

Sandy
DEJONCIS

By Robert Luhn





If you ask Sandy Dennis about the state of the American Theatre, she's apt to roll her eyes in a wordless reproach — "Oh, come on!" — and ask if you'd like something to eat. The state of Sandy Dennis is quite another thing and though her responses are guarded, the message is clear: she is an actress and is confident she's a good one. "In the last five or six years as an actor, I find that everything is accomplishable. Fifteen years ago, I would have had more to say about it, because then I didn't have the technique and the abilities I have now. A lot of it comes with age...you start to put things together. I certainly did. I could do things, but I didn't know what I was doing. I did them almost unconsciously. I was very talented but I had no technique. It was mostly a kind of emotional acting equipment that I had. Now I can lay that emotional equipment on top of a very good technique."

In conversation, Dennis' face comes to life. The gestures and mannerisms that distinguish (and some say mar) her acting are all present, rounding out her sentences and thoughts. Her hands rotate, her face crinkles and frowns and goes through ten emotions in the space of a sentence.

"Most actors operate out of fear; fear of failing, fear of what the critics will say, fear of acting. I still get stage fright, because when you get up there, you're on your own. Once you get over that feeling and you start enjoying what you're doing, then it's great. The most amazing thing that's happened to me was the ability to give up ever having to think about what other people thought of me. When you're able to do that, it's much easier to operate as a human being and a creative artist. I came to a point where I knew I was right and I could go ahead without being worried."

Dennis reached that point only after many years of working on stage and in film, and perhaps, from having been hastily rejected by Hollywood as being too "off-beat." After the acclaim of *Up the Down Staircase* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (which won her an Oscar in 1965), her film appearances received less and less notice from the movie industry. Her last film during the period *The Out-of-Towners* (1969) drew good reviews and a healthy gate, but it marked the beginning of a hiatus that lasted eight years, ending with *Nasty Habits* (1977) and *The Four Seasons* (1980). During the years away from Hollywood, she refined her technique on Broadway with such long running hits as *Absurd*

Person Singular, *Any Wednesday* and *Same Time, Next Year*.

The acting process began for Dennis nearly twenty-five years ago. She grew up in the Midwest and remembers never wanting to be anything else but an actor.

"I just knew from the time I was a kid. I never thought of being in the movies, and that's all I ever saw. We had a community theatre but I didn't know enough to go to it. Yet I always wanted to be on stage."

Dennis acted in school, worked in summerstock, made the obligatory trek to New York (with \$100 as a grubstake) and studied for several years with Herbert Berghoff at the Actor's Studio. Her first paying part (\$45 a week) led to a larger role in a Palm Beach production of *Bus Stop*. One actress in the cast at the time noted, "She showed up and said she had all kinds of experience. There she was, fat and beautiful and shy and sensitive, and you could see she had this great talent, but she didn't know anything."

The chance to play opposite Jason Robards in *A Thousand Clowns* in 1962 proved to be the enlightening experience of Dennis' early acting career. Her performance as Sandra Markowitz, the timid social worker whose teary cloudbursts punctuated the play, charmed critics and theatregoers. She won a Tony and a New York Drama Critics Award for the role, but she remembers most working with Robards.

"When I went into that play, I was twenty-five and had been studying for about six years. I'd done a couple of plays but I was so serious. And all the things I'd learned I didn't know how to use. I mean, I was good. That's why they chose me, but I couldn't let go. Getting onstage with Jason was acting — he goes to town! Jason made fun of everything and you got really loose. He taught me at twenty-five what acting was about...that it was not putting a gun to your head and being serious, that it was enjoying. He'd be in the middle of a scene — he was terrible! — with tears rolling down his cheeks and at the same time he'd be muttering to me, 'Do you see that lady in the third row with the hat?' He was crazy. He's a real con artist too, you know. Sometimes he would just crap out in the middle of the play. He gets bored. Then he'd really get loose. I remember when he did that people would say afterwards, 'Oh, I saw him and he was so drunk!' He was never drunk. But he was a con man."

"Yet I never saw a man so technically adept. If he was losing the audience, for whatever reason, he'd change his voice and they'd all sit up in their seats. He taught me about humor and timing. It was a great deal of fun and a great deal of passion. A passion for acting."

Dennis believes in passion, but she also believes in technique. In the 1960s she was known as something of an improviser, a practice that didn't endear her to many of her fellow actors. She said that ignorance motivated much of her experimentation.

"A lot of the improvisational quality had to do with not knowing what I was doing. When I was younger I could use that im-

provisational quality to help me out. But it's been five, ten years since I've done that."

Dennis was exposed to many acting styles during her years of study, including the method. She said that none of them affected her much, that improvisation worked as her method. But it's not something she recommends for everyone.

"Some actors I worked with enjoyed it, and some got really pushed. I didn't understand that until I learned that I was wrong. I was very good and I still have an odd sense of timing. But you see, you're very selfish when you start out. It's like being a baby. You want it all for yourself. You can't think about other people. What's important is the structure of the play and your ability to help other people."

