The Meisner technique

A teacher reconsiders a popular approach to actor training

BY DAVID MONTEE

Last year, I was granted a semester-long sabbatical from my position as head of a theatre arts program in a performing arts high school. In addition to a few other projects, one of my objectives while on leave was a program tour of undergraduate theatre programs that I hoped would put me, and consequentially my students, in a better position to understand what was being taught by the various university and conservatory-styled B.F.A. programs around the country. As I was already reasonably familiar with the more prominent programs, I elected to visit those schools about which I had

IN THIS ISSUE:

Training student stage managers
An acting teacher returns to the stage, part two
Going to Laramie: high schools take on a controversial play
The Meisner technique
A teacher reconsiders actor training
by David Montee
Page 1

Managing the show
How to train student stage managers
by Lisa Mulcahy
Page 3

Going to Laramie
A controversial play is making waves in high schools
by Melissa L. Jones
Page 10

Relaxation and emotion
An acting teacher returns to the stage, part two
by Bruce Miller
Page 15

News and notes
The arts under NCLB get a boost from the Department of Education
Page 28

James Palmarini, editor
Elizabeth Cobbe, associate editor
William A. Johnston, art director
Susan Doremus, graphics specialist
Donald A. Corathers, director of publications
Linda Hwang, web editor

The Educational Theatre Association
William Myatt, president
Gail Burns, vice president
Michael Peitz, executive director

© 2004 by the Educational Theatre Association
TEACHING THEATRE is published quarterly by the Educational Theatre Association, 2543 Auburn Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45219; telephone (513) 421-8900. The Educational Theatre Association is a national non-profit arts service organization dedicated to the advancement of educational theatre. It is recognized as tax-exempt under Section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and is thus eligible to accept charitable contributions.

Subscriptions: TEACHING THEATRE is published for members of the Educational Theatre Association. A portion of the annual membership fee goes toward a one-year subscription. Library subscriptions are available for $34 per year.

Change of address: Send old and new address and enclose mailing label.

Editorial matters: Contact the editors at (513) 421-3900, e-mail: palmarini@edta.org, or write to Teaching Theatre, 2543 Auburn Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45219. We cannot be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts.

heard differing reports—mostly good—from our own alumni. My travels took me to a variety of environments and facilities from the Midwest to the East Coast, allowing me to observe a wide range of teachers and educational approaches to the theatre arts, particularly acting. In total, I visited seven universities in four weeks, spending one to three days at each.

This essay responds to but one aspect of my observations during those travels, and should in no way be interpreted as a critical response to or qualitative rating of those programs. To avoid any such reading, I will not identify any of the schools I visited. In many ways that is a shame, as it was apparent to me that there is excellent, caring artistic instruction of the highest level happening “in the provinces” (that is, not only in New York City or Los Angeles) on many of our college campuses, and that it should be recognized more often. For the most part, I was enriched and encouraged by what I observed in classrooms and rehearsals.

One thing became clear to me from my first visit, and continued almost steadily until the last: the Sanford Meisner technique of acting instruction is very much in vogue today. I was heartened to discover the prominence of the Meisner technique. For nearly fifteen of my twenty years in the classroom and studio, I had maintained an eclectic approach to the methodologies of teaching acting, preferring to offer my students a variety of training approaches. My strategy was to lay out creative options before them which they were to sample responsibly and with discipline before beginning their development of personalized systems, always urging them to bear in mind that any systematic approach to art inevitably needs adjustment to meet the specific challenge encountered. Five years ago however, I settled upon the belief that the Meisner technique is the best foundation for establishing a continuing sense of spontaneity in the young actor’s work, and it has been an important staple of my individual teaching process ever since.

This article presumes the reader’s understanding of the fundamental precepts and exercises of that technique (see the sidebar on page xx for a basic overview). Those readers who want to become more familiar with Meisner’s work should read Sanford Meisner on Acting by Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell (Vintage Books, 1987), as well as the series of four workbooks by Larry Silverberg collectively entitled The Sanford Meisner Approach (Smith and Kraus, 1994-98).

