms. Adler did all the talking, I knew she probably wouldn't remember me.

Except for size, the dinner party was not dissimilar to the lecture course, and I once again said nothing. As Stella discoursed on George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen, everyone at the party, many of whom were as famous as she, hung on her every word. I was seated at Ms. Adler's right. When we finished our entrée, she suddenly turned to me and asked imperiously, "What do you do, young man?" "Well," I said, "I'm an acting teacher, Stella." Her eyes blazed for a moment and then she said, challengingly, "And what do you teach?" And I said, almost shyly, "I

was in your script analysis class for three years and I'm hoping to carry on some of the traditions and techniques that I learned from you." Stella impulsively and startlingly grabbed my hand, stared me straight in the eye, and passionately blurted out, "Don't let it die! I beg of you, please pass these ideas on." Then she put her head down and began to weep. At which point everyone else at the table, including me, also began to weep. So there we were, eight theater people with our heads in what remained of our chicken dinners, gurgling and gasping at how much our love for the art of acting meant to each of us and what we wanted it to mean for the next generation. This book is part of my keeping this promise to her.

I'm going to teach you acting from the beginning, and the beginning is script analysis.

In a way, the technique of script analysis is comparable to the process a detective uses to solve a mystery. Just as the detective learns to examine and understand the lives of the people involved in his case (their backgrounds, their relationships, their behaviors, their motives), you will use the technique I'm teaching you to examine and understand the lives of your character and the other characters in a script and see them as real people with real lives, and in so doing you will begin to discover the overall dynamic of that play or film. You'll be able to define precisely what drives your character, the other characters, and the story.

If this sounds like an intellectual exercise, I want to assure you that *nothing* in this book is simply an intellectual exercise. Everything I'm teaching you about acting has one aim only: to fire you up emotionally and behaviorally so that you can give a vivid, involving, and memorable performance. So when I talk to you about using your mind, ultimately it's to use your mind to *carbonate* your emotions and imagination. You know how soda is carbonated? It's not just flat in the glass; it's filled with bubbles rising, bumping into each other, bursting, alive. That's the point of everything I'm teaching you—to make you not act but live.

Given circumstances is the term used in acting for everything the writer tells you in the script about your character and the situation they find themselves in. Given circumstances are the *facts*; they are the information that is not subject to debate. In other words, given circumstances are irrefutable. They are the ground on which you build your creative choices, the *only* place you can begin. Later, we'll talk about your interpretation of a role, but the facts are the facts and you cannot afford to overlook them.

I know this sounds obvious, but I've seen actors forget that the character they are playing has been written to have a cold, or is entering from

a snowstorm, or has just found out that his mother has a fatal disease—the kind of given circumstance that should color how you play a scene from the moment of your entrance.

To the extent that a character's actions toward and reactions to other characters are specified in the script, they are also part of the given circumstances. *Anything the script tells you about who your character is or about what the character has done before the story starts is part of the character's given circumstances.*

That's why it's so important to read the text. And read it again, until nothing in the script is vague to you. I've heard some actors say, "Well, I didn't even read the whole screenplay, I just read the scenes I'm in." I think that's irresponsible and arrogant, because the given circumstances are so integral to the work that you can't give a full performance without including them.

I'm going to give you several examples of given circumstances to make the idea clear to you and I'm going to begin with the given circumstances of one of history's greatest plays, *Hamlet*. At the beginning of the play, Shakespeare tells you that Hamlet's father is dead and that Hamlet has come home to Denmark to mourn and to be with his mother, Gertrude, who has quickly, and shockingly, married his dead father's brother, Claudius. In the last scene of Act I, Hamlet is told by his father's ghost that Claudius has murdered him and the ghost asks Hamlet to avenge his death. Through the ghost, Hamlet learns that his mother is complicit with his evil uncle, but whether she knew about the murder or simply lusted indecently for Claudius seems open to interpretation, and this ambiguity creates more torment for Hamlet. The ghost also tells Hamlet that while Hamlet must take revenge on Claudius, he should leave Gertrude to heaven and her own inner turmoil. If you're playing Hamlet, the fact of your father's death, why you have returned, and the ghost's visit, as well as the information the ghost imparts, are not subject to debate. Hamlet's father is not just *possibly* dead, nor did Hamlet return to Denmark because he wants to marry his girlfriend, Ophelia, or celebrate the hasty wedding of his mother and uncle. His father's death, Hamlet's grief, the ghost's appearance and demand for revenge against Claudius, and Gertrude's unseemly lack of mourning are the absolutes; they are the given circumstances.

