

THE YES, NO, MAYBE **TECHNIQUE**

An Acting Teacher's Guide to Accomplishing More Training in Half the Time

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| What Yes, No, Maybe Does | 8 |
| Playing the Game | 15 |
| PHASE ONE — Introducing the Game | 15 |
| Phase Two — Introducing The Slap | 17 |
| Phase Three — Cementing The Exercise | 19 |
| Phase Four — The Final Cement | 19 |
| Phase Five — The Emotional Dimension | 20 |
| Phase Six – Continue To Develop The Truthful, Reflexive Emotional Response | 22 |
| Phase Seven — The Dreaded “Maybe” | 24 |
| Phase Eight – Cementing The Maybe | 26 |
| Phase Nine – Beginning Specific Communication | 27 |
| Phase Ten – Specific Non-Verbal Communication | 28 |
| Phase Eleven – Cementing Specific Communication | 29 |
| Phase Twelve - Introduction Of Character And Point Of View | 30 |
| Phase Thirteen – Introducing Actions | 33 |
| Phase Fourteen – Students Developing Actions | 35 |
| Phase Fifteen – Cementing Actions | 36 |
| Phase Sixteen – Developing The Memorization Muscle, Deepening Listening And Specific Communication | 37 |
| Phase Seventeen – Deeping Listening, Memory Muscle, Concentration And Circles Of Awareness | 38 |
| Phase Eighteen – The Final Cement | 40 |
| What To Expect | 41 |

INTRODUCTION

When I was a young actor a few years into my profession, I was presented with an amazing opportunity. As a co-founder and member of the Metropolitan Playhouse of New York, I was invited to join a troupe of my fellows who were going to Lithuania. The Berlin Wall had recently been torn down, and the USSR had collapsed. Lithuania, now newly and fully independent from the Soviets, was struggling to quickly realign itself into the capitalistic world. During its stint as a Soviet satellite state, Lithuania had operated under the guiding principles of communism, and its theatre had been run under a state system. Now suddenly, Lithuanian theatre was looking toward the western model of production but it needed help. Since under the state system Lithuanian theatre was fully funded by the government, there was little focus on concerns about the length of rehearsal periods, the impact actors' salaries had on potential profits, or even how box office potential might affect budgeting. Often Lithuanians would rehearse plays for over a year, sometimes never reaching production. Often rehearsal days began with a protracted period of socializing over cups of coffee and shots of vodka. Our group was tasked to assist Lithuania's first fully-independent company learn the American way of making theatre.

Beyond the practical matter of coaching Lithuanians through shortened rehearsal periods and effective planning as a tool for expediting the rehearsal process, we also had an artistic goal. We were going to join in an attempt to find a universal means of expression that could transcend language, much in the mode of Peter Brook. The task was an exciting one, particularly for me, a budding theatre artist who wanted to plumb the very depths of my craft in order to make new discoveries expressions. Little did I know my most profound discovery would be a new method of approaching actor training.

When our collective group of actors met in a Lithuanian rehearsal hall for our first day of work, it was clear our task wasn't going to be easy. Our two groups stood on opposite sides of the room and eyed each other suspiciously. The Lithuanians spoke rudimentary English, and we Americans spoke no Lithuanian at all. We Americans had expected to begin rehearsals with a staff of Lithuanian stage managers giving us schedules and laying out all the logistical matters surrounding rehearsal. No Lithuanian stage management was present. The Lithuanians had been expecting to begin rehearsals over drinks in the next door café. They greeted us with the attitude of "You Americans think you're so hot". We viewed our counterparts as an open question: "Can they even act?" Both our groups looked at their respective directors with an unspoken "what the hell is this?"

Sensing the mounting tensions and the clear disparity in the room, our American director strode forward, clapped his hands enthusiastically and said, "Let's begin with a little Yes, No, Maybe, shall we?" It was a brilliant choice. Yes, No, Maybe was a simple group warm up game that was deceptively difficult, required total concentration, and depended on deep listening and clear communication.

We started in English because the Lithuanians were familiar enough with the words. After several days, and a better mastery of the exercise, we switched to Lithuanian. The Lithuanians constantly corrected our pronunciations, and eventually the exercise became the spark that invested them in teaching us their language. When we Americans had the basic words under our belts, the group executed the exercise switching from one language to the other ad lib. Yes, No, Maybe turned out to be the perfect ice breaker. We began every rehearsal with it and came to love it. It brought us together as artists, colleagues and friends. Heck, it was fun!

