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The Seven Pillars of Acting Circumstance

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The Seven Pillars of Acting: Circumstance

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Abstract: The Seven Pillars of Acting is a modern acting technique that spawns from the great teachings of Stanislavski, Meisner, Chekhov and Grotowski, to name a few. It seeks to connect the actor to authentic transformation, and one of the most important Pillars to ignite that transformation is the Pillar of Circumstances. Having done extensive research in my professional studio in Southern California, I have noticed how Circumstances can turn a novice into an embodied actor. I aim to describe the Circumstance Pillar and elucidate its power and presence in an actor's craft.

Keywords: Acting, Acting Technique, Pedagogy, Education

Introduction

Acting is transforming into character with ease and authenticity. Our craft is about setting up imaginative conditions that allow the actor to behave, speak and feel as the character. Acting is not an escape; actors put themselves in the line of fire, exposing themselves to tremendously high stakes to tell a story. Integration, the harmonizing of the actor with the role, is vital. This is our ideal: to train the actor to live and breathe within her own body, mind and spirit but in the *circumstances* of her character.

I have been gathering research and evidence through my professional acting career as well by teaching hundreds of students both privately and in classes. I created The Seven Pillars because I learned amazing techniques, such as: Meisner from Vicki Hart, NeoClassical Technique from Louis Scheeder, Viewpoints from Mary Overlie, Suzuki from The SITI Company, Plastiques from Stephen Wangh, Personalization from Richard Brestoff, Contact Improv and Physical Acting with Annie Loui and Chekhovian Balinese Mask from Per Brahe. Despite this incredible training, I left school overwhelmed by this abundance of knowledge and wanting for a clear, unified technique. As I began to work professionally, I slowly constructed a path to create a role as well as an effective way to teach acting. It was inspired by my education, but it was also something distinct and unique. Curious, I began to write about acting technique and opened my private studio in New York City. Several years later, I became the owner of The Actor's Studio of Orange County, where I have been teaching The Seven Pillars and testing out the philosophies and precise curriculum.

I will be using my experience as a form of research for this paper and I combine it with the pedagogies of great teachers, such as Robert Cohen and Richard Brestoff, who are two professors of acting at the University of California at Irvine, as well as acting theoreticians, Sanford Meisner, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Declan Donnellan. I aim to describe the second of seven Pillars, Circumstance, and elucidate its power and presence in an actor's craft.

The Seven Pillars of Acting is a concise yet flexible formula aimed at helping actors transform into character with ease and authenticity. Transformation, in acting terms, is the unification of the actor with the character, a process that requires rigorous emotional and imaginative work. The result of such transformation is tremendous presence in the actor. The Seven Pillars aim to achieve this precious, alchemical state by guiding the actor through seven essential steps: **Contact, Circumstance, Meaning, Emotional Life, Objective, Action, and Physical Life**. Although the Pillars are ultimately interchangeable, they are taught sequentially to organize and structure an actor's path to character.

Contact, the foundational Pillar, pertains to the ever-changing relationship an actor/character has to the other person in the story, because all acting is dependent on the *other*. It also refers to the actor's awareness of her own thoughts and feelings. Contact is inspired by

Meisner Repetition Exercises in *Meisner on Acting* and Personalization Exercises, as written by Richard Brestoff in *The Actor's Wheel of Connection*. The next Pillar, **Circumstance**, refers to the past, present, and future facts of the story *as the character perceives them*, which reveal the confines and contours of a character's point of view. Circumstance is inspired by the teachings of Robert Cohen in *Acting Power* and Richard Brestoff. **Meaning**, the third Pillar, is the character's emotional response to her circumstances and the point at which the actor clarifies whether she relates to the circumstances or not. **Emotional Life** bridges the gap between the character and the actor through imaginative and emotional exploration. Sanford Meisner's innovations on how to daydream are a major source for Emotional Life; see *Meisner on Acting*. **Objectives** are the needs and wants of the character, and **Actions** are the tactics the character uses to achieve her objective. Declan Donnellan in *The Actor and the Target* clearly emphasizes the importance of Action and Objective. The last Pillar, **Physical Life**, which is based on Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards A Poor Theatre* and Mary Overlie's Six Viewpoints, deals with how the body and voice activate the actor's imagination and contributes to characterization.

