PROLOGUE

"If one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an 'artless art' growing out of the Unconscious."

—Zen master D. T. Suzuki

In my senior year of college a theater professor took me aside and said, "I know you want to become an actor, and you have a lot of talent. But talent is like water. Without a vessel to contain it, it's useless."

"What is the vessel for talent?" I asked.

My professor answered, "Technique."

"Fine," I said. "Then I'll learn technique. Where do I go to do that?"

"If you're going to bother at all, you'd better learn from the best and study with a Master Teacher."

"Show me where the Master Teachers are and I'll study with them," I said. And so it was that, days later, I borrowed a friend's car and drove to Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, home of the Mason Gross School of the Arts. I was going to meet Bill Esper.

He wasn't what I'd imagined. I suppose I had this vision that a Master Teacher of acting would be a rakish man in a beret with a

Mephistophelian mustache. Imagine how surprised I was to meet a kindly, quiet man with salt-and-pepper hair who waved me into his cramped office at Mason Gross's Levin Theater. This was the famous Bill Esper? Impossible. This man was a regular guy with a well-trimmed goatee and piercing eyes behind spectacles.

We talked for about forty-five minutes, and I'm sure I was trying too hard to make a good impression, because I honestly can't recall a single word that Bill said. Except this one part: Toward the end of our talk, Bill asked me, "Why are you interested in coming here? What interests you about studying with me?"

I said, "I studied the Meisner Technique a little in college and I got a lot out of it. Now I want to learn it top to bottom."

Bill didn't respond. He just sat there looking at me. Finally, very quietly, he said, "If you come here, you won't be learning Meisner Technique. You'll learn *my* technique, the Bill Esper technique. And—God willing—if you leave here, you'll leave with *your own* technique. Do you understand this?"

I didn't. Not really. But I was young. I lied. I nodded my head and said, "Yes."

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Now, more than ten years later, Bill has asked me to visit him. The door to his studio swings open, and I walk through a short vestibule with red-painted walls, heading straight toward his office. It's a cramped, busy little room, and the first thing I notice is the metal umbrella stand just inside the door. It holds three umbrellas, a battered vaudeville cane, a Louisville Slugger, and a fencing foil. Surely this is an actor's office.

I glance up. Bookshelves cover the wall behind Bill's desk from floor to ceiling, the wooden slats bowed under the weight of his library. Spiral-bound notebooks are crammed onto the shelves

at impossible angles. Manila files jut forward like stuck-out tongues, each bursting with what appears to be a lifetime's worth of scribbled musings. Tchotchkes from around the world sit on the shelves, too. Some of the items must have once served as props in a play: a leather armband beset with glass jewels, a feathered headdress, a white fluted vase with a single silk rose erupting from it in a brilliant red comet. A tiny metal box stands next to a battered, blue-bound copy of *Webster's Unabridged English Dictionary*. Carved wooden horses stand here and there—they appear to serve as tiny guardians for this eclectic library.

My teacher sits behind his cluttered desk, reading the morning paper. He glances up. "I hope this is a good place for us to work," he says. No other introduction, though we haven't seen each other in years.

"It works for me," I say. This office is obviously a sanctuary for the imagination, and therefore a fitting place to begin the task at hand. "Will it work for you?"

Bill grins. "I'm not sure. I've never written a book before."

"It's easy," I say, "if you know where you want to begin. Let's take a moment to introduce you." I reach into my bag for a microcassette recorder, which I click on and place on Bill's desk. "First of all, why do you want to write this book? What do you want to say?"

Bill thinks for a long moment. Then he says, "I've been very fortunate to devote the past forty years of my life to continuing Sandy Meisner's legacy. In that time it's been my great pleasure—and fascination—to refine his technique and, in some cases, to extend it. I apprenticed myself to Sandy for seventeen years when he was at the peak of his career. Then I worked nearly thirty years more to experiment with the technique, distill it, and apply it to areas Sandy wasn't able to, like the classics, for instance. Plays with heightened language. Sandy loved style and theatricality, but

he never had the time to work in these areas in any extensive way as a teacher."