Many years later, when I began my first day teaching Beginning Acting at the College of William and Mary, I found myself confronted with a situation very similar to my Lithuanian experience. William and Mary is a strong, liberal arts college, and my Beginning Acting class was both the foundational course for students who intended to pursue acting as a profession and the means by which non-majors could satisfy a general college arts requirement. I, too, faced two disparate groups, actors and non-actors. They, too, eyed each other with suspicion and trepidation. I quickly surveyed the tenor of the room and took a cue from past experience. Clapping my hands together, I strode boldly to the center and announced, “Right, everyone. Shall we begin with a little Yes, No, Maybe?” Just as it had once proven, the exercise was the perfect fix.

As I continued through the semester, I made the exercise part of the warm up for every class. I used it to begin my Directing classes as well. I have also used it to warm up casts, professional and student, in shows I directed. Over time, I started experimenting with my own additions and deviations. As I did, the potential power this exercise might have in training actors in core instrument development and early craft work began to become clear to me, so I started re-working the exercise to be a training tool for actors. With my retooled version of the exercise, I found that with fifteen to twenty minutes of practicing Yes, No, Maybe at the beginning of each class, my students’ core instrument growth and craft practice accelerated exponentially.

My initial acting training had been in the Meisner technique, and I had come to admire the utility Meisner repetition had in producing actors whose automatic responses and line deliveries were truthful, believable and wonderfully specific. I have found a class supplemented

with Yes, No, Maybe can produce the same results in at least half the time. In the course of six months, my students were showing results common to Meisner training after a full year.

This works because the exercise helps develop actors' instruments quickly and efficiently within a group exercise. Commonly, much of the actors' core work is developed through scenework (as the Meisner technique does). Although scenework is an effective approach, it takes a lot of time because it usually involves working students in pairs. I think you will find using Yes, No, Maybe, as an enhancement to your standard acting program, will develop your actors' skills at a pace that will make them ready for scenework and craftwork sooner and at a more advanced level.

Finally, Yes, No, Maybe is a great equalizer. It puts experienced actors and non-actors on the same footing. It is easy to learn and easy to teach. As opposed to esoteric exercises, the purpose of which many student actors simply don't get, Yes, No, Maybe is concrete, systematic, and students will be able to see their clear progress on a daily basis. It also serves as a means for them to break bad habits without even realizing what is happening. This exercise is effective for training beginning actors at any age, middle school to adult, and has the added bonus of being a great warm up that focuses concentration and flexes impulses.

The results can be pretty remarkable. I hope you give it a try.

WHAT YES, NO, MAYBE DOES

Yes, No, Maybe is built to help develop the actors' core instrument and craft in these

areas:

1. Concentration

As we all know, Concentration is a primary requirement for acting. We actors must create an imaginary world in our minds, on some level believe in the truth of it, and maintain that self-created illusion through the course of a performance. This requires an exquisite level of concentration. Concentration is a muscle that needs to be fully developed in the student actor. Yes, No, Maybe demands intense concentration from the start, and concentration is rewarded by success in the exercise. With each new level of Yes, No, Maybe, the student actor is deepening and strengthening their concentration muscle without even being aware they are doing so, mostly because it's fun.

2. Listening

"Acting is listening," most instructors will assert. It is a primary skill for offering an accurate and truthful response to stimuli. Assisting beginning actors to develop the listening muscle can be a long and arduous process. Yes, No, Maybe forces students to listen intensely from the very start. As new levels are added to the exercise, students are continually challenged to become more specific and attuned in their listening. In Yes, No, Maybe, listening is developed with numerous other core skills simultaneously as students must become more and more adept at identifying *what* is being said and *how* it is being said.

3. Emotional Availability and Truthful Response

Like Sanford Meisner's repetition, Yes, No, Maybe frees emotional bonds to allow truthful and automatic responses – what Meisner referred to as “the pinch and the ouch”. Because Yes, No, Maybe is framed within the context of a game, however, it doesn't involve the tedium that is intrinsic to repetition, and it happens totally without student awareness. The more challenging the game becomes, the more students are forced to get out of their heads and allow their natural responses to dominate their behavior. The added element of speed pushes students to respond quicker and with precision, thereby breaking the bonds of self-consciousness that keep emotions trapped inside.

4. Circles of Awareness

Actors are like fighter-jet pilots, they must focus awareness on many things at once – lines, blocking, staying in the light, keeping open, pausing when the audience reacts, vocal projection and diction, the behavior of those around them, their physical environment, etc. Beginning actors consciously focus on these elements, which ejects them out of the truthful, imaginary reality they are striving to build in their own minds. As actors gain experience, these various levels of awareness become instinctual and actors are freed to focus their primary attention on living truthfully in the moment of reality they've created. Yes, No, Maybe adds a new layer of awareness with each new level introduced to the exercise. Mechanics become naturally instinctual as students must devote more and more attention to listening intently and responding truthfully.

