

## THE ALCHEMIST

*Susan Batson and the enterprise of acting*

BY JOHN LAHR



*"She can shake you like a tree and get the fruits do Juliette Binoche says of Batson.*

According to the folk adage, what comes from the heart goes to the heart. This is not exactly the case; not, at any rate, if you're an actor. Sometimes the heart needs educating; sometimes it needs resuscitating; sometimes it even needs finding—and that is why Susan Batson is in business. Batson, a fiftyish African-American powerhouse, is an

acting coach, or, more accurately, a technician of the spirit.

"Acting coach" is a comparatively new job description. The Old Guard movie stars had a sort of cash-and-carry attitude toward their work. Jimmy Cagney summed it up this way: "Find your mark, look the other fellow in the eye, and tell the truth." Since then, with in-

creasing competition, minimal rehearsal time, and directors with great knowledge of the camera but little understanding of acting, the stakes have become higher and actors more pragmatic. Marilyn Monroe was so devoted to her coach, Paula Strasberg, the wife of the Actor's Studio guru Lee Strasberg, that she had her own room in the Strasbergs' apartment. Montgomery Clift's coach, Mira Rostova, notoriously stood behind the director to give her client the nod about the quality of each take. During the filming of "The Big Lift," the exasperated director, George Seaton, took Clift aside to explain that he'd hired *him*, not his coach. "But, George, you don't understand," Clift said. "When I'm on the set, Mira Rostova *is* Montgomery Clift."

"Actors are helpless; they can't see themselves," said the director Elia Kazan, who co-founded the Actor's Studio in 1947. "If you paint a painting, you can look at it later, say, 'This is lousy,' and put a knife through it. The poor actor is . . . totally and painfully dependent on a teacher to tell him you're good, you're bad, this, that, and the other. And it lends itself to racketeering." In "True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor," the playwright David Mamet takes this complaint one step further. "Let me be impolite," he writes. "Most teachers of acting are frauds, and their schools offer nothing other than the right to consider oneself part of the theatre." What distinguishes Susan Batson from the "frauds" is her intense empathy and what Nicole Kidman, one of the many stars who have kept Batson on the road for nine months of the past year, calls "just a hell of a lot of pure talent."

Through Batson's ministrations, many performers who have found a public—Kidman, Juliette Binoche, Lily Tomlin, Jennifer Lopez, Madonna, and Chris Rock, among others—have stayed fresh for the paying customers. When Tom Cruise received a Golden Globe for his astute performance in "Magnolia," he thanked Batson, the first coach he'd ever had. Three hundred and sixty-eight performers in search of a public have also found their way to Batson's studio—an airy, sixth-floor office space in SoHo, in a kind of arts conglomerate called Black Nex-

xus, which was founded by Batson's twenty-eight-year-old son, Carl Ford, in 1996, and now grosses nearly a million dollars a year. There, classes for every level of skill are offered. The curriculum begins with the workout class "Ex-er Actor" (thirty dollars a class), progresses to "Developing Your Own Method" and "Scene Study" (both fifty dollars), and culminates with a master class with the snake-oil rubric "Gold Dust" (a hundred dollars). Black Nexxus requires its students to take at least one Ex-er Actor class and one process class a week, but Batson, who gets two hundred and fifty dollars an hour for a private session, believes that lack of funds should never be an excuse for not enrolling. Many of the people painting, cleaning, filing, and answering phones at the headquarters are bartering their services for her expertise.

In the business office, at the center of a steel table where each student signs in, is a red stone with the word "wisdom" chiselled into it and a crystal ball. These are the totems of Batson's undertaking, which is to sell both insight and magic. "Making Dreams Come True" is the slogan on Black Nexxus's letterhead, and a quotation from a version of Goethe's "Faust,"

pinned to the studio's bulletin board, underscores the point:

Whatever you can do,  
Or dream you can,  
Begin it.  
Boldness has  
Genius, power  
And magic in it.

Underneath the poem is a quotation from Proverbs 31: "She sees her work as good, and her lamp does not go out." The "she" in question is clearly Batson, whose work schedule is herculean. She employs a rotating group of about six working actors to teach her technique while she's away, but she never takes a vacation, and her classes run as late as 5 A.M. Her obsessive metabolism is built into Black Nexxus's artistic policy. "We are an organization that never rests," its mission statement reads. "We are available 365 days a year, 24 hours a day."

