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SF PERUSALS

Acting:
The First Six Lessons

by
Emily Bridges and Beau Bridges

Adapted from the novel by
Richard Boleslavsky

A Samuel French Acting Edition



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ACTING: THE FIRST SIX LESSONS was first produced by John Gallogly and Emily Bridges and presented at Theatre West in Los Angeles, California on April 9, 2010. The performance was directed by Charlie Mount, with sets by Charlie Mount and Jeff G. Rack, costumes by Beau Bridges, Emily Bridges and Charlie Mount, lighting by Yancey Dunham, sound by Charlie Mount, and original music composed by David Loud. The production stage manager was Roger Cruz. The cast was as follows:

THE TEACHER . . . . . Beau Bridges
THE CREATURE . . . . . Emily Bridges

AUTHORS' NOTES

After a voice in the darkness at the beginning of the play, an actor and an actress come on stage and introduce themselves. We have included our version of an introduction only as an example. Each cast of performers should create their own introduction to the play, speaking of their own particular history with the craft of acting and with Boleslavsky's book.

The actor playing the Teacher also plays the parts of the Stage Manager and the Movie Director. The actress playing the Creature plays the part of the Aunt.

We encourage the performers to have a short ten-minute conversation with the audience after the play.

Dedicated to

Lloyd Bridges, Jr.,
Dorothy Bridges,
and
Wendy Bridges

(The house lights slowly dim to black. A few seconds… then a voice echoes out of the darkness.)

VOICE. All the shadows are strange and solid. The quiet is trembling and alive. I respond to that quiet. My nerves begin to vibrate and to throw threads of sympathy and expectation toward the great promising black riddle, the empty stage. A peculiar peace descends on my mind, as if I partially cease to exist and somebody else's soul is living in me instead of my own. I will be dead to myself, alive to the outward world. I will observe and participate in an imaginary world. I will wake up with my heart full of dreams. Sweet poison of an empty theatre, empty stage.

(The stage lights come up. There are a table and two chairs, just left of centerstage. On the table is a miniature theatre set inhabited by small wooden actors. Two coat racks are at opposite sides downstage. An **ACTOR** *enters through a door upstage left and walks down to centerstage.)*

ACTOR. Good evening! I'm Beau Bridges. Actually, my real name is Lloyd Vernet Bridges the Third…or as my grandfather used to say, "The *Turd*."

(An **ACTRESS** *enters through a door upstage right, carrying boxes of clothing. She holds a small book. She begins hanging bits of her clothing on the downstage right coat rack, occasionally glancing at the man. As the* **ACTOR** *talks, she goes to the coat rack downstage left and begins hanging clothes on it.)*

My parents wanted to name me "Beau" (they'd been reading *Gone with the Wind*, and there's a baby in the book named "Beau"), but there was a problem. I was born December 9, 1941, at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital in Los Angeles, two days after Pearl Harbor was

bombed. The hospital was blacked out because they thought Japan was going to keep coming and bomb LA. I was born by candlelight…kind of romantic, huh? Also, back in those days, they heavily sedated women who were preparing for birth, so my mom, Dorothy, was a bit groggy when the nurse asked, "What would you like to name your baby?" Mom answered, in a drugged stupor, "Beau." The nurse (not being familiar with the name) said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, perhaps you're confused…you have a *son*, not *daughter*." My mom, not in the mood to argue, put an end to the conversation, "Just call him 'Lloyd the Third' after his father."

(The **ACTRESS** *approaches the* **ACTOR**.*)*

ACTRESS. Dad! Perhaps you digress…

ACTOR. Oh, sorry…

(to the audience)

This is my daughter Emily. Actually, her full name is Emily *Beau* Bridges. My mom wanted her to take *her* middle name, Louise. She even said…

ACTRESS. *(interrupting)* Tell them about the book, Dad.

(She hands the actor the book.)

ACTOR. Right…

(He holds up the book entitled "Acting: The First Six Lessons.")

Many years ago when I was considering going to work in my father's shop, so to speak, my dad Lloyd gave me this book, "Acting: The First Six Lessons" by Richard Boleslavsky. It was the only book on the craft of acting my dad ever gave me. I've continued the tradition, giving it to each of my five children.

ACTRESS. Dad gave me the book when I was about twelve, the same year we lost "Zade." My grandfather, I called him "Zadie," loved being an actor.