I was never fortunate enough to have met Sanford Meisner, much less
Continued from Meisner, page 2

study with him prior to his passing several years ago. So I learned my brand of Meisner from reading and research, as well as from former teachers of my own, a few of whom had studied with him or someone closely associated with him. My approach to the Meisner technique also evolved through my own work with some very talented and intuitive students. Several of the instructors who shared their classroom work so graciosly had themselves studied with Meisner, or with one of his recognized and trained pupils. Although I will never have a personal memory of Meisner in the classroom (apart from viewing the wonderful, too-brief PBS American Masters documentary), I share their faith in the galvanizing "be here now" quality that his repetition exercises—done with proper focus and within helpful parameters—instill in many of the actors who use them. When approached correctly, the system seems to cover the excitement, passion, wonder, and pure joy of even the smallest, most inconsequential of life's little interactions—a joy that the best actors passionately embrace and share with their partners, collaborators and spectators.

But are we currently using Meisner with young actors to its best advantage? Or are we inadvertently creating more roadblocks for them, even while, with the best of intentions, we try to knock down some others? These are the questions that began to nag at me while watching my colleagues and their students work, leading me to reconsider my own evolving thoughts and approaches to Meisner in the classroom over the past several years. Consequently, I offer the following thoughts in the hope that they might rejuvenate our faith in the real strengths of the Meisner technique, while at the same time examining its possible pitfalls, especially when applied to the younger and more inexperienced actors we teach. I also hope that it might inspire more of our best and most inventive teachers to bring their own individual refinements to the Meisner approach, perhaps making a wonderful tool even more effective.

Even with only one source—in this case, the book Sanford Meisner on Acting—it's easy for both teacher and student of the Meisner approach to acting to become confused regarding its priorities. Take, for example, a few different quotes from the text:

"The foundation of acting is the reality of doing."

"Character is an emotional thing. The internal part of character is defined by how you feel about something."

"The text is like a canoe, and the river on which it sits is the emotion. The text flows on the river... [and] takes on the character of your emotion."

"The text is your greatest enemy."

As a moderately experienced actor I am immediately drawn to the flashes of wisdom in these observations. But when I consider them separately, as a teacher of fledgling artists I am also aware of the potential questions those statements prompt when they are received as absolute studio gospel.

For instance:
- What is of primary importance for the young actor's attention when beginning work on a play: action, character, or emotion?
- If character is defined by feeling, shouldn't the actor always search for the feeling first and foremost, rather than mapping the action (or the "doing")?
- Exactly how can the text be the "greatest enemy" while also supplying the primary means (i.e., the canoe) for traveling "the river" without drowning in it?
- Precisely what is the primary interest in the theatrical event: the actor's personal emotional life or the action outlined by the playwright's text?

I should confess that I too have been guilty of downplaying the importance of the dramatic text when working with young actors. In their tendency to properly interpret the dialogue, they often fail to connect those lines with their own experiences and situations, or even with those of people that they know. On more than one occasion, I have told my students that the text is but the icing on the cake, while the actor's behavior must be the cake itself. However, in my experience, downplaying language and text is not a productive tactic with young actors. It is in dealing with the challenge of finding truthful behavior and emotional response as it is inspired and ignited by the action of the text where Meisner work can prove the most beneficial for teacher and student alike.

I believe that an essential responsibility of a classroom practitioner of Meisner work must be to teach the student to serve the text. Although that can encompass a variety of meanings, the actor's most important creative contribution to the theatrical collaboration should be to infuse the text with personalized, unique, and intuitively truthful behavior, thus illuminating it in new and involving ways. Doing this, they make poor plays more interesting, and good plays more brilliant. The text is not only the canoe of Meisner's analogy; it is effectively the boatsmith as well. The actor's job is to navigate and pilot the vessel down the river without crashing into the rocks or swamping it in the rapids. Text, emotion, behavior, and action should never be separated from one another for very long or very far in any classroom exercise or activity.