There are hundreds of acting coaches plying their trade—the New York edition of "The Actor's Guide to Qualified Acting Coaches," which is a subjective and incomplete list, comes to a hundred and forty-one pages—and almost as many approaches to the job. Batson herself is a Method gal. The bedrock of her teaching is a series of psychological procedures first popular-

ized by Stanislavski, and promulgated in America primarily by Strasberg and Kazan, to create a more complex internal representation of human behavior. Batson's accoutrements—the crystal ball, the slogans—sometimes give her a whiff of the swami. But her particular approach is drawn from a gallimaufry of external wisdom: the Bible and books about focussing the mind, such as "The Inner Game of Tennis" and "Zen in the Art of Archery," as well as books on healing and popular psychology (Alice Miller's "Drama of the Gifted Child" is a favorite). Prominent near the front door of Batson's duplex is a volume of affirmations. Affirmation is the name of Batson's game—something she gets for herself by giving to others.

The one-hour Ex-er Actor class begins promptly at 10 A.M. Batson, who is five feet two in heels, has a nonsense manner, saucer eyes, and high cheekbones, set off by a mane of cascading straight black hair—a kind of Eartha Kitt with more pounds than purr. Normally, only the first fifteen students to arrive each morning are allowed into the rehearsal room, but when I took the class there were seventeen of us, barefoot, and Batson, who was wearing a diaphanous yellow tunic and tan leotards. Her technique with beginners is to construct a series of layered, personalized associations, which the actor can then channel into a character to make it specific and alive. When the actor is working well, these layers run together fluidly—surgeons call this marriage of discipline and instinct "unconscious competence"—but in the Ex-er Actor class each component is isolated and worked on, then deployed in a short scene.

Batson put Aretha Franklin's "Queen of Soul" into a CD player and bopped along with her students as we formed a circle and began the day's journey into our interiors. Soon she was calling people from the periphery into the center. "Drop in," Batson said. "Submit yourself to the person." The idea—a mimetic exercise—was for the students in the circle to somehow distill in their own movements the essence of what the person inside the circle was expressing. A languorous frizzy blonde in a red tank top, who seemed at first to



*"Would it kill you to compost?"*

be lap dancing, ended up rolling her lithe body on the floor and yawning. Then, as if to provide a counterpoint to the joy of Aretha's expansive sound, another woman swung into the center with a sour, defensive dance—bobbing and weaving like a cornered bantamweight, occasionally letting out little Taebo kicks and jabs. A woman named Susan, dressed entirely in black and looking for all the world as if she were performing Jules Feiffer's "Dance to Spring," seemed to be permanently knotted and turned in on herself. Walter, an older man, stood flapping his arms improbably and roaring like an overexcited baby, without actually moving anywhere. When my name was called, I sashayed into the center. Aretha was singing "You and me / For eternity," and I felt lyrical and confident in the moment. At the end of the exercise, Batson walked around the circle asking each student, "What are you aware of?" The frizzy blonde, who turned out to be a Russian émigrée named Natalie, said, "I am aware of *beink* tired." Susan clutched Batson's hand and whispered like Elaine May talking to Mike Nichols. "I am aware of being in such pain," she said. From the exercise, I was aware that bodies tell their own stories.

Next, to develop what her manual calls "emotional flexibility," Batson instructed the students to remember a time when they had been betrayed, a moment of trauma that they could then condense and use to personalize a character. "*Vat iss* trauma?" Natalie asked. Once the meaning of the word was made clear to her, Natalie was screaming, kicking, clawing, and keening like the others. It was bedlam. "I'm so fuckin' sick of my fuckin' faults," the actress beside me snarled. "Bring it in," Batson said to one actor, who could not stop crying after the exercise was over. "Let it go."

