

Episode #007 Breaking Down A Script (Transcript)

Charlie Sandlan (00:03):

So today we're going to talk about a question that every actor wants to know the answer to. How do you break down a script? What do you do when you get a piece of material, whether that's one page or 15 pages? What's the work? What are the questions that you should be answering for yourself, so that you can create behavior? Put the phone in your pocket, let's go.

Charlie Sandlan (00:58):

Well, hello my fellow daydreamers, it's Charlie Sandlan and you are listening to Creating Behavior. I'm sounding like a broken record. I am still in Guatemala, we are down here now. It's funny because we spent the first month, two months not wanting to go back. And knowing that it was safer down here than it is in New York City and now psychologically, we need to get back. We need to get back to our dogs, to our apartment, to our life, so that we can figure some shit out. So we had a flight scheduled, it was booked for the 23rd of May and I know that by the time you hear this, we're going to be past that date. But this is where I am now, this is where I am at the time of the recording. So we had a flight set and then the Guatemalan government tightens up some restrictions, our repatriation flights get canceled and now we're here into June. We're going to try to fly out June 2nd. So that's where we are on that front.

Charlie Sandlan (02:07):

Yesterday morning, I get up a lot earlier than Trish. Trish stays up late, gets up late. I go to bed early, I get up early. So I'm up 7:30 or so, I walk through the living room, walk back into the bedroom and literally in five seconds, a hummingbird flew in through our front door and just smashed right into the glass doors in the living room. So I come back into the living room and there's this

hummingbird lying unconscious on the ground. So of course I'm panicking, because I mean, it was very upsetting to see because we watch these hummingbirds every day in the backyard flying around. They're just absolutely gorgeous. So I'm like, "Trish, Trish, get out here. Oh my God, oh my God. There's a hummingbird on the ground." Now she thought I was full of shit, because I had been trying to get her up to come out and exercise. So she didn't believe me at first, but then she heard her mother gasp, and so she comes running out and she springs into action. She picks up this little hummingbird in a little towel and we go sit out back.

Charlie Sandlan (03:20):

I don't know if you've ever seen a hummingbird up close, I never have. They're so fast and they move away so quick. This little thing was laying there and it was gorgeous. The whole back of it, the feathers on its back were this beautiful emerald green, that just had these incredible shades to them, and it's got a beak that's probably the size of your pinky and it's very thin, very long. And I'm sure this is going to shock you, but hummingbirds actually blink their eyes. This little thing was lying on this towel, kept blinking its eyes, it was shaking a little bit and I thought it's dead. I really did, I'd thinking to myself. Of course it always comes back to me, right? I started thinking, "Oh my God, my day's ruined. I'm going to be so sad that this hummingbird is dead." And then after 10 minutes it flew off. It was fine, I think it just got knocked out. So that was yesterday morning, which was rather adventurous, to say the least.

Charlie Sandlan (04:27):

So today's episode, right? Let's talk about it, breaking down a script. It's ultimately what an actor does when they get a piece of material. Now, hopefully you've done a lot of other work on yourself, on your instrument. So that you've got a pliable body and you've got a voice that's resonant and good diction and your facile with your emotional life. You know how to listen and work off

another human being and you're spontaneous and all that good stuff. Right? But then there comes a time when you need to start auditioning and you actually start working on things, and you need to know how to break down a piece of material. Now, what happens is that most actors don't know really what to do. So they work on line readings. They sit in front of a mirror or they say their lines out loud and they practice how they want to say them. Right? They'll try different line inflections. Or they will punch certain words and they'll do that over and over again and they'll try to memorize their lines with those line readings. Right? That's what hacks do, actors that don't know how to work.

