

Foreword

I have been an enormous fan of Nancy Gold and her theater work for years. So much so, that upon first encountering her talents, I eagerly sought her as a master artist/teacher here at the American Conservatory Theater's Young Conservatory. A regular faculty member at the conservatory for many years now, Nancy continues to affect young actors with her artistry and her visionary teaching. In fact, it was a little over a year ago that I urged Nancy to allow me to approach Smith and Kraus Publishers with the idea of publishing a book highlighting the techniques she employs in her work. When they examined Nancy's work, Smith and Kraus were as eager as I was for such a book. And so, the book in your hand is the result.

A consummate theater artist, Nancy Gold has devoted her life to creating vibrant and imaginative theater. Because she has continued to return to the studio to refine and expand upon her techniques, the work Gold brings to any project or class is fresh, usable and electric. Throughout her professional life, Gold has devoted herself to her personal artistic evolution, from completing her professional master's level training at Ecole International du Theater Jacques LeCoq in Paris (working with the great master himself) to advanced studies in physical theater with the astonishing Czech director, Ctibor Turba.

Physical theater training is perhaps the most difficult training to capture within the pages of a book. Like ballet or singing training, it requires an immediate kinesthetic experience, best offered with corrections along the way. This is one of the reasons why *Finding Your Funny Bone! The Actor's Guide to Physical Comedy and*

Characters is so remarkable and such an accomplishment. It is as useful as it is illuminating. Rather than talk about the work, Gold insists that you jump in and try it on. It is also a real find for the performer or teacher, a treasured volume to include in the actors tool kit. With this book, the first to capture her techniques, Gold has gotten down to very specific areas of focus and offers the brilliant scheme for taking the performer on an experiential journey, a “Tour of Discovery,” as she so enticingly puts it, in which she happily offers the player the opportunity to stop along the way. Without judgment, Gold encourages personal imprint and experimentation and gives permission to discard what doesn’t suit the individual. This has been a key in her performance work and a large tribute to her success here at ACT. And while the pages that follow are filled with the technical language of bodywork and training, Gold isn’t asking for anyone to pass some elusive scientific test. *Accessibility* is an important ingredient to Nancy Gold’s work, and it is beautifully a part of this book. So many technique books appear as dogma, profound solo visions on a process that is never solo. Here, Gold asks for you to explore, experience, and make your own choice on what to take away. She is as interested in your *personal* journey, your needs, and the outcome of the course as she is in demanding you adhere to rigid formulas. What Gold has to offer represents significant lessons as building blocks; nonexclusive magnificent tatters that can help compose the symphony of your work.

When I first read this manuscript, I was struck with how much of the persona of Nancy Gold comes through in the writing. Happily, the voice in Gold’s prose is the enthusiastic tone of discovery, offered as if you were the most trusted student, leaning forward, in her studio class. Gold is a masterful artist, who treasures the silliness that keeps one, finally, from becoming overly self-conscious. She enjoys the process of creation so much that you can’t help but be caught up with her boundless positive

sparkle while on this “tour.” I encourage you to jump into her amazing book with both feet, as if you were to jump into your favorite dessert. Don’t spare on the mouthfuls, the feeling you will have when finished will be not only useful in all your work, it will be life affirming. If you happen to be a teacher, looking for a resource to help you free up the physical constraints of your acting students, you couldn’t be in better hands. We incorporate Gold’s work in every session at ACT. I’m sure once you’ve encountered her gifts in these pages, you will too.

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Introduction

The first time I heard the phrase, “How to Find Your Stupid and Stay in It,” was at the International Clown Congress in Philadelphia. Pierre Byland said it as he was giving a workshop in clowning. It stuck to me like glue. What a perfect description of clowning and comedy!

Let’s face it. No one wants to be considered stupid by others. It brings up painful ridicule and embarrassing moments filled with total frustration and illogical logic. It brings that voice in your head screaming into consciousness HOW STUPID CAN YOU GET! HOW COULD YOU DO SUCH A THING? YOU ARE SOOOOOO STUPID!

