



# THE ANATOMY OF A CHOICE

MAURA VAUGHN

AN ACTOR'S GUIDE TO  
TEXT ANALYSIS



# **The Anatomy of a Choice:**

**An Actor's Guide to Text Analysis**

by

**Maura Vaughn**



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of America

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4501 Forbes Boulevard

Suite 200

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UPA Acquisitions Department (301) 459-3366

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# **Dedication**

To the wonderful students, faculty and staff of the Branson School,  
and to the Wood Family Fund, who made this work possible.

# **Anatomy of a Choice**

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# FOREWORD

## Foreword

Maura Vaughn's *The Anatomy of a Choice* is an indispensable handbook for any young actor starting out on their long journey to become a theatre artist. Come to that, it's a most useful tool for any actor already on that journey who should, when lost in rehearsal or performance, quickly refer to her concise, well-written advice and learning, and they will soon find new and better avenues opening up. They will learn a lot.

Quite rightly she puts great emphasis on reading and continually re-reading the text of the play. Not only reading but also digging, asking questions to stimulate the imagination and so enable the actor to bring the playwright's character to life and not allow the actor to deliver simply a version of him or herself. She asks for hard work and dedication: obviously a director and teacher who will not settle for easy answers and sloppy results.

At the end of each of her chapters, there is a review sheet for the actor to fill in and answer, reminding them of the work they are asked to do in the preceding chapter; an invaluable tool not found in any (as far as I know) other books on acting.

Another invaluable piece of advice she gives is for the actor to black out any stage directions in the printed script, except say, the obvious entrances and exits. This enables the actor to bring their own imagination to the creation of the character and in no way be influenced by previous productions, editors or lazy writing on the playwright's part.

Too often one has seen a young actor rehearse in some peculiar way, who when asked what on earth they think they are acting reply, "It says here dreamily." Cross that out, she will suggest, and find out what the line really means in the text and not try and act dreamily as some editor has suggested..

Another of her most sensible mantras is to ask for long and deep research into the time and place of the play. In *The Anatomy of a Choice* she concentrates on Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, asking the actor to thoroughly research the period, the district, the type of housing, the rooms in which the play takes place.

In this day and age she suggests use of the Internet so the actor can see, print and keep pictures of all of the above and the clothes and type of objects or props that help to bring the character to life. Most sensible.

She asks the actor to investigate and define every objective in active language of each character in the play. In *Streetcar* she even goes deeply into the scene where the Newspaper Boy comes to collect money and discusses the actions and objectives and actions of both Blanche and the Boy. She suggests the actors meet outside rehearsal so that they can

agree on the same objectives and not be playing at odds with each other.

At the end of the book she sensibly includes a copy of scene ten from *Streetcar*, the rape/seduction scene between Blanche and Stanley, suggesting their options, tactics and objectives. Obviously influenced by the teachings of the great Stanislavski, she asks the actor to discover all the names a character may have, their married status, age, their parents and relationships they may have or had with them and any siblings; their likes, dislikes—everything and anything that can be discovered about the character to enable the actor to bring it to true theatrical life.

In short, *The Anatomy of a Choice* asks (demands!) that an actor go about his or her work with the seriousness that the art deserves. Unfortunately, there is still an attitude amongst some young beginning actors that all they have to do is to show up to some rehearsals, roughly learn their lines and have some fun. *The Anatomy of a Choice* certainly puts the lie to that.

At the same time it points the way and leads the actor to the real fun: the thrill, joy of creation. In short, the wonderful elation that comes with true acting. Maura Vaughn will show the actor how to build a wonderful character based on imaginative truth and hard work.

Her book is a gift to any actor of any age. Read it. Any actor will certainly learn a lot.

**Jeremy Geidt**

*Senior Actor, American Repertory Theater*

*Lecturer in Drama, Harvard College*

# INTRODUCTION

Artists are magical helpers. Evoking symbols and motifs that connect us to our deeper selves, they can help us along the heroic journey of our own lives.

—Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Acting is much like a puzzle: once all the pieces are in place, they fit easily. Leave even one piece out and the puzzle is incomplete. Force one into place and the puzzle no longer reveals a clear picture. So it is with acting. In order to be free to be creative, impulsive and daring, an actor must look at the information in the script. An artist mines the text first and then creates art.

An actor must first understand how to unravel the play before making any assumptions about a character. It is too easy to impose limits and decide that a character would never behave in a certain way before fully reading the play. It is too easy to look at the character not from the perspective of the facts in the script but from a similarity to one's own life or to other characters that one has seen or played and so re-create oneself within the play rather than build the character.

To be a great artist one must love the art and be willing to do many hours of hard work. Anyone can learn to act, but few are real artists. To be among the few who create art, know

that it takes patience and perseverance, not because it is such an uncertain and competitive field but because art comes from great personal toil.

I have called this book *The Anatomy of a Choice* because it is a guide to finding the different pieces of a character and a map to assembling those pieces together. Working through a play provides the opportunity to make a long series of conscious choices about how to approach a role. These choices need to be in place before going into rehearsal, even though the process of rehearsing with a director and fellow actors will alter many of them. This book will help make those initial choices.

In this guide to breaking down a script, I have quoted liberally from many great acting teachers—particularly Constantin Stanislavski. Directing and teaching during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he developed a psychological style of acting that transformed the theatre. He is the father of modern acting, and much of what I write about in these pages comes from him. Many of the quotes that are not his come from teachers who were either directly or indirectly Stanislavski's disciples. These are the great acting teachers of modern theatre. I have supplied a list of many of the best books written about acting in the bibliography at the end of the book.