I initially began to worry about possible misreadings of Meisner's instructional bases during a conversation with two former students who were immersed in the same New York City Meisner studio a few years ago. They described how they had been assigned scene work from published plays, but had been forbidden by their teacher to read the plays themselves. In fact, if they had previously read the play in question, the scene was reassigned to those students who hadn't. Apart from using so-called "contentless scenes" in daily class work as a precursor to working on published plays (primarily for inventing a context when the words alone don't clearly offer one), the idea of this out-of-context approach was baffling to me. Shouldn't a budding actor always be encouraged, until it is a matter of disciplined habit, to use all available tools at his disposal? Isn't the text the most valuable of those tools? Even if, for the actor, the context of a dramatic situation trumps the text as a primary guidebook for truthful behav-
ior, doesn't the context always come from the text?

My increasing uneasiness about the way I've sometimes seen Meisner interpreted and utilized—particularly with beginning actors—lies in the potential degradation of language and text (including language and text that is improvised) in pursuit of emotion, not behavior. Ironically, this mainly unintentional outcome seems more akin to results seen from Lee Strasberg's method of "emotion memory" and "private moment"—two principles that Meisner, along with Group Theatre acting teachers Robert Lewis, Stella Adler, and others, originally attempted to distance themselves from rather than embrace. While it is certainly vital to help young actors become more emotionally available, instinctive, and intuitive in their work, it should always be based in a methodology that aims for the application of these qualities in an effective dramatic evocation of a text. Moreover, when striving diligently to follow Meisner's specific steps in his technique, we must guard against denying the very thing that we are trying to encourage students to discover in themselves: their unique and instinctive behavioral response to a given situation.

To give one example of this counterproductive potential: in one Meisner class I visited, first-year acting students doing a basic secondary level repetition exercise together were regularly reduced to inarticulate cries of rage, frustration, and creative anguish (rather than words) to express to one another how they were feeling. As those familiar with Meisner will recall, in this particular exercise one student works physically to accomplish a difficult but not impossible task that has some importance to him; a second student enters the room (the requirement of an initial knock on the door seems to vary from instructor to instructor) and engages the first with improvised repetition-based dialogue. In this instance, the limitations imposed by the instructor seemed inexplicable to me. The entering second student was to knock first, yet was then required to enter the room without any vocal response at all from the first. This might seem to be a small detail, but when truthful behavior is at the core of the work, even small departures in intuitive decorum can be important. Indeed when another student pointed out that, instinctively, he wouldn't behave in such a way—that is, come into a room after knocking without waiting for a reply—he was advised to "get out of his head, he was thinking too much."

This is a familiar axiom to almost every acting teacher I know—don't think, do! I've used it myself repeatedly, phrased in various ways. After enjoying a unique opportunity to watch others teach, I found myself seriously questioning the wisdom of tossing that particular piece of advice off so easily in the novice classroom.

The truth is, as acting teachers—regardless of our personal methodology—I don't believe we should separate thinking, doing, and feeling in the actor. By attempting to do so, we set up an unprofitable creative dislocation in the young actor who will try earnestly to follow our well-intentioned coaching and directions. While trying to please us
and unlock in themselves the secret of good acting, they are more likely to stifle in themselves the very instinctive responses that Meisner desired to bring forth. One student I watched in another classroom (the “enterer” in what was basically the same exercise) tried tentatively to question the instructor as to why she could not move further into the room where her partner was engaged in her activity. “We’re not to that stage quite yet” was the reply. But clearly she felt herself — instinctively at that stage — ready to enter the room and was baffled that she was limited from following her instinct, something that she was repeatedly told to do.