Taken all together, the given circumstances—the facts that the writer gives you—are the *foundation* of the performance; what you add to that foundation is your specific *interpretation*. Will you choose to make Hamlet

an angry, aggressive character, a muted, tormented, self-hating character—or both? The text Shakespeare gives you allows for these and other interpretations. That is the actor's job: *to interpret*. But you cannot change the basic facts of the script, and if you ignore these facts your performance will begin to fall apart and the play or film will not make any sense.

A couple of years ago in my class, two young actors were presenting one of the final scenes from Anton Chekhov's play *The Seagull*. In the scene, the young writer, Treplyev, begs Nina, an actress whom he's long loved unrequitedly, to make him part of her life. She rejects him cruelly by expressing her passionate love for another man, Trigorin, a more successful writer whom Treplyev envies. At this point, the actor playing the tormented Treplyev started to beat the actress playing Nina and throw her about the room. The startled young actress began to speed through her final monologue so that she could escape with her life, after which Treplyev, as the script demands, burned every piece of his writing, put a gun to his head, and ended his life.

In my critique, I asked the actor where he found the evidence in the text to support his choice to be physically aggressive toward Nina right before he blows his brains out. The actor's intriguing answer: "I'm so tired of seeing Treplyev played like a victim. I wanted to give the play new life."

I suggested to the actor that, in fact, he had killed the play by refusing to accept the character's given circumstances. At that point in the play, Chekhov never gives Treplyev any lines to express his rage over his great loss of love. The tidal wave of feelings within Treplyev remains choked back. In addition, Nina is written in such a way that she is insensitive to the intensity of Treplyev's pain. If Treplyev were to express his rage physically toward her, she would have to comment on it, and there are no lines that allow her to do that. All Treplyev reveals in this scene is vulnerable love, need, and helplessness. If he could so easily lash out physically at Nina and be so direct with his anger, maybe he wouldn't have to tear up everything he's written and put that gun to his temple.

As Chekhov wrote the part, Treplyev *is* a victim. He is a victim of his mother's narcissistic indifference, which has left him with a feeling of worthlessness. This is a given circumstance. It is why he chooses Nina, who is a duplicate of his mother in that she, too, cannot truly see or value him. It is the intolerable feeling of being invisible to those whom he needs to love him that causes Treplyev to self-destruct. The young actor

in my class was making an effort to be creative in his choices and, perhaps, something in him needed to communicate this anger, but it was totally inappropriate and harmful to the scene. His desire to be creative and to express himself blinded him to the needs of the play.

Let me add that Chekhov does give Treplyev a chance to be aggressive toward Nina when she first rejects him at the play's beginning, but as Treplyev grows older, he grows more internal and more repressed and depressed. In order to play Treplyev successfully, you must understand the given circumstances, which come out of the depth of Chekhov's understanding of human psychology. Chekhov understood that Treplyev's suicidal depression is his anger turned inward. As an actor playing Treplyev, you need to understand Treplyev's behavior, his interactions with Nina, and his *point of view* on life as it is expressed very specifically in the text.

Chekhov makes it clear from the start of the play that Treplyev sees the world as a frustrating, cheating, unloving place, and that his only hope for happiness is to be respected as a playwright and loved as a man by Nina, dreams that are painfully eluding him. Look at how many facts about Treplyev's given circumstances are given in his dialogue in the first scene in which he appears. He tells his uncle, Sorin, "My mother doesn't love me. Why should she? She wants excitement, romance, and pretty clothes. I'm twenty-five now. That reminds her she's no longer young. When I'm not around she's thirty-two, when I am she's forty-three. She hates me for that." In that line alone, Chekhov establishes the context from which Treplyev views life: he is an unloved son who feels that his mother wishes him out of existence.

