

The Acting Class

Sal Lancione

Here is yet another true Father Mac story. This one is thanks to Mr. Scalzo. At the time this incident occurred, teachers were paid based on the number of diplomas or courses they could accumulate. A diploma was something like five or six university courses. Personally, paying teachers by the number of courses they take is simply stupid. This is especially true in light of the fact that the courses had nothing to do with what the teacher was teaching. For example, if you took courses in finger-painting and pottery-making, you would get paid more as a physics teacher. Go figure! Indeed, it is my philosophy that "a diploma does not a teacher make!" Today, fortunately, all teachers are paid the same.

Mr. Scalzo was missing a course to move up a category and thus benefit financially. One day he decided to enroll in a course at McGill University to complete his diploma. However, being employed full time at Father Mac, there were not too many courses from which he could choose. He was restricted first to the courses available after school and second only to those courses he had never taken. He discovered that only one course met both criteria. This was a course in acting that McGill University offered off-campus starting at 4 PM in the afternoon. If I remember correctly, the course was given at John Rennie High School. The next day at Father Mac, Mr. Scalzo complained to me that he didn't like the fact that all the students in this particular course were women. He then asked me, "Can you do me a favor?" I immediately replied, "No, absolutely not, I am not enrolling in an acting class" as I assumed he wanted me to enroll. But no, Mr. Scalzo did not want me to enroll; what he wanted was for me to accompany him only for the first class. I figured why not, "one class won't kill me", so I agreed.

On the day of the first class, I remember purposely not reading the Montreal Gazette that morning thinking to myself, "I'll read it in Mr. Scalzo's class this afternoon." I feared that I might get bored and envisioned myself sitting quietly at the back of the classroom doing nothing. Unfortunately, as it turned out, I never got the chance to read the Gazette.

At about 20 minutes to 4 PM that day, Mr. Scalzo and I were riding in his car headed towards the West Island to attend his first acting class. I must say that, compared to how I drive, Mr. Scalzo drives very slowly and very cautiously. I distinctly remember asking him, "Listen, what the hell is wrong with this car?" as I began suspecting his car was not safe to drive fast. He answered, "Nothing, why?" and I said, "Don't you think we should go faster if we want to make it on time?" He replied something or other about safety. You can well imagine my feelings, a person who drives as fast as possible sitting in a car with a person who drives as slow as possible. It felt as if we were in a parade. Moreover, each time we approached a "green" traffic light, Mr. Scalzo would slow down. When I remarked, "What are you doing? Go faster before it turns red!" which is something I'm in the habit of doing, Mr. Scalzo replied, "It is because it's going to turn red that I'm slowing down." "On the contrary, that's exactly why you should speed up" I answered. He went back to his lecture on safety informing me that most accidents happen when people speed up rather than slow down at traffic lights. All of a sudden, I remembered a strange incident he had told me about a month or so earlier.

The incident occurred to Mr. Scalzo while he was driving to Father Mac one morning. That story now made sense to me. While driving in his car, a man was following him in a truck. Somewhere along the road, the truck suddenly surpassed him and made a full stop some distance ahead. The truck driver then came out of his truck swinging a chain over his head ready to attack Mr. Scalzo as he drove by. Wow! Talk about road rage! Fortunately, he managed to accelerate quickly out of the way. I remember him telling me, "I don't know what that guy wanted? He was crazy. I could have run him down." Although Mr. Scalzo was oblivious to what caused the man to become so irate, it now dawned on me that perhaps he thought Mr. Scalzo was doing it on purpose, driving as if they were in a parade and slowing down at green traffic lights. Who knows? When we finally arrived at John Rennie High School we were about 15 minutes late. Naturally, the class was in progress. I had the Gazette under my arm ready to read. It was my intention to tell the professor that I was only a visitor and not part of the class. However, as I was soon to discover, this was no ordinary class and this was no ordinary professor. The professor was a short and skinny woman who talked very authoritatively, very fast, very loud and very much. Trust me, when this woman spoke, there was little chance to interrupt. Upon entering the class, the first thing I noticed was that there were no desks at the back of the class, no place for me to sit and read the Gazette. The chairs were all rearranged with the students paired in twos and yelling at each other. Although in progress, the class was very noisy. When the professor saw us, she started clapping her hands, told everyone to stop and yelled at us, "Quickly, quickly, quickly". I followed Mr. Scalzo with the intention of telling her that I was not a member of the class. It was impossible for me to speak as she simply did not want to hear what I had to say. Each time I began speaking, she placed her finger vertically over her mouth and with a very serious look said to me, "Shhhh ...". Every time I opened my mouth she repeated the motion and said, "Shhhh ...". When she saw that I kept wanting to talk, she came right to my face, leaned forward and repeated, with a very angry look, "Shhhhhhhhhhhh ...". Because the whole class was watching, I had no choice but to give in and shut up!

