

*The ABC's of
crafting a role*

By Bruce Miller

An actor's

AN ACTOR'S technique is built using many tools. As you study acting, you will encounter several approaches to the craft. For instance, some may focus on the information provided by the playwright. Others may emphasize the physical expression of a character, or the action of the play. Still others may concentrate on the actor's own emotions. However, all of the approaches offered these days have far more similarities than differences. That's because no matter what teacher we study with or what acting book we read, most of the concepts can be traced to the basic vocabulary and ideas of Konstantin Stanislavski, the great Russian director and acting teacher.

Before Stanislavski began to develop and record his own approach to the acting process, actors learned primarily by observing and imitating those they worked with and admired, and by getting on stage themselves. There was very little useful material that actors could read to learn how to do what Sarah Siddons, Edmund Kean, Edwin Forrest, and Thespis had apparently been able to do so well. Hamlet's speech to the players is, of course, an exception.

Stanislavski recorded his approaches in three books—*The Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and *Creating the Role*. Censorship and translation have distorted the genuineness of these texts, yet they are considered authoritative.



Blocking. Annette Miller as Maria, Walton Wilson as Toby Belch, and Michael F. Toomey as Fabian in Shakespeare & Company's 2000 production of Twelfth Night.

Part of Stanislavski's influence can be attributed to his willingness to be wrong or to change his mind. Over fifty some years, his theories on acting evolved as he observed human behavior, learned from his students and co-workers in the studio, and tried to apply his theories to performance. In his early work, Stanislavski thought that the core to truthful, believable acting was the actor's ability to find emotional truth internally, such as from personal memories.

Later he came to believe that this kind of focus led an actor to concentrate on the self at the expense of the script and often yielded routine rather than fresh performances. Stanislavski turned to theories of physical action and vocal expression, external techniques that he considered to be more reliable, learnable, and ultimately more truthful.

In America, Stanislavski's techniques were embraced by Lee Strasberg starting around 1930. One of the principal acting teachers and founding directors of the Group Theatre, Strasberg worked with actors using emotional memory to develop their characters. Other members of the ensemble believed that Stanislavski's approach to physical expression and focus on given circumstances should be emphasized instead. This difference of opinion about what acting is and how it should be taught contributed to the breakup of the Group Theatre.

Former members Stella Adler, Robert Lewis, Harold Clurman, Elia Kazan, and Sanford Meisner started acting studios of their own in New York. They continued to develop their own theories and approaches to the craft and produced actors of exceptional talent and training,

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many of whom became famous in film. All of these teachers continued to use the same basic principles first systematized by Stanislavski.

Here follows, in alphabetical order, a partial list of acting terms and concepts that are most often used today. Some have changed slightly since their introduction by Stanislavski. Others have evolved into something seemingly different. Still others may seem to be inventions of an era that came long after Stanislavski's exit into the wings. But each of these terms owes at least something to the Russian teacher and director who began the development of the acting craft we know today.

Acting

The most common definition I have seen is "behaving believably under fictional circumstances," and that certainly describes the process. However, a more useful definition might describe *good* acting: behavior that is believable and tells the best possible story while serving the script.

All actors, of course, must be believable. The audience must accept an actor's work as he moves through the world of the play in a sequence of action. The story he creates, however, must be consistent with the intentions of the playwright and the production. A nonrealistic play may require **choices** that are not necessarily true to life but that are consistent with the play itself. Hugely entertaining actions that are inconsistent with the overall needs of any script or production cannot be considered good acting choices. Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, each actor's work must fit perfectly into the pieces that surround his **character**.

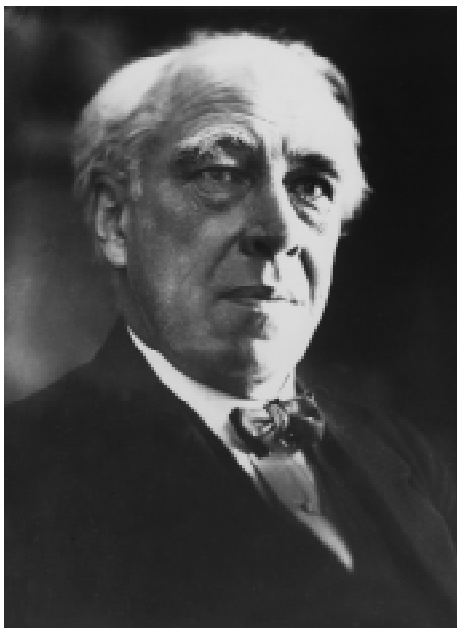
Action

This term has two meanings pertinent to the acting process. Both types of action are essential ingredients of drama and are closely related to the dramatic engine, **conflict**.