But when you think of comedy, that is exactly what happens. The comedian or clown has to find his or her stupid and stay in it for the audience to be reminded of their humanity. And it takes a great deal of courage, intelligence, and grace to stay stupid.

The following is a *guide* to finding your personal stupid and a *how to* approach for staying in it. This is geared for the performer, actor, speaker, and student of virtually anything. Stupid knows no bounds, and comedy is the sweet smile that makes your life more enjoyable.

This guide has taken years to realize. All the parts were floating around, but recently they landed in a fashion I could verbalize and communicate. Developing your Eye for how and what creates a certain affect and effect is all part of it. Develop your Eye—not only focus but also to see the world in a new way. See what works and how things can be more exciting. It’s all right in front of your eyes. You just need to Look and See—fine-tune the

tube or set the tracking or find the right website. There is all that beautiful information and clear pictures staring you right in the face.

Some people are naturals—they have the gift. Others need a little guidance. But either way, these games, exercises, improvisations, and entrées will enrich you on both the professional performance level and within yourself. So enjoy, whether you are 5 years old or 50 or have decided to team up with Jack Benny and remain 39 forever.

I love comedy. I remember watching those live television shows when I was very little. Danny Kaye and Carol Burnett would have their variety shows. I used to wait for those moments when something went wrong. A line was dropped or a door got stuck or they *lost it* and cracked up. Those wrong moments were the best right moments of the shows.

I loved to listen to the stand-up routines. How did they get those laughs? They just knew how to say their lines, tell their jokes, and quickly respond to whatever happened onstage and on-camera. There was no laugh track. It was real. There was an edge to it, because you couldn't yell cut—millions of viewers were watching. It was dangerous and delightful.

I wanted to be a comedian. I so admired stand-up comedy. But I personally did not possess the hard edge that stand-up requires. But the comic monologue or skit was right up my alley. What better thing to do than find that part of myself that was really other folks and copy or satirize them? Oh, the Marx Brothers and Bob Hope and Carol Burnett and Robin Williams and a long list of others charged me up. But how did they do it? They had the gift.

What was that magic they all had? And more important, how could I get some? So I took theater classes. I thought I needed to learn the Art of Acting. But I had difficulty with the Method. Just thinking and remembering things did not do it for me. I needed

a more physical approach. I was playing the part of a young Indian girl. I had to be in pain because I was hungry and exhausted. As much as I thought about being hungry and exhausted, my life at that point had not paralleled my character's, and I couldn't muster up sufficient hunger and exhaustion. My director came over and squeezed my stomach 'til it hurt. From that moment, I had a physical memory to go on, and I didn't have to think about being hungry, I thought about my stomach getting squeezed. I think that was the first time I used an abstract approach to get a concrete result.

And that is what this guide will do for you. It will give you an abstract approach to achieving very specific concrete results. Basically, if you want to jump high, don't think about jumping or trying to get your body off the ground. Let go of the control and *allow* the string that grows at the top of your head pull you up and get pulled down into the center of the earth at the same time, and you'll be springing off the floor before you know it. Spontaneity can actually take a lot of technique to achieve. Some times you are conscious of it, and other times you just do it. For those times when you are conscious, here are some ways to just do it.

I wanted to do that. Make people laugh. Ever since I was seven. I thought it was stand-up comedy—but actually it was comedy in all its forms. I began with physical comedy. I saw the Art of Mime in High School. Claude Kipnis did a lecture demonstration, and I thought I'd fallen off a cliff. It was magical and funny and powerful and required only you and the air around you. There was a world out there where anything could happen. The only boundaries were what my body could do and what my imagination would think of. Mime was so magnificent. It was so independent. You didn't need anything—you had it All. All you needed was your Body and the Air around you! That air defined Space. That air was Space. What you needed was SPACE. Oh the joys of manipulating space. The Power of making something out

of nothing. I was a magician, and I didn't know a thing about magic. I could make people gasp and laugh and feel and change.