I have also included journal entries from some of my own students, sharing observations that they made as they struggled with some of the more difficult and exciting techniques that belong to text analysis.

This book lays out how to pull the clues necessary from the text to make the most active choices from which to act. Along the way an individual mapping process develops for the actor. When an actor doesn't know how the process works, he or she creates the character by chance or worse simply endures the rehearsals until the real fun begins: performance. An actor must develop a personal language that clarifies the understanding of creating a role. The artist must be able to name his or her process. Strive to be an artist.

Breaking down a creative process is a wonderful challenge, daunting at the best of times and imperfect at the worst. Think of this as an outline. There are few absolutes to mining a text and those are these: take the time to find all of the clues, continue to read the script and reevaluate those choices, and believe that the character must want something so badly that he or she is willing to kill to get it. This book is a way to find the actor's journey, to discover what feeds an artist, what comes easily, what requires more diligence and what makes one's approach to a role unique.

Acting is a collaborative art form. Some of my students accuse me of making it into a contact sport. In many ways it is. Without the other person or people on stage, there is no one to connect to. A good actor always knows to whom he or she is talking and what he or she wants. An artist wants something from the other person on stage even when that other person is another part of themselves, the gods or the audience.

Acting is joyous. Make sure all of the equipment is in place and in good working order. Make sure the preparation for this incredible feat is complete, and then build the character piece

by piece until everything comes together and the audience gets to witness the art.



# CHAPTER ONE

## The First Word

The rehearsal merely clarifies the problems that an actor needs to work on at home.

Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character*<sup>1</sup>

- [The First Word—Bringing the play to life](#)
- [Things you'll need](#)

## The First Word

Every great actor spends as many hours or more analyzing a script outside of rehearsal as rehearsing. This book will provide some of the tools that those actors use to create a character, prepare for rehearsal and evaluate their work. Every actor has studied, continues to study and is in constant pursuit of the ever-elusive nature of this craft. There are many different approaches to developing the craft of acting. Each approach or technique has a common denominator: they are all giving the student a means with which to bring the play to life. Before starting out on this journey, an actor must be clear about all the aspects that make up the story. Why would a great actor spend so much time reading and re-reading a script? To ensure that no detail is overlooked, that no choice is left unmade, that no action is underused. In short, to make sure the actor knows where to go and what to do.

Text work is detective work. It is a rare rehearsal process that allows the playwright to discuss with the actors why a character takes a particular action or speaks a particular sentence. But in order to embody the character fully, the actor must know why and what. Why does this character do the things this character does? What makes this character act in such a way? The actor cannot act what he or she cannot clearly understand. Don't be stingy. Spend the time to get to know the play inside and out.

All great performances have two phases of preparation: breaking down the text and building the character outside of rehearsal; and putting that textual analysis to the test in rehearsal. The amazing thing about text work is that once rehearsal begins, the actor must let go of all of the hours spent exploring, trust that all the work will be there and focus one hundred percent on affecting the other characters in the play. It is reasonable, at this point, to question the choice of spending time pouring over the script if, in the end, everything comes down to affecting the other actors and being affected by them. Why spend the time breaking down the text? Why not just walk into rehearsal and act the scene from whatever impulses arise in the first place?

There may be some actors who instinctively know what the playwright is saying, what their character wants and what the most active and interesting way to go about bringing this to the stage might be without spending any time on the text, but I do not know any. I have never heard of a stage artist who does no text work. Any actors who say that they never do any work on their scripts are either lying or are simply not very good.

The reason to spend the hours reading and rereading the play, pulling the clues from the dialogue and trying different ways to get what the character wants, is to open up the life of the play to the imagination, to the intellect and to the soul. Find the most fascinating way—not the most obvious way—to play this character. Find a way that no one else can duplicate, that no one else can do—not the way any person with little talent and no training can find to portray the complexity that is any character. Put a stamp on this character forever so that every time those who were lucky enough to see the production, read the play, see the play or think of this play, they think of what you brought to the role.

That is what all great actors do: they make the role their own. Be patient, do the work, don't skip over the steps that are frustrating or make less sense the first time around and take the time to study the craft of acting.

Research the playwright: find out what else he or she has written, what style he or she writes in and a little bit about his or her background. Knowing basic information about the playwright will help frame the actor's inquiry. An actor should always have the complete picture from which to work.

No book will ever replace a class. Study with as many teachers as possible. Even after finding that one teacher who communicates clearly, one who challenges, nurtures and inspires, still read and study other approaches to acting. Every experience, every observation will help build a vocabulary of characters.

The Anatomy of a Choice will teach the actor to read the play carefully and find all the necessary information to understand

the story and the character's plight. It will teach how to use that information about the story to identify an objective for the character—to choose a reason for the character to travel through this story, a reason so strong, so compelling that the character would die for this reason. The book will help you identify what is in the character's way of achieving that objective. The book will provide a process for establishing actions to play as the character to achieve that goal. The book will explain how to break down the text so that the character is always acting or reacting, affecting or being affected. The book will give an overview of various techniques to use to fully embody a character.

There are also purely practical sections. [The character interview worksheet at the end of Chapter 2](#) is an invaluable aid to bringing the character to life. The list of tactics a character might use to affect the other characters on stage is a great way to get the scene moving. The rehearsal journal guidelines will keep the actor on track, balancing text work with effective use of rehearsal time, and the troubleshooting section will come to rescue when all else seems to fail.

This book is a great tool—use it.

To play needs much work. But when we experience the work as play, then it is not work anymore. A play is play.

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*<sup>2</sup>

Things you need in order to make this book useful to you:

- a copy of Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*