The piece we were required to perform at the end of the session was an eleven-line tantrum that Batson had written, based on one that a pop diva had thrown at her road manager. "We need to feel that her fear is heartfelt," Batson advised, as she handed out the script. "Really obligate yourself, really drop into the character's need to be understood." After a few minutes of

study, each of us acted out what we remembered of the speech. It read, in part:

Val—Val—this is catastrophic! Do you SEE what has been placed before us here—I can't believe the disgrace. I SAID—before we booked this place, before you made the phone calls to CONFIRM our dates here—that there should be no green M & Ms in the fucking assortment. . . . Let me do the honor of describing your fucking JOB again—you are required to oversee the finite details of what gets placed in our path at all times. . . . Now PICK those little monsters out of there—or the band doesn't play.

In time, and with practice, Batson would be able to show these students how to break down a script—which words to stress for exposition and conflict, how to build a scene to an articulate emotional climax. Today, however, they ranted at full tilt. None of the actors seemed to have any critical capacity. They could feel, they could read the words, but they were at a loss to winkle out nuance and irony from them. Afterward, Batson asked each performer in turn to sit next to her while she critiqued his or her performance and then invited observations from the rest of the class. The comments from the class were generally an easy ride, and sometimes incidentally hilarious. To a young man attending his first class, one student said, "I like the package. I see star." Batson uses these exchanges to judge where her students are and what they need. "It helps to balance my voice in their heads," she says. She herself is very specific in her criticism and remembers the details of even the worst performance. To one actress, who had opted for an emotional meltdown that included throwing her shoe, Batson said, "This kind of emotional life can control us, then we forget we have to be artful and tell a story. Acting, I swear to God, is not really about emoting. It's about doing."

Talent cannot be taught, but ways of releasing it can. Batson approaches theatre as a sort of spiritual excavation, and whether prowess is achieved or not isn't entirely the point. Her goal is to make articulate energy out of the struggle to explore the self and its defenses. As she remarked about the hapless Walter, "He will leave with, I think, some information about himself."

Batson grew up in a spacious old house in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Her father, a caterer, died young, and her mother, Ruth M. Batson, a former Democratic State Committee woman and

head of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, remembers Batson as a “way-having child” who was “hard to take” and “kind of rebellious.” She was dubbed “Tallulah” by family friends for her precocious antics. When Batson turned eight, her mother—in an attempt to find friends willing to play with the hyperactive child—took her to the Boston Children’s Theatre. (Batson thought she was being delivered to a mental institution.) “I think these are the only people who can understand you,” Ruth said. Before then, Batson, who had childhood-abuse issues, had felt “an enormous amount of being disconnected, not knowing what to do or where to go. I often feel that, had my mother not made the choice, I might have been in a little trouble,” she says.

While at Boston’s Emerson College, Batson auditioned for the John Hay Whitney Fellowship and won. The day she graduated—June 14, 1969—she set off for New York to begin her acting career. By September, she was performing

in “Hair,” at the Public Theatre. “She had a quality like Laurette Taylor,” says Uta Hagen, who was a judge on the fellowship panel and, along with her husband, the actor-director Herbert Berghof, later taught Batson. “It was radiant. Then, when she didn’t trust that and started pushing it, she lost it. I think she could have been a big star.” So did a lot of other people who recognized Batson’s gifts and tried to help her. Joseph Papp gave her work and found her a small duplex on the Upper West Side, where she still lives. Lee Strasberg saw her as a sort of prodigy and accepted her into the Actor’s Studio. “Everybody was around,” Batson recalls. “Rod Steiger, Paul Newman, Maureen Stapleton, Robert De Niro. They were *in* the classes. I developed this wonderful relationship with Strasberg; he was very protective of me.” Batson quickly acquired a closetful of awards, including an Obie for a thrilling, manic performance in Heathcote Williams’s “AC/DC.” “I had money. I worked immediately. I was very well

taken care of,” Batson says now, and starts to cry. “But I got so disappointed in the business. Oh, it hurts! . . . I’ve had to forgive myself so much.”

She is speaking of the time when she was about twenty-two and had been hired by the director and critic Harold Clurman to understudy Barbara Harris in Arthur Miller’s “The Creation of the World and Other Business.” During the fourth week of rehearsals, Batson replaced Harris in the leading role. “So I take over, with Arthur Miller helping me and the producer Robert Whitehead’s wife—the actress Zoe Caldwell—being like my assistant, telling me what to buy, what to eat. She was fantastic,” Batson says. Batson was well reviewed in Boston and in Washington, where the show played at the Kennedy Center. But soon after the D.C. opening Miller and Whitehead visited Batson in her dressing room to tell her that they wanted Caldwell to take over the role. Batson says, “I sit there. I’m really numb. ‘This is awful,’ I said. ‘This is really bad!’