ACTOR. My dad didn't want people calling him "Grandpa." He didn't like the sound of the word, made him seem

old I guess. His best buddy was a guy named Grainy Kaplan, and Grainy's grandchildren called him Zadie, so that's the name my dad wanted, too!

ACTRESS. Zadie and I were very close. I remember being six, maybe seven years old, and wanting to sing him a song from a play I was preparing to do at our local community theatre. He sat me down, serious as death, and gave me my first acting lesson. He had amazing patience, you can imagine, trying to explain character objectives to a six year old. "Concentration" is so important, he would say, in life as well as on the stage. I hung on his every word that day. I knew right then and there, I wanted to be an actor.

ACTOR. My dad was always a strong taskmaster…supportive, but a perfectionist. He demanded a lot from himself and his family, too. He used to say, "Only one person gets the job, and there are a lot of people in line so you better prepare as hard or even harder than your competition." He passed away more than ten years ago, but every time I step out on a film set or every time the curtain goes up…I feel his spirit is with me.

ACTRESS. Tonight we want to pass on this wonderful story my Zadie gave to us.

ACTOR. Somehow that makes mortality a little easier to accept. Passing on the stories generation to generation.

ACTRESS. Tonight, I'm playing "The Creature."

ACTOR. And I'm "The Teacher." Oh…we also play supporting roles as well. The year is 1933. FDR has just taken office. Hitler has just been appointed Chancellor of Germany. Under Stalin's rule, ten million people have died as a result of famine in the Soviet Union. Sixty-seven thousand homeless children are reported to be wandering the streets of New York City.

(The **ACTOR** *turns and walks to his coat rack, takes a scarf, and puts it around his neck. Now, as the* **TEACHER**, *he walks to the center of the stage and begins*

to manipulate the arms of a small wooden man he holds in his hands.)

ACTRESS. Will Rodgers has just hosted the 6th Annual Academy Awards. Walt Disney won for *The Three Little Pigs.* Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* is a success on Broadway. *King Kong* with Fay Wray is a smash at the box office. We are in the Teacher's Manhattan apartment, where he gives his acting lessons.

(The **ACTRESS** *goes to her coat rack and picks up a small purse, then exits.)*

(The **TEACHER** *walks to the miniature set and begins to carefully place the wooden man in the set. He is interrupted by a knock at the door.)*

TEACHER. Yes, come in.

(The door opens. Slowly and timidly, the **ACTRESS** *enters as a pretty* **CREATURE** *of eighteen. She looks at the* **TEACHER** *with wide-open, frightened eyes and crushes her handbag violently.)*

CREATURE. I…I…I hear that you teach dramatic art.

TEACHER. No! I am sorry. Art cannot be taught. To possess an art means to possess talent. You can develop it by hard work, but to create a talent is impossible.

CREATURE. Yes, of course. Please help me.

TEACHER. What I do is to help those who have decided to work on the stage, to educate themselves for honest and conscientious work in the theatre.

CREATURE. I simply love the theatre.

TEACHER. Loving the theatre is not enough. Who does not love it? But, for the sake of the theatre to give up everything, to suffer everything!

CREATURE. I know…

TEACHER. And expecting the theatre to give you nothing in return…

CREATURE. I know. I played a great deal at school. I understand that the theatre brings suffering. I am not afraid of it. I am ready for anything if I can only play, play, play.

TEACHER. And suppose the theatre does not want you to play, play, play?

CREATURE. Why shouldn't it?

TEACHER. Because it might not find you talented.

CREATURE. But when I played at school….

TEACHER. What did you play?

CREATURE. *King Lear.*

TEACHER. What part did you play in this trifle?

CREATURE. King Lear himself. And all my friends and our professor of literature and even Aunt Mary told me I played wonderfully and that I certainly had talent.

TEACHER. Pardon me, I don't mean to criticize the nice people whom you name, but are you sure that they are connoisseurs of talent?

CREATURE. Our professor is very strict. He himself worked with me on King Lear. He is a great authority.

TEACHER. I see, I see. And Aunt Mary?

CREATURE. She met Mr. Belasco personally.

TEACHER. So far, so good. But can you tell me how your professor, when working on King Lear, wanted you to play these lines, for instance: "Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!"

CREATURE. Do you want me to play it for you?

TEACHER. No. Just tell me how you learned to read those lines. What were you trying to attain?

CREATURE. I had to stand this way, my feet well together, incline my body forward a little, lift my head like this, stretch out my arms to heaven and shake my fists. Then I had to take a deep breath and burst into sarcastic laughter – ha! ha! ha!