First, action can refer to the cause and effect sequence of events in a play. This series is integral for understanding the given plot and for making choices that are consistent with and supportive of it. This kind of action can also be referred to as the **throughline** or **arc**.

In this sense, the action reflects the **journey** each character makes through the course of a scene or play. It is up to the actors to understand the journey made by their characters and, through their chosen actions, to communicate how these events affect them. In general, the bigger the difference between the character at the end of the play and at the beginning, the more interesting the performance—provided the audience sees the actor making those changes.

Konstantin Stanislavski



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The term "action" can also apply to any physical or psychological activity an actor carries out in the course of the play, as in "what is the action you are playing?" This kind of action is more frequently called an actor's **objective** or **intention** and reflects the needs an actor playing a character must pursue at all times on stage. Most objectives should be connected to the other characters who share a scene. Chances are that if a playwright put two characters in a scene, conflict exists between them. The objective—to win something from the other character—most often arises from that conflict.

Acting is not the same as life; it just closely resembles it when well done. No matter how well the actor probes the psyche and emotions of a character from the printed page, to some extent the actor is pretending. By pursuing the character's goal, whether the character is aware of that goal or not, the actor creates the illusion of reality while making choices that serve the story. Actors who focus on emotion or character rather than action are in danger of falling into theatrical quicksand. As Stanislavski came to believe, actions are doable; playing emotion or character directly is less so.

Analysis and synthesis

The intellectual tools necessary for breaking down a script and putting it back together so that it will work effectively for an audience.

Good acting begins with an understanding of the play and the ability to make acting choices that serve that understanding (a concept that I've termed "head-first acting"). Examples of analysis include identifying the conflict, objec-

tives, and **given circumstances** in a script. Each piece of analytical information shapes acting choices. During synthesis, these choices are performed in a manner that supports the script.

Arc (See Action.)

Beat

The length of script with a recognizable pattern or rhythm during which an actor plays a particular objective or **tactic**. A particular beat is played until a victory, defeat, discovery, or new information causes it to end. When this occurs, there is a **transition**, and a new beat is established and played.

The term, coined by Stanislavski, is actually the result of a mistranslation of the word “bit” in Russian, although there is a logic to the word “beat” as well. As Stanislavski probably originally meant it, one bit (or small section of action) is followed by another and another, creating the throughline of the scene.

Beginnings, middles, and ends

The sequence that an actor must go through for all effective storytelling. Plays, scenes, beats, and even moments have beginnings, middles, and ends. So do all **physical actions**. Actors who fail to find the beginnings, middles, and ends to actions, moments, or any other aspect of their work will fail to be believable and to execute choices that are clear and compelling for an audience.

Dialogue, for instance, doesn't begin with the first word. It begins with the need to speak. Novice actors performing a monologue often start with the words rather than the need to speak. Frequently, it takes them several moments before they connect with what they are saying. Similarly, most actions start with the reason for the action. The actor who ignores this fact jumps into a middle and fails to communicate the story sequence believably.

Here is an example. Try yawning. If you started with opening your mouth, you probably failed to execute a believable yawn. Yawns start with an impulse. So does an acting moment. The yawn is complete not when the physical action



Gesture. Suzanne Irving as An Actress (right), with David Kelly as A Wigmaster, and Christine Williams as A Wardrobe Mistress in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 2001 production of Enter the Guardsman.

of yawning is finished, but when the yawn's result is apparent to the yawner and to the audience.

Blocking

The physical elements of storytelling on stage—**movement, gestures, and business**.