All in all, The Seven Pillars hinge on the concept of **Circumstance**. Without understanding what is happening in the scene or story, the actor has no parameters. Like a glass of water splashing on the ground, an actor without circumstance is formless and messy, and her energy dissipates, just as the water evaporates into air. Circumstances set up conditions, or boundaries, that guide the flow of energy in the actor. The categories of this pivotal Pillar are varied and extensive, so as to give the actor rich access to the many ways she can interpret the circumstances in the story.

Circumstances

Circumstances are more a series of questions than an accumulation of answers; they are the beginning of the conversation. Therefore, avoid boxing yourself into choices without allowing yourself a period for discovery. Circumstances are the jumping off point, and from there "we begin to shape what we do and how we do it. But, let us continue to resist making choices," urges actor and acting teacher, Richard Brestoff; "Choices need to be made *after* living in the circumstances for a while" (Brestoff 2005, 50).

Circumstances are the facts, events, actions and details taking place in the past, present, and future, exclusively from the character's perspective. Anything that happens *to* the character is a circumstance. An emotion is not a circumstance, but the emotions of *others* definitely are.

Imaginary Verses Real Circumstances

When playing a fictional character, it is a misnomer to think we are merely dealing with fiction. To the character, her circumstances are not imaginary, they are real, impending and meaningful; thus, our standard is to create *real* circumstances that we can believe in and give over to imaginatively. Even though our characters were dreamt up in the imagination of the playwright, these life experiences have certainly occurred in real-time to *someone*. Therefore, we can lend these circumstances some credence. The assimilation of these life experiences into one character is truly a work of brilliant and eclectic authenticity, as it brings to one body the make-up of many stories. Let's start off on equal footing with our characters by valuing their experiences as we value our own. By respecting the character's circumstances, we can start to believe them.

Our own circumstances are not "real." Instead, they are highly processed details that *seem* real due to redundancy. Robert Cohen was one of the first acting theoreticians to address this topic in his book, *Acting Power*. On the subject of reality, he writes:

Reality is not a very simple concept to define. Certainly we can agree that reality includes trees, birds, rocks, the human skeleton, and the sky; but what place in reality do dreams, feelings, numbers, love, or despair occupy? They are real if only because we

feel they are real; their realness, though subjective, is as influential in our “real” decisions as hard and fast tangible reality. (Cohen 1978, 3)

The only thing that makes our reality seem real is that we *believe* in it, and because we believe it, it feels real. Therefore, because of the degree of belief, the circumstances of our lives seem more real than the circumstances of our characters. But, in fact, the only distinction between these sets of circumstances, one’s own and one’s character’s, is the degree and fervency of *belief*. Maybe by considering life more subjectively and by holding our circumstances lightly, we may be able to let them go long enough to relate to another set of circumstances.

Given And Fabricated Circumstances

Circumstances can be broken up into two different categories, Given and Fabricated: **Given Circumstances** are those written by the playwright/author/writer in the script itself. They are non-negotiable in an actor’s interpretation. **Fabricated Circumstances** are those created by the actor and based on the Given Circumstances in order to flesh out the role or events of the story. They are limitless in number and created in the actor’s imagination.

Much like connecting the dots of an image, acting a role requires the actor to use the circumstances given by the playwright in the text to create a fleshed out representation of the character. Konstantin Stanislavsky, Russian actor, director, teacher and acting theoretician of the first half of the twentieth century, defined **Given Circumstances** as “the plot, the facts, the incidents, the period, the time and place of the action” (Stanislavsky 2008, 53). He knew that they were more than just cold, hard facts; instead, he advised actors to “concentrate on the Given Circumstances. Start living them and then “the truth of the passions” will arise of itself” (Stanislavsky 2008, 54). Given Circumstances are naturally the first ones to examine as they are the author’s intent and will define what the actor can embellish and expand upon. An actor must closely examine the text for Given Circumstances, as these will be the guideposts for interpretation.