(She laughs, a charming, childish laugh. Only at happy eighteen can one laugh that way.)

Then, as though cursing heaven, as loud as possible pronounce the words: "Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!"

TEACHER. Thank you, that is quite enough for a clear understanding of the part of King Lear, as well as for a definition of your talent. May I ask you one more thing? Will you, if you please, *say* this sentence, first cursing the heavens and then without cursing them. Just keep the sense of the phrase – only its thought.

(The **CREATURE** *doesn't think long; she is accustomed to curse heaven.)*

CREATURE. When you curse the heavens, you say it this way: "Bloooooow wiiiiinds, and craaaaack your cheeks, Raaaaage Bloooooow."

(The **CREATURE** *tries very hard to curse the heavens, but through the window the* **TEACHER** *sees the azure heavens laughing at the curse. He does the same.)*

And without cursing them, I must do it some other way. Well…I don't know how…Isn't it funny? Well, this way:

(The **CREATURE** *becomes confused and, with a charming smile, swallowing the words, hurriedly pronounces them all on one note.)*

"Blowwindsandcrackyourcheeksrageblow."

(She becomes completely confused and tries to destroy her handbag. A pause.)

TEACHER. How strange! You are so young; you do not hesitate a second before cursing heaven. Yet you are unable to speak these words simply and plainly, to show their inner meaning. You want to play a Chopin Nocturne without knowing where the notes are. You grimace, you mutilate the words of the poet. What right have you to say that you have worked in the theatre? You have destroyed the very conception of the word Theatre.

(A pause; the **CREATURE** *looks at him with the eyes of one innocently condemned to death. The little handbag lies on the floor.)*

CREATURE. So I must never play?

TEACHER. And if I say never?

(Pause. The eyes of the **CREATURE** *change their expression, she looks straight into the Teacher's soul with a sharp scrutinizing look, and seeing that he is not joking, clenches her teeth, and tries in vain to hide what is happening in her soul. But it is no use. One enormous real tear rolls out of her eye, and the Creature at that moment becomes dear to the Teacher. It spoils his intentions completely. She controls herself, clenches her teeth, and says in a low voice –)*

CREATURE. But I am going to play. I have nothing else in my life.

(At eighteen, they always talk that way. But just the same he is deeply touched.)

TEACHER. All right then. I must tell you that this very moment you did more for the theatre, or rather for yourself, than you did in playing all your parts. You suffered just now; you felt deeply. Only by paying this price can you attain the happiness of creation.

(The enormous, beautiful tear is forgotten. It disappeared somewhere into space. A charming, happy smile appears instead. The Teacher never thought his creaking voice could produce such a change.)

Listen and answer sincerely. Have you ever seen a man, a specialist, busy on some creative problem in the course of his work? A pilot on an ocean liner, a biologist, an architect, or a great actor seen from the wings during his interpretation of a fine part?

CREATURE. I saw John Barrymore from the wings when he was playing *Hamlet.*

TEACHER. What impressed you chiefly as you watched him?

CREATURE. He was marvelous!

TEACHER. I know that, but what else?

CREATURE. He paid no attention to me.

TEACHER. That is more important; not only not to you but to nothing around him. He was concentrating. Remember this word *"concentration."* It is important in every art and especially in the art of the theatre. It is the quality which permits us to direct all our spiritual and intellectual forces towards one definite object and to continue as long as it pleases us to do so – sometimes for a time much longer than our physical strength can endure. I knew a fisherman once who, during a storm, did not leave his rudder for forty-eight hours. Only when he had brought the schooner back safely into the harbor did he allow his body to faint. This strength, this certainty of power over oneself, is the fundamental quality of every creative artist. You must find it within yourself, and develop it to the last degree.

CREATURE. But how?

TEACHER. Concentration is needed. The pilot has a compass, the scientist has his microscope, the architect his drawings – all external, visible objects of concentration and creation. Tell me, what do you think is the object of an actor's concentration?

CREATURE. His part.

TEACHER. Yes, until he learns it. But it is only after studying and rehearsing that the actor starts to create. And what is acting?

CREATURE. Acting? Acting is when he…acts, acts…I don't know.

TEACHER. You want to consecrate all your life to a task without knowing what it is? Acting is "the life of the human soul receiving its birth through art." The object for an actor's concentration is the human soul, including his own. You must know how to concentrate on something materially imperceptible. In other words, you need a spiritual concentration on emotions which do not exist, but are invented or imagined.

