THE ACTOR ATTACKS

Start the line strong to make it work for you

BY ROBERT COHEN

LAST YEAR IN THESE PAGES I wrote a series of articles about the parallels between the art of acting and the sport of boxing. I'm not the only one to notice this pairing: the famous American actor and one-time boxer Anthony Quinn once observed, "The closest thing to acting is bullfighting or boxing. It's a matter of adjusting to the other man's blows. You're so busy adjusting it's difficult to think of anything else."

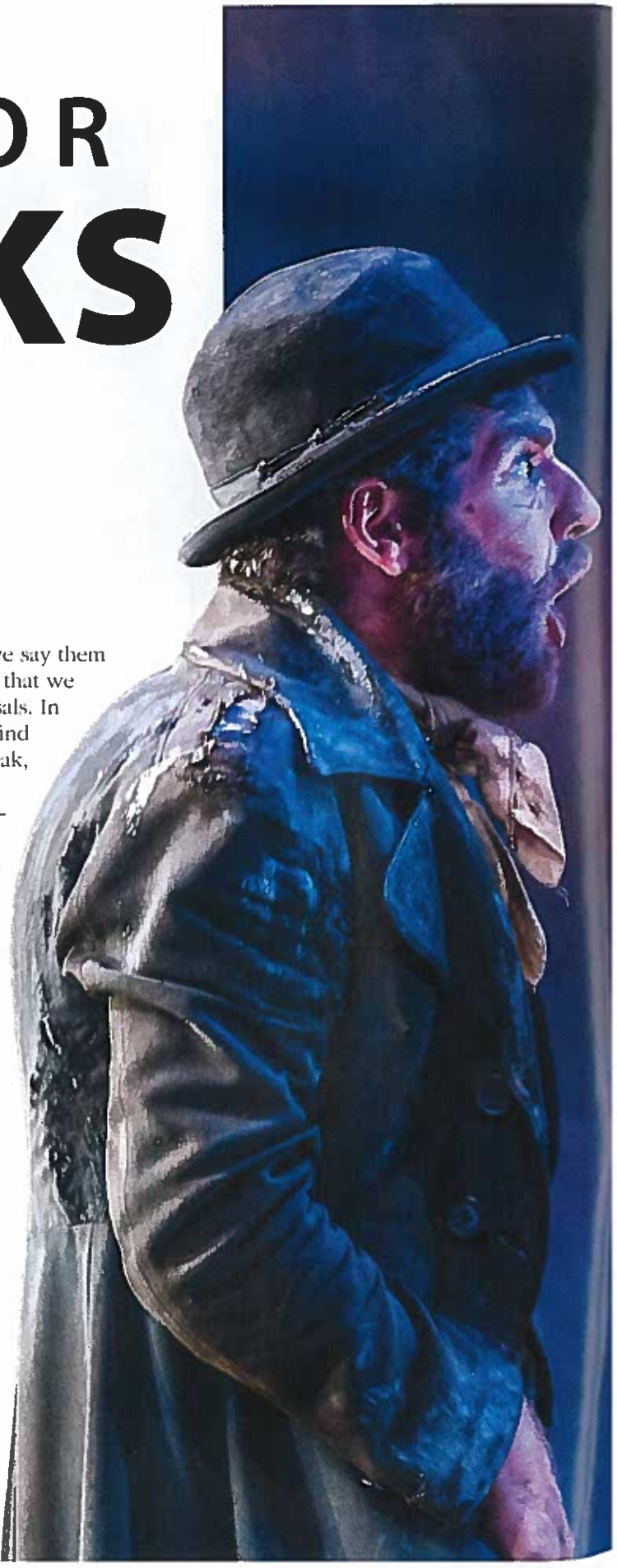
Boxers attack with their fists. Actors attack with their lines, most often with the very first syllable of their lines. The word "attack" in this sense most commonly refers to a singer coming in boldly on the downbeat of their very first note.

The word can also be used to describe how actors should, in most cases, start their speeches boldly and *right on cue*. And when they don't, their director is likely to tell them to "pick up your cues!"