"For a moment," I say, "let me play devil's advocate. There are lots of acting teachers out there. What have you got to say that's so special?"

Bill nods. "These days most people who call themselves acting teachers do so because they offer helpful hints and anecdotes to performers who are desperate for real instruction. I don't consider that teaching. The way I see it, very few teachers have done what Lee Strasberg and Sandy did; very few teachers have developed a concrete, step-by-step approach to training a truly creative actor—a system that takes an artist as raw material and builds the skills necessary for him to excel at his art from the ground up.

"Craft—technique, if you will—is vitally important to art, but so many people don't understand it. The biggest misconception I hear about acting technique is that it restricts the artist's talent. Ridiculous! Ultimately technique does not constrain the artist's instincts; it frees them."

"How does this apply to Meisner Technique?"

"Learning to act is very much like building a house. First you have to pick a spot to build and clear the land. Then you must dig a good foundation and shore it up against the elements. These are the very first stages; perhaps they're also the most important stages. If the foundation of a house isn't properly laid, the entire structure will eventually collapse under its own weight during the first good wind. In Meisner Technique, we uphold this analogy by practicing a regimen of exercises which create foundation, a stable floor upon which we build our craft."

"You generally work with actors over a two-year period," I say. "In terms of this training, how do you lay the foundation?"

"Utilizing the Meisner approach," Bill says, "my students spend the entire first year of their training developing themselves into

truthful acting instruments. If you like, you could say that this first year is all about training the actor in the basic skills required for professional acting."

"I'll play devil's advocate again," I say. "A lot of acting schools consider the basic skills for acting to be voice, speech, and movement. What do you believe?"

Bill waves his hand. "Voice, speech, and movement are external skills. Very important to acting, yes. But not so important that you study them to the neglect of an actor's inner life—his emotional core. An actor without an emotional core is like a cardboard cutout of a human being.

"These days the most common piece of advice you hear people telling a young actor is 'Be yourself.' Of course, this leads the actor to ask the next, inevitable question: 'Who am I?' The way I see it, until an actor learns to work from the core of his own truth, all the voice, speech, and movement training in the world will only succeed in creating a highly skilled puppet. I don't want to train automatons. I want to develop actors who are unique! Who are alive!

"Painters make their art from brushes, canvas, and hues. Sculptors work in clay and bronze, stone, and plaster. Writers use pens and paper—lately they use computers. Musicians have their instruments. But what does an actor use to create his art? Some would say nothing, but this isn't true. In fact, the actor has the most complicated instrument of all—*himself*! His experiences, his imagination, his sensitivity. His physical body and his observations. Everything that makes up the sum total of a person's humanity is part of the actor's instrument. As Eleonora Duse once said, 'All that I have to offer as an artist is the revelation of my soul.'"

"That sounds a lot like Stanislavsky," I say. "Why not simply use his work?"

"For a variety of reasons," Bill says. "Teaching Stanislavsky doesn't work for contemporary actors. The realities faced by twenty-first-century actors are completely different than those faced by Russian actors of the nineteenth century. In Stanislavsky's world, if actors wanted to rehearse a play for three years, they could. Modern actors, however, must constantly adjust their work to meet the demands of various media, and they must do so while laboring under the restraints of incredibly condensed rehearsal times. This is particularly true in the film and television industries, where actors are lucky if they get three minutes to rehearse before the camera runs. As things stand now, feature films are often made in twenty-eight days or less. The pressures of television are even more acute.

"One of the reasons I believe so strongly that Meisner's technique is the best approach to training actors is that the technique can be applied to any challenge an actor faces. It develops actors who can create performances of genuine quality in any medium.

