

Advanced Acting Strategies for the Experienced Actor

Great book choices:

Irreverent Acting: A Bold New Statement on the Craft of Acting and Individual Talent by Eric Morris – June 22, 1992

On Directing by Harold Clurman

A Sense of Direction by William Ball

Since Stanislavski and Vakhtangov: The Method As a System for Today's Actor by Lawrence Parke – March 1986

Stanislavski in 7 Not-So-Easy Steps

from: The Stanislavski System: Growth and Methodology by Perviz Sawoski

THE METHOD OF PHYSICAL ACTIONS: Stanislavski's System proposed that a series of physical actions arranged in sequential order would trigger the necessary emotions in an actor's performance.

1. These emotions were based in the unconscious (or subconscious) and could not otherwise directly come to surface when needed.
2. They would have to be brought out through indirect means. Hence his search for the 'conscious means to the unconscious' led him to create this 'Method of Physical Actions,' a physical map plotted out for the actor. This 'conscious' physical map of action would then arouse and bring out the 'unconscious' emotions of the actor.

1. **Units and Objectives** In order to create this map, Stanislavski developed points of reference for the actor, which are now generally known as units and objectives.

- **A unit:** is a portion of a scene that contains one objective for an actor. In that sense, a unit changed every time a shift occurred in a scene. Every unit had an objective for each character.
- This **objective** was expressed through the use of an active and transitive verb;
 - *Example: "to seduce her" or "to annoy him". This active (action driven) objective then had corresponding physical action(s) that would help to achieve the objective.
 - *The objective was directed towards another person in order to ensure interaction.
 - NON-Example: "to remember" or "to think" would not be valid objectives, because they could not be directed towards another person. This would result in introspective and self-indulgent acting, rather than communication with others on stage.

2. **Through line of Actions and the Super-objective** When objectives were strung together in a logical and coherent form, a through line of action was mapped out for the character. This was important in order to create a sense of the whole.

- **Super-objective:** the phrase that would carry this 'through line of action.'
 - *The super-objective could then be looked at as the 'spine' with the objectives as 'vertebrae.'
 - *Example: the super-objective of one character could be "to win back the love of..." (the other character).
 1. In order to achieve this super-objective, the first character would have successive unit objectives such as, "to tease her", "to please her", "to excite her", "to provoke her" and "to placate her".
 2. These objectives, when strung together, revealed the super-objective ("to win back the love of...", the logical, coherent through line of action. Stanislavski called this super-objective the 'final goal of every performance'

3. **Analysis of Text through Action** In analyzing an action, the actor answered three questions:

1. *'What do I (the character) do?'*
 2. *'Why do I (the character) do it?'*
 3. *'How do I (the character) do it?'*
- This helped the actor understand the aim, or main idea, of the play. Through this analysis, the actor could then create psycho-physical behavior on stage in action.