Let me emphasize that this was not a poor teacher, nor were the students making excuses. What was happening, and the creative frustrations arising in response to it, seems all too common in the Meisner work that I saw with relatively inexperienced actors. Yet by no means would I advocate avoiding Meisner-based training with novices. Instead, I believe that some important clarifications and reminders of what we are pursuing in the work with our young artists might help us all make better and more effective uses of the Meisner technique in achieving the most important goal of any acting: telling the story of dramatic texts in performance. What follows are some thoughts on individual elements of Meisner training and how I think we might better use them to train our young actors.

Point of view

Meisner utilized the term “point of view” to describe the step in the basic repetition exercise in which the two partnered actors move from rote repetition of observational words and phrases to an amended response that incorporates their own perspective (for example, from “red dress”/“red dress” to “You’re wearing a red dress”/“I’m wearing a red dress”). One class I visited seemed to give the term more weight than perhaps was Meisner’s original intent. The student entering the exercise was advised repeatedly to “stay with her point of view,” yet as far as I (and seemingly, she) could tell, she was already doing just that: repeating what her partner had spoken from her own perspective. Consequently, her confusion threatened to rob her of much of the exercise’s benefit.

In retrospect, what I think the class’s instructor was actually looking for — and he was correct in doing so — was the student’s personal agenda as she entered the room. I believe that this is vital for what Meisner was trying to achieve at this stage of the exercise, although little attention is given to this aspect in most presentations of it that I have witnessed. By personal agenda, I mean a concrete objective, tactical ideas about how to achieve it, and a sense of how to achieve it.

If a personal agenda is absent in the second actor as he enters the room to engage the first (who, in the terms of the exercise, is already busily immersed in a difficult activity holding some emotional importance for her), the encounter usually suffers a frustrating stasis in
the action, or the "doing," which Meisner repeatedly emphasized as so important to the effectiveness of our acting. Without this agenda, all of the entering actor's attention tends to focus upon what he is feeling when his partner ignores him, as she so pointedly continues with her task. This limits any sense of purpose, much less any relevant emotional response on the part of the second actor, aside from frustration for his failure to feel much of anything at all.

Most Meisner class work I have seen lacks sufficient attention to a clear agenda and context in both partners simultaneously. I believe this is largely due to the instructor's part that one actor or the other (or both) may be "thinking" or "inventing" too much. However, that should be an essential part of the student's preparation in order for the exercise to prove helpful, or at least so I have come to believe from my own classroom experience. What's more, not only should both actors in the exercise have agendas for their encounter (even though the entering actor's agenda can have significantly lower stakes that that of the first), the first actor's agenda cannot exist in a dominoary context while the second actor simply remains a student coming onto the classroom stage to do an exercise at the instructor's direction. In other words, both actors have to be fully engaged in the improvisational context, and possess a fully realized point of view. If they're not, there might be plenty of expressive and instinctive moments, but they will be limited to expressions of anonymity by actors who find themselves literally in different worlds from one another. Such emotional outbursts, without any comparable context of belief, will certainly not help the student actor master his or her craft.

**Instinctive response**

One of the real strengths of Meisner's technique lies in its sharp focus on uncovering and encouraging an actor's instinctive responses to the situation around him, and to the people with whom he shares it. Therefore it is understandable if we often hear Meisner instructors cautioning their students to stop judging and thinking, and simply respond. However, this must be tempered somewhat. What is most crucial for our acting is simply to be aware of our instincts and impulses. Following them is sometimes a good thing, but sometimes not, like in real life. Young actors working with Meisner exercises hear a great deal about the desirability of following their impulses. But I have seen normally responsible young men and women do physically and emotionally irresponsible, even dangerous things, during class improvisations—Meisner and otherwise—in their frantic pursuit of following impulses without reservation. We do not live our lives this way, nor should we. Balance is essential to our acting, just as it is in our daily lives. Sometimes onstage or in rehearsal the actor/character feels an impulse, but as actor, character, or both, decides that following that impulse will not achieve the desired results. The choice not to proceed along the path of that impulse becomes every bit as dramatically "in the moment" as would the pursuit of the impulse. What a character chooses not to do can be as theatrically exciting as what he chooses to do. Both are actions, as Stanislavsky, the primary inspiration for Meisner and most other acting teachers of the last century, explained succinctly when pointing out that each actor judges feeling, mind, and will in every moment of every performance, if they become imbalanced, the performance will likely follow suit.

