

# How Does This Happen, Bruce Dern?

I never dreamed of Hollywood. I never thought of movies. The goal was just to go to New York. I saw movies, but I knew that my way, and any real actor's way, was to go through the theater. The movies were a last resort because they took another skill I hadn't developed yet, which is working in front of a camera. I didn't understand how to do that. But I understood the proscenium. I understood a live audience, communicating in front of people. So I was good enough to go to New York. I would get on the Trailways bus from Philadelphia, where I was living at the time, to New York Tuesday morning and make the rounds Tuesday and Wednesday. The A to M agencies on Tuesday and the N to Z agencies on Wednesday. I had a picture with four different Brucies on it and a bunch of horseshit on the back, which was my résumé. It consisted of scenes that I'd done in class and *Waiting for Godot*. I would leave that picture. The girls trashed it as soon as I left. Maybe some of them kept it, but I doubt it.

The next Tuesday I'd go back to the exact same offices and I'd keep doing it and doing it and doing it, because to me they were intervals, like running track. You just keep repeating, repeating, repeating, and one day you'll get good enough; you'll hit a good race on the right day, and in the half mile you'll start your kick at exactly the right time and be able to sustain it all the way through to the finish. Once I was in New York, I did that May, June, July, August. In September of 1958 I went into the office of Cheryl Crawford, who was one of the three founding members of the Actors Studio, along with Kazan and Strasberg. Cheryl Crawford was a woman who dressed and behaved like a man, but she was fabulous to me. During that summer I realized I had two goals: one was to work for Mr. Kazan and the other was to be a member of the Actors Studio. So Cheryl Crawford's was always the most important place that I stopped at. She had a secretary named Jo who was never particularly fond of me one way or the other.

The very first visit, I said, "Don't trash my résumé, please."

And Jo the secretary said, "Why not?"

I said, "Because I can act."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I'll tell Miss Crawford that."

"Tell her I passed my first audition."

"Who judged your first audition?"

I said, "Tell her Mr. Strasberg judged it."

She said, "He doesn't judge first auditions."

"Well, he judged mine. I don't know why."

"It can't have been."

"He was there."

"Okay. I'll tell her."

And then I just forgot about it. Cheryl Crawford went off for the summer. That's the trouble. In June, July, and August they've all gone to Fire Island or Bucks County or wherever the hell they go.

Marie Pierce, my first wife, and I had decided that we were going to move to Flushing, where Marie's grandmother lived. We were going to live with her because she had two bedrooms upstairs and we needed two bedrooms. I had to be in New York all the time. I couldn't

keep going back and forth between New York and Philadelphia. Marie would find a job in a bank in New York.

The week after Labor Day, I walked into Cheryl's office and there's a bunch of guys sitting there. All looking exactly like me. All looking like they hadn't had a meal in a year. All looking like Irish terrorists, every last one.

Jo said, "Where the hell have you been?"\*

I said, "What are you talking about?"

"Cheryl Crawford has been looking for you since the end of July."

"You told me don't come back because she'd be gone for the summer."

Jo said, "Well, the Actors Studio decided they're going to do this play, *Shadow of a Gunman*, on Broadway, and today is the last day of casting. We're casting for this small part, but it's the key, pivotal part of the play. The bomber. The guy who blows up the building and gets everybody arrested. He's the lead terrorist. It's a Sean O'Casey play, and Mrs. O'Casey is coming over for the opening and Jack Garfein is directing it."

I said, "That's the other guy who judged my audition along with Lee Strasberg. I couldn't remember his name."

"Yes, Bruce. We know all about your audition. We know all about Mr. Garfein and Mr. Strasberg. That's the reason we've been looking for you."

The other guys sitting there are looking at me like, *Who the fuck is this?*

Jo said, "Miss Crawford wants to see you right away. She had no idea where to get hold of you today."