Why is this? Most directors will tell you it will "pick up the pace of the play," or it will "make the dramatic action more energetic." And it usually does do these things. But the most important reason for attacking your lines instead of just emitting them is that it will make the play more like real life.

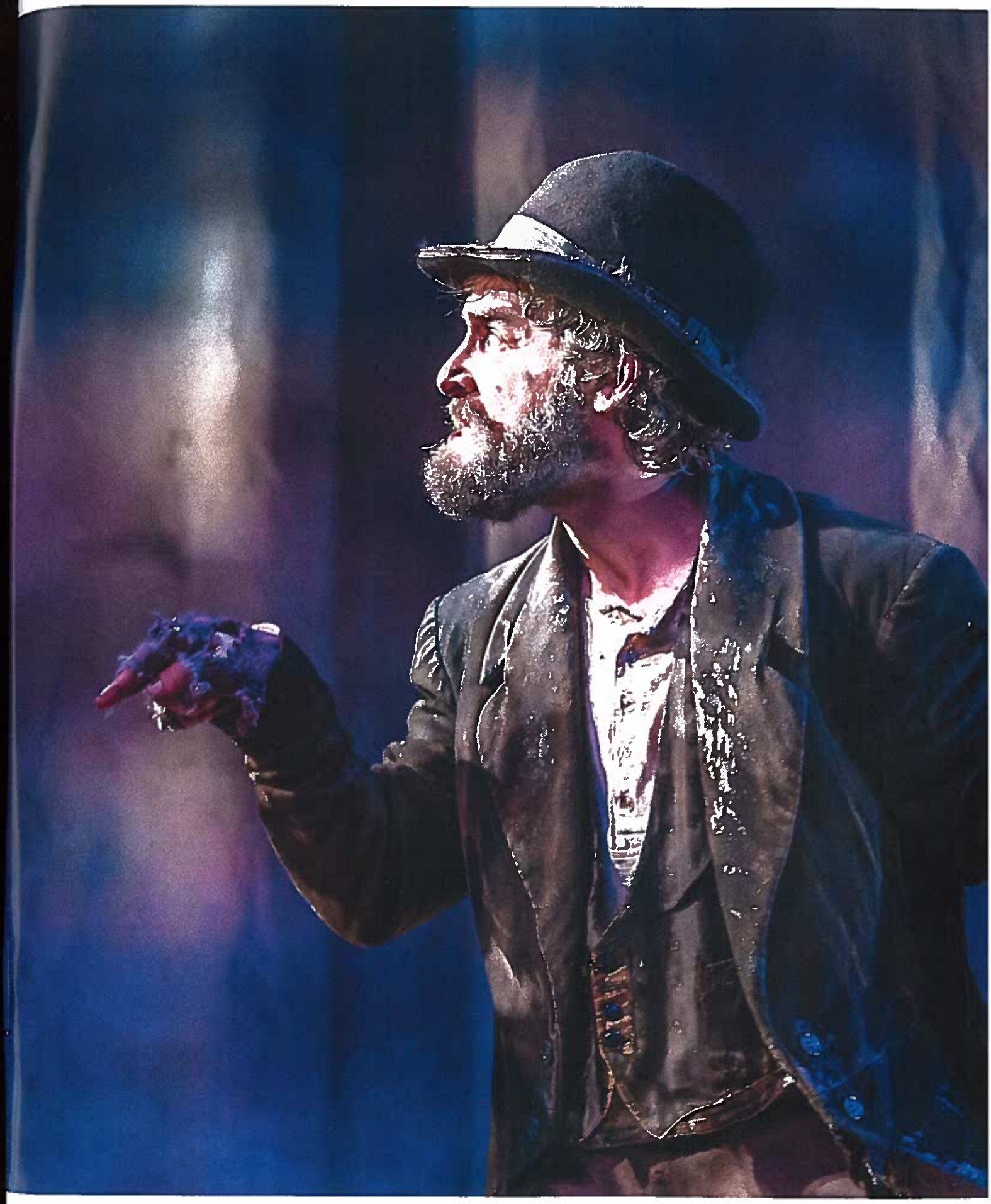
Really? Yes, because in real life, we do not speak lines that we have memorized, nor do we say them in response to "cues" that we have heard in rehearsals. In real life, we have to find an *opportunity* to speak, and then create what we are going to say—as we are saying it.