DANVILLE—

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Thank you!

Miller says to me, 'Now, don't get neurotic, Susan. This is a great opportunity. You're gonna understudy Zoe. What are you upset about?' Then he goes on to say, 'I really wrote it for Zoe. I hear Zoe's voice in my head.' By this time, I'm murderous. I leave."

As a child, Batson had carried protest signs at political demonstrations her mother took her to. She had been taught early "never to perpetuate a black stereotype," and she saw her demotion as racist. "I'm a black woman who was just starting professionally," she says. "They couldn't understand why I wasn't grateful to understudy Zoe Caldwell. They thought it was a little outrageous." Batson's mother came to her defense and initiated legal action with Actors' Equity, which ruled in favor of the producers. Then Batson dropped out for a time; she married a fellow-actor and followed him to Boston, where he got a law degree and she had their son. Three years later, she was divorced and a single parent, living in Los Angeles, where she did

some acting and, with Strasberg's encouragement, began to teach.

Coaching allowed Batson to do for others what, increasingly, she was unable to do for herself: "Keep the actor going." She withdrew into the process; and, because her own mother had been "consistently very public and very busy" when she was a child, Batson figured she'd teach at home, where she could also be with her son. This was not altogether a success. "I was always there," she says. "But, as the therapist said, it was somewhat of a 'profound neglect.'" Batson worked upstairs, into the late hours. Carl was downstairs, largely alone. He found his mother's gruelling regimen frustrating and confusing. "She spent more time with her students than she spent with me," he says. "I begged her—I said, 'Why couldn't you have become something else? Why couldn't you have been a lawyer or a doctor?' She said, 'This is all'—and she began to cry—'this is all I ever wanted to do with my life. This is my passion.'" Carl, who is now a writer

and a director, eventually set up Black Nexus both to hold on to his mother and to wean her from coaching. "The whole purpose of Black Nexus was to get her working, to write and direct material for her to star in. She's not an acting coach in my mind—she's an actress." At Spike Lee's request, Batson has appeared in three of his films—"Bamboozled," "Girl 6," and "Summer of Sam"—but she has been otherwise reluctant to return to her first vocation. "As a result of not trusting the business, I won't put myself out there," she says. The irony of this isn't lost on her. While she works to coax other actors out of hiding, she herself remains, as she confesses with a laugh, "in deep hiding—which makes me an authority on hiding."

Part of the chemistry that exists between Batson and actors—"She can shake you like a tree and get the fruits down," Juliette Binoche says—comes from a sense of safety that her vigilance generates in them. Binoche, who con-

DANVILLE—

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siders Batson one of her best friends, explains, "It's a generosity I've very rarely seen. She's listening with, like, six ears. She's always trying to see further." Some acting coaches like to send the actor out not knowing quite where he's going; Batson sends the actor on his journey with a map. "She leads you to a place of direct emotional understanding," Jennifer Lopez says. "She gives you confidence that when you go out there you know already you're good, because she said so."

Coaching is about intimacy, which is impossible without equality—a fact that appeals to the highly politicized Batson. "When I sit across from Tom Cruise, doing my job, we have to share on this intimate level to get a piece of art done," she says. "That role has never been played by a black person. It has to be equal. Everybody—Anglo-Saxon, German, French—has to make an adjustment. They have to get rid of all kinds of stereotypes in order to sit in the room and do the work."

As a coach, Batson also has to be something of a shape-shifter, and she adjusts her approach to the needs of each client. She first worked with Cruise on Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut." "He said to me, 'You know, I've done this King of Hollywood thing. I really wanna act,'" Batson recalls. "He wanted to grab something and bite into it. And he did." For "Magnolia," in which Cruise played a woman-hating men's-empowerment guru, Batson worked to open him up "to the scumbag in him, the hustler in him." She says, "I wanted him to be more physical. We worked on an animal—the fox. He would start to feel the whole thing, which gave him the clothing, the look. Once he got the sensation of the tail, he was totally present."