CREATURE. But how can one develop in oneself something which does not exist. How can one start?

TEACHER. From the very beginning. Not from a Chopin Nocturne but from the simplest scales. Such scales are your five senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste.

CREATURE. I hope you don't mean to say that I don't even know how to listen or how to feel.

TEACHER. In life you may know. Nature has taught you a little.

(She becomes very daring and speaks as though challenging the whole world.)

CREATURE. No, on the stage, too.

TEACHER. Is that so? Let us see. Please, just as you are sitting now, listen to the scratching of an imaginary mouse in that corner.

CREATURE. Where is the audience?

TEACHER. That doesn't concern you in the least. Your audience is in no hurry as yet to buy tickets for your performance. Forget about it. Do the problem I give you. Listen to the scratching of a mouse in that corner.

CREATURE. All right.

(There follows a helpless gesture with the right and then the left ear which has nothing in common with listening to the delicate scratching of a mouse's paw in the silence.)

TEACHER. All right. Now please listen to a symphony orchestra playing the march from *Aida*. You know the march?

CREATURE. Of course.

TEACHER. Please.

(The same business follows – nothing to do with listening to a triumphal march. The **TEACHER** *smiles. The* **CREATURE** *begins to understand that something is wrong and becomes confused. She awaits the Teacher's verdict.)*

TEACHER. I see you recognize how helpless you are, how little you see the difference between the lower *do* and the higher *do*.

CREATURE. You give me a very difficult problem.

TEACHER. Is it easier to curse the heavens in *King Lear*? No, my dear, I must tell you frankly: You do not know how to create the smallest, simplest bit of the life of the human soul. You do not know how to concentrate spiritually.

CREATURE. All right. I will learn.

TEACHER. Not only do you not know how to create complicated feelings and emotions but you do not even possess your own senses.

CREATURE. I will do everything you tell me. Will I be an actress then?

TEACHER. Of course you will not be an actress, yet. Suppose that you are playing. The curtain goes up and your first problem is to listen to the sound of a departing car. You must do it in such a way that the thousand people in the theatre who at that moment are each concentrating on some particular object of their own; think only of the presence of your imaginary car! That, for the moment, you are the most important person in the world.

CREATURE. But what do I need to accomplish that?

TEACHER. Talent and technique. The education of an actor consists of three parts. The first is the education of her body, the whole physical apparatus. An hour and a half daily for at least two years on gymnastics, classical and interpretive dancing, fencing, all kinds of breathing exercises, diction, pantomime, make-up. This will make an actor pleasing to look at. The second part of the education is intellectual, cultural. I need an actor who knows the world's literature, who knows the history of painting, of sculpture and of music. I need an actor who has a fairly clear idea of the psychology of motion, of psychoanalysis, and the logic of feeling.

And then there is the education and training of the soul – the most important factor of dramatic action. Unfortunately it is acquired by long, hard work. One thing alone remains which cannot be developed but must be present. It is TALENT.

(The **CREATURE** *sighs and falls into deep meditation.)*

CREATURE. You make the theatre seem like something very big, very important, very…

(The **CREATURE** *looks at him with sorrowful eyes. He understands what these eyes express.)*

TEACHER. Yes, for me the theatre is a great mystery, a mystery in which are wonderfully wedded the two eternal phenomena, the dream of Perfection and the dream of the Eternal.

(He turns to the **CREATURE***, but she is gone.)*

Only to such a theatre is it worthwhile to give one's life.

(The lights go dim. The **ACTRESS** *goes to her dressing station and produces sides for an audition. The* **ACTOR** *removes the miniature set from the table. He goes to his coat rack, hangs up the Teacher's scarf, and puts on a hat. He is now the* **STAGE MANAGER***.)*

(The lights come up as the **STAGE MANAGER** *comes downstage.)*

STAGE MANAGER. Number seventeen! We're ready for you, seventeen!! If you're not on stage in the next ten seconds, I will have to go on to the next actress…

(He looks at his watch.)

All right, that's it. Number eighteen…you're up…take the stage. Eighteen!

(The **CREATURE** *hurries to the stage from the back of the house, brandishing a number seventeen tag that hangs from her neck; she carries sides in her hand.)*

CREATURE. I'm here!…Please…seventeen is here…I was in the…I had to use the powder room…I'm so sorry…I…

STAGE MANAGER. Didn't you tell the stage manager?!

