

**Syncretism or Synchronism? Review of Getting into Character:
Seven Secrets a Novelist Can Learn from Actors by Brandilyn
Collins**

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Published

2003

Journal Title

TEXT: The Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/8272>

Link to published version

<http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct03/coadwest.htm>

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Syncretism or Synchronism?

review by Cher Coad and Patrick West

Getting into Character: Seven Secrets a Novelist Can Learn from Actors

Brandilyn Collins

John Wiley & Sons 2002

212pp AU\$26.95 Pb

ISBN 0-471-05894-7

Actors who become writers know that their writing benefits from their experience in stage or screen productions. For most actors, a first engagement with a character comes about through a preliminary reading of the script. In this situation, the actor thinks about how to translate the writer's words into actions and emotions. Some actors appreciate a lot of guidance from the writer at this stage. Others prefer to depend upon the power of their individual creative interpretation. The writer's relationship to the actor might exhibit similar variations. What is it that an actor can learn from a writer or a writer from an actor? If the author becomes possessive of the script there is the potential for character workshopping with the actor to be difficult. But some writers are quite self-effacing and open in their relations with actors. Obviously much depends on the initial quality of the script. That special ability to suggest without explicitly proscribing a character paradigm is sometimes missing.

But who exactly is this generalized writer in search of a genre? Brandilyn Collins imagines a readership of novelists for her book and does not once mention the scriptwriter. She thereby denies a voice to that whole body of writing and associated theory that draws attention to itself in the space between page-based writing and the flesh-and-blood actor in the *mise en scène*. As we read *Getting into Character*, we found ourselves increasingly concerned about the argument that Collins endeavours to prosecute. It is a fine and original thing to try and bridge the chasm between two very different creative processes, novel writing and acting, but perhaps the connection between novelist and actor would be better formulated via a detour through the person of the scriptwriter?

This book certainly breaks new ground in the 'how-to-write' field. Whether it lives up to the quite extravagant claims of the author is something that we intend to test here. To us, it all comes down to the sheer difference between acting and the production of words, and the possibility of a relationship between them that would be more than just a delightful parallel or an analogy.

The seven secrets of the subtitle to Collins' book are lifted from the Method Acting principles of Constantin Stanislavsky. Collins devotes a chapter to each secret: 'Personalizing', 'Acting Objectives', 'Subtexting', 'Coloring Passions', 'Inner Rhythm', 'Restraint and Control', and 'Emotion Memory'. A boxed epigraph outlines what that chapter's secret means for both the 'Actor's Technique' and the 'Novelist's Adaptation'.

Reducing Stanislavsky's insights to the level of simple technique might raise an eyebrow or two amongst actors. To novelists looking to supplement their own practice with a secret from another creative area, that one word 'Adaptation' promises a lot. Turning the page, the reader finds Collins entering into explanatory mode, fragmenting each secret into its components and pushing home the point with still more words in boxes.

Every chapter concludes with two 'Study Samples'. Comprising extracts from a wide range of literary sources (mainly novels) these parts of *Getting into Character* are interpreted by Collins as explicit realizations of the secret just introduced and explained. Sometimes the choices of author and text seemed arbitrary and badly in need of contextualization (not to mention, in Mark Twain's case, at least a modicum of theory about fiction/non-fiction relations). 'Exploration Points' follow every sample. Resembling a 'model' examination paper, these sections comprise question-and-answer couplets that hamstring originality of response at least as much as they reinforce the lessons of the chapter. Disconcerting to say the least. This author keeps the reader on a tight leash. Perhaps this is because she would like to repress any interrogations that might start to unravel her showy thesis. What, for example, do Charles Dickens, Jacquelyn Mitchard, Leo Tolstoy, Victor Hugo and Jane Austen actually have in common when it comes to acting? Or, did the secrets start before Stanislavsky (1863-1938)? And where, above all, are examples of similar magnitude of actors in an engagement with acting?

Collins concludes her book with two appendices. The second is entitled 'Books on Method Acting by Stanislavsky and Boleslavsky' (Richard Boleslavsky was an actor and director of the Method school). A short summary of one Boleslavsky and three Stanislavsky texts is followed by a table that cross-references the seven secrets with chapters in these publications. In 'A Word about the Appendices,' the author comments of the works listed in Appendix A 'Additional Books on Writing Fiction' that they are no more than *supplementary* to her expression of the secrets. 'The Secrets we've discussed here are unique enough to the fiction world that you will not find them mentioned - much less discussed - in other writing books' (191). Collins appears to be claiming a significance for herself in the field of writing studies that might rely on an exaggeration of the actual quality of the insights contained in her book.

What concerns us considerably is whether Collins has managed to actually generate something of interest for novelists to use when they sit before a blank page, out of her theorization of the experiences of actors preparing for and inhabiting a part. We suspect not. *Getting into Character* seems rather to exhibit in different spaces the effects that both actors and novelists aim for in what could well be argued are very nearly antagonistic fields of creative activity: the page; the performance space.

Chapter Six of Collins' book almost seems to undo all of the rest. It's as if one has suddenly landed in another book. 'Restraint and Control' reads very much like a section from one of the publications about writing faintly derided by Collins in her Appendix A. Where is the influence from the actor in such passages as:

The key is to use the most specific verb possible. Many verbs are just too general to be very descriptive. These include verbs such as *stand, look, see, walk, move, talk, sit*, and so on. If your character is sitting, is she slouching? Slumping? Perching? (152)

All wise advice to be sure, in its way. But one feels the strain at the heart of the higher-level argument. As conceived of by the author of *Getting into Character*, acting and writing form two roads that don't ever really meet. Such as it is, the logic of her argument requires that issues of acting are never really brought into fine focus for the reader. How

could they be anyway? For the actor, it's mainly not words. For the writer, it mainly is. Where do the twain meet?

Brandilyn Collins is at her best when, in chapters like 'Coloring Passion' and 'Action Objectives', she maps out how to create believable characters. There is much of value here - writers can also inhabit parts. Yet in a book that is so much about process she begs the question of process just as significantly. Acting and (any sort of) writing are nothing if not very different.

In our view, the better question for Collins would be, what is left for the novelist to exploit when the fire-walling differences between the two modes of creativity are extracted and neutralized? Unfortunately it is precisely the assertiveness of these differences that seems to have seduced Collins into a series of meretricious claims. To us, this explains the peculiar absence of the scriptwriter, a figure around which many of the questions that Collins brings into play have already been responded to in both theory and practice. The scriptwriter is probably our current best hope for continuing to work through the problem of what, say, a novelist (but why not also a short-story writer? or a poet?) might be able to learn from an actor. (The alternative would be the minor line of enquiry asking what, emanating from the actor, somehow bypasses the scriptwriter, as he or she engages with the issues of writing for performance, and ends up, previously untouched, in the novelist's court. From where the scriptwriter might, in turn, retrieve it. What thin and uncertain trajectory would this be that the novelist somehow intercepts?)

Sometimes from big things little things grow. This is our summary of *Getting into Character*, a publication too easily cut down to size.

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TEXT

Vol 7 No 2 October 2003

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

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