

# Dream Appreciation

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*A dream is not a work of art in the usual sense of that term. In its own way, however, it is a form of art.*

## ON DREAMS AND ART: PART II

### THE ROLE OF CRAFT IN ACTING AND DREAM WORK

By MONTAGUE ULLMAN, M.D.

*"A work of art - expressing its implicit interpretation by its technique - is a rotating, many-faceted gem against psychically darkened backgrounds; so too is a dream."*

The Psychoanalyst and the Artist, p. 167

By Daniel E. Schneider, M.D. The Alexia Press, Inc. 1979

In the last issue of *Dream Appreciation*, I spoke in a general way about the analogy between dreams and art. What they had in common was their rootedness in creativity and how, through the mastery of the specific craft, something original and meaningful came into existence. A dream is not a work of art in the usual sense of that term. In its own way, however, it is a form of art. I am going to further develop the analogy by invoking the art form that is closest to the nature of the dream and the craft of bringing the

dream to life. I am referring to the art of acting.

The art of the actor lies in the truthful and therefore convincing portrayal of the character in question. The same might be said about the dreamer if we look upon the dream taken as a whole as the assumed character to be portrayed. For both the actor and the dreamer, the character is different from the self, yet played out by the very same self. I hope to show that the difficulties that have to be overcome and the craft needed to accomplish this are much the same. So are the rewards that accrue in pursuing a task that requires plunging into the very depths of one's being.

I came to the task of talking about acting from a position of profound ignorance concerning the craft involved. As a kid I went

to the movies every Saturday afternoon, pleaded with a passing adult to chaperone me until I passed the ticket collector, and then settled down to a double feature (silent films), usually a western or an adventure story followed by Fox Movietown News, an episode in the serial "The Man in the Iron Mask" (waiting breathlessly for the next episode in the hope of seeing who was behind the mask), and finally a Krazy Kat cartoon. It never mattered if we came in in the middle of a picture because we usually caught on to the plot rather quickly, and besides, we had the opportunity to sit through it again. I hated sad movies and cried when Jackie Coogan sat at the bedside of his dying mother in *The Kid*. At the end of the movie when the cast was dis-

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Monte's website is: [www.pp.htv.fi/msiivola/monte](http://www.pp.htv.fi/msiivola/monte)

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played, I could never understand why two separate columns of names appeared when it seemed to me one set would suffice.

I was not much further along than that until I was in my mid-eighties and accidentally came upon an episode of the Actors Studio on TV. At the time I was not sure of how or why it happened (that will become obvious later), but for the first time in my life I became addicted to a TV program. I religiously rearranged my life so as to be free the hour it was on. I don't know at which point it was that I not only began to learn there was a craft to be mastered, but also that the craft was, in spirit and in substance, so amazingly resonant with a craft I had to learn with regard to working with dreams. It has turned out to be a healthy and exciting addiction.

For those not familiar with the program, a brief description of the setting is in order. Imagine an auditorium accommodating about 200 students in a Masters Degree Program sponsored by the New School University for Social Research and conducted at the Actors Studio in downtown New York City. The students

are enrolled in one or more of the three tracts offered by the Studio: acting, directing and play-writing. There is a mix of students from each of the three years of the program. The stage in front of them is small but ample enough for a small table and two chairs. James Lipton is seated in one of them. The other chair is for the actor or director he is about to introduce and interview.

A word about Lipton. He is largely responsible for a program that, in its essence, is an intrinsic part of the training program, and at the same time is capturing an ever-widening general audience. Lipton, who has had his own career in the theater as actor and writer, is now devoted to teaching the craft of acting. For the past several years he has been using the television program to get across to the students the role that craft has played in the lives of successful actors.

Lipton succeeds admirably in the double agenda he sets for himself. The first is to give the students a glimpse of the future, the variable ways and times at which talent emerges, how it is nurtured, what aspects of training have proven most valuable and, finally, how

acting as a profession contributes to their individual development as human beings.

The success of the program rests on four unique features he brings to it.

1. The first is his deep understanding of and respect for the acting profession and the demands it makes on those who fall under its spell.