And Treplyev goes on to detail his humiliations and defeats: "Maybe I'm selfish, but I wish she weren't a famous actress. Can you imagine what life is like with her, Uncle—the house always full of famous actors and writers? Can you imagine how I feel? The only nobody there is me." His mother, who is clearly comfortably off, has refused to support him. "I left university my third year," Treplyev says, "due to circumstances, as they say, beyond my control. I haven't a kopeck." He feels socially inferior: "According to my passport, I'm a 'bourgeois of Kiev.' That's my social position. My father was a 'bourgeois of Kiev,' too, but he was a famous actor." Treplyev's father—whom we learn is dead—overcame his middle-class position through his talent for acting, but Treplyev says he has "no talent." Later Treplyev says, "When my mother's famous actor, writer and musician friends deign to notice me, I feel them measuring

my insignificance. I imagine their thoughts. It's humiliating." In just a few short lines, Chekhov tells us almost everything we need to know about Treplyev's point of view.

I've heard that John Malkovich has said if he understands his character's point of view of the world, it gives him a great clue about how to play all the scenes. Sometimes, as with Treplyev, a character's point of view is given to you clearly in the script, other times you have to glean it from the facts that the script gives you. You have to study the text very diligently until you can say, based on what the script tells you about the character's history, how the character is treated by others, the character's reactions to that treatment, and what the character actually does—not just what they *say* but what they *do*—that the character sees the world in a certain way. In this way, your character's point of view is part of, and inextricably tied to, their given circumstances.

In James Brooks's film *As Good as It Gets*, it is a given circumstance that Melvin Udall (Jack Nicholson) has obsessive-compulsive disorder and sees his life exclusively through that lens. This is not my psychoanalysis of Melvin, it is a fact that is spelled out vividly, and often hilariously, in the script. The first time we see Melvin, he is anxiously walking on the street toward his favorite restaurant, desperately trying not to touch or be touched by anyone he passes (saying to people who walk by, "Don't touch! Don't touch!"). He is also trying to avoid stepping on cracks in the sidewalk. At the restaurant he impatiently waits for the exact table and the exact waitress—Carol Connelly (Helen Hunt)—that he always has. He accosts the people sitting at the table he wants and talks *at* them about their having big noses and being Jewish until they are so affronted that they flee. So the given circumstances of the scene are that he is an obsessive-compulsive middle-aged man who comes to the restaurant where he wants *his* particular table and *his* particular waitress, someone else is at *his* table and he needs to have everything in harmony with his compulsions in order to feel safe and not become hysterical with terror. Part of his behavior, because of his disorder, is that he will insult anyone about anything if he's frustrated or frightened.

The given circumstances for Carol are that she's a single mother working as a waitress, whose entire life is devoted to taking care of her dangerously asthmatic son. She has no other priority, no other life. She has waited on Melvin many times before, and she knows him. In that opening scene, Carol warns Melvin to behave and at the same time protects him from the glowering restaurant manager, who wants to throw him out.

Carol's point of view is not spelled out in the script as explicitly as Melvin's is, but you can still get it from the text. Despite having a severely ill son and meager financial resources to take care of him, it's clear from the script in the way Carol interacts with the other waiters and waitresses and with Melvin that she is warm, has great humor, and a kind of bemused patience. So part of the given circumstance of her character is that she's a positive person; she doesn't wear her problems on her sleeve; she's a survivor and makes the best of the situation she's in.

When I worked with Helen Hunt as she prepared for the role, she came up with some brilliant interpretative choices for Carol, which I will talk about in the chapter titled "The Actor's Choice." But, again, all good interpretive choices build on the given circumstances—the facts the writer gives you in the script.

Here's an exercise I often give to actors when they prepare for a role. After they have digested the material in the script, I ask them to express the character's point of view of the world in the following way: "My name is [character's name], and the world is [six descriptive words or phrases]." For example, if you were playing Melvin in *As Good as It Gets*, you could say, "My name is Melvin Udall and the world is a terrifying, vicious, unfair, desperate mine field in which I must get them before they get me, and I must keep control of everything in my life so the world doesn't explode into chaos where all the germs will get me." This is how Melvin walks into the story. You must walk into every script with this kind of specificity about who you are, why you're there, and your whole unique life experience.

During Roxie Hart's first major scene in the movie musical *Chicago*, Roxie (Renée Zellweger) is making love with her lover in the bedroom she usually shares with her husband. Why? Because she wants to be a famous singer and she has been led to believe her lover can get her a job in show business. She's not going to bed with him just because she's attracted to him: the given circumstance is that she wants him to do something for her hoped-for career in show business.