CREATURE. I…I apologize…I didn't know I was supposed to…

STAGE MANAGER. A basic requirement for the actor…

CREATURE. I didn't mean to…

STAGE MANAGER. You must be on time!

CREATURE. I always am…

STAGE MANAGER. All right enough…

CREATURE. I just had to…

STAGE MANAGER. You're here now…let's not waste any more time. Do what you're here to do!

(The **CREATURE** *lifts up her sides and smoothes the pages in preparation.)*

You have not committed the speech to memory? That was the assignment.

CREATURE. I've…yes, I do have it memorized…but if you please…

STAGE MANAGER. Put down the script.

CREATURE. I would feel more comfortable if I…

STAGE MANAGER. Give me the lines or leave now.

CREATURE. *(stalling)* Yes, I'm so sorry I've inconvenienced…

STAGE MANAGER. Number eighteen!!

CREATURE. No, no…please…let me begin.

(She drops her script to the floor and begins her speech immediately in a hurried Irish dialect.)

Mama, please stop crying. We'll see each other again. You know we will. Remember when Katie got married? You cried and cried for weeks after she left, but we still see her sometimes, don't we? And…she…she…writes to us. I'll…I'll…

STAGE MANAGER. All right…all right.

CREATURE. Mama…Mama…

(The **CREATURE** *lowers her head. She's mortified. She's forgotten her lines.)*

STAGE MANAGER. That's fine. That's enough.

CREATURE. I…I know these lines…I knew them perfectly…

STAGE MANAGER. Now, I want you to take a deep breath…

CREATURE. I'm so sorry.

STAGE MANAGER. Just relax. Take it from the beginning again. You need to let the words speak for themselves. You have all the right attributes for this role. You just need to allow the character to speak through you. Just give yourself a second…then try again.

(The **CREATURE** *takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and when somewhat composed, she begins the monologue again.)*

CREATURE. Mama, please stop crying. We'll see each other again. You know we will. Remember when Katie got married? You cried and cried for weeks after she left, but we still see her sometimes, don't we? And she writes to us. I'll write to you every day if you like. Mrs. Taylor is a good woman, Mama. She'll take care of me. Just think of all the wonderful things I'll learn, the people I'll meet. She will take me shopping in the city, and I will attend the most fashionable parties. I'll write to you and tell you about every minute of it. I hope you'll write me, too. I hate to think of not seeing you every day, Mama, not being here to help you, but I have such a strong feeling. This is what I have to do.

(She looks expectantly at the **STAGE MANAGER**.*)*

STAGE MANAGER. Much better, not bad at all. See what a little focus will do for you. And I like that Irish brogue. Tell me, when were you last on stage?

CREATURE. Last year, I was the lead in my school's year-end production of…

STAGE MANAGER. No, I'm talking professionally.

CREATURE. Well…I've had a few small parts in some community…

STAGE MANAGER. *(cutting her off)* Thank you very much. We'll let you know. Number eighteen!! Number eighteen!!

(The **CREATURE** *scurries off.)*

(The stage lights dim almost to black. The **ACTOR** *goes to his coat rack, takes off his hat, and puts on the Teacher's scarf.)*

(The lights come back up. We are once again in the Teacher's parlor. The **CREATURE** *and the* **TEACHER** *walk towards each other.)*

CREATURE. Hello!

(Her handclasp is firm and strong; her eyes look straight into the **TEACHER'***s.)*

TEACHER. I am certainly glad to see you. I have followed your work. I never thought that you would come back. I thought I had frightened you the last time.

(He gestures for her to sit down.)

CREATURE. *(ignoring his invitation to sit)* Oh, no, you didn't! But you certainly gave me a lot to work on. What a horrible time I have had with that idea of concentration. Everybody laughed at me – once I was nearly run down by a street car because I had tried too effectively to concentrate on "the happiness of my existence." You see, I give myself problems like that for exercise, exactly as you told me to do. In this particular exercise, I was fired from my job and I wanted to pretend to myself that it didn't concern me at all. And I succeeded. I was on my way home and made myself happy in spite of everything. I felt as if I had just received a wonderful part. I was so strong. But I didn't notice the streetcar. Fortunately I jumped back in time. I was scared, my heart was palpitating, but I still remembered "the happiness of my existence." So I smiled at the motorman and ordered him to proceed. He said something to me, but I couldn't understand him – he was talking behind the glass.

TEACHER. It was just as well that you didn't distinguish his words.

CREATURE. And do you think he was right – being rude to me?

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