2. The second is his regard for the students who are so eager to learn all they can from those whose accomplishments they admire so much. When the TV monitor pans over the audience you see several hundred young faces who are listening as if their very lives depended on it and who are so responsive in their applause. Lipton has wisely arranged for the students to take over the last quarter of the hour to ask their own questions of the interviewee.

3. The third is the diligence of his preparation for each interview. Like any real scholar, he goes back to original sources. In the last two weeks before the session, he replays for himself the movies the actor has been in, and contacts people within and outside the profession who have worked with or

known the actor. In the course of the interview he comes up with details that often bring a look of amazement to the actor's face. On the table before him is a noticeable pile of 5" by 8" cards, containing the notes he has made in the course of his review. He often refers to them in formulating his question or offering a direct quote.

4. The fourth point is how his talent as an interviewer blends with his goal as a teacher.

His respect and admiration for the interviewee are much in evidence. His questions are simply invitations to the actors to talk about their lives and accomplishments. They begin at the beginning with their family setting, their early life, how their interest in acting began, and systematically note the varying influences that shaped their career. Whenever possible, he steers the discussion in the direction of how they have used their craft. From time to time brief clips taken from their movies are shown on the screen to illustrate particular aspects of their technique. By both gesture and with a ready sense of humor Lipton manages to inject a light touch into a serious discussion.

## THE ROLE OF CRAFT IN ACTING AND DREAM WORK

No analogy is perfect, but I hope to show that the analogy between the task of the actor and the task of the dreamer is quite striking and may hold the possibility of being mutually beneficial to both. The analogy is structured around the fact that both are called upon to plumb the depths of their being, the actor to make a felt connection to the part he or she has assumed, and the dreamer to the dream. The actor has the choice of accepting the role or not. The dreamer has the choice of working on the dream or not. In both instances, the choice is made by something more than curiosity. In both there is a felt connection, to the part or to the dream, that signals its personal connection and that results in the decision to develop and clarify that connection.

One doesn't become a successful actor or dream worker overnight. Craft is involved in each instance. For the actor, the character isn't born full bloom. For the dreamer, the dream doesn't yield its secrets easily. Further roles for the actor and further dream work for the dreamer are necessary for the mastery of the respec-

tive crafts. While the two crafts differ in the specifics, they come together in their end-point, namely, to come into possession of

dreamers. In lieu of a set, they need a structure which will help them do their thing, the job of unraveling the dream. Just

deal of unity in their responses. For their own safety and freedom, they wanted the trust, respect and most of all understanding of the vulnerability an actor feels in disidentifying with himself or herself and identifying with this new entity in their life. There are times when they need help from the director and must feel that such help is there for them. Once they have been cast for the role, they want the director's confidence in their ability to find their own way. The actor in turn respects the fact that the director is more in touch with the larger picture than they are.

In the dream group the dreamer needs pretty much the same from the leader in the group. The structural goal of the dream group is to create the safest possible atmosphere for the dreamer in which to risk undressing psychically and stand revealed in her emotional nudity before others that are fully dressed. This is what I refer to in my writings as "The Safety Factor". It is up to the leader to see that this safety is never compromised in any way. The dreamer needs help in removing some of the clothes usually worn by his

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the key that unlocks an unconscious domain that harbors an emotional range often quite foreign to anything one experiences in ordinary waking consciousness. What makes it difficult for both actor and dreamer is that the ego is of limited use in finding that key. In fact, the more one dispenses with one's ego, the more apt one is to discover the key. At one session a student in the audience remarked that acting is an "egoless craft".

Acting is a cooperative venture. Actors need other actors. Actors need photographers in the case of movies, set designers and any number of specialists to ensure that all is in place for a given scene. Dreamers need other

as an actor does not immediately grasp all the dimensions of the character he or she is to play, there is much in the dream that initially seems quite foreign to the dreamer. Other dreamers are there to offer both support and help. Those who have had experience with the process I use are familiar with the various ways the group helps the dreamer find his or her own way into the dream.