When Batson was hired to help Jennifer Lopez on "Enough," a film about emotional abuse, she began with what amounted to a pep talk: "You know, a lot of young girls look to you for who they are, what they're gonna wear. You have a responsibility to make sure they understand this woman." By the end of this, Lopez was in tears. "Exactly," Lopez said. "Once I got Jennifer to have a purpose, she knew she had to send it," Batson explains. "I could start talking to her about actions."

Recently, Batson was called in to help Chris Rock with "Bad Company," a film

in which he plays twin brothers—one a Harvard-educated C.I.A. agent and the other a comic hip-hop homie. She found herself stonewalled with "the first resistance ever." "Comedy built my house, not acting," Rock told her. "What are you doing here?" "He's sitting there. He's got khakis and a beautiful shirt with his legs crossed. He's leaning on the couch," Batson says. She decided to help him use his own body language to develop the character of the C.I.A. agent. "I said, 'What about crossing the legs, and stuff? If he sat wearing elegant clothing, five-hundred-dollar shirts, and you just cross your legs for him—make sure the legs are crossed—that would, I think, serve the character.' He looks at me. 'And the other one, the comic hip-hop character, I think you can put together yourself.' He says, 'You're absolutely right.'" At the end of their session, Batson asked, "You want me to come back tomorrow so we can maybe get the emotional life into the character?" Rock worked with her for eight days, and asked her to go with him on location; she demurred. As a rule, she stays away from the set. ("I get directorial—it gets messy.") The only exception is Spike Lee's films, for which she and Lee often review the monitor after each take. "His strength is in the visual," Batson says. "Not necessarily pulling from the actor what he wants." At an early point in their collaboration, Batson was summoned to Lee's offices. As she recalls it, "He pulled out a notebook and pen, and said, 'Well, tell me about acting.' I said, 'This is not the way to tell you about acting.' 'Well, just give me a few notes on it.' Finally I said, 'Look, the only way I think you will understand the process is to take the class.' I have yet to see him."

This summer, Batson accepted the notoriously temperamental Naomi Campbell on the basis of a phone call. "By sixteen, Naomi was out on her own, creating her career," Batson says. "That's something I understand. Naomi's boda-



## INCARNATION

In the blind a bird dog watches  
as you become irretrievable  
and snow geese come down from the east.  
Your children look for you where you are not.  
In the basement of the house.  
The ties we find are drunk with animal life:  
the pheasants set in whiskey-colored frieze.  
Heavy English jackets laid like skins.  
My milk teeth in a drawer.

I taste you in smoked meat near the bone.  
My lungs run, sick and guttural and gold.  
You faced an animal. It said, "It hurts so much."

—Dana Goodyear

cious on the runway. When she commits, it's wonderful. There is no way Naomi could work half-assed. She may not have all the elements, but she'll have the courage." At thirty-one, after a few haphazard appearances in films, Campbell had signed on to perform Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues" in San Francisco and London, and had flown to New York to spend three weeks cramming with Batson. "I'm nervous when I'm on the runway, but I'm not speaking, so I'm not playing my emotions. I'm used to covering," Campbell explained to me.

Batson's style of coaching involves a particularly personal scrutiny; for a celebrity, to be experienced and not just seen can be at once moving and humbling. "Because I'm meeting them on such intimate territory, I meet their 'Little Girl,'" Batson says, using her term for the hidden or wounded part of some of her diva clients, which the carapace of fame hides from the world and from them. "Madonna, for instance. The first thing she said to me—I don't make this up—I'm putty in your hands. I was waiting for the testy bitch, the queen who you gotta do it her way. She absolutely, completely surrendered." So did Campbell, who had never been onstage and had a limited time in which to get ready. From the first day of Ex-er Actor class, she displayed extraordinary access to her feelings. Batson had asked the students, when reliving their moment of trauma, to feel the face of the figure they were

imagining. "Naomi screamed, 'No! No!'" Batson says. "She didn't want to go near the person. It was so vivid for her. She was right, right there."