Charlie Sandlan (05:47):

Now, I think good actors have a number of questions that they answer for themselves. And Meisner certainly laid out five really important questions, that actually have a progression to them. And over the course of certainly the two years of Meisner training, you learn how to work with each one of these questions. Now, the first thing I'll say about acting and about really when you get a piece of material, is that you are never going to be asked to be complicated as an actor and you're probably saying, "Well, wait a minute, aren't there complicated parts? What are you talking about? Acting is very complicated." No, you will have to play complicated parts, hopefully, complicated, rich, dynamic human beings. But your job as an actor is to be able to take complicated material and break that down into something that is very easily accessible and easily understood. It must be crafted, you're crafting and that's what I call it. You're crafting must be simple, specific and personal. Those three words. I tell my students, "Tattoo that on your ass, simple, specific and personal."

Charlie Sandlan (07:05):

And that's not necessarily easy to do, because we have a tendency to complicate things, to get them convoluted. And a lot of actors, they've been taught or they've been trained to work on things that don't really fucking help. Like writing backstory and

coming up with 30 years of history about your character. That's not going to help you create the behavior that you need for a scene. So I thought that today I would give you the five questions, so that at least you have them. I mean, I would rather that you have them, then to have absolutely no clue about what they are. Learning how to answer them deftly and artistically, well that just takes work, but here we go.

Charlie Sandlan (07:58):

So every time you get a piece of material, you have to read it first, right? The first question is this, what is the previous circumstance that has happened offstage to me that causes this scene to happen? What is the previous circumstance? So think of it this way, if you were to remove this circumstance, the scene would not happen for you. So what we're talking about here, is what really has compelled you onstage? What has brought you into the camera shot? If you don't know why you have walked on stage, if you don't know what has compelled you into this scene, you're not going to be very good. So how do you figure that out, right? Well, oftentimes if you read the script and you were good at script analysis, you can figure out what the previous circumstance is just by reading the scene. It'll become clear.

Charlie Sandlan (09:11):

Sometimes however, you're not going to know what the circumstance is, it's not going to be clear. Especially if you get an audition and you've got two pages of material or three or they don't give you the script and maybe it's vague and you're not quite sure. Then you have to invent it, you have to be able to deduce and use your imagination. Given what you've got there, the material, what is the previous circumstance that brings me on stage? That needs to be simple, it needs to be easily stated, it can't be something that takes a paragraph to express. Anything that takes you more than a simple sentence to state, is too complicated. And you can tie yourself up in knots trying to figure something out. You want to stay away from playwrighting, you

want to stay away from storytelling, your job is to be simple and specific. So that is the first question that needs to be answered. Okay? Without fail, every single time that you get a piece of material.

Charlie Sandlan (10:18):

Now, question number two. How do you feel about it? How do you feel about the previous circumstance? Which means you have to learn and have to have the skillset to be able to really put yourself in that previous circumstance, to daydream yourself in it as if it were true, right? Because ultimately this is the circumstance of the scene, so it is your circumstance. Which means it needs to be as personal and as real and as embedded inside of you, as something that were to happen to you in real life. So that means you have to really have a facile instrument, that is capable of harnessing your ability to daydream and fantasize, because that's really what we're talking about. You need to put yourself in the shoes of the circumstance of the scene, and you want to see what is going to emotionally come to life in you, right? What's the emotional response?

Charlie Sandlan (11:31):

Now sometimes a previous circumstance might not require any kind of emotional response. It might be maybe somewhat pedestrian or the emotional life that it requires is maybe tepid, to start the scene. But sometimes, the scene might start where you're walking on stage or you here, "Action." And you've just found out that your husband or your wife has been having an affair for the last two years. Well, you have to be emotionally related to that. And so the second question, right? How do I feel about the previous circumstance? When that is boiled down, it gives you really ultimately what your emotional preparation needs to be. And I know I talked about that in an earlier episode, when I talked about emotion. Emotional preparation is a very big part of acting, it's self-induced emotion really. We're talking about what you do to yourself, in order to alter your inner life, to bring yourself

emotionally alive. And the second question, when that is pinned down and that is answered, tells you where you need to go emotionally. Where you need to be at the beginning of the scene when you hear action or when you walk on stage. Okay?