The actor needs a director. In all of the more than 50 programs of the Actors Studio that I have watched, Lipton invariably turns the dialogue to the way the actors feel about directors and what they want and need from a director. There was a great

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or her ego. The leader is there to see that that help is available through the proper interaction of the group and the dreamer.\*

### The Craft of the Actor

I have no firsthand knowledge of the craft of the actor. All I know are the casual references the various actors have made to the exercises in the course of their training that they found helpful. The one skill that all the actors in the program agreed upon was the art of listening, especially to one's co-actors. I don't know the name of any specific exercise geared toward this end, but I'm sure there must be one. Other exercises mentioned were felt memory (where one learns how to recover and use emotions generated by events in the past), sensory exercises (presumably to know how to make fuller use of all one's senses), animal exercises (Anthony Hopkins described how the sliminess and the hissing of the snake was of help in the character of Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*), impro-

\* The various ways the group helps the dreamer and their rationale are fully described in my book *Appreciating Dreams*.

visation (reliance on imagination and listening), bodily exercises, movement and probably many others that were not mentioned.

In Part III of this series on Dreams and Art which will appear in the next issue of *Dream Appreciation*, actors will speak directly to you about what aspect of their background and training they

found essential to character portrayal. At this point I am simply going to note those features of their work where there was a general consensus. Those of you who have personally experienced the group dream work I do will be quick to grasp the analogy in what follows between the skills the actor and the dream worker have to learn.

### Listening

Without exception, whenever the discussion turned to the subject of craft, first and foremost was the importance of learning how to listen. Listening, especially to one's co-actor, is the key to all else that makes act-

ing convincing. [*Dreamer Alert!*: *Listening is the primary skill in dream work. Just as the co-actors, in order to be of help*

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***Just as the co-actors have to master the art of really listening to each other without bias or à priori judgment interfering, the dreamer and the helpers (the group) have to do likewise.***

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*to each other, have to master the art of really listening to each other without any bias or à priori judgment interfering, the dreamer and the helpers (the group) have to do likewise.]*

### "Being-in-the-Moment"

Only through good listening and the focussed attention that is necessary to maintain it can the actor dispense with his or her own ego and free up the character to spontaneously respond in its own voice. This is what I believe actors so often mean when they talk about getting at the "truth" about what they are doing. In acting there is the underlying element of pretense. The actor knows when he or she succeeds in being-in-the-moment. As Harrison Ford noted, that is the moment when pretense becomes reality. Perhaps it

never really disappears but it is overshadowed when in some mysterious way something real in the actor merges with something real in the character, what actors are fond of calling the "essence" of the character. When one returns to one's own personal life at the end of the day, that element of pretense may not return so quickly.

Faye Dunaway, after playing a painfully unpleasant character, said she had an easier time getting into the character than getting out. She went on to explain her reaction. "When the camera rolls I have permission to bring up painful chunks of myself." To reassure the students she went on to say, "You go through the pain but then there is a sense of relief." [*Dreamer Alert!*: *Doesn't this sound familiar?*]

### Focussed Concentration

To be in the moment requires concentration maintained with an intensity where nothing else but what is focussed upon exists. The ego withers away under that intensity. Something beyond the ego comes into being — the special field between the actor and whoever or whatever is in the scene. [*Dreamer Alert!*: *Isn't*

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*that what happens in a dream group? I know, for myself, that whether I'm leading the group or presenting a dream of my own, it's the only time I can go for two or three hours at a time without doodling. Time itself seems to disappear.]*

### Approaching the Task Non-Judgmentally

So many of the actors spoke of respect for the character regardless of how evil or despicable a person that character may be. What is important again is getting at his "essence"; that which is vulnerable and human about him. [**Dreamer Alert!**: *How many times have you heard me say, "Never judge a dream from the vantage point of the waking state." Don't say "This dream is so short it can't be important," or "It isn't very interesting," etc. It's as if nothing short of an Ingmar Bergman scenario or a Cecile B. DeMille spectacular would suffice. To put it paradoxically, a dream has to be judged on its own terms and, when you do, then judgment plays no part. Surprise and discovery replace it. I have spent up to three hours on a dream consisting of only a single image.]*

### The Craft of the Dreamer

Here, as I noted earlier, the analogy falters a bit. The actor receives scripts from outside sources. The dreamer, unbeknown to his waking

dreamer also makes a choice of which dream to work on in the dream group.