Fabricated Circumstances are the actor’s playground. They are the millions of ways she can fill in the blank spaces and weave a dynamic and authentic character. Whenever an actor is unsure of a sequence of events within the script, she can fabricate a circumstance to satisfy that need. When it is not clear what the relationship is between two characters, she can create circumstances to make the relationship more compelling. Most importantly, if the actor feels inauthentic in a moment, she can fabricate circumstances to justify an action or connect more deeply to the character’s truth. As long as it is justifiable in the script, the actor has free reign to add circumstances as she sees needs fit. The more an actor fabricates circumstances, the better she can envision, believe and ultimately give over to the imaginary circumstances.

Third Person Verses First Person

Actors often speak of their character in the third person: “My character is so-and-so years old and has such-and-such a life.” This wording sets the actor up to perceive the role from the outside looking in and encourages analysis of the effect rather than the cause of the character. Therefore, may I suggest that from here on out, we refer to our character in first person. Instead of “She lives in Detroit,” say “I live in Detroit.” Making this shift is huge, as it starts to work on the imagination: the brain hears you speaking in first person and subtly starts to believe it. The actor will also slowly stop spewing judgments regarding her character, and, most importantly, this shift will help the actor see the other characters from her own character’s perspective. Richard Brestoff argues for the logic of using first person: “This way of working helps us to see the characters from the inside, think their thoughts, and this helps to inoculate us against judgment of them from the outside. We don’t see them as good or bad, but as justified from their own point of view (Brestoff 2005, 56). It is easy to judge others, but we are more discerning and sympathetic

when it comes to judging ourselves - which brings us to the issue of objectivity verses subjectivity.

Objectivity Verses Subjectivity

To the actor, the only circumstances that matter are those that come from the character's perspective. And those circumstances are either Objective or Subjective. **Objective Circumstances** are those that are verifiably true in the world of the character, such as a character's occupation or city of residence; for example, "I wait tables at Applebee's." **Subjective Circumstances** are those that come in the form of thoughts, perspectives, beliefs, opinions and judgments, such as "Men are not to be trusted," "That dress is ugly," or "Peter, my customer, is very insulting."

To the character, there is little difference between Objective and Subjective Circumstances. If a character waits tables and also thinks Peter is insulting, these two circumstances may be equally true and real to her. In fact, Subjective Circumstances may seem more real than the Objective ones, as they impact the individual more. Peter, in this instance, may be a lawyer, but the fact that he is insulting may be more relevant or influential than his occupation.

In life, we value objective perspective more highly than the subjective, since objectivity is verifiable by facts. However, in terms of acting, this is not the case; Objective Circumstances are no more important than Subjective Circumstances. In fact, since Subjective Circumstances are formed by past experiences, impressions and judgments, they are oftentimes more poignant and powerful, as they reflect the character's identity.

Sequence Circumstances

In view of the above, there are numerous aspects of Circumstance, but ultimately each one must qualify as one of the Sequence Circumstances: **Global, Past, Previous, Present, Future, and Potential**. These different categories delineate how the circumstances apply in time (past, present and future) to the character.

Global Circumstances

Global Circumstances are the general rules of the world and dominating features of the character's past, such as: "I was born and raised in Nebraska," "My father left me at age ten," and "I went to community college." Global Circumstances address how one's roots and nurturing define character, and these details paint a picture for the actor to understand how the character came to be who she is. Just as we are the sum total of all the events of our lives, so are our characters. Actors often write character biographies, which is a perfect way to create and lay out Global Circumstances.

Past Circumstances

Past Circumstances dwell in the character's past and are more particular to the story or scene at hand. Less like the objective biography of Global Circumstances, Past Circumstances are subjective and personal to the character, and they invite the actor to daydream. Daydreaming is the process of living out past character moments and events by using the imagination, body and voice to bring these moments to life. Daydreaming is one of the best ways to get acquainted with circumstances. For example, if in a scene a character decides to divorce her spouse, it might be useful to examine and daydream the past experiences of the couple. The actor could imagine when they first met, when they got married, what their moments of tension and conflict were, or she could visit a major disagreement. Any and all of this would give the scene in which she tells her husband she wants a divorce more authenticity and depth.