5. Physical Expression as an Automatic Response

For many new actors, physical self-consciousness is a painful impediment to truthful behavior. Often they will grasp their hands behind their backs or stuff them in their pockets, hold arms unnaturally pinned to their sides, walk stiffly and awkwardly and execute movement mechanically. Many new actors who have stage experience prior to serious training will plan their gestures and movement in rehearsal and mimic them during performance. This deprives their performance of the spontaneity that gives it truth. Beginning actors need to lose physical consciousness by focusing on action. Yes, No, Maybe demands both physical and vocal expression, and listening and response, through intense concentration on the action of the game. The element of speed in the exercise does not allow actors time for physical self-consciousness because an automatic response is continuously required. The game integrates truthful and physical expressions naturally, without conscious awareness.

6. Non-Verbal, Vocal Communication

Acting is living, and in life much of our vocal communication is done non-verbally (a laugh, a snort, a moan, a scoff). When new actors are given lines, they tend to focus on speaking lines as their only form of vocal communication, ignoring the imaginary life between their lines. How many university Shakespeare's have we seen in which a character delivers a long monologue while the crowd stands mute and unmoving, waiting for it to be over? Yes, No, Maybe deals directly with non-verbal, vocal communication and requires the participants to deliver actions specifically through non-verbal vocalizations.

7. Memory

In my experience, the most commonly asked question during audience talk backs is: “How do you memorize all those lines?” My response is always, “A lot of hard, tedious, boring work.” Acting work is all about memorization: “What I say, where I stand, when I walk, what scene comes next, what I wear etc.” Memory is a muscle that needs to be developed through exercise. Yes, No, Maybe exercises that muscle in a fast-paced, high-pressure environment. Memory requirements build through phases of the exercise until students are stretched to the utmost when they must deal with multiple circles of awareness while relying on memory to keep their place in the game.

8. Specific Communication through Actions

Actions are the behaviors that an actor, as a character, undertakes to achieve an objective. Specific communication is achieved, not through what characters say or do, but through how they say or do things. This is a core plank of the Stanislavski system. Most commonly, actions are taught once basic instrument have been developed. In Yes, No, Maybe, actions are used as an early tool to develop instrument skills, which promotes a natural acceleration up the learning curve. Although actions are not defined until mid-way through Yes, No, Maybe development, actions are required for communication as soon as the students become familiar with the basic parameters of the game. Thus, students begin employing actions without knowing they’re using them. This causes the use of actions to become part of the student’s muscle memory very early in the training. Actions in Yes, No, Maybe must be specific because miscommunication brings the game, naturally, to a halt.

9. Character Point of View

What actions we human beings undertake, ergo characters undertake, depends very much on our point of view. Through text analysis, an actor interprets whom and what a character is, then frames their analysis into a point of view. From the point of view an actor chooses is derived their choice of actions. For instance, one actor may interpret Hamlet as a frustrated man of action while another may see Hamlet as a fearful hesitator. It is that point of view that determines what specific behaviors actor/Hamlet will use to achieve their objective. In Yes, No, Maybe actors are given a scenario of characters and must play the game through actions that represent the character's point of view. Actions and point of view are created simultaneously, thus organically.

10. Subtext

We rarely say what we mean and rarely mean what we say. Communication occurs, not through the words, but through the meaning that is imparted through behavior as the words are said. "I love you" can have a thousand different meanings depending on how one says it, which is determined by what one wants to do or is trying to get through the words. Subtext is the meaning beneath the words, not what a character *says*, but what they *mean*. Subtext, Character Point of View and Actions can all be seen as facets of the same gem. They are inseparable. Subtext comes into play in Yes, No, Maybe as soon as students have a basic grasp of the game fundamentals and it is used throughout the process. Students engage in subtext without knowing it, so the knowledge and use of subtext becomes instinctual and organic.

Yes, No, Maybe serves many purposes. It builds core acting instrument and craft skills. It frees automatic response which frees creativity. It gets participants out of their heads and into their instincts. It's a great warm up and a great ice breaker that puts all participants on a level footing. Its early phases are simple enough to use in middle school drama classes and both early and later phases are difficult and detailed enough to challenge seasoned actors. Not only have I used it in rehearsals, I've used the basic game in workshops on creativity for MBA programs, in board retreats to build interpersonal rapport and in academic classes to focus concentration and shake out cobwebs from dusty minds. Best of all, it's a game. It's fun. Through it, beginning actors go through rigorous and demanding core training without the burdensome pressures of worrying about succeed