### Research

An actor often engages in a good bit of research to flesh out his

turn out to be the most important. Secondly, it involves gathering his or her own initial associations to the various elements of the dream as soon after awakening as possible.

### Listening and Reacting

This is every bit as important to the dreamer as co-actors are to the actor. From the very beginning the dreamer is actively engaged with the co-dreamers who compose the group. The latter are there as help to the dreamer in the support and trust they offer and in their respect for the fact that only the

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***Just as an actor makes a spontaneous choice about whether or not a particular character is of interest to him, so a dreamer also makes a choice of which dream to work on in the dream group.***

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self, keeps producing scripts by himself. The first problem, then, for the dreamer is retrieval. Dreams are very elusive and fade into the mist quite quickly unless a conscious effort is made to retrieve and capture them on paper as soon as possible after awakening.\*

### Choice

Just as an actor makes a spontaneously felt choice about whether or not a particular character is of interest to him, so a

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\* There are many techniques to facilitate dream recall. They are noted in a book I co-authored with Nan Zimmerman (*Working with Dreams*, Tarcher/Putnam).

knowledge of the character. Robert DeNiro actually drove a taxi in preparation for his role in *Taxi Driver*. Tom Hanks and his co-actors had a dose of what astronauts go through to be able to move in a gravitation-free field. In general, every effort is made to learn as much about the character as possible — appearance, mannerisms, etc. The dreamer's own research into the dream is twofold. It involves making the conscious effort to recall and note every possible detail in the dream. This includes all that can be said about the characters in the dream, the setting, the feelings evoked, the colors, the time of day, and the age of the dreamer in the dream. The most insignificant looking detail may

### ***DON'T FORGET MONTE ON THE WEB***

Those of you who enjoy checking out sites on the web, don't forget to visit Monte's site at:

**[www.pp.htv.fi/msiivola/monte](http://www.pp.htv.fi/msiivola/monte)**

There you can find not only back issues of *Dream Appreciation* — in case you missed any — and also other articles Monte has written.

Many thanks to Marku Siivola for all the work he has done to make this site a reality!

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dreamer can ultimately spark across the metaphorical gap between dream image and waking reality. By means of a number of non-invasive techniques, they broaden the dreamer's associative range to the point where the recent feeling residues that triggered the dream are exposed in their connection to more remote feeling residues. As these connections are made, the dream begins to speak in its own clear voice and loud enough for the dreamer to hear. Dreaming develops our metaphorical muscles. All we have to do is remember they are our muscles and learn how to use them.

### Performance

The actor and the dreamer are in the same boat when it comes to performance. Both are vulnerable because of what may be exposed to others and themselves. The actor has to fight off inappropriate intrusions of the ego. The dreamer has to fight off "resistances," a term used to refer to the way the ego fights against the struggle to change a given psychological status quo. Both involve courage. For an actor, as Jessica Lange noted, it's a leap of faith. For a dreamer, it's like jumping into water without knowing

how deep it is. Both need a safety net, a comfort zone for the actor created by the director, the other actors, and many others. For the dreamer, the leader and the others in the group offer a support group, one that never takes control of the

process away from the dreamer.

Actor and dreamer alike are often passionate in the way they pursue a course that releases their creativity and furthers their personal development. And they have fun doing it. ♦

*Dream Appreciation* is published quarterly for people interested in working with dreams and the group process developed by Dr. Montague Ullman.

Comments, suggestions, questions and letters are welcome. Contact the Editor, Wendy Pannier, by phone at (610) 925-0758, by fax at (610) 925-0759, or by writing 105 Taylor Lane, Kennett Square, PA 19348. Our e-mail address is [dreams@kennett.net](mailto:dreams@kennett.net).

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