

INTRODUCTION AND GROUND RULES

My name is Nicholas Ray and I am contracted to teach you within the time and space available whatever I can about the art and craft of acting and directing in the media of film and television. You are encouraged to reject anything I say that you consider useless or inapplicable.

Nonetheless, I ask that you kindly regard these next words as basic, fundamental, grass roots, key to your ability to live, develop, and perform with increasing effectiveness in the world of art: Your tools are physical, mental, and spiritual. Are you hesitant about acknowledging the word spiritual? If that word makes you uncomfortable, you would do well to find understanding that *religious* and *spiritual* are different words with separate roots and meanings. That we have a common vocabulary will become increasingly important. You are here to discern and exercise your physical, mental, and spiritual muscles.

In a current issue of *The New Yorker*¹⁶ Kenneth Tynan relates the opening of a luncheon conversation between Sir Ralph Richardson and Sir John Gielgud, who were appearing together eight times a week in the play *No Man's Land*:

SIR RALPH: You're looking very well.

SIR JOHN: Thank you.

SIR RALPH: I haven't seen much of you lately.

16. "Profile: Ralph Richardson," *The New Yorker*, 21 February 1977, pp. 45–46+.

SIR JOHN: We meet in costume.

SIR RALPH: We meet as other people.

A pleasant inside joke. But think for a moment. What were they really saying? Although the conversation took place in obvious good humor and lightness, it is germane to the subject I wish to develop now for our later discussion, and I do not care to leave it hanging as another one of those opening handles to a speech without asking you to reflect on it. What were they really saying? It's a question you need to pose each time you break down a part, and sometimes even in conversation. Of course, you usually don't stop and ask yourself as you are talking or listening, "Who am I? What am I? Why am I?" But aren't those questions the undercarriage of the Gielgud-Richardson exchange? Aren't those the questions you want to be asking?

At this moment in preparing my notes I stopped and asked myself, "What am I really saying?" Quick answers: I am saying that we are meeting together for the first time; that your attitudes and sensibilities are mysteries to your neighbors, yourselves and to me; that you are perhaps hoping to learn something, to share what you learn or question in your learning, and to size me up; that it would be nice if you were aware of your neighbor's breathing, warmth, and reactions; and that by the end of the evening you may decide that coming here was a nonsensical thing to do. But now your group attitude is attentive, and we are as we are.

But what am I really saying to you? At this point, I'm going to interrupt and detour the flow of what I intended for the rest of the evening. I want to give sounds to what I am really saying, now, to let you know where I'm at. Perhaps that is my real action in being here—but is it the only one?

I am here to discuss a subject I think important to the worker in the theatre, and I want that subject to become clear to you, not by what I say, but by what we all say. So I want to find out what you think about what I am saying. That is another action and reason for my being here.

I said, "What you think about what I am saying." Isn't that presumptuous and vain? Why do I use the word vain? Because if I use it first, self-critically, you will think I am not vain. If it is important to me to have you think I am not vain, then I must want you to like me. Yes, I want you to like me.

Some day you may hear me scream at an aspiring or even semisuccessful director, "You want your cast to like you? You're in the wrong profession!" Don't take it for granted that that is what I am really

saying. I may be saying, "Why do you want to be liked? To get more authority quickly, so you can manipulate with more facility, so you can have more power, which will bring you more money? What's wrong with your sex life?" If you want people to like you and pay you for it, try prostitution, it walks both sides of the street in different clothing. Permit people to love you or hate you. It's like speaking a line in a play: say it as if for the first time or the last time, but never in between.

Oh, and by the way and *et cetera*, if you do decide to become a whore, become engaged with the role, play it to the hilt. Perhaps you'll experience enough of love and hate and detestable compliance to put you back on the road to becoming a better, more complete director.

On the other hand, a few weeks ago Lee Strasberg and I were sounding each other out, and I mentioned that my first orientation to the theatre was more toward Meyerholdt, and then Vakhtangov, than Stanislavsky. Lee said so was his, and then said: "You know, the middle road is a road in itself." As Vakhtangov was the road between Stanislavsky and Meyerholdt, I thought back to his essay, "The Agitation from the Essence," which has been a principal guideline for me in my directing career, although not so fruitful in personal relationships. End of detour.

I want to state the ground rules for our work together:

1) Those of you who are taking the course for credit will not be graded according to your talent. I do not presume to be able to judge talent working under the kind of pressure we'll have here. C. Day Lewis, an Englishman who wrote good poetry, said: "The greatest enemies of poetry are talk and alcohol." Proclaim and scream out that you are talented and a poet of the celluloid strip, but not among us. I caution you against acting out the hoped for result before you have done the work. And confine your worries about it, as you do other acts of masturbation, to your private quarters.

2) There will be tools here with which you will work according to your capacity, and the principal tool is yourself. Then come the others in the group to whom you are only another, no matter how special another you may wish to become, and temporarily may become.