Every one of these guys leans forward in his chair like he's going to get up and say, "Sit the fuck down. I was here before him, and I'm going in there." I see guys who have played lowlifes and junkies on *Naked City* or have been in *A Hatful of Rain*. These guys are all members of the Actors Studio. I'm not. Geoffrey Horne is there and he's

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\*In this conversation, and most of the conversations in this book, you'll notice that everyone sounds a little bit like Bruce Dern. While these represent the gist of the conversations as he recalls them, no one is claiming these are the exact words.

already co-starred in the biggest movie ever made at that point, *Bridge on the River Kwai*. He's the Canadian guy who William Holden screams at, "Kill the Japanese." Jimmy Olson is there. Arthur Storch is there, Stefan Gierasch. They're all in *Threepenny Opera* with Lotte Lenya. They're all sitting there. And I'm going in before them. I walk in the room, and there's Joel Shanker and Jack Garfein and Cheryl. Joel comes over and puts a big hug on me. Jack was famous because he was an Auschwitz death camp kid who got out at nine, went to America, and was adopted by Lee Strasberg. He was married to Carroll Baker, who was *Baby Doll* and had just starred in umpteen big movies and was the biggest movie star around at the time in her age group.

Cheryl said, "Bruce, I'm not going to ask you to read. We found you just in time. Are you available to start rehearsal on a play tomorrow?"

I said, "I've been available all my life to start rehearsal tomorrow. I'll start right now."

"No, you don't need to do that. Do you have an agent?"

I said, "Yes, Edith Van Cleve." Edith Van Cleve was a tremendously big agent at William Morris in New York. I'd never been to California, so I didn't know how big William Morris was or who they were. I knew Edith Van Cleve was big stuff.

Cheryl said, "I'll call Edith and tell her we're giving you ninety-two dollars a week for the run of the play. That's it. You'll have a dressing room that you'll share with another actor. Sign this."

I said, "Sure."

Joel Shanker looks at me and doesn't bat an eye as I sign. All of this is against the rules. Your agent's supposed to negotiate for you, but I don't know that.

Before I could get to a phone, she called Edith and said, "This is what your client accepted and I just wanted you to know that." Edith Van Cleve and Cheryl Crawford go back because they're both in their seventies at this point.

I went right from Cheryl's over to see Edith, who couldn't have hugged me more. She said, "Do you have any idea what you plugged into today? I've been handling actors fifty years. I've never had an actor plug in in one day first time out like what you plugged into today. You plugged into the Actors Studio. Their first play ever on Broadway. With

Cheryl Crawford, Lee Strasberg, and Elia Kazan putting on the play as producers, the only non-Studio member of the play is you. No one knows who you are, how you got here, and they hired you without even reading, based on an audition you did six months ago. How does this happen, Bruce Dern?”

I said, “I have no idea. I was only an hour away from not getting the part.”

Edith said, “Cheryl said you made six enemies today.”

I said, “I’m sure I made six thousand enemies today.”

She said, “No, you just pulled it off. Joel Shanker is in love with you. He said you’re so sincere. You showed someone who has been beaten.”

I’ve never forgotten Joel Shanker picked up on that. Later on Kazan told me, “The first thing that ever drew me to you was when I had seen you run a couple of times in Madison Square Garden, and you had that air about you. Whether you won or lost, you could take losing.”

We had three previews, and Cheryl didn’t take it out of town. The producers didn’t have the money to board actors. Since it cost no money to go to the Studio, it’s all donations from other members and there’s no fund-raisers. The Actors Studio had revenue then only because some of its members had gone on to be stars. The producers exhausted their coffers by putting on this play.

Physically, the Actors Studio was in the 400 block of West 44th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, three blocks from the heart of the theater district on the West Side of Manhattan. An old church converted into a big open room with seats and a flat floor, not even a raised stage. Little folding chairs. People do the work onstage, and when it’s over you sit there. The moderator asks, “What were you trying to do?” After you tell him what you were working on, he asks the other students what they thought of what they saw. He sums up what we’ve all said, gives his comments as to what he saw and felt about the work and the progress that the two actors are making in accordance with their careers. He suggests what they should work on in the future and states their strengths and weaknesses. The principle of the Actors Studio is that it’s a hospital. What you’re working on are not your strengths, but your weaknesses.