She hopes she's trading sex for a career, and when her lover brushes her off, she shoots him. If you're playing Roxie and you think you're going to bed with him just because you think he's hot, the scene is not going to work—because it won't make any sense for you to kill him. You kill him because you find out he lied: he's not going to do anything for your career because he doesn't have the connections he said he did; furthermore, he hurts you physically and humiliates you when you confront him with his lie. This makes you as Roxie feel your worst fear: that you are

invisible and that you have sold yourself cheap for no good outcome. That's why you take your husband's gun and shoot your lover.

So the given circumstances at the beginning of the scene are that your lover is still alive; at the end of the scene the given circumstances are that you've shot your lover, you've been arrested because your husband makes a stupid mistake and incriminates you, you are going directly to prison, and will probably be hanged for the murder. As you can see, the given circumstances for your character are constantly changing and you must be diligent in recognizing the changing facts.

Roxie doesn't know she's going to kill her lover until he says he just wanted to lay her, that he has no intention of helping her because he has no show business connections. When she pushes the issue of his helping her in her so-called aspiring career, he hits her and pushes her to the floor. What makes Renée Zellweger's performance live is that she didn't *anticipate* her disappointment or her humiliation or that she even has murderous impulses—at the beginning of the scene, as far as she's concerned, her life is hunky-dory; she's going straight to the top. She discovers these other facts moment to moment as the scene goes on.

As you study a script, write the given circumstances on a list, scene by scene. Ask yourself:

Where does the scene take place?

Who is in the scene?

What do I as a character know about the other characters in the scene?

What are my relationships with them emotionally?

What do the other characters say about me?

Given what the script tells me, is it true?

What do I as a character know about myself that is relevant to the scene (my background, my attitudes) as I enter?

What does my character literally *do* during the scene?

What do other characters *do* to me? How do they treat me?

When you've gone through the whole script and written down every piece of information it tells you about your character, you will have a list of your character's given circumstances and you will see the way they change as the story develops.

This is all *homework*, a word you're going to hear me use many times in this book. When you are actually performing the scene, you forget

everything you know except for the specific need and point of view of your character at the beginning of each scene. We do all this homework to give our performance inner structure and specificity, but when we actually act, we have to forget what we know—and by that I mean we need to be innocent—until our character is confronted with new events. *Don't bring into the scene something your character doesn't know yet.* If you're working moment to moment, these new events should surprise you and give you a chance to react spontaneously in performance. This is what makes your character live.

I want to say here that I use the word *character*, as in a *character* in a play, but I mean a human being, a person. Don't distance yourself from the role you're playing by thinking of it as a character if that word doesn't convey to you a flesh-and-blood human being.

When you're doing script analysis, you'll find that what your character says is not always the same thing as what they do, and you have to note this as part of the given circumstances. For example, in one scene, a character—think *person*—may say, “I don't love you, and I never will,” and in the next scene, she may passionately kiss the man she just said she didn't love. Remember Norman Jewison's film *Moonstruck* with a wonderful script by John Patrick Shanley? When Ronny Cammareri (Nicolas Cage) tells Loretta Castorini (Cher) that he's in love with her, she slaps him and tells him to snap out of it. Yet a very short time later, she falls into his arms. If you're playing Loretta and you take your character at her word, you're not seeing how she *really* feels. How she really feels is revealed by what she does: she kisses him. Characters, like people in your own life, say a lot of things, but we understand them primarily through their behavior, which is why I said earlier that you have to define a character's point of view primarily by what they *do*, not necessarily by what they *say*.

Again, the specific ways that you bring your character to life—your physical choices, vocal choices, the range and depth of your emotions, your rhythms and tempos, the choices you make about how you're going to deliver the writer's lines, the colors and hues of your performance—are all part of your interpretation, but *the given circumstances are always the same, no matter who acts the part.*

When I was nineteen years old, I was in the audience for the very first preview performance of Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* starring the gifted actress and acting teacher Uta Hagen and Arthur Hill. The play opens with George and Martha, a couple married twenty years, coming home late at night—2:00 A.M.—from a party given by Martha's

father, who is president of the college where George teaches. George thinks they're coming home to sleep, but Martha knows that she's invited guests, a young couple, Nick and Honey, whom she met at the party. Those are given circumstances of the first scene. But they're not the only given circumstances.