I advise that your eyes, ears, and other sensitive organs and emotions will serve you best through alertness, objectivity, and an absence of self-deceit. I want you to draw on the pure stuff of you. I'm not a moralizer, I don't believe an artist should moralize in any form of the word, but I do not want any use of alcohol or mood changers

in our working situation. If you want to discuss the advantages of drugs, I could filibuster all of you with great and glorious highs. If you need a fix to face the day, I empathize. Just don't participate in class, because if you're high, your judgment is not quite right. Some clouds appear, the mood changes, you can't trust yourself.

Or come to our sessions spaced out if you wish—no blame. You may even serve as a helpful reminder to others, and thus find a noble negative purpose for yourself as the premature martyr. The penalty, however, is devastating. You will not be able to recover your balance without the help of others, anymore than you will be able to learn in this class without the help of others. Even the blessed sanctuary of aloneness you can learn how to manage only with the help and examples of others. Those others may have the inclination to help you recover, but they will not have the time.

We're all dependent on each other. If you want to work here, you've got to have a spine. Where I have not been clear about the function and relation of the individual to the group and the group to the individual, I expect you to use your memory, curiosity, observation, and intelligence to sift it through for yourselves.

3) It's easy to fall into sloppy habits in class, indulging in criticizing others, using too many words. Sometimes it may make you feel good, but your first and healthier instinct probably is to try to find out or express something about yourself. I want you to get away from the habit of making comparisons. I want you to deal with immediate experience. Film is an immediate experience, so go to the root right away by using the other person's work as a source of personal experience, a means of exploring how you identify with what you have seen, what you would do. That way you'll be involved in the class all the time. In this case the use of the first person pronoun is much to your advantage.

4) I come to you with this concept or aphorism, which my wife calls a euphemism: Peter Lorre, exasperated, once said to a director, "But I have only five expressions." Bogart overheard him and, with some cause, repeated to me, "Goddam it, Nick, I've only got five expressions." I once worked with an architect named Frank Lloyd Wright, and he said, "Learn your limitations and take advantage of them." I don't mean learn to live with them. Take advantage of them and stretch them out.

5) Finally, do your "thinking" on your own time. Do your doing here.

I want to get us on our feet as fast as possible, and let the theory come along with accomplishment. And I'd like to start out doing—

All of you have done some theatre work, right? I'd like you to find a monologue or a duologue and do it as if you were presenting an audition for the theatre. And then I'd like to take that and immediately transpose it onto film—or in this case video—so we can begin to tackle the question of what happens on film that is different than in theatre, or different than in life. Shyness towards approaching the camera is usually an obstacle that has to be overcome. If you can come prepared with some material tomorrow, we'll start by diving right in.

Now I'd like to take an hour for lunch. I'd like it very much if you'd break into small groups and get to know each other a little bit, discuss some ideas, and see if there's anything we can do this afternoon, anything you'd like to try.

I'm going to go get a camera. The rest of the equipment will be here tomorrow.

Learning and Teaching

Riding down an elevator I observed two young fellows, both with guitars in identical cases. One fellow was about 21 and in a hog helmet; the other was slightly balding, about 31, with blond hair and beard, and obviously the teacher. I couldn't make out whether he was the teacher of the intricacies of the motorbike they had parked outside, or of the guitar. At any rate, he said to his companion: "I'll teach you how to play it."

The other boy said, "No. Nuh-uh."

The older one said, "Why don't you want me to teach you? You're going to have to learn it. Why don't you let me teach it to you? It'll take fifteen minutes."

The younger boy said, "No, look, well, maybe—" And he stalled and stalled and stalled until the elevator got to the ground floor and the door opened.

It struck me that maybe those in the upper five to ten percent of their classes are there because they enjoy the exhibition of themselves learning something, while the majority are embarrassed at showing that they have learned something in front of other people. The volunteer in the classroom is probably an exhibitionist. Why is it that so many of the men of brilliant scientific or scholarly achievement were so often last in their classes, so seldom one of the top five?

I think the group system of learning is perhaps no longer an acceptable or functioning method.



Learning is finding out what you already know.

Doing is demonstrating that you know it.

Teaching is reminding others that they know it just as well as you.

We are all learners, doers, teachers.

Your only obligation in any lifetime is to be true to yourself.

You teach best what you most need to learn.

Live never to be ashamed when something you do or say is published around the world—even if what is published is not true.

“There is no problem so big that it cannot be run away from.”

—Snoopy the Dog

Open any book and read what’s there: you’ll find your problems. Hold a problem in your mind. Open a book.

Don’t turn away from possible futures before you’re quite certain you have nothing to learn from them. You’re free to choose another (different) future, another past.

There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands. You seek problems because you need their gifts.

You will find a helping hand at the end of your arm.

Anyone worth knowing is also a little odd.

I am concerned with the state . . .

[8/10/77]

I am concerned with the state of my household.