To become a member of the Actors Studio, you have two auditions no matter who you are. You audition the first time for three people who judge your audition. They're selected by Mr. Strasberg. In my day, they were selected by Mr. Strasberg, Cheryl Crawford, and Mr. Kazan. If you passed the first audition, you moved on to a final audition of which there were two a year judged by Mr. Strasberg, Miss Crawford, and Gadg\*. If you passed that, you were a member of the Actors Studio. They were admitting five or six people a year. Once you're in, you're in for life and it's free.

The producers had to buy the rights to *Shadow of a Gunman* from the O'Casey estate. It was a risk because, in the 1950s, who cared about the 1919 Irish Republican Army? Lee and Gadg walked in at about eleven in the morning on our fifteenth day of rehearsal. We were still sitting at the table reading the play. In twelve nights we were opening on Broadway. The play had not been staged. We were still working on relationships. Lee watched for about five minutes, and we were sent to lunch. We came back knowing nothing.

We sat down at the table, and Lee said, "You, you, you and you, and you, you, you, and you"—and there were nine of us in the cast. "You pick up that table and get it the hell out of my sight. Bruce, I know you can run up and down stairs. Take all this stuff and get it up in the dressing room. Any of you that have to make a phone call go make it now because none of you are going home until this play is staged. And we're going to stage it today."

Bill Smithers, Jerry O'Laughlin, and Susan Strasberg—who was Lee's daughter—were the three stars.

The producers said, "This is hideous and disgraceful. We're shocked and embarrassed to you and for you. But this play's going on. It's going to open October twenty-fifth when it's supposed to open."

Lee turns to his daughter. He says, "You, girl. Over there." She stands where the door would be. "When I count to three you come through that hole." You're in a rehearsal room and there's no door there. "Tall guy, sit down on the box. Other guy . . . older guy." No names.

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\*For most of his career, friends referred to Elia Kazan as Gadg, sometimes spelled Gadge.

Lee said, “Okay, the rest of you, just crouch over there until I call for you.” One by one we staged the play. It was the most magnificent afternoon I’ve been through in my life.

He said, “Runner guy. What’s his name? Oh yeah, Bruce. I remember you from *Waiting for Godot*. You’re Gordon Phillips’s friend or son or something. But you run, right?”

“Well, not anymore.”

He said, “Who cares? You’re working for me now, right?”

“Right.”

“You’re Jack’s guy, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Jack’s not here now. I want you and Mr. Reed and Miss Cunningham and Stefan to go up there on the second landing. Suzy, keep talking. Do the lines of the play. You three, I want you to talk about what you read in the paper today. Suzy, speak English for Christ’s sake. We’re not speaking Hebrew here. Bruce, sports, talk about the Giants. Down here, up there talk.”

We were carrying on dialogue because it’s a tenement. The principals are in a room down here. We’re in other apartments up there. Lee’s creating offstage dialogue that will be at the same level as the dialogue onstage to create a tenement atmosphere for the audience. You will never see us, but you’ll hear our voices throughout the entire play. The audience is always aware of the pressures around the people in the room who are planning this clandestine overthrow of the Irish government. Well, if this isn’t exciting, I don’t know what is. This is what I came here for.

I went over to Gadg at the first break and said, “Hey, Bud”—I’ve called people Bud all my life—“this is it.”

He said, “It ain’t it, but it’s gonna get there.”

I said, “I came for this.”

Gadg said, “You told me last week you came here to work for me. You ain’t working for me yet. You think the rabbi’s the only guy who can do this? I’m from Turkey. Wait till you work for a fucking Turk. Imagine if Lee and I were to do something together.”

I was so excited and turned on the very first day. That was the beginning of my life.