Making the opportunity to speak is the main subject here. When, in real life, we want to speak and be heard, we have to prevent other people around us from speaking at the same time. The biggest difference between conversing on stage and conversing in real life is that in real life nobody is required to shut up when you open your mouth. In



PAUL R. KENNEDY

Chris Klopatek as Estragon and Ben Jacoby as Vladimir in a 2011 production of Waiting for Godot *at the University of California-Irvine, directed by Robert Cohen.*



real life, you have to *make them* shut up.

Imagine the classic worst-case scenario. You are the first speaker at, say, a well-attended wedding reception. You step up to the speaker's platform, but all the guests are talking, laughing, dancing, drinking, and flirting with each other. If you were to start speaking in a normal voice, no one would notice that you are speaking, much less hear what you have to say. Indeed, the guests are having such a good time they don't even *want* to hear you. You must get their attention somehow. The classic way is to clink your drinking glass loudly with a piece of silverware a few times. If that doesn't work, you might speak into the microphone, saying something imbecilic like "Is this thing working?" or "Can you hear me in the back?" When the voices have started to lower, you can begin with a very loud "Good evening, everybody!"—and then repeat it two or three times until everybody has finally begun to pay attention to the fact that you're trying to begin your speech.

The struggle to be heard is part of nearly *all* human conversations. Imagine you and three or four friends are chatting at a lunch table. Suddenly, you have something important (or funny) that you want to say, but at this moment someone else is telling a joke. You have wait her out, then find the precise moment to cut into the laughter that follows—before someone else does. So you lean forward, inhale loudly to indicate you have something brilliant to contribute, and perhaps make "speaking movements" with your lips, or toss your head about until you find the split-second moment you can jump into the conversation. Even in life, we call this "grabbing the stage."

But you must not only come in at the right moment—you must also come in so strongly *on the first word* that nobody else will come in more engagingly than you and take the floor from under your feet.

Has this ever happened to you? Sure it has. This process is what conversation analysts (and there are such people) call "turn-taking." It takes place in conversations everywhere in the world and in all languages, even (physically) in American Sign Language. Everyone who learns to speak learns quickly how to butt into ongoing conversations. We all learned it as young children—indeed, children cut into and cut off each other's remarks far more than we do. Such improvised conversation is vigorous, animated, energetic, and exciting.

Compare it to responsive reading that you might hear (or participate in) during a church service. What is spoken in the service may be sacred, but no observer will ever call it vigorous, animated, energetic, or exciting. This is simply because those speaking have been told what to say, when to say it, and when they must stop saying it, by indications in the written text. It may be a dialogue, but it is not dramatic dialogue, and it is certainly not lifelike, outside of a church service.

Vocal attacks—bold and brisk turn-takings—are particularly evident in real-life arguments. And arguments are fundamental to drama; indeed, in Shakespeare's day, a play's plot was called its "argument."

When you argue, you want to win your argument—and you don't normally do this by waiting patiently for your counterpart to politely hand the stage over to you. Rather, you must overtake the stage. Think of televised political debates. After the candidates have made their opening remarks, each starts trying to take over the conversation, interrupting their opponent—and sometimes the moderator—to forcefully shut them down and inject their own viewpoints. That's why they often begin their comments with familiar turn-taking one-word exclamations such as "Look!" or "Listen!" or even "Nonsense!"—so their opponents are thrown off stride and cowed into silence. The same thing happens in schoolroom chats in which turn-taking interjections like "Hey!" or "What?" are used to grab the floor from another speaker.