Actors often expect the director to provide them with their blocking in rehearsals. But as Stanislavski came to believe, making and performing physical choices is as important to acting as delivering lines. (He also asserted that physical action can connect actors with their truthful emotional center.) Physical actions can tell as much about a character and the story as any other acting tool. Whether with or without the director's input, the most effective actors communicate thought and emotion to an audience through what they do physically as well as vocally.

Business

Any ongoing physical activity an actor carries out while pursuing or completing an objective on stage. The manner in which business is performed provides details about the character.

Biting nails, taking eyeglasses off and on, fiddling with a button, or drinking are examples of stage business that can add to the actor's characterization and

believability. Business is almost always secondary to the main action of the scene and objective of the actor, and it doesn't always require direct focusing. The specifics of the business, however, can help shape a **moment** or inform an audience what a character is thinking or feeling. When an actor chooses to bite his nails when the doorbell or phone rings, it tells the audience something. A good actor uses business in a specific way to help shape the performance.

Character

One of Aristotle's basic elements of drama needed in order to have a play (other elements include dialogue, action, idea, spectacle, and music). Characters develop through action, enhanced by externals like costume and makeup.

Actors often talk about “being their characters,” “inhabiting their characters,” and so forth. Some create biographies of characters' lives before and after the action of the play. All of this can be dangerous, especially to a beginning actor. Inhabiting character and living out imaginary biographies can lead actors away from fulfilling their responsibilities to tell the play's story by making acting choices that come from the script. It's better to focus on the actions of each character and the manner in which those actions are performed.

Choices

Every actor must make choices about what her character needs from the other characters who surround her and about how to get those needs fulfilled.

In real life, people seldom think specifically about what they need or why they play out many of their actions during the course of a day. Actors, however, must make choices for the characters to get them closer to what they need, even if the characters themselves are unaware of why they do the things they do. When actors make choices that will get them toward their goal simply, they are invariably serving the conflict of the plot. Any necessary complexity of character will be provided by the script and the audience's perception as they watch the action.

Positive choices help a character get what she needs. Negative choices do not. Actors should play only positive choices. Negative choices make for indulgent and often dull acting because they diminish or destroy the potential conflict built into a scene by the playwright. For example, a negative choice would be to only act sad and cry during a monologue to your estranged sister about losing your mother to cancer. A positive choice would find action through the playwright's words, such as pursuing an objective of your sister's apology. If these actions are played effectively, the audience will understand the emotions, too. The difference is in making choices that help your character get what she needs (fulfills the objectives).

Conflict

When two opposing forces meet; the engine of all drama; the core ingredient an actor must recognize before choosing an objective.

Playwrights want to tell the best story they possibly can. They know that a good story centers on a conflict, usually between a central character and the obstacles that character faces. When an actor recognizes the conflict in a scene and relates his objectives to the character who will be opposing its fulfillment, he is contributing to the conflict and to the scene's dramatic success. Scene by

scene, this approach almost guarantees an exciting, watchable story.

Craft

The tools of acting that can be learned and mastered, distinguished from talent, which is innate and cannot be learned. Many of the terms defined here are elements of an actor's craft.

The mastery of craft can help the gifted actor hone and shape his work. For those less talented, it can go a long way toward substituting for the lack of natural gifts. Those who choose not to master craft will always have to gamble that their instincts are never wrong and will constantly be at the mercy of those who seem to have control of the acting situation. Good directors, who are focused on and able to bring out the best in each actor, are hard to find. The actor who has mastered craft can rely on himself to produce effective work.

Criticism

Outside evaluation, a necessary part of an actor's work.

Without an outside eye to steer the course of an actor's work through critical observation and comment, the actor cannot improve. Actors who perceive criticism as negative will have trouble enjoying the creative process and are likely to be difficult to work with. Criticism must

be seen as a necessary and positive step toward making the final product the best it can be. Actors who cannot do this naturally must learn to do so quickly, as listening to criticism is part of the **craft**.

Emotional memory

Real and honest emotions recalled from an actor's past experience and applied to an acting situation.

This internal approach to acting was employed by Stanislavski in his early work and described in *An Actor Prepares*. He later abandoned the technique in favor of an external, physical approach toward acting. **Method** acting as described and taught by Lee Strasberg relied heavily on emotional memory.