Charlie Sandlan (12:45):

So those are the first two questions. Question number three is, what's the acting relationship? It's a very important question, it is emotional most of the time and it's the third question, because the other two questions are more than likely going to inform question number three. Because of what's just happened and how I feel about it, who are you to me? And it's emotional, how we feel, how do I feel about you? And that needs to also be answered in a way that isactable, that is simple, that is clear and can be easily stated. Really what we're talking about here is your point of view towards the other person, your emotional point of view. Now you want to be careful that you don't answer this question in a way that's not going to help you as an actor. There's a difference between the program relationship and the acting relationship.

Charlie Sandlan (13:48):

The program relationship as I call it, is what's printed in the program, to kind of explain the relationship. Whether that is husband, wife, mother, father, cousin, neighbor, best friend. That doesn't really do anything, it's not going to help you, right? So I'll talk to an actor that might not necessarily know how to craft and I'll say, "Well, what's the relationship?" "Oh, he's my husband." That doesn't mean anything. If I were to line up five different married couples, each one of those couples has a completely unique, different relationship, emotional relationship to each other, right? Yes, they may be husband and wife, but emotionally they might function as strangers. Yes, they're husband and wife, but he might be the master and she might be his property, right? If it's an abusive relationship, let's say. Yes, they might be married, but they might function as best friends. Yes, they might be husband and wife, but they have a sibling relationship. They might function

as business partners, that might be their relationship. So to just rest it on husband and wife, isn't going to really do anything for you.

Charlie Sandlan (15:08):

If you're approaching A Doll House, let's say, Ibsen's groundbreaking play. If you don't really understand that Torvald and Nora, yes, they're husband and wife, but the relationship really is that of a Victorian father to his daughter, emotionally. If you don't really understand that that is the dynamic, you're going to miss the entire play. Now, sometimes you can pin an acting relationship down just to a couple of words, something that's essential, and the script really is going to dictate what the point of view is toward the other person. You might find them to be a gossip or a backstabber or a flirt, a cock tease. You might find the other person to have a huge chip on their shoulder. You might find them to think of themselves as God's gift to women. You might find them to be narcissistic.

Charlie Sandlan (16:07):

I don't know, but you have to be able to pin it down. So that how you interpret what they say to you, the homework that you're going to do on their lines, ultimately is going to be played up against how you feel about them. And that needs to be something that is rooted and grounded in you, so that you can work off of them the way that the playwright, the screenwriter intended you to do that. And sometimes with more complicated parts, right? The relationship is deep and you want to stay away from also, kind of cliches, "Oh yeah, he's the love of my life. She's my best friend." What does that mean really, to be the love of somebody's life? To have your heart so full and so open and so deeply filled with the presence of another human being. I mean, that takes insight, it takes also just your ability to kind of understand something about the human condition. So question number three, what is the acting relationship? It's very important, it needs to be pinned

down and it needs to be answered in the order that it's asked.

Okay? So what's the acting relationship?

Charlie Sandlan (17:30):

Question number four, incredibly important question. What is my objective? Okay. You have to have an objective when you act, you are always trying to achieve something, when you were on camera or when you are on stage. If you are not trying to achieve something, you're not going to be doing anything. Okay? So what is my objective? Knowing what that is and knowing when you get it and knowing if it changes, all things that you need to be able to figure out when you're working on a piece of material. Sometimes you might get a scene and you might not have an objective to start the scene. You're going to get one, you're going to get one at some point and you need to know what that is. Sometimes you achieve an objective in a scene and then all of a sudden you want something else or you'll need something else. Sometimes you don't get what you want.

Charlie Sandlan (18:26):

All of that is already laid out for you by the playwright, it's laid out for you by the screenwriter, so don't play it. Certainly when you train with me, I teach you, you never play the objective, right? That kind of ham hacked acting went out 50 years ago. You got to learn how to work off the moments and just trust that the objective will be there. But you have to know what it is you're trying to achieve and it's got to be stated in a way that's concretized. If you're answering that question, you say, "Oh well, I want her to forgive me." How are you going to know that? That's too general, you cannot act that, you cannot try to achieve that.