These turn-taking words have no semantic meaning, but they certainly communicate a message, which is something on the order of: "You shut up! I'm talking now!" And they are often accompanied by aggressive gestures like raising a fist, shaking the head, or pounding the podium. Elections have been won and lost on the basis of how well a candidate seized the stage and silenced an opponent at the most appropriate moments.

This attack, this butting-in, generally requires that you, the actor, enter a conversation *with the first or at least second syllable.* You do not have the option of clinking the glass with your spoon or asking if you can be heard in the back. You must start with the syllable that begins your speech. Occasionally, the playwright gives your character a turn-taking word that helps. After Hamlet is stabbed by the poisoned sword, for example, Osric enters to report that Fortinbras and his army are about to arrive to take the throne of Denmark. The still-living courtiers (and there are a few at this point) are presumably in a panic, but Hamlet, though dying, wants to speak. So Shakespeare gives him a turn-taking jumpstart: "O, I die, Horatio." The word "O"—while semantically meaningless—allows the dying Hamlet to grab everybody's attention (that of the courtiers and, yes, of the theatre audience) and give his final speech.

Indeed, if you were to examine a number of Shakespearean speeches at random, you will find that most begin with a one-syllable word, or else the name of the person being addressed, both effective turn-takers. Shakespeare, we remember, was an actor before he became a playwright.

Actors must learn how to make strong vocal attacks, not because it speeds up the play (which it does) but because it is how people earn their right to speak in real life. Actors do not just respond to the arguments of characters with whom they are in conflict: they attack them, they try to override them. They try to silence those who would like to continue speaking and try to abort anyone

else's efforts to join the conversation. And they must capture the focus of the other people on stage and those in the audience, rather than simply relying on the playwright (and the lighting designer) to give them the spotlight.

Playwrights help actors not only by giving their characters turn-taking words at the top of their speeches but also by having their characters literally interrupt each other in the script. In Tennessee Williams' *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel,* for example, 60 percent of the lines are briskly cut short by another actor. ("It could be a fantasy that I'm" "I won't be seen by a man that" and "I'll" are some of the "sentences" in this play.) In *Top Girls,* Caryl Churchill has made many lines overlap, defining exactly at which point in the sentence the second character interrupts. Such barge-ins can be found in classical dramas as well. Shakespeare's characters often interrupt each other. For example, the comic but brutal interruption with which the Duke of Gloucester (soon to be King Richard III) turns the tables on Queen Margaret when she berates him:

MARGARET: Thou slander of thy
mother's heavy womb!
Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins!
Thou rag of honor! Thou detested—
GLOUCESTER: Margaret!
MARGARET: Richard!
RICHARD: Hah!

And Queen Margaret is left glowering in silence as Richard has taken over the conversation and turned her attack against him into an attack against her.

Here's a longer dialogue between two Shakespearean characters in *All's Well That Ends Well,* each of whom interrupts the other in every line:

LAFEU: To be relinquish'd of the artists,—
PAROLLES: So I say.
LAFEU: Both of Galen and Paracelsus.
PAROLLES: So I say.

LAFEU: Of all the learned and authentic fellows,—
PAROLLES: Right; so I say.
LAFEU: That gave him out incurable,—
PAROLLES: Why, there 'tis; so say I too.
LAFEU: Not to be helped,—
PAROLLES: Right; as 'twere, a man assured of a—
LAFEU: Uncertain life, and sure death.
PAROLLES: Just, you say well; so would I have said.
LAFEU: I may truly say, it is a novelty to the world.

In this scene, Parolles and Lafeu are not arguing about ideas. Rather they are competing to show who has the highest intelligence. Attacks are not only used to win arguments; they are also employed to establish status.

Mostly, however, the playwright does not indicate the timing of the turn-taking. This is up to the actor, and often the actor has difficulties "coming in on cue" as the director may request or "grabbing the microphone," as I sometimes call it. Why?

One possible reason: it may be because the actor wishes to be polite. You may think jumping into a conversation is rude behavior—but you won't when you realize that almost all of us do it in real life all the time. Actors should always be polite offstage, but they should be absolutely free to become tigers on the stage.