Emotional truth

The product of an actor who can find honest emotions within herself and use them to serve the acting situation she is engaged in.

At one point, Stanislavski believed that emotional truth was best found through the application of **emotional memory**. Later, he realized that emotional truth could better be found, reproduced, and controlled through physical action. Today, most actors accept the validity of both approaches. Some rely more heavily on one technique, while other actors use a single approach exclusively.

Conflict. John-Andrew Morrison (left) and Marc Damon Johnson in the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park's 1999-2000 production of Spunk.



Endowment

Giving an object specific emotional meaning that can be effectively used for acting purposes. Every prop an actor uses has potential for creating wonderful acting moments—moments that can help communicate how the character is feeling or what she is thinking.

When Dorothy first picks up the ruby slipper left by the late Witch of the East, she does not simply pick it up. She endows the object with the emotion of the moment. When her three friends receive their worthless gifts from the Wizard, each endows the object received with what that object means to him, thereby creating wonderful acting moments lasting only seconds on screen but staying with the audience for the rest of their lives.

Gesture

A single specific physical action that communicates emotion, information, or attitude.

The choice in a scene to place your hand on your forehead after hearing that your daughter has died is a gesture. Shaking a fist at an adversary after being embarrassed by him is also a gesture. The simple execution of each communicates information about the thoughts and feelings of that character. Gestures can be a calculated choice that through the rehearsal process become natural, or they may be discovered as they happen spontaneously during rehearsal or in performance, and then, because they work, become part of the performance.

Given circumstances

The who, what, where, and when of a play or scene that must be considered before making acting choices. The four w's refer to the character saying the line, the situation in which she finds herself, the location in which this occurs, and the time (both general and specific) of the occurrence.

When a line is delivered and makes sense in the context of the play, an audience gives it little thought. But any line of dialogue has an infinite number of ways it could be said. Which is right? Which best serves the play? Which best serves the character saying it? Examining

the given circumstances of the play, the scene, and the moment helps the actor narrow down the choices. Take the line “I love you.” How many ways can you say it? Now narrow down the choices by manipulating the given circumstances (a boy to a grandfather, or on a blind date, or at an airport, or on a cold winter's night). The number remains vast, but you are no longer operating in the dark.

Indicating

When a performer physically demonstrates an action without making a personal connection to what he is supposed to be thinking, feeling, or doing. Indicating an action is the opposite of fully committing to it and is avoided by believable actors.

Intention (See Action.)

Journey (See Action.)

Justification

The process an actor goes through in order to make sure that a line or moment is acted clearly and believably within the given circumstances.

A line that is not justified will sound wrong or empty when delivered in the context of the play. It will sound like the actor is simply saying the words rather than having a need or purpose for saying them. A playwright puts everything into a script for a reason. An actor must discover those reasons and use them to support or enhance the text and subtext.

Listening

A basic requirement for an actor if he is to be believed, and an essential step for reacting effectively and staying in the moment.

Actors who remain in the moment sustain the illusion of the character existing in the play's present. Those who do not listen may be reliable performers but their work seldom grows and almost never presents the audience or their fellow actors the gift of spontaneity that being in the moment brings. Being able to adjust to the nuances of each performance by listening

and responding to all that is happening keeps an actor's work fresh and alive. Those who simply wait their turn to say a line are easily distinguishable from the good actor. Sanford Meisner devoted most of his teaching to developing this important aspect of his students' craft. His repetition games, in which actors repeat what their acting partners say to them and try to shape these lines into actual conversations, have become a highly valued standard practice.

The magic if

A term coined by Stanislavski that reminds an actor to ask, “What would I do if I were this character in this situation?”

Notice that the question is *do*, not *feel*. Stanislavski came to believe that playing out actions told the audience more about a character's feelings and thoughts than working with emotion directly, and “the magic if” became an essential tool toward doing so.