4. **Truth, Belief & the 'Magic If':** Stanislavski stated that truth on stage was different from truth in real life.
- This was an important factor in acting, especially so in realism where the aim of the actor was to create the appearance of reality or 'truth' on stage.
 - **The Magic If:** The problem was then creating the appearance of reality for the spectator. Stanislavski's answer to this problem was in the creation of the 'Magic If.'
 - The actor tried to answer the question, "*If I were in Macbeth's position, what would I do?*"
 - Thus, the character's objectives drove the actor's physical action choices. Through the stimulus of the powerful 'if,' an actor could make strong theatrical choices that would appear to the audience as real, true and believable. In Stanislavski's opinion, the actor who had the ability to make the audience believe in what he/she wanted them to believe, achieved 'scenic truth.'
 - **Scenic Truth:** Stanislavski defined 'scenic truth' as that which originated 'on the plane of imaginative and artistic fiction.' The success of this scenic truth, according to Stanislavski, then constituted 'art' on stage
5. **Imagination:** Stanislavski cautioned actors that knowledge and application of his techniques was only useful to an actor if accompanied by a fertile imagination. There is no such thing as *actuality* on the stage. Art is a product of the imagination, and the aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality. The more fertile the actor's imagination, the more interesting would be the choices made in terms of objectives, physical action and creating the given circumstances around the character.
6. **Subtext:** refers to the meaning lying underneath the text/dialogue. This subtext would not be spoken, but rather, interpreted by the actor through intonation, gesture, body posture, pauses or choices in action. Thus, through the actor's imagination, the subtext 'spoke' to the audience. For Stanislavski, subtext added texture and richness to an action. According to him, even a truthfully executed action would fall flat without subtext. The spectators would want to be involved in the causes of the character's behavior, emotions and thoughts.
- Example: *Jane accidentally runs into Tom, whom she finds extremely annoying. Social necessities oblige her to be pleasant to him, while underneath she wants to get as far away from him as possible. Here, the text that contains polite and pleasant dialogue conflicts with what is going on underneath, which is the first character's objective, her desire to get away from the second character.*
- The spectators see the duality of behavior in the first character. They see her performing pleasantries for the second character's benefit, and also see her discomfiture at being in the encounter. This discomfiture is conveyed to the spectators through body language, gestures, intonation, glances or pauses in speech.
 - This leads to another observation regarding subtext -- Subtext makes the audience complicit in the behavior of the actor displaying subtext. The spectator and the character share a secret that the other character in the scene does not. This increases the spectator's involvement, holding the spectator's interest much more than just a superficial interpretation of the text would. An important point to note is that **subtext and text/dialogue may or may not be consistent with each other, but subtext must always be consistent with the objective.**
7. **Motivation:** Stanislavski insisted that an actor was either driven by emotions or by the mind to choose physical actions. This in turn aroused the 'will' of the actor to perform the given actions. 'Motivation' looks backwards into psychology and the past, while 'objective' looks forward towards an action.
- Motivation then becomes extremely important in psychological realism which is based on subtext and hidden meanings.

Improv Games and the Methodology Behind the Game -- *From the New York Film Academy:*

Acting exercises are a key to success for any actor. They keep your mind and body sharp during those times when you're not working. Hopefully, you'll use some of these and apply them to your craft.

Public Solitude

The student will play out their morning routine in the studio as if they were alone. Wake up, brush and floss, call a friend, make their bed, etc. It should be as close to reality as possible. Have them bring in their possessions and set up their living space. (In the interest of time, limit each student to 20 minutes.)

Why? Public solitude is the artificial sense of privacy. Humans don't behave the same way if other humans are watching. The goal of this acting exercise is to forget the audience exists.

Repetition

Two students will stand on opposite sides of the room, facing each other. One makes a simple observation about the other: "You're wearing a blue shirt." The other student simply repeats it: "I'm wearing a blue shirt." They repeat that same statement *until they feel they have to* change the statement.

"Stop looking at my shirt!"

"Stop looking at your shirt?"

And so on. *They must keep repeating.* Don't let them stop and think of something to say, just repeat.

Why? Repetition helps a student to "get out of their head." They must act on their impulses instead of logic or wit. It also trains the student to pay acute attention to their scene partner.

Observation

Observe a complete stranger for few minutes. Describe his or her behavior. Are they sitting, standing, walking? Who do you think they are? How are they feeling? What are they doing? Reading a book, waiting for someone, having a conversation? (Note: Don't let them notice you. It will ruin the exercise.)

Why? Acting is behavior, nothing more. The better you become at reading someone else's behavior, the better you will react to it

Music

Choose a theme song for your character. Is it classical, or contemporary? Does it have lyrics, or is it instrumental? Is it fast, or slow? If your character were a piece of music, what would they sound like?

Why? A simple yet effective acting exercise. After you've chosen a piece of music, put it on your iPod and play it just before a performance.

Circle of Concentration

Immediate Circle: Choose a location and get comfortable. Imagine that there's a circle around you, about 10 feet in diameter. Your task for the next five minutes is to concentrate only on the objects within that imaginary circle. How would they feel, or smell? How heavy are they? What color?

Intermediate Circle: The rules are the same, but the circle enlarges. This time it's the whole room. Do another five minutes.