Charlie Sandlan (19:09):

What is something that's more specific? If I'm coming into a scene with my wife and we've been separated and I made the biggest mistake in my life, because I fucked my secretary, let's say. Well, what would be an objective? If I want her forgiveness, how can I concretize that? It may be in the script and it might not be, I might

have to invent it. It might just be that I want her to agree to go to therapy with me, to get her to agree to go to couples therapy. Now if that's in the script, that's going to be pretty clear for you. But if it's not, if the objective isn't necessarily clear, you've got to be able to pin it down and it's got to be something that isactable. And with all of these questions, you have to be able to pin them down in a way that it tells you exactly what to do, exactly what you need to create. So question number four, what is my objective?

Charlie Sandlan (20:05):

Which leads me to one of the most difficult, one of the most problematic, one of the most hard to understand parts of acting and that is question number five. And in Meisner's two year progression of training actors, question number five really is what the second year of the work is all about. First year is about understanding questions one, two, three and four. Question number five is, how do I achieve my objective? What are my actions? And actions is, I think really the most important and the most essential thing to understand if you want to be able to create behavior, because that is what acting is. It is behavior, right? And actions, the doing of actions is what is going to create behavior, it is the clay of acting. What am I doing? What am I doing to achieve my objective?

Charlie Sandlan (21:13):

And what you need to understand, is that you are trying to achieve something in every single moment. Whether you have lines or you don't have lines, right? Most actors, they wait, right? They respond on their line and then they wait and then they respond on their line, but acting is continual. You are continually responding, you are continually doing, whether you have something to say or not. You might be doing something to the other person or you might be doing something to yourself. You can actually try to achieve something with yourself, you can do things to yourself. Do you know? You could berate yourself, reprimand yourself. Actions are universal, they are what we do in

life, right? We've been doing actions for thousands and thousands of years. We've been flirting for thousands of years. We've been threatening, we've been warning, we've been boasting, bragging, warning. We've been sharing from the heart, we've been broaching difficult subjects. We've been putting people in their place, we've been setting people straight. These are all things that are doable and it's the language of acting.

Charlie Sandlan (22:24):

Now, directors or other actors, they might call it different things. What's your tactic? What's your tactic there or what's the doing in the moment? Do you know? But any really good actor understands that they have to know what they're doing. What am I doing here? And when you're breaking down a script, you can break a script into acts and to scenes, you can break a scene into a beat and then you can break a beat into moments. And each moment ultimately has an action, it has a line intention, I'd call it. What am I doing in this moment? What am I doing with this line? And that gets worked out. Now when you're first training, certainly my second year students, it takes them a good seven, eight months to get this, to begin to be second nature. Ultimately, when you understand them and you work with them, it just becomes how you work, how you think it's not something that is heady and also actions are not infinite, right? Do you know what I mean? If you got and understand a good 40 to 50 actions, you're good to go.

Charlie Sandlan (23:47):

Now, one of the things to kind of try to understand, is the difference between an objective and an action. Well, someone might say, well, I might ask a student, "What are you doing?" They're all, "I'm trying to, I'm seducing her." I said, "Yeah. Okay, but that's not an action." "Well, what do you mean? I'm seducing her." "Yeah, but how?" That might be the overall objective for an entire scene, right? To seduce is an objective. What am I going to do to seduce you, right? I might flirt with you, I might tell you a

joke, I might compliment you. Right? I might share a very personal anecdote about my previous sexual foures. But you're going to do various specific things in order to seduce someone.

Charlie Sandlan (24:38):

I might ask an actor, "What are you doing now?" They go, "Well, I'm questioning, I'm interrogating them." I'll say, "Yeah. Well, that's too general." You can't interrogate somebody in one moment. If you're doing a scene, the entire scene could be an interrogation or an entire beat might be an interrogation. That might be an overall action for an entire scene, right? If you look at any of these crime procedurals, Law and Order, NCIS, any of those, right? Yeah, I might be interrogating you in a scene, but I'm going to be doing more specific things in moments. I might be threatening you in a moment, I might be demanding an answer. I might tell a joke to break the ice, to make you feel comfortable, right? I might share with you a very personal story about my own brush with the law when I was a kid. Just so that we can relate to each other, as I try to get you to open up to me. All of that would fall under this generalized action of interrogating.