By the time I joined them for their one-on-one, Campbell had already worked on characters from two such moments. The whole experience, she told me in her breathy, girlish voice, had been incredible. In a green dress and sneakers, Campbell sat at the steel table in the business office with Batson and Batson's assistant Gail Williams. They were in the process of breaking the lines of a scene into beats. Campbell studiously noted the conclusions in a notebook with three columns marked across the top of the page: "Action," "Description," and "Personalized Material."

"I hated my thighs and I hated my vagina even more," Campbell read out loud. "I thought it was incredibly ugly. I was one of those women who had looked at it and from that moment on I wished I hadn't. It made me sick."

"Now, this is a major conflict," Batson interjected. "This is an inner conflict."

"Right," Campbell said, entering "inner conflict" under the "Description" column in her notebook.

"So the action is not to go to the loathing side but a desire not to have such an inner conflict inside." Then, referring to a period of depression in Campbell's life during which she stayed in bed for three days, Batson added, "The stuff that you felt in the shutdown period is what you want here."

Campbell took notes, then launched into the next line: "I pitied anyone who had to go down there. I began to pretend—" Batson stopped her again. "No, no, no. Do you believe her, that she pitied anyone who would go down there?"

"Yeah," Campbell said, fingering a diamond cross at her neck. "Well, she let Bob go down there."

"She *finally* let Bob go down there. You could make this a total character statement and be a liar about it. Or you can really mean it."

"No, she hates it. It's a fact," Campbell said. She continued reading: "I began to pretend there was something else between my legs. I imagined furniture—cozy futons with light cotton comforters, little velvet settees. Leopard rugs, pretty things—silk handkerchiefs, quilted pot holders, or place settings."

"Look at the stuff she's putting there. Comfy, pretty things. It tells you what class the woman is, too," Batson said. "We're dealing with a middle-class woman. This is the soft, lady side of her coming out."

Campbell carried on: "Whenever a man was inside me, I pictured him inside a mink-lined muffler, or a Chinese bowl." At this point, she suddenly broke off.

"I'm right here," Batson said. "What's touching you about this?"

"I got dizzy, actually," she said, leaning back in her chair. "Just got dizzy there. I wanted to throw up right there."

"You may want to ask yourself, What's the feeling that's just occurred now? You feel how it's knocking you out?"

Tears were rolling down Campbell's face, and she looked bewildered. "I feel like something might be wrong."

"Can you guess what the feeling might be?"

"Denial."

"I think you're no longer in denial," Batson replied. "I think that's what the problem is. You want to try again, maybe with the feeling? Whatever it is, it's gonna stir this up. It really is."

"We got to 'Whenever a man was inside me' . . ." Campbell broke off again. "I have a lot of guilt right now," she said.

"How about anger?"

"Yeah, there is anger, because why couldn't they see, why didn't they take my shutdown?" Campbell said.

Like a prosecutor leading an expert

witness, Batson said, "So maybe this is real anger, you know."

Campbell got up from her chair and stood unsteadily. "This is the weirdest thing. Have you ever seen this?"

"Oh, yeah," Batson said. "I just want you to know that we're not panicked. Not yet. If you faint, I'll jump up. You want to try a couple of 'fuck you's while I sit here?"

Campbell began to curse. "Fuck you! Fuck you!! Fuck you!!!" Then she stopped, her eyes glazed. "I feel so bloody weak," she said. "I don't understand what's happened. This is so strange. I can't look at a paper, and I can't—"

"Do you want John to leave so you can talk about it?"

I left the room. Through a glass partition, I watched as Batson led Campbell to the sofa to lie down. A few minutes later, she joined me in the lobby. "My suspicion is that the anger is the real thing, and to put it on display is a little tough," Batson said. "Right now, I think she's kind of amazed at how enraged she is. I think she could kill. I'm just gonna have to lift it up to art so that when she gets to this monologue she doesn't balk."

Half an hour later, Campbell woke up. Like a floored fighter pushing up from the mat, she struggled to the table. Batson came around and knelt beside her, holding her hand and whispering into her ear. "Make a sound. Just let yourself cry. Let it go," she whispered, as Campbell started to sob. "Make a sound! Good. Everything is breaking up. Let everything happen."

"I'm feeling something," Campbell mumbled. "I don't understand. My whole body is empty."