Or perhaps the actor already owns the stage at a given moment and believes that no one else would dare speak because it's "her line," so she takes a moment of silence in which to prepare the line the playwright has given her. However, real life does not provide us with ownership of time. If the actor wishes to appear as a real person, she has to speak her mind when she still has a chance to do so.

It may be that the actor is afraid of saying the wrong line. For my sixth-grade graduation ceremony, our music teacher tried to rehearse an Irish ballad. None of us had previously sung in public, so despite our teacher's furious beating of her baton, no one wanted to start singing until someone else did, because we were never sure that we would come in with the right word or the right note. We repeatedly came in feebly with each new stanza, to the dismay of our teacher.

Perhaps the actors giving cues don't know their lines perfectly, and cues are not being picked up because they are not recognized. The line you speak as an "interruption" cannot literally overlap—that is, it cannot cover—the last line of the cue, unless the playwright or director has specified that it should. But when the actor facing you paraphrases his lines, even if his words provide the same information as the playwright's, you cannot know for certain when he's finished saying it! Any hesitation will make you seem uncertain, turning a fiery scene tentative and a romantic one timorous.

There's a final problem I'd like to address on the vocal attack. In my opinion it is by far the worst: when the actor picks up her cue not with the first word the playwright has given her, but with a highly audible—and clearly disdainful—gasp, a gasp that conveys something like, "How stupid can this guy get!" I call this the "Valley Girl Gasp," because that's how it is most frequently seen—in TV sitcoms, uttered by teenage girl characters and followed by a round of prerecorded laughter. Yes, such a gasp may allow the actor to seize the floor, but it has no content. The Valley Girl Gasp is only a filler, usually employed because the actor wants a little breathing room before she starts to speak. Except in rare cases, it is far better to seize the stage with the words the playwright wrote, words with semantic content that create action and response rather than boredom and apathy, words that show your character trying to win your goal rather than trying to escape it.

Conversely, coming in strongly on your attack words gives you great

advantages on the stage. It sustains the emotions you have built up, and it puts the other actor on edge, building up her emotional charge as well. Your acting partner will then compete with you to grab and hold the stage. After all, an argument is not only about the topic being argued but also about each character creating his or her authority while arguing it. To win an argument—which your character must be trying to do if the scene is to be affecting and convincing—you must not only try to make the best case but also try to show yourself to be the best presenter of that case. Note the word "try" here. You may or may not defeat your partner; that is determined by the playwright. But you must *try* to defeat her, and *expect* to defeat her—even if, in the end, you don't. This trying (even when you think it may be impossible) and expecting (even when, in the text, you ultimately lose) is what makes for great drama. And for great acting.

Ultimately, trying to command the stage is what charges up the audience. It shows you really care about winning, and if you care the audience will care along with you—even if you are the villain. We love to see a fight.

Picking up your cues and delivering them with power (the most common way of describing the actor's attack) is critical to great stage acting. But this must be understood in more than technical terms. It is critical not because it is a well-known technique (though it is), but because it is what we do in real life. Picking up your cues will happen automatically if you are pursuing your goals and seeking to gain your desired victories—in a prize fight, a political debate, or in a dramatic argument. Actors "attacking" with their lines are as exciting as boxers attacking with their fists. Each has the capacity to surprise their partners, to catch them off guard, and to keep them guessing. This is what acted dramatic situations—in contrast to recited responsive readings—require. And when your opponents do to you as you do to them, you will have an amazingly lively interchange. Being kept guessing about what will happen next, even though you've rehearsed or performed this play every night for several weeks, will make for a better production—and will make you a far, far better actor.

So be brave. Try (but don't succeed) to start your speech *before* your cue. Try (but don't succeed) to *interrupt* the speaker. Keep your lungs full of air so that you can speak the first chance you get—which of course just happens to be the end of the other person's line. Then make that very first syllable *grab* the attention of everybody on stage—and everybody seated in the back row of the audience. This eagerness, and these quick and bold starts, should be on your initiative, not the director's. You'll be off to the races—and after a while, so will your acting partners. ▼