By using daydreaming to investigate the Past Circumstances of the story, the actor creates the character's bedrock of experience. Events from the past color how we perceive the world around us, and life experience informs how we make decisions in the present; therefore, by connecting with these experiences of the character, the actor enriches each of her character's choices.

Previous Circumstances

At a certain point, the past runs into the present, and this juncture is our next Sequence category: **Previous Circumstances**. It's particularly important to be crystal clear on what happens in this time frame since Previous Circumstances deal with the events that lead immediately and directly into the action of the story or scene. There are no hard and fast rules on when exactly a circumstance qualifies as "Previous;" this is an artistic choice for the actor to make. It could be the day of, an hour before or ten minutes before; whatever is most useful to the actor qualifies. The Previous Circumstances align the actor with the present moment. It's analogous to turning on the radio and catching a news story mid-sentence. Oftentimes, the listener must spend a few moments figuring out the gist of the story in order to follow along. Without hearing a bit of the set-up, the listener struggles to understand what she is hearing in the moment. Much like the radio listener, the actor must "tune into" the character by connecting to the Previous Circumstances before entering any scene.

Continuing the example of the character divorcing her husband, it would be appropriate for the actor to clarify and daydream her Previous Circumstances: maybe she is on the way home from a restaurant where she had been preparing herself to drop the bomb on her spouse. If so, the actor could daydream being at the restaurant, walking home, coming to the front door, searching for her keys, pausing before inserting the key in the door, considering returning to the restaurant, smelling dinner cooking and then deciding to go in. It is these details that viscerally draw the actor into the first moment that starts the scene. By acquainting with the recent past, the actor can engage with the present.

Present Circumstances

Once the scene has begun, the actor is in the territory of **Present Circumstances**. It is a fleeting space wedged between the past and future: "While the past yawns darkly behind us, and the future limitlessly ahead, the present is but a single line of vague dimension separating those two vaster infinities" (Cohen 1978, 56). Specificity becomes even more necessary in this segment, as the actor lives moment-to-moment in the scene in order to remain present.

Present Circumstances are all the events that happen *to* the character, as opposed to anything the character does herself, for "from the actor's viewpoint, it is his situation, not his character, which is dominant" (Cohen 1978, 17). We are dismantling the hyper-awareness of self from which an actor often suffers and focusing on external causation, shifting her attention to her surroundings to get to the root of her actions and words.

If this is confusing, consider your life and observe yourself as you are right now. While reading this, maybe you've scratched your nose, turned a page or got up for a cup of coffee. These are the observable actions, manifestations or effects of a cause. Also called stimuli, causes are more subtly impacting, such as: the itch on the nose insisting that you scratch, the completion of the page in the book in your hands, the silence of the coffeepot signifying that coffee is ready. The simple fact is that every action we take, everything we say and every feeling we feel is a direct response to stimuli, whether we are aware of it or not.

Due to this natural proclivity to attach to and identify with circumstances and the chaos it can incur, people often practice spirituality or philosophies that encourage self-awareness and detachment from the circumstances of life. In so doing, they cultivate an ability to be in the world but not of it, centered and less susceptible to the slings and arrows of the day-to-day. This is a wonderful state to practice in life, but it is death to an actor, who already suffers from too much

self-awareness when she acts. Drama and comedy never revolve around centered beings. Peace and happiness are neither dramatically or comically interesting! Instead, the characters we are playing are in the throes of their circumstances, much to the intrigue and delight of their audience. Therefore, it behooves us, as actors, to immerse ourselves in these external forces and place all the blame of our actions, words and feelings on them.

I have heard actors say, “I can’t get out of my head,” a version of self-awareness that inhibits the actor’s ability to be present to the story at hand. Delving deep into Present Circumstances is the perfect antidote to this hapless self-absorption. To do this, we look through the lens of the character who cannot see herself, but rather sees a vast world of circumstance happening *to* her and forcing her to act.