Charlie Sandlan (25:36):

I'll ask a student, "What are you doing there?" "Oh well, I'm greeting her." I'm like, I'll say, "Yeah, but that's too general. How many ways can you greet somebody?" I'm going to greet my mother in a completely different way than I would greet Trish. I mean, let's hope, if I'm healthy. So actions are a very, very difficult, very challenging thing to understand. Because not only do you have to be able to speak and be clear about them, you've got to be able to do them. And they've got to be something that is just instinctual and keeps you out of your head. But that's question five. What am I doing in order to achieve my objective?

Charlie Sandlan (26:20):

And those are really the five core fundamental, bare-bones questions that you have to ask yourself. Now I will tell you, that's fundamental stuff. Okay? There is a lot more that goes into

creating a fully realized human being, right? These are just the basic questions, but ultimately you've got to bring your understanding of psychology. You've got to have ideas for the part, for the character, whether that's the way you walk, the way you stand, the way you speak. I mean, a lot of actors might start from the outside and work their way in, but at the end of the day, you've got to know these questions. If I give you the analogy of building a house, right? First year, all of the ability to listen and respond and all of that fundamental stuff is like pouring concrete, laying the foundation. These questions, knowing how to do them, how to craft them, how to answer them, that's the frame of the house. And then you have to furnish it ultimately, you've got to continue to add to your craft as an actor, to flesh it out so that you have a real clear way of approaching a piece of material.

Charlie Sandlan (27:39):

And then ultimately, right, there's other things that you have to do when you're looking at a script, when you're breaking it down, right? You have to do homework on the other person's lines. You have to be able to know how to implant meaning, right? It's the way you have to work when you're dealing with a reader. In an audition a reader's not going to give you anything, so you better know how to do homework on the other person's lines. You better be clear about who the other person is to you, what the acting relationship is with the previous circumstances. How do I feel about it? Because you're going to have some assistant sitting there, hitting play and recording you and just saying those lines to you. You've got to be able to respond with the behavior that you need to, it all goes into the crafting. And I will say this to you, you will never be better than your crafting as an actor. And those actors that don't know how to craft, right? That don't have a way of working, they just have general horseshit, general horseshit behavior. But if you craft simply, specifically and personally, you will create vivid behavior and it all has to do with how well you craft.

Charlie Sandlan (28:46):

And those are my five questions for today. Take them, run with them, do the best he can with them. You need to be facile with those and they need to be answered quickly sometimes, certainly in an audition situation. So again, you can also email me if you need to follow up with anything that I might've said here. Now, this slight little jazz intro that I'm throwing into the show here, is to introduce a new section, a new segment of the show. I've talked on previous podcasts here about how important it is to be intellectually curious, right? That you got to keep feeding yourself, you've got to keep nourishing your artistic soul.

Charlie Sandlan (29:34):

So I thought I would share with you something that I learned this week, that I was clueless about a week ago and this has to do with an incredible artist that I discovered, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Let me say her name again, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. I'm probably slightly butchering her name, because she's Nigerian. There was an article in the Arts and Leisure section of the New York Times a week or so ago that I had put in my queue to read. And it was an interview with her and she is an incredibly accomplished writer. And one of the leading feminists culturally today and I had never heard of her, had no idea who she was. And I read this piece, I'll link it up on the website, where she was just talking about everything. From the books she's read, to the style of writing that she likes, to author's that she respects. It was an incredibly deep, highly intelligent interview and I didn't recognize a God damn thing that she was talking about. And I was just like, "Oh my God, I am so bereft of this woman's life. I have no idea who she is."

Charlie Sandlan (31:01):

And so I spent a good week learning about Chimamanda. So the first thing I did was listen to her 2012, I believe, it might have been 2009. I can't remember, but I listened to her Ted Talk and the title of the Ted Talk is, The Danger of a Single Story. And this Ted Talk

has over 23 million views, it's one of the most watched Ted Talks in their entire history. The whole premise of the conversation was this idea that when we keep imposing the same story over and over again, it robs people of their dignity. It emphasizes their difference between one another, as opposed to their similarities as human beings.