Distant Circle: You might want to go outside for this one. Now the circle is as large as a house. Do another five minutes.

If your attention moves outside the circle, gently move it back. Don't feel discouraged. Not only is it unhelpful, it isn't within the circle. So you're not allowed to think about it.

Why? Concentration is very important for an actor. When playing a scene, you must reject the stimuli you're experiencing as an actor in favor of the stimuli of the character. In other words, you must see what your character sees.

Research

Research your character's life. Down to the last detail. How old are they? What do they do for money? Where do they live? What color fingernail polish do they wear? Are their parents alive? If not, what happened? Write everything down. Be specific.

Why? Not so much an acting exercise, more like homework. But the more you discover about your character's circumstances, the better you are able to answer the question: "If I were this character, how would I behave?"

Picture-ization

Right now, vividly recall an event from your character's past. See it play out in front of you like a movie scene. Be specific. As the scene plays out, move from third person to first person. Put yourself in the scene. Become your character.

Why? This acting exercise will help you to "own" your character. Their experiences become your experiences. It's also quite a workout for the imagination.

Finally, Some Animal Imagery and Eric Morris from his book, *Irreverent Acting*.

Zoo Stories: Using Animal Imagery By Jean Sciffman

Sometimes playwrights apply animal images to their characters, and the actor would be well-advised not to ignore these helpful clues. Tennessee Williams describes Blanche as a moth, Stanley as "feathered male bird among hens," and Mitch as a "dancing bear" ("A Streetcar Named Desire"); not only is Maggie a Cat on a "Hot Tin Roof" but Big Mama is described as a "an old bulldog" who comes onstage like a "charging rhino," Big Daddy smiles wolfishly and has a barking laugh, and one of the daughters enters like a mad monkey.

Shakespeare, too, imagined animals when he wrote. Iago refers to Othello as an "old black ram." In "King Lear," Goneril is described as a kite (bird of prey) and serpent, Goneril and Regan as pelicans. Lear describes himself and Cordelia as little birds in a cage, and Gloucester calls himself a bear tied to a stake. In "Henry VI" and Richard III, Richard is described variously as a toad, rooting hog, crab, boar, and bottled spider. When British actor Antony Sher played Richard, he used crutches, and with long tendrils of cloth hanging from his elbows, he looked like he had six legs when he bent over.

Humans are animals, too, so just as actors observe themselves and others when creating roles, so can they broaden their palettes by observing animals closely and absorbing what Southern California-based actor James Newcomb calls an animal's "essence."

Newcomb has been playing the humpbacked king for several years now at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, starting with "Henry VI Parts I and II" and proceeding to this season's "Richard III," in which I saw his stunning performance.

Like Sher, Newcomb uses crutches. "That automatically gives an insectlike look," he says. But unlike Sher, who was specifically going for the bottled-spider metaphor, and who scuttled across the stage like a bug before beginning his first speech, Newcomb wanted to incorporate as many of the textual animal images as he could. When he leans over his crutches and lowers his head, he feels like a boar. When he kneels with the crutches, he appears crablike. And there are times when he feels like a praying mantis, using his crutches to grab someone in the same way that a praying mantis grabs its mate and eats it. He also moves quickly, stops quickly, and appears to glide. "When you

watch a centipede moving with all those legs, they're all moving in sequence like a conveyor belt that draws the animal forward," he says. "I try to keep my head as still as possible. With those insects I've observed that their heads stay still and their legs move independently."

Newcomb says his animal images evolved organically as he was preparing for the role. But he has made a steady habit of observing animals and filing away the images in his mind for future reference. He remembers seeing a dead potato bug on the sidewalk being consumed by ants. "I was struck by how alone the little bug was," he says. "I thought, 'It's kind of a metaphor for what Richard does--control, dominate, and devour.' I see him as a predator, someone who devours any obstacle in his way. That image [of ants devouring the lone bug] stuck with me in [preparing for] the role."

He recently observed a three-legged squirrel, noting that it didn't curl up and die or feel sorry for itself. It pulled itself along on its front legs "like a Civil War amputee on a sled...doing what it would do anyway to the best of its ability," creating another useful image for the deformed but determined Richard and perhaps some role in Newcomb's future.