Let’s use the example from above of the wife entering the house, but now in the first person: “The strong smell of garlic and onion hits me, my hunger kicks in. My husband, Robert, approaches; he smiles at me, there is some tension in his face, he asks me to set the table. He talks about his day, he seems slightly stressed. He smells good, his hair is damp, he must have showered recently. He opens the pot and in it is chicken korma. He asks me to help serve and inquires about my day. He senses my discomfort. He is on to me.” The details are limitless, but the actor can prioritize which Present Circumstances heighten the stakes of the scene, connect her more deeply to her partner and spur her on to achieve her objective.

Present Circumstances align the actor with a natural sense of action in a scene. Sanford Meisner was on the hunt for authenticity in acting; he urged his actors: “Don’t do anything unless something happens to make you do it” (Meisner 1987, 34). Much like Newton’s law of physics, a character’s action is wholly dependent on and equal to its stimulus. Meisner also called this principle “The Pinch and the Ouch,” which means that every action has a reaction; it is equal, proportionate and direct. To illustrate this principle in class, he pinched a student, and proceeded to lecture:

“In short, my pinch justified their ouch, isn’t that true?”

“True.”

“And their ouch was the direct result of my pinch?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the principle involved in this?”

“Not to do anything until—”

“Something happens.” (Meisner 1987, 35)

Future Circumstances

The future affects a character as much as the past and present. **Future Circumstances** are the next category of Sequence Circumstances. Although certainty of the future is a contradiction in terms, we depend upon the enfoldment of the future without question. For instance, the reader may know she’s going to go to bed this evening; tomorrow, she will have breakfast, go to work, pick up some groceries, etc. She depends upon these plans. When the day’s itinerary is set, there is no reason to doubt its enfoldment. Why would she think otherwise? However, the truth is we have no guarantees that night will come tonight, that work will happen tomorrow, or that groceries will be bought. We put so much stock in what is only a false guarantee; the future makes no promises. Nevertheless, we make our plans and believe in them.

Just the same, the character is counting on certain Future Circumstances to transpire, and “like his character, the actor must look outward and forward, not inward and back” (Cohen 1978, 18). It is useful to identify what those Future Circumstances are for the character, as they affect how the character behaves in the present. If you knew that in a few hours you would be with the love of your life, you would behave differently than you would if you knew you would be with your arch nemesis. On this premise, we realize the potency of Future Circumstances in our craftwork. What is your character expecting or anticipating?

Future Circumstances are concrete and dependable, like:

“I will eat dinner tonight.”

“I will marry so-and-so tomorrow.”

“I will complete my degree.”

“I will meet my lawyer at 2pm.”

Future Circumstances are an excellent acting tool in that they set the stage for very full realizations, disappointments and revelations during the scene. A character who fully believes in a Future Circumstance will be terribly disappointed and surprised when the story takes another turn. Every character has her own idea of how her story will play out. She is completely unaware that things will *not* go her way... who is? Who can anticipate such things? We wish we could, but unfortunately we are stuck with blind faith, and so, too, are our characters. This lack of hindsight knowledge is the key to crafting discoveries in scenes. Setting up what you don't know is just as useful as setting up what you do know.

So how do we, as actors, un-know what we know will happen in a scene? By fully investing in Future Circumstances. The more fervent the faith, the greater the surprise the character/actor genuinely experiences in the moment. Perhaps Robert, our example husband, plans on watching a movie with his wife this evening, or he wants to brainstorm a vacation just for the two of them. With these plans set in mind, he will be all the more surprised when his wife says she wants a divorce and those Future Circumstances come to a screeching halt.

Potential Circumstances

You may remember the Subjunctive verb tense from a French or Spanish class. We have it in English, too, but don't study it closely. The Subjunctive is the verb tense of what *could be*. The basic structure is “If X then Y.” It is a unique tense, as it dwells in the possible, not in the actual. For example, “If I study hard, then I will do well on the test.” In the Subjunctive, there are no guarantees, only good guesses. If Future Circumstances affect how characters behave, then what impact does potentiality have?