Fitting into a play's structure and analyzing its dynamics onstage is a task not all actors are equipped to handle. Some, according to Dennis, have an innate ability to sense the proper moment; others simply do not, or cannot learn it. A line poised and then released at just the right time can bring a laugh rather than a long, uncomfortable silence across the footlights. The boundaries of the play, as determined by the playwright, cannot be brushed aside or stepped over. The internal structure of the play is supported by one set-up after another.

"Part of all acting is setting up somebody else. It means knowing that somebody needs a line — now! It's a complicated thing to verbalize. The moment that you understand within a play and within another actor *how* they need a line in order to get *their* line to get the next line to get a laugh, you've understood timing. It's like improvisation in jazz. I've seen musicians play a melody and then go into something and the audience goes wild. Acting is the same thing — when you can sense another person's need and work off of that."

"Sometimes, technically, you need a line a beat faster. Twenty years ago, if a director had said, 'Sandy, just come in there a bit sooner,' I would have gasped! But now it makes perfect sense."

But what about emotions and character? What happens when an actor runs up against a situation never encountered before? The play, said Dennis, is the guide. She doesn't dismiss the various acting methods, because as exercises they can be useful in supplying what an actor needs. But there are pitfalls.

"When I'm trying to teach acting, I could use those exercises. They're really quite simple. If you have a problem, you can go to this method and work things out. It sounds like some great thing, but it's almost mechanical — it's childlike. Let's say you have to cry. You go and you work or an exercise that will make you cry. Emotional recall, recalling an old experience. The trouble is, when you're in a play and you're trying to get that emotional recall — which you may be able to get and then fit into the play for the moment — you take away from the moment you are doing the play. It separates you from it. Much better

that you can cry because it comes up in the play, because the emotion is there in the material.

"I find that if I'm having a problem (with a part), I'll put on a costume and amazing things will happen to me. I tell my kids in class to work with costumes. You start to walk differently, talk differently. It's all that simple.

"I try to tell them what I think. You can only tell them from your point of view. I try never to put them down, because that's one of the worst things you can do. But I think you can create monsters by not criticizing them. I mean, let's face it, most actors are so full of it."

Sandy Dennis, then and now: with George Segal, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in the film version of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, a performance which won Dennis an Oscar in 1965; with Mark Patton in Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean, which opened on Broadway in February.



Dennis has taught at Herbert Berghoff's school for nearly four years, mostly for the pleasure and as a way of repaying the years of free training given her by the studio. She admitted the job isn't worth much money. When I talked to her, she was about to return to her class after an absence of four weeks.

"I left them and now I'm going to pay so dearly for it. 'I had my scene. Don't you remember it?' Damn!" She laughed. Teaching, like acting, has its ups and downs. Dennis does not audition her students, but takes the first fifty who sign up. She has been mostly blessed with talented newcomers. But sometimes luck fails her.

"Once I got forty of the worst that could ever come. It was like trying to get through a three-foot brick wall. I dreaded it. I am

amazed sometimes seeing the good ones work. They can do so much more than I could when I was their age. Much more inventive."

Whatever her abilities were as a young student, taking the measure of a character and projecting it is a process that now comes easily and quickly to Dennis. Once she defines a role, she changes it very little from performance to performance. The gestures, the inflection, even the movements across the stage evolve only until she feels they are right. But some readjustments take place, to keep the part alive and fresh, especially during a long run.

"You reach certain plateaus in any play. You do it for several weeks and then you get tired. But you see, part of a good technique is that people believe you. Sometimes you're just empty and you can do it and be believable. Three or four times a week you have the Emotional Experience. But you can't have it all the time."

How does she make a role authentic? Does she research a part à la Lily Tomlin or delve into her subconscious?

"I just make something up. Imagination is one of the prerequisites of acting. Anyone with it can do something they haven't done before. When I act, I can act out of the material. If something's way out of character, it's only more interesting because I can be creative. I don't use a method. All acting methods are for those who can't work out things. If you can do something instinctively right, you do it.

"You need the ability to look at people and see how they really behave. When we watch television, we aren't looking at what is happening, but at what we *think* is happening. Don't get me wrong. There's some good acting on television, but there's a lot of bad acting too. The response to human emotions is so ordinary. If someone cries, it's like..." (She waves her hands in the air and sobs melodramatically for a moment).

"Watch people. Everyone cries differently and you cry differently at different times and you behave angrily at different times in different ways. What we see on TV is a stereotype of emotionalism. And we're used to it now. It's so much less painful than the reality of something. It is a reality, I guess. They cry, they get divorced, they do everything, but they don't do it the way it really happens. When you start to act, you begin to see things differently, and people don't like it. They like to see what's ordinary. Good, well executed — but ordinary. They don't like to see reality, and yet that's what real acting is all about. That extra reality you can bring to something. That's what's exciting."