**Staying out of the head**

I plead guilty of urging my students to "stay out of the head" on occasion. When I say it, I want the student to understand that they are out of Stanislavsky's balance: their mind—or at times, their stubborn will (or ego)—is dominating their feeling, or vice versa. More often than not, this occurs because the mind is a much safer, more secure, less revealing realm than true feeling. Young actors, not yet safe in the empowerment that true revelations of self through our feelings can lend us (as well as our souls), are often cautious about showing too much private vulnerability, as they should be. As their acting progresses, it is necessary for us to regularly remind them to risk dropping their emotional shields, while providing them a safe environment for doing so. Meisner and the other great artistic/teachers recognized that only from those regions do our deepest powers as actors come.

But as teachers of younger actors, should we cling too hard to this idea of "staying out of the head?" I think not. If it's our ultimate task is to "hold the mirror up to nature," our acting must recognize and encompass the legitimate responses of both heart and mind. Every moment of our conscious existence involves this interaction: we impulsively speak, we catch our tongues, we reason things out, and we lose our wits—all can be interesting and dramatic. Audiences and critics since Aristotle have recognized that an emotional response affects and endures more fully than an intellectual one; that doesn't mean the head is without value, or plays no part in the emotional response. Once again, balance is the key.

**Avoid playwriting**

"Avoid playwriting" is a fundamental instruction we use over and over in side-coaching actors during the repetition exercises. Although intended to prevent the student from feeling the necessity of being inventive, clever, or entertaining, and thereby retreating from simple, truthful and attentive contact with a partner, it can also bewilder a young actor who is still too anxious to do the exercise "right." Don't we always have a play of some nature unfolding in our head virtually every encounter we have with another human being? In fact, after many of our daily personal interactions we often continue our fantasy playwriting with many scenarios, thinking of what we "should have said" in order to have affected a more satisfying outcome from our own point of view. Playwriting as we socialize with one another seems to be an honest and natural tendency in human behavior. Of course, when the instructor sees that the actor's tendency to think too far ahead takes him out of the present moment of an encounter, that should be addressed, but perhaps not in such absolute terms as "Never playwrite!" Younger actors can interpret this to mean "Never fantasize!" which can lead to a sharp curtailing...
ment of surprising, stimulating, or provocative occurrences between partners in the repetition exercise.

We must regularly remind students to stay within the parameters of the repetition, looking for all motivational clues to come from their connection to their scene partners. At the same time, we should guide young actors in a manner that they cannot misread as any prohibition of their ongoing inner fantasies. Like all good acting instructors, Meisner respected the importance of nurturing the actor's natural tendency toward fantasy—which means living "in his head" to the appropriate degree, even in the "mindless" earlier stages of the repetition exercises.

**Feeling versus doing**
In one of the best Meisner classes I visited, one of the students rose to begin her scene: something, as I recall, that had to do with desperate attempts to separate pages of a valuable document upon which she had spilled some glue. After scant seconds of trying to achieve this task, she was beyond her initial tears and bordered upon full hysteria. Upon the interruption and distraction of her partner's knock and entrance into the room, the hysteria gave way to a tumultuous outburst. While certainly electric and engaging for the spectators, and clearly coming from a truthful place inside the actor, the emotion we witnessed seemed to have little connection with her partner's intrusion, the direction of the repetition, or the relative difficulty she experienced in accomplishing her task.