Can you imagine, just my luck, this class required an even number of students as they were to be paired and work in two's. And there were an even number of students. That is, until Mr. Scalzo showed up. This made the class consist of an odd number of students which was a "no-no" as far as the professor was concerned. Without choice, although an outsider, I instantly became a welcomed "insider". For some unknown reason, I guess to keep my word to Mr. Scalzo, I resisted the temptation of simply walking out.

Mr. Scalzo was paired with a student and I was told to sit with another student. As the prof explained for those of us who had just arrived, the purpose of the exercise was to express anger at your friend. When I turned to my partner with a puzzled look, she told me "We have to pretend we are pissed off at each other". I remember saying to myself, "There is no pretending on my part because right now I am very pissed off." Just as I started to explain to her my story that I was not a student of the class, the professor clapped her hands, and my partner started screaming at me, "How many times must I tell you not to leave a mess? How many? How many? How many times? ..." Wow was she good. When I tried to answer, she told me not to talk just to listen (and take it!).

The whole situation was hilarious to me as I began laughing at this person who looked as if she was going to have a heart attack screaming at me at the top of her lungs. In

fact, every now and then during her rant she stopped and politely asked me to stop laughing because this was to be a serious scene. As angry as I was, I had a hell of a time controlling my laughter. The professor then clapped her hands and yelled, "Switch turns!" At long last, it was now my turn to express my anger and explain that I was not a student in that class. Of course, I did not have to pretend, I was truly angry. I started by saying "Listen, get this straight, I am not a student in this class. I am only here as a visitor ...". Convinced that I was acting, she remarked, "You're doing good, very good". I then resumed screaming as angrily and as loudly as I could both in an effort to convince her as well as to let out my frustration. But it was to no avail as half the class was also yelling and screaming. It was an exercise in futility. Soon the professor clapped her hands and yelled "Everyone stop!" I did not stop since finally I could be heard and continued to tell my partner, "Listen, I am not joking and I am not acting, I am not part of this damn class ...". However, my talking annoyed the professor who singled me out as she sternly said, "Excuse me, you, silence please!" Again I had to shut up. Our professor then announced to the class that it was "group exercise time." Silently, I wondered to myself, "What the hell is group-exercise time?"

We were asked to push the desks aside in order to make room in the middle of the class. She then explained to the class that the group exercise would consist of five students to form and act as a human hand. As she started picking out the students to form the fingers of the hand, I figured I would seize the opportunity saying to myself, "Good, here's my chance to get the hell out of here!" and immediately started looking for my jacket. Within seconds, our prof selected four students to play the fingers. As I turned to glance and see which students she had selected, the bossy professor looked directly at me saying, and I kid you not, "Now, let's see, who will make a fine thumb? Yes, you, you will be our thumb" pointing straight at me. I couldn't believe it; everybody turned and looked at me as if to say, "Please, be our thumb!" Feeling guilty and somewhat obliged, I canceled my "disappearance" act in favor of the "group exercise" act. Instantly and without much thinking I concluded to myself "why the hell not?" I gave them a "thumbs up" signal and walked slowly to the front of the class feeling like a "thumb".

The four fingers and me, the thumb, were instructed to lie down on the floor as our professor positioned us in the formation of a hand. As the thumb, I had to lie down on the floor slightly apart from the other four students (the fingers). Using her right hand, our professor then illustrated how to properly open and close like a hand. I distinctly remember her telling me that as the thumb I was to be the last one to close because I was to "fold" on the top not underneath the fingers. Indeed, when forming a fist the thumb is on top of the other fingers. Furthermore, I was instructed to "close" by landing on top of the girl forming the middle finger. Note that the middle finger is the finger that is used when giving someone "the finger". To make sure I got it right, I remember giving the prof "the finger" while sarcastically asking her "You mean this finger here?" However, she wasn't looking at me at the time I made the gesture.

And so there I was, rather than quietly reading the Gazette at the back of Mr. Scalzo's class, I was lying on the floor in the middle of the classroom "thumbing" whilst the rest of the class was watching. Actually, it was quite an experience as we performed well at the command of the professor. All five of us grouped inwards in unison when the hand was to close as the prof said "Hand close!" After a few seconds, in remarkable unison, we all opened on the keywords "Hand open!" This went on for about five or six times, each time opening and closing the hand on cue. Finally, our demanding professor

yelled, "Very good, excellent! We will now take a short break." Exhausted and relieved yet somewhat proud that we did a good job, I resolved to myself, "I'm out of here!" Throughout my stay in that acting class, I don't ever recall seeing Mr. Scalzo once. He somehow became oblivious to me as I had to concentrate on performing as a thumb. No doubt he was watching and laughing throughout the ordeal. When it was time for me to escape, I rushed over to Mr. Scalzo and said, "Give me your keys because I will wait for you in your car!" Seeing that I had had enough, he answered, "Me too, this is not for me, let's go!" and we left. We went to a restaurant to have supper. Upon arriving at the restaurant I remembered my Gazette and realized I left it at John Rennie High School. Mr. Scalzo offered to buy me another Gazette but I declined. However, when he offered to pay for the meal I did not decline. In the end, although I "thumbed" that day, I did not "thumb" through the Gazette as I had planned! What can I say?

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