Charlie Sandlan (32:02):

And she relates that to growing up in Nigeria and becoming a voracious reader. But all of the characters, the world that she was reading, were blonde, blue eyed, white, privileged in that certain American European way. And they didn't look like her, they didn't sound like her, but yet these were the stories that she was reading. These were the people that were littering the pages of the book she read and it was hard for her to relate. And so when she started to write, she was writing about blonde haired, blue eyed girls. And it wasn't until she started reading Nigerian literature, African literature, that she began to see that there were people who like her and where the artist in her began to form in a more genuine, unique way.

Charlie Sandlan (33:01):

She's written two very popular books, one, Americanah, which I do not know, but I did start to read Half of a Yellow Sun. A book that deals with the Nigerian Civil War from the late '60s, like 67 to 70, 71, which was catastrophic, it was brutal. And with any civil war, right, what you do to each other, to your fellow citizens can be brutal. And the kind of the soul of the book, the way she describes this character, Ugwu. This young man, young boy really, who gets thrown into the military, the Nigerian military and ends up participating in an atrocity, a gang rape. It's a very complicated character, because he invokes so much compassion and so much sympathy, because he is a good human being who just gets caught up and ends up doing something really, really awful.

Charlie Sandlan (34:00):

Was just a lovely thing to read and it started me to go down this wormhole, so I go to Vulture. Vulture, if you want to read good articles on artists, on intellectuals, get a subscription online to Vulture. She has a great interview on Vulture. There's been a great story on her in the New Yorker, she is very culturally relevant. And even in the Vulture article, when I was reading about her, she was talking about Nigerian highlife, music, which led me to really incredible Nigerian musicians. Dr Sir Warrior, you should look him up on Spotify and Victor Olaiya, O-L-A-I-Y-A. Check out their music, check out some Nigerian artistry. It was beautiful. And so not only did I learn about her, but I also just broaden my musical horizons and I realized who the hell is talking on the Beyonce song, Flawless. The quote that's in the middle of that song is Chimamanda. I just feel so much better knowing something about her.

Charlie Sandlan (35:21):

She has this book that was originally an email to her. One of her very best friends who just had a baby girl and it was this long email that had to do with how to raise a feminist and the title of the book, Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions. I read that online, you can download the PDF. It was eye opening, it was humbling, it was thought provoking, it was angering, it was a beautiful piece of writing. And I'll just share with you a couple of quotes from that book. Here's one, "If you criticize X in women, but do not criticize X in men, then you do not have a problem with X, you have a problem with women. For X, please insert words like anger, ambition, loudness, stubbornness, coldness, ruthlessness." Quote number two, "The premise of chivalry is female weakness." Quote number three, "We have a world full of women who are unable to exhale fully, because they have for so long been conditioned to fold themselves into shapes, to make themselves likable." Quote number four, "I want to tell the truth, that's where my storytelling comes from. My feminism comes from somewhere else, acute dissatisfaction."

Charlie Sandlan (37:08):

Well, there you go everybody. That was this segment of what Charlie learned last week. That title will probably change, but that sounded good right now. All right, let's wrap up the show shall we? Listen, I want to thank everybody for sticking around with me and keeping that phone in your pocket and not taking it out. You can subscribe, please, to this podcast on any of the platforms that you are listening to it. You can check out any of the art and the artists that I talk about in this episode or any of the other episodes at creatingbehaviorpodcast.com. You can email me your questions, anything you'd like me to talk about in future episodes, your feedback, your thoughts, charlie@creatingbehaviorpodcast.com. Lawrence Trailer, thank you for this theme music. You can check him out, lawrencetrailermusic.com. Well, my friends, listen, we are all grinding out our days. We've got our highs, we've got our lows. Be creative when you can, play full out with yourself and don't ever, ever settle for your second best. I'm Charlie Sandlan, peace.