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I went to visit Dennis at her Connecticut home, set in a forest of alder trees. It was dusk and a welcoming committee of twenty or thirty cats was on hand. Later, a walk around the grounds revealed more cats, a gardener mowing the rolling back lawn and, in the forest, the bones of a discarded dune buggy that has peacefully become

part of the underbrush.

After dinner, Sandy excused herself to watch one of her "favorite-horrible" films, *The Uninvited*, starring Ray Milland. The comfortable two-story home is well kept but not fussy. The bookshelves are the most striking feature; they ramble from the entry hall into a large parlor room. The stacks reveal complete sets of well-read Shakespeare and Dickens, along with numerous volumes by lesser-known British authors. Amidst the books is a cast photo from *Absurd Person*. Elsewhere there is a snapshot of Sandy sticking her tongue out. One case is full of books devoted to the study of the theatre, while another is a miscellaneous assortment propped up by a Drama Circle award. Prominent in the room is a case containing Dennis' prized collection of Virginia Woolf first editions. A children's book written, printed, bound and signed by Woolf is wrapped with care, one of 125 copies in the world. On top of this case, high above on a dusty shelf amidst unused flower vases, sits Dennis' Oscar.

Later, we talk about money. Dennis is well acquainted with the economics of the theatre. Acting, even for a successful Broadway actress, is not that lucrative. The money can be good, but as too many actors know, the work is often sporadic. And then, like death or reruns, there are taxes.

"In my last play, *Supporting Cast*, I made a good deal of money: \$4,000 a week. You know what I came home with? About \$900 a week. First I paid my taxes: New York and federal. That was half. Then Social Security and Equity, our union, which takes two percent. Then \$100 for unemployment and ten percent for my agent's fee and five percent for a manager's fee. Out of this run, I probably made \$40,000 and after taxes and expenses and everything else, I came home with about \$10,000.

Some actors have incorporated themselves like other professionals. Sandy tried it once at the suggestion of a former business manager and ended up almost broke. She is quite happy now to simply pay her taxes.

An actor's economics can be sorely affected by a few individuals — not by a producer or director or a David Stockman, but by the critics. *Supporting Cast* did well out of town for four weeks and in New York had five sellout preview days. The next morning the reviews came out and the house gate dropped sixty percent.

"It's amazing what reviews can do. The critics just didn't like the play. They liked the actors very much. It was a great audience play — *they* loved it. A silly comedy, everybody arguing. If we had gotten any sort of decent review we could have run. But the critics just went crazy. They were so angry about it. It's funny to see them up in arms. Well...we were just lost."

There are problems, too, with the expense and time involved in working on any production. Most producers do not cover hotel or other out-of-town expenses, even for the leads. And when a play is close

enough to commute to, the schedule can be draining. A typical day means leaving at four in the afternoon to catch a 4:35 train that gets into New York City at six. Dinner is an hour and work is over around eleven. The 11:20 train leaves the city and arrives at home (Westport) at, say, 1 A.M. On matinee days, it's worse.

"During the run of *Supporting Cast* I thought I was dying of some dread disease. I just couldn't get up. I was exhausted. I loved the play and the other actors. Sometimes you get someone in the cast that can slow you down. You get actors who are stubborn and say all the things we had left behind years ago, things like, 'I don't feel motivated' or 'I don't think this person would do this or that.' It means you have to work three times as hard in rehearsal and when there are changes on the road. It's tiring."

If Sandy's past experience is any guide, her latest adventure across the footlights may be a bit easier. Though Sandy's new production, *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, matches her with stage novice Cher, the production will be guided by one of her favorite directors: Robert Altman. They first worked together in 1967 in Altman's *That Cold Day in the Park*. Sandy recalled it as an enjoyable and stimulating experience.

"It's a crazy film. I pick this boy up from the park and bring him home and keep him locked in. He brings in a girlfriend, and in the script I was just supposed to beat her with a lamp. I said, 'Let me kill her.' He said wonderful! That's how crazy he is. It was very improvisational. You never had to do things absolutely right. He also did master shots instead of doing a shot of you and then a closeup of the other person. He would watch people behave. If something went 'wrong' and it worked, you kept it. He took a lot of behavior out of people and that's what's exciting."

However exciting this new play turns out to be, the frustrations remain: the long hours, the out-of-town work where breaking even is considered lucky, the critics who sleep during a play at night and pan it the next morning. Worst of all, being offered a superior role and having to turn it down for something less inspiring but for more money.

Dennis talked about retiring someday and spending her time travelling or puttering around the house. Though she has little use for awards or accolades, she admits that receiving them now, fifteen years since her Tony, would be much nicer.

Through it all, acting is what she does and it is doubtful she will ever give it up. She knows acting and has studied it and has won a fistful of awards. Even when she works in something that is less than distinctive, she said she enjoys it because it is acting, after all. She teaches acting not so much to repay her debt to her profession, but to pass on her life's passion: a passion for acting.

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