Yeah, I needed to make them FEEL. Hmmm, here was a tricky thing. You see as a mime I was a master of illusion, imitation, re-creation. I could create the look of a feeling, but to create or actually experience a REAL feeling, well, that required REAL ACTING techniques. And now I was back to remembering my feelings, curing myself of the experience, and starting all over again with a fresh powerful memory. This went on for a while until I decided to focus on my mime career, because like a dancer, I figured I had only X amount of time, and then the body would not be as supple, and when that happened, I could focus on the acting. Acting you could do any time, but Mime, well, that had a limited shelf life.

So I asked my mentor, Claude Kipnis, what I should do, and he suggested I go to Jacques LeCoq in Paris. He taught more than manipulation. He taught theater. So I went.

Here is where I encountered Mime that was not the illusion type. Manipulation was broken down into sequences. Each movement could be divided into many movements, and depending on how you did them, slow, fast, big, small, you got a different effect.

Then I met Masks—all kinds of masks—neutral, character, utilitarian. WOW. Each movement was powerful, and the more focused you could get the better. Doing nothing was the most powerful thing you could do.

Kipnis had everyone start in zero position—which basically was aligning your body in a straight line. The neutral mask only worked if you were in zero position, but it required ultimate focus, no judgment, and filling your space with energy.

Add to this elements—Water, Wind, Fire, and Tree. Mix and match the elements on a bench, add degrees of each element, and voilà! You have a plethora of characters and relationships. Then broaden your horizons and make anything an element, and once again the world of performing was infinite.

Add color as emotions and color intensity as emotional expression from light pink to deep red, and you have a magnificent palate of feeling to pull from. No more guesswork. No more drudging and redrudging that illusive feeling: think of your element and color and your body knows. It goes to places your conscious mind would never dream of. Whew!

But something was still missing. I might be feeling and moving and picking symbols that my audience could relate to, but did my audience feel it? And I had to find out how I could adjust this enormously expressive face to fit in that little camera. I EXPLODED on film.

Other performers moved great and created brilliant stories. What did those magical variety artists like Bob Berky and Michael Moschen have that left their audiences standing on their feet? What did they possess that touched you deeply? What does Cirque du Soleil have, and Chagall and Van Gogh and Rodin?

And then I met Leonard Pitt. He had just got back from Bali where he studied mask theater. He did this little exercise he called Ghee Dong. BAM WHAM SLAM—YEAH!!! It was a very simple game of tossing ENERGY around like a laser beam. OHHH, it was fun. You could hit body parts, and it was like a cartoon. It looked great. It felt great to do. Felt in your whole body great . . . In fact, ENERGY was the key. This was science and art coming together. This was metaphysical meets Stanislavski. This was connecting the universe to your performance. Why stop at the world when you have unlimited energy available to use? Don Richardson, who was a television director and acting teacher, talked about how all emotions were actually created physiologically the same way in your body, and how you could walk looking down at tiles and counting them, and people would interpret your feeling in their perceived response to the action of the scene.

All of ART—no matter what kind it is—is an exchange of ENERGY between the audience and the artwork or performer,

between the performers on the stage and between you as the performer and the character.

Eureka!!! Oh my God, there is a method to this madness.

And then came Madness to make the Method—in meeting and studying with Ctibor Turba. I first saw Turba in Paris. Not him personally, but his work. The giant rolls of Paper. The spontaneous stupidity, the illogical logic. I fell in love with his work. And then he came to America, and I got to study with the Paperman himself. Priceless information on the clown. And on being so in control out of control that you could laugh in increments that went from zero all the way to the extreme of laughter to the abstraction of laughter and back again, taking the same steps down that you took going up.

Apply what I coined as these CHROMATIC steps to physical and emotional expression, and guess what?! You put Space, Energy, Mime, Masks, Movement; add some Elements, Chromatic Movement, and Emotional Expression; top it off with some Clowning; mix in Relationship to inanimate Objects and Relationships to other Characters; and you have a *guide* to *how to* create comedy characters.

I once had a job as a tour guide for Sara Lee Bakeries. It was one way I subsidized my college education and my sweet tooth . . .

“Hello, my name is Nancy Gold, and I’d liked to welcome you to *Finding Your Funny Bone!* Please no touching the dough and don’t miss the butter extruder.”