The instructor—whose personal approach was admirably adaptive to his students' work, and who was one of the most effective teachers of Meisner among the strong group whose classes I visited—stopped the exercise. "What you're feeling seems to have little relationship with what you're doing, and how that's going," he commented firmly. When the actor protested that her feelings were genuine, the instructor quickly pointed out, "That's not the issue. I'm sure they were. But this is about doing to achieve a result, and you already seem to have determined that the result you're working toward is an extreme emotional response to your failure and his interruption."

As already noted, this teacher was astute and direct in his coaching; but he was also considerate and compassionate with the student's obvious vulnerability. He advised her to make necessary adjustments in her preparation for a follow-up during the next class meeting, and invited her to stay afterwards to clarify any confusion she might have as to what he was maneuvering her toward discovering: that the action, the intention, and the objective of what she was doing was where her emotional responses should begin. At the same time, he was careful to congratulate her on the easy availability of her emotional life while cautioning her against allowing it to overwhelm her work by stealing her focus from her partner and the here-and-now. "Your temperament is your playground," he noted. Using it wisely, safely, and artistically seems to be the lesson with which the class was left.

**Approaching text**
None of the foundational Meisner classes in which I was a guest had yet reached the stage of using play text. When they do, I'm reasonably certain that they will not proceed along the path of the New York class I mentioned at the beginning of this article, where the teacher would not permit knowledge of the play and its context to muddy the actors' choices and emotional responses in their scene work. There, I believe, madness lies.

In my own studio work with the Meisner technique, I employ a very simple exercise that simultaneously emphasizes the focus on listening that the repetition work offers, and the need for the actor to bring a sense of spontaneity and empowerment to the scene.

Here's how it works. Once the scene text is learned by both actors, as part of their rehearsal process they must then couple the lines with Meisner's repetition—but not mindlessly. By carefully listening to what is being said to them while focusing complete attention on their counterpart's physical behavior, they must repeat and confirm the core phrases that they believe communicate the fundamental messages of their partner's lines and intent. That repetition may then continue for as long as they
wish—just as in the earlier stages of the repetition work—until one or the other instinctively or tactically chooses to move on. Most importantly, that movement does not necessarily proceed to the next line as specified by the text. In other words, either actor may choose to improvise along any of the contextual paths of the scene as they currently see them, exploring different options and emotional levels than those to which a strict adherence to the lines as they are written in the scene might have led.

Thus, with this strategy, using the play text in conjunction with Meisner’s repetition exercise allows the actor to playwrite a bit and follow his head or heart as seems appropriate with the moment. It also allows him to come to a better understanding of the play, its structure, and its character’s life, learn to better comprehend the language of the playwright and its nuances as they are linked to his partner’s physical and emotional behavior; and feel more freedom and power in his choices, both of what he must do and what he must not do.

Finally, linking the play text with the repetition exercises is a way for the actor to make the successful transition between repetition and actual text work, thereby bringing the process and the product one step closer together.

* * *

My experiences at the various schools I visited were invaluable in recognizing my own assets as a teacher, as well as the gaps in my own methodology. They also re-affirmed my faith in the importance of the Meisner technique for training actors. But I think it’s also worth mentioning that it was the man, Sanford Meisner himself, who, with his individualism in the classroom and with students, gave us so many insights into the nature and the art of the acting craft. It was not a miraculous technique that he discovered, any more than Stanislavsky’s ideas of truth in behavior onstage at the beginning of the twentieth century was an entirely new concept. But Meisner’s expression and demonstration of them was unique.

As actors, teachers, and students who are inspired by his explorations, I think we should also feel free to bring our own insights and alterations to his approach, as well as guard against any slavish reverence to his methodology. In truth, as all good teachers know, methodology is important, and continuing to measure one technique’s results and worth against another’s is vital. Every talented student presents a different challenge, one that we meet most effectively when we continuously embrace adjustment and adaptation, allowing what has worked well before to perhaps work even better in tomorrow’s class. Meisner himself spoke of the dangers of a rigid adherence to any artistic theory or approach when he wrote in his own introduction to Sanford Meisner on Acting:

“I once spent four lovely months in Puerto Rico in a little house where I went specifically to write a book about these matters. I wrote two chapters. Later when I reread them, I didn’t understand them, and I thought that was the end of the book. I decided that a creative textbook about acting was a contradiction in terms, and that it was foolish, even wrong, to attempt to write one... My basic principles were now on paper, but, paradoxically, how I uniquely transmit my ideas wasn’t sufficiently apparent. My students weren’t in those pages either, nor was the classroom in which we interacted week in and week out. Lastly—and this was the greatest lack—the drama inherent in our interaction, as they struggled to learn what I struggled to teach, was missing. I came to realize that how I teach is determined by the gradual development of each student.”

These are wonderfully wise final thoughts on the Meisner technique for both students and teachers alike—from the master himself.

David Montee is the director of theatre at Interlochen (Michigan) Center for the Arts.

---

Next year, we remember the city that care forgot.

EdTA’s annual conference returns to New Orleans, September 15-17, 2005.
The actor's communion: Meisner basics
Sanford Meisner (1939-1997) was one of a half-dozen interpreters of the Stanislavsky system whose thoughts and teachings formulated the methodology utilized by most American acting teachers over the latter half of the twentieth century. Like Stella Adler, his fellow Group Theatre member, Meisner felt that too much emphasis was being placed on Stanislavsky's principle of affective memory ('emotional recall' in Lee Strasberg's terminology), and that this was turning the actor inward with problematical results. "You introvert the already introverted," he accused such teachers, and set out to address that issue with a new approach.

While Adler turned to more emphasis on Stanislavsky's textural analysis and "magic if" (in her own studio), Meisner was more intrigued with the Russian master's idea of the actors' "communion." Students in Meisner classes never work alone on projects, but always with a partner. Honest and emotional interaction between human beings is what intrigues audiences most, he insisted; therefore he demanded that actors never do anything in their work that they were not compelled to do, intuitively and impulsive-ly, by their partner's behavior and its effect on them. Meisner exercises usually follow several basic steps, with the first being repetition. Partnered actors make simple physical observations about one another that their partner repeats, word for word. These progress from simple phrase fragments (such as "blue eyes") to full sentences ("You have deep blue eyes.") which the two must keep repeating until the instructor stops them. The mere repetition, mindless as it becomes, serves to turn the actor away from planning his next move and focuses more attention on partner interaction. From the sidelines, the instructor helps the students guard against attempts to be clever and entertaining, coaching them firmly to avoid steering this interaction toward any preconceived result.

From this, the exercises move to "point of view," in which the student, hearing the initial observation, repeats it from a personal perspective instead of simply echoing words ("You have deep blue eyes.") The purposes of the repetition/point of view are to:
1. Make the actors listen more closely for both word and nuance from one another.
2. Put all focus on the partner in the hope of defeating self-judgment.
3. De-emphasize thought in favor of impulse.

Meisner then moves through a careful evolution of the repetition. First, the partners gently provoke one another in their opening statement ("You have a crush on someone in this room"), and observe and describe what they see in response. Later, the partners are given limited permission to follow their impulses in changing the repetition as seems "right" ("That's none of your business" perhaps, to the above provocation). However, the repetition framework must remain in place, even with the new impulses. Eventually, one partner is instructed to bring a task to the exercise, one that has some vital purpose for him in its pursuit, that is difficult to accomplish but not impossible. The second partner then enters the exercise requiring some attention and the repetition begins anew with these added obstacles, promoting dramatic tension.

A final and more controversial step occurs once the actors pursue their individual emotional preparation (or "particularization" as it is sometimes called) offstage before entering the exercise. Intended to raise the personal stakes for the actors before coming onstage, it must not divert their focus too far from the intuitive communion between them, which is the work's primary purpose. The primary pitfalls for teachers and students lie in this difficult transition between these later steps of the Meisner method, for now the actors are moving from pursuing the impulse of the moment toward the practical application of these techniques to a text's given circumstances.

—D.M.