"I'm not so much trying to specifically copy an animal's movement, but more to empathize with the essence of what it is to be that animal and incorporate that into a holistic dynamic," adds Newcomb. "I've been thinking a lot about the role of empathy in the process [of creating a character], whether in animal imagery or even the quality of light or water. If you have a kinetic sense of empathy...you can incorporate that into the texture of whatever role you're playing, to enhance the character. What is it to be a drop of water? I know it sounds New Age-y, but I've been thinking more and more about it." The more empathy we can generate--for people, animals, plants, objects--the more we can contextualize our characters as humans, not monsters or things. The ramifications of that mindset go well beyond the world of theatre.

In his book "Irreverent Acting" (Putnam, 1985), Los Angeles acting teacher Eric Morris writes about working on the role of Eben in "Desire Under the Elms" and having trouble accessing the animal quality of O'Neill's character. He ended up spending three hours a day, three days a week at the Los Angeles Zoo observing the gibbons and then the gorillas--their rhythms, their limitations, and more--for a year, until he practically mind-melded with the apes. "Achieving the 'spine' of that animal and translating it into human behavior fulfilled not only the physical character elements [of Eben] but the emotional ones also," he writes. "I felt close to the earth, and even my thought and speech patterns slowed and faltered."

In his classes at University of California, Irvine, professor Robert Cohen (who noted some of the animal images mentioned in the first two paragraphs of this article) occasionally uses animal exercises. But he also knows the danger of letting that aspect of the role--or any one aspect of any role--dominate too much. "If you say, 'This character's a bear,' and miss other things, you're playing it like a bear at a carnival or a costume party," he explains. He also observes that there can be repercussions: In a production of an Indian epic, one actor was directed to play his character like a monkey, which outraged the local South Asian Indian community. "[Animal images] are useful at getting to a certain kind of animalistic level," he says. "But if that's all you get, then you're playing a stereotype."

When I talked to him, Cohen had just returned from seeing Robert Wilson's production of "The Fables of La Fontaine" at the Comedie-Francaise in Paris. In that play, all the actors portray animals: lion, crow, frogs, birds. "It shows the anthropomorphic values you can convey through animals," says Cohen. Interestingly some French

literary-types felt Wilson's show was too animalistic and failed to bring forth the human elements that La Fontaine intended.

In his book "Advanced Acting" (McGraw-Hill, 2002), Cohen writes, "Actors can make use of animal imagery...by discovering or creating animalistic metaphors (or residual traits) in their characters, which will help make those characters both highly specific (as to a given species) and archetypal."

Like Morris, acting teacher Larry Moss, in his book "The Intent to Live" (Bantam, 2005), describes how an animal exercise helped him. Preparing for a role in a Broadway musical--a character that is filled with rage--he chose to study the rattlesnake. "I found out that rattlesnakes are born blind and that their mother leaves them after three days," he writes. "I figured that would really piss you off.... I walked with my knees bent as low as I could possibly bend them, which gave my character, a predatory bondage-freak rapist, a slithery quality and a sensuality that I had never been able to reach in my work up till that point. The animal exercise freed me."

Moss recommends an exercise in his book: Pick an animal--mammal, reptile, bird, insect--and learn all about it. Study its "breathing patterns...musculature...how they eat, defecate, urinate, have sex, and what kind of alertness they have when not in captivity." He advises that you examine all the sensory perceptions the animal needs for survival, writing, "Remember that any animal you play is either prey or predator or both." He suggests living as that animal (in class, if possible) for five to 10 minutes, or videotaping yourself at home to see what elements of the animal you captured.

He also describes how several of his students worked on a scene in class using animals. They started "from a silly place," exaggerating their animals. One was a hawk; she said it affected her vision, the way she sat, her sense of her neck, her feeling about the space she inhabited. Another used the image of a prairie dog--the way that prairie dogs sit on their haunches and the way that they're curious. In his performance, the student retained the sense of posture and alertness, which no doubt enhanced the specificity and texture of the character.