"The art of acting has been in a state of perpetual change since the day it began. A lot of it has to do with the way society develops, but a large part of it has to do—interestingly enough—with technology. For instance, during the nineteenth century, actors trained to work in large theaters; they worked on projecting their voices and developing stock gestures that conveyed their emotional life to the back of a large, crowded hall. Then, in the early part of the twentieth century, silent films became a viable job market for actors, and suddenly they had to conquer the problem of acting without sound. Then, after talkies arrived, actors confronted the massive issues of subtlety and truthfulness in film acting.

"When I studied with Sandy in the fifties, television was a budding medium. Look at how many actors work in television today. Then, in 1963, the Guthrie Theater opened and inaugurated the regional-theater movement. Suddenly there was a tremendous

need for American actors who could handle the language and period styles of the classics, which pose huge acting challenges."

"But doesn't every form of actor training prepare you for these media?"

Bill shakes his head. "No. Not in the least. These days, no matter which road you choose to travel into the art of acting, there's a school out there that will charge a toll and raise the gate. But are their graduates just as skilled at doing TV and film as they are in the classics? Rarely. Because the systems they train in aren't as clearly organized as Sandy's. My vision of a well-trained actor is someone who can apply his training to a contemporary film or a stage production of Shakespeare with equal ease. An actor who can perform Euripides, Shaw, Brecht, and O'Neill, then turn around and work a contract role on a soap opera."

"That's a pretty tall order."

Bill looks at me. "It certainly is."

"But why write another book on Meisner Technique? Isn't Sandy's book enough?"

Bill raises his eyebrows. "Sandy wrote a wonderful book. But because of constraints on his time and energy, it's incomplete. There are many important aspects of his technique which he didn't have the opportunity to address in *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. I'd like to explore these lost areas. Also, the proliferation of Meisner Technique has led to a dilution of it. Many teachers across the country claim to teach authentic versions of Sandy's work, but they don't. One pitfall of the Meisner Technique is that the beginning exercises are easy to learn and easy to teach. This attracts a lot of underqualified practitioners. They teach versions of Repetition and claim that they're teaching Meisner's work without progressing to the next steps, all of which are necessary to build genuinely accomplished actors capable of creating characters with deep and compelling inner lives."

I clear my throat and glance away at the walls. "Bill, I have a confession to make."

From the corner of my eye I can see he's sitting there, waiting. Patient. Bill Esper has the speaking habits of a poet. He speaks only words that are essential. He's incredibly comfortable with silence. Had he chosen to pursue a career in writing rather than acting, I suspect he would have made a lousy author of pulp fiction. His haiku, however, would have been stunning.

"I've begun to teach."

Bill's ears prick up. I can see this pleases him immensely.

"Excellent!" he says. "I always thought you might."

"It's *not* excellent," I snap. Bill doesn't blanch for an instant at my reaction. He doesn't judge it. From the look in his eyes I can see he's already intuited my problem: It frustrates the hell out of me. "The more I act and teach, the less sure I am about the *reasons* behind what I'm doing."

"It takes time to develop a feel for it," Bill says.

"I've been at it for eleven years."

He snorts. "Come back to me in thirty more. We'll see what you've picked up then." But then he nods. "This is good. I want to write a book about training actors. You want to learn more about teaching actors. Why don't you show up here tomorrow? I have a new class that's just beginning. We'll start at the beginning and work our way through the process."

"That sounds fine," I say. "Really. That sounds wonderful."

Bill smiles.

Over the next year and a half, I observed Bill teaching his first-year students and worked together with him on this book. We decided that no single class would be likely to cover the full range of situations that regularly arise in the classroom or show the many ways that the method can help individual students with their specific problems. Instead we created a narrative that is

meant to depict a representative first-year class, with the general types of students and issues Bill has encountered over the years. None of the students described in this book represent actual individuals. We drew on my observations and on Bill's decades of teaching to re-create the classroom experience and to give readers the most illuminating portrayal of the technique in practice.