Martha is disappointed in and angry at George because George didn't mix well at the party (she says, "I watched you at Daddy's party and you weren't there"). That's her point of view toward her husband; she's disappointed, and therefore aggressive ("Jesus H. Christ!" she says when they walk into their house. "What a dump!"). George's point of view is that he wants to go to sleep since they're both inebriated, and he had a lousy time at the party (another given circumstance). When he finds out what Martha has done, George is irritated and resentful. He begins to whine, complain, and jab at her with sarcasm, and finally rejects Martha's sexual overture. That's the beginning of the war between them that night.

George likes irritating Martha, because he's as angry at her as she is at him. This does not mean that they're not strongly bound to each other out of need and out of their own version of love. One of the great problems in their marriage, as this scene reveals to us, is that Martha is daddy's girl, and somewhere within her she wants George to separate her from the emotional incest with her father which has kept her a crippled child. She is angry that George hasn't been strong enough to succeed in her father's college and thereby rescue her. She wanted George to be a man who was going to go places, and for years she has punished him for his failures and weakness. These are part of the given circumstances of the play, too, and they are the foundation for the characters' points of view and interactions in the first scene.

And Martha has a loud voice. How do I know? The script tells me. At one point early in the play, George tells Martha, "At least I don't go around braying at everybody." Obviously Martha has to be loud enough vocally at times that George could call her "braying." The play also tells me there are reasons why Martha is so loud; it's to protect her from the razor-sharp comments that George makes to try to wound her and beat her at their savage game.

If you're playing George or Martha, you need to know that from the moment you walk in the door, you have to be convincing as a bickering couple that's been together for twenty years—and you have to understand, through analyzing the given circumstances not just of the first scene

but of the entire play, the issues that underlie the bickering. Included in these circumstances is the history of their imaginary son, "the kid."

I learned an interesting lesson when, forty years after I saw the first preview of the Broadway production, I saw an excellent staged reading of the play with Uta Hagen reprising her role as Martha and the excellent Jonathan Pryce as George. During the opening scene in this production, Martha and George took each other so much for granted that they barely looked at each other but they also had a humorous, odd affection. Their George and Martha were certainly angry, but for much of this scene they seemed to be entertaining each other, until George's sexual rejection of Martha, at which point she became lacerating. They brought to life the conflict of that couple of twenty years—the given circumstances—but they did it *their* way. With the same given circumstances, Uta Hagen interpreted the role very differently in the original Broadway production I saw. She was far more vitriolic and predatory as Martha from the start. In the same production, Arthur Hill played the first scene withdrawn, passive, and tired, whereas Jonathan Pryce was playing the game of provoking Martha almost from the beginning. Both interpretations were absolutely valid for the given circumstances.

In the beginning of the 1940 classic film *The Letter*, a woman, Leslie Crosbie (Bette Davis), is brutally shooting a man to death as only a rejected leading lady in a 1940s Warner Brothers movie melodrama could. These are the given circumstances that start the whole story in motion. The audience is presented with these circumstances right away, and a few moments later we see Leslie lie to her husband and tell him that the man she killed was an intruder who had tried to rape her. These are similar to the given circumstances in *Chicago*, but *Chicago* is comedic and satiric, and *The Letter* is emotional and deeply dramatic.

Based on W. Somerset Maugham's short story, *The Letter* truly stands the test of time, as does Bette Davis's performance. When you see the look on her face as she shoots her lover dead, you know she's a rejected woman. What's great about Ms. Davis's performance is that you can see in her eyes as she lies first to her husband and then to everyone around her, including a jury, that the real given circumstance of the shooting—her rejection—is boiling underneath her skin as she tries to save her life. And in her eyes is another given circumstance as well: the full knowledge that she's killed the only man she'll ever love. She makes you feel her love for the man she killed, even though you never see one scene of their

actual affair. It's the actress's deep commitment to bringing out all these given circumstances that makes the performance alive over sixty years after it was filmed.

Stella Adler famously said, "It's not enough to have talent. You have to have a talent for your talent." One of the talents you need is to be able to break down a script and to identify all the facts that the writer gives you that help you understand your character, what each scene is about, and what the whole script is about. These given circumstances may make you emotional when you read them, and that's important, because that shows you that you're connecting to the material. But just as critical as your emotional response is being completely clear about the actual facts of the story. Because only by identifying and investing in these facts can you bring your truth—your interpretation—to your performance. Root your performance to the earth (the given circumstances), and you can begin to fly.