The center of the stage is a towering mass of second-hand furniture. The oldest piece, a seventy-five-year-old leather armchair, has been moved, year after year, level after level, to the top of a heap (or pyre) of beds, chairs, desks, lamps: Tiffany, fringed, crystal, parchment, multi-switched, rheostated, focused, neon, tubular, petite, and indirect—every mode of light but the sun (O Ibsen, where is the sun?). The lamps alone, if formally arranged, could mark off eighty years in as many seconds—not a bad idea to consider for the final staging. Rugs, tapestries, whatnots, paintings and photographs, books, papers, newspapers, wallpapers, handouts and throwaways, petitions and posters. The entire heap revolves slowly, like the prism chandelier of a '90s ballroom. Or a steamboat ballroom. On each new level and at each full turn of the heap, another form or two or three appears briefly, for one revolution. An old man makes his way upwards through the debris. Behind him a blue light, a gentle blue, outlines a naked female body. She pulls a quilt over her head.

I can't find my writing materials. She steals my writing papers. I like to write on library cards. They help me believe I have an ability to keep things in order. I don't, because I rebel against categories, but I like to write on them just the same. Continuity seems more

easily kept in such a way. She has to keep her continuities too (he pauses and rattles through a rolltop desk), doesn't she? It seems to me that if she has to write on library cards she could steal them from the office supplies where she works, same as I do from the university (he slams the rolltop) where I work. In the summers. She's forty years younger than I am. She should be at least as enterprising. Maybe she's in competition. (He nears the top.) I came home two nights ago and found her in intimate conversation with a *former* mentor of mine. I grabbed him, rushed him to an open window—this is the fourth floor we live on—and threw him out.

—Nick! He's seventy-five years old!

—If he can fuck he can fly!

He continues to the top, and settles into the old leather easy chair.

I am concerned with my family's sanity—and with my own as well. As well I might be.

—Or—

Begin with the false armistice, mother and sisters, before arriving at the top.

—I never questioned your sanity, father. Perhaps I don't know what sanity is—or is made of. What is sanity made of?

A woman's voice (a quiet, unquestioning, rather than authoritative, voice, and the words are spoken with a Norwegian accent):

—There is some jello and an egg sandwich. Do you want anything, son?

—Jello, please.



It seems to me my most vivid recollections of my life reflect efforts to call attention to myself. While I was preparing the script for the filming of *Rebel*, a schoolteacher from Missouri told me of a remark made by a small-town schoolteacher in Michigan: "A juvenile delinquent is merely a boy or girl who has fallen out of attention." Sixty-some years is a long time to be a juvenile delinquent.

I was born at 5 A.M. on August 7th in Galesville, Wisconsin. The astrologers will tell you that my sun was rising, which probably accounts for my being bent towards incest with other people's children and wives, ex-wives, and daughters and such.

My mother was of Norwegian descent, but she was born in a log cabin in central western Wisconsin, where the Menominee Indians still raided now and then. My father was born on the western side of the state, in Milwaukee. His name was Raymond Nicholas Kienzle.

The first song I learned on the mandolin was the “Ballad of Sam Hall”:

Oh my name it is Sam Hall, it is Sam Hall,
 Well my name it is Sam Hall, it is Sam Hall,
 Well my name it is Sam Hall,
 And I hate you one and all,
 Yes I hate you one and all,
 Goddamn your eyes!

At age three I changed my name to Sam Hall. At the outbreak of World War I, German names became unpopular in the United States, so I changed my name to Raymond Nicholas Kienzle, Jr., and my father approved, since that was what was written on my birth certificate.

Ever since I was four and she was nine I’ve wanted to make it with my sister Helen, because she was my sister. I’m still planning it. She was a bitch at nine and she never changed.

We played a game at school to “Farmer in the Dell.” You know the tune? They changed the lyrics to:

The hun is in the dell
 The hun is in the dell
 Hi ho the merry-oh!
 The hun is in the dell.

I was always the hun. After birth and the mumps the only time I can remember crying until I got to Hollywood was then. I cried with such rage that I broke through that circle, ran over to the highest point on the school grounds, got on top of it, and said, “Let’s play King of the Mountain! I’m King of the Mountain!” And the sonofabitch that got close to me first got it right square in the eyes from my right foot. Thus my present views on prejudices and bigotry were built on a solid foundation.

The story begins at the in-between time of November 8, 1918, the day of the false armistice. I was seven and had become a Lutheran monk sulking under the butternut trees, lying in a hammock, wearing bell-bottomed sailor trousers, teasing my sister to tickle up or go. That night my oldest sister Alice drove my other sisters, Ruth and Helen, my mother, and myself through the town of Galesville, and we all beat pots and pans and lit red torches, honked the two horns, and yelled out, “PEACE PEACE PEACE!! ARMISTICE ARMISTICE PEACE PEACE!!!”

The next morning Alice came into my room to say with heavy doom that it had been a false armistice. I hadn't yet observed that that was the nature of life, so I got goddamn Norwegian mad and ran slamming doors through the house to the front porch. The walls were covered with antler heads, the floor with the tears of my mother and our neighbors, the Beizers. The Beizers' house had been painted yellow during the night to show that they were still dirty yellow huns.

The best epitaph I can think of is:

Born
Lived
Interrupted.

And it happens every day.