"I'm having a feeling, a deep, deep feeling.' Say that, please," Batson said. Campbell did as she was told and started to cough. "There you go," Batson said. "The cough is the indication of the rage. It's fantastic, Naomi. This is how talented you are, how sensitive. You took it off the page—something hit you from the page! You don't have any escape route now. You can't cover. This is an ancient feeling. That's how deep down you put it. It's older even than you, maybe. I mean, this is primal stuff."

As Campbell sobbed, Batson gave little intakes of breath, as if she, too, were reining in tears. In the moment, Batson was not fake, but not entirely real, either. The maneuver, she said later, signalled, "I'm here, I'm feeling you. We

can release." As Batson zeroed in on the source of Campbell's feelings, she began to change her syntax, moving from first person to third person, referring to Campbell's "Little Girl," whom she seemed to be calling out: "You want to throw up? You want to curl up? This is her pain. She has every right to cry. She has every right to be angry. This is the feeling. You didn't ever feel it before. And it really hurts. You're not gonna be violated by another person. And you come to that just by being clear about this. And this is why the shutdown."

"I just feel bad for the Little Girl," said Campbell, who by now had clearly absorbed Batson's analytic vocabulary. "Her mother shouldn't have left her. A lot of stuff I've gone through I don't think I would have gone through if my mother was there."

"I'm glad you feel sorry for her," Batson said. "She was this hurt. That's the feeling. And that feeling you've been running from in fifty million ways."

After a while, Batson said, "You did amazing work tonight. You took time to have sympathy for that Little Girl, which is the most important work. Maybe tomorrow when I see you, you'll be ready—*boom!*—to lift it to art."

It was well after midnight by the time we left. As Campbell and I got into the elevator, another actress, who had been waiting patiently for forty minutes, smiled and walked into the office for her one-on-one with Batson.

Because Campbell had slept for only a few hours and had awakened with a migraine, her lesson the next day was shifted to her sumptuous lemon-yellow Upper East Side hotel suite, which smelled of lilies. When I reported the events of the previous night to a friend, he'd quipped, "For a supermodel to pass out unassisted by drugs is a major achievement." But, as Campbell ushered us graciously into her room, I was disappointed in myself for having laughed. Struggle is an opportunity, Batson was fond of saying, and Campbell, it was plain to see, was working hard to grow. "I had no understanding of what was happening," she said of her collapse. "I was like, Why is she not sending me home? When we went through it to the end, I understood. I feel lighter. I feel more connected with making peace with

those things that have happened to me."

The lines that had thrown Campbell the night before now posed no problem, and she made it to the end of the speech: "I began to swell, began to feel proud. Began to love my vagina. And Bob lost himself there, and I was there with him, in my vagina, and we were gone."

Batson reviewed the trajectory of the character—"total shutdown to disgust, hate to acceptance"—then returned to the beginning of the monologue to layer it with psychological gesture. Like a platoon sergeant demanding pushups, she called for movements and watched over every adjustment that Campbell made to her body. For two hours, they went back and forth over the lines like a brass rubbing, bringing both Campbell and the text into greater definition.

"She's ready to work it," Batson said, as she got into a taxi to go downtown. "I usually don't like to lay it out this quickly. But she doesn't have much time." (Campbell, it turned out, was a hit in San Francisco, and was asked by the producers to reprise the role in Los Angeles and New York.) Teaching acting, it seemed to me, was a confidence game; that is, it gave confidence. Coaches are entrepreneurs of hope. Their strange alchemy is part psychology, part technique, part smoke and mirrors. What made Campbell and all the other stars believers was Batson's intuition. Kidman and Binoche had also made reference to this quality, and both could explain it only as a kind of magic. "She just brings out the truth in some people," Campbell had told me. I asked Batson if, as a child, she had been aware of having heightened perceptions. "I used to call myself crazy all the time," she said. "I would make announcements like 'Uncle Richie just died.' The phone would ring, and Uncle Richie would be dead. So my mother would say to my sisters, 'Meet her at the door. Tell her not to have any revelations today.'" Batson laughed. "She'd say, 'Don't say anything, because you're gonna put your mouth on a situation.' So I thought if I opened my mouth this evil thing would happen." Batson looked away, as if remembering herself as that manic little showoff. "But in the theatre I was told that I had to put my mouth *on*—and that it was all right." ♦