Potential Circumstances are those that haven't yet come to pass and depend on certain action; in other words, the future is contingent on certain factors playing out. Compare this to how we think and behave in life: We live in the potential state of mind all the time without realizing it ... “If I take a class at this acting school, then I will have the chance to perform, as well,” “If I sit close to this attractive man, I may get to chat with him,” “If I eat this frozen yogurt, I will feel happier.” It is through the lens of the potential that we gauge our actions. Our characters are the same; they are “pulled, not by an external force, but by the intended results he images or sees ahead of him” (Cohen 1978, 35.) This is a powerful aspect of our consciousness to tap into, as Potential Circumstances affect how we manifest our desires and goals, large and small.

Potential Circumstances are more elusive than Future Circumstances. They are written as an “IF/THEN” statement, usually grappling with an obstacle of some sort:

“If I complete this task, then I will be able to join my friend for dinner.”

“If I meet with my professor, then I can possibly salvage my grade.”

“If I convince the bus driver to let me on, then I might make my meeting.”

As you can see, if the character plays her cards right, she may gain a set of Future Circumstances she desires, and this compels her to act.

It is best to consider Potential Circumstances in a positive light by wording them in such a way that improves the character's situation. It is easy to succumb to the negative by playing the problem, however it's antithetical to how we live life. Even in the depths of despair there is a silver lining, and we reach for it no matter how grim our state. It's important to clarify that “positive” doesn't mean rainbows and sunshine, nor does “negative” mean evil and bad. Positive, in acting terms, means progressing toward your goal, and negative means affirming the obstacle

or devolving into the problem. A few examples of negative circumstances reworded as positive Potential Circumstances:

Negative: "If I don't say something, then Robert and I will continue to struggle."

Positive: "If I say something, then the truth will be known."

Negative: "If I deflect his interrogation, then he will remain in the dark."

Positive: "If I answer truthfully, then he can take the steps to move on."

Negative: "If I don't explain my reasoning for divorce, then he won't understand me."

Positive: "If I explain myself, then he may understand and calm down."

Actors should lean into the positive rather than the negative, as it brings them closer to the circumstances the character desires. Potential Circumstances are the circumstances hoped for; therefore, the actor, as the character, strives to make what is possible actual. This makes for an active, dynamic performance. The audience loves to see characters fight for something tooth and nail.

However, there is still good reason to acknowledge what you are running away from just as much as what you are running toward. English film and stage director, Declan Donnellan, stresses the use of duality: the person/event/thing you repel as well as the person/event/thing you desire. According to him, these two poles of one's objective and obstacle are like gravitational magnets steering your direction. He believes that "both the positive and the negative are present at the same time, both the hope and the fear, both the plus and the minus" (Donnellan 2006, 52). The reason for this is simple: in life we are always striving for a better future while avoiding an unfavorable past. Actors can bring their performances closer to the human experience by tapping into this natural duality. Knowing what you *don't* desire along with what you *do* desire deepens the actor's sense of truth. From the tension of these opposites springs a transcendent and inspired result.

In Summation

The Circumstance Pillar builds the house in which the character lives. When the character feels rooted in her surrounding circumstances - past, present, and future - all she has to do is live and respond truthfully in each new situation. This structure creates tremendous freedom for the actor. As Declan Donnellan says, "the more energy the actor can locate in the target, the greater the actor's freedom" (Donnellan 2006, 25). When responding to a circumstance, the actor need generate nothing on her own. She crafts her circumstances meticulously so that effort is absent from her performance. In our own lives, we do not expend effort to experience or feel anything. Things just happen! And it's the same for the characters in the story. They are responding to stimuli and aiming for the happy ending they envision at the end of their personal story.

The circumstances and environment dictate the character. All the actor has to do is assume the circumstances and the character's life happens on its own. The Seven Pillars Acting Technique, in conjunction with Circumstance, emphasize a strong belief in imaginary circumstances. Aiming to liberate the actor's imagination, they ultimately lead to performances marked with ease and authenticity.

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