Here is an example. Say you are Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*. You have just been told by Tom, your brother, that your mother, Amanda, has died. What do you do? What do you feel? Act it now. You may be stuck, especially if you try to conjure up an emotional response. But what we know about Laura can give us some good clues to actions she might take, which in turn could provide a springboard for her emotional response. Perhaps Laura would walk toward her menagerie to find comfort. Perhaps she would pick up some pieces and examine them closely. Perhaps she would stroke her favorite one or hold it tightly in her palm while putting it next to her cheek. Character and story can be communicated through what we do and how we do it. Asking “the magic if” can help lead to those choices.

The Method

An internal approach to acting focused on the use of **emotional truth** and **sense memory**, made famous by Lee Strasberg, but based primarily on early writings of Stanislavski.

Critics of this approach, like Stella Adler, felt the method was self-indulgent and often made actors look good at the expense of the play. Even she could not

disagree, however, that the Method was a highly effective technique for film acting, where the intimacy of the camera demanded an emotional presence not necessarily required by stage acting.

Moment

The smallest unit of dramatic action that can be performed.

Actors must learn where moments occur through effective analytical reading and good **listening** in rehearsal and performance. Every created moment offers an important contribution to the overall story and to the story of each character. A fully realized moment has to be clear and full, and most often has a **beginning, middle, and end**. Moments most often occur at the end of a **beat**, after new information is delivered, when a discovery is made, or when a victory or a defeat of the actor's objective takes place. Any new information a character learns should be reacted to.

Examples of moments arising from new information in *The Glass Menagerie* include when Amanda learns that Tom is planning to leave, or when Laura learns that her mother knows she has not been attending business school. An example of a discovery is when, in *Twelfth Night*, Viola (disguised as a man) realizes why she has been given a ring from Olivia.

Victories are the actable moments when objectives are reached. A moment occurs when Tom wins the argument about his leaving home and Amanda accepts the fact (although in the subsequent transition Amanda comes up with a new strategy). That same moment is a defeat for Amanda, and the actor playing her has and should take the opportunity to respond in that moment. These kinds of moments are often followed by a transition, which is equally interesting and equally important to act.

Motivation

The reason a character pursues a particular objective.

Motivation cannot be played directly but can be used as a device to find the acting objective, which must be played at every moment of a character's stage life. Here is an example. I am jealous of my brother. My mother always liked him bet-

ter. How do I play jealous? I cannot. But I can try to hurt my brother whenever possible—to get back at him for taking all of our mother's love. Jealousy is the motivation; punishing my brother is my objective. I can and should play my objective.

Movement

The aspect of **blocking** when an actor travels from one place to another on stage.

Any movement should be connected to the actor's particular objective since physical positioning can help or prevent a character from getting what she needs. The physical relationship between characters on stage should be used to establish or maintain power and weakness that tie into a character's objective. An actor crosses the stage because her character needs to put distance between herself and another character, or because she needs to decrease the space between them. If an actor chooses to move away from someone or something, she is also moving toward someone or something else, with purpose. These movements have beginnings, middles, and ends. The actor should use movement to pursue her purpose and help reveal her inner life to the audience.

Objective (See Action.)

Obstacles

The elements in a scene or play that prevent a character from achieving his objective. They provide conflict and heighten the stakes of any acting situation.

Obstacles can be in the form of another character (Tybalt for Romeo). They can be internal (the struggle in Friar Laurence to decide whether or not he should perform the marriage rites for Romeo and Juliet). They can be external (the politics of Nazi Germany that infuses *The Diary of Anne Frank*). Or they can be inanimate (the weather in *The Grapes of Wrath*). Whatever the category, obstacles help keep a character's actions and the play's overall story interesting and exciting.

Physical action

The tangible and visible things a character does on stage.

Try right now to conjure anger and to play it directly. Did you feel it? Would I recognize this feeling if I were watching? Now make a fist and slam it into your other hand as though you were angry. Did you fully commit to the action? If you did, you probably felt anger, and the audience would have recognized your action as anger. Now plan a sequence of actions that tells a story and that communicates what you are thinking and feeling. Make your physical planning specific, and rehearse each action carefully in sequence. When you have done so, you are acting in the manner that Stanislavski describes in his later work. This kind of approach to acting is clear, interesting, controllable, and repeatable. So is the good actor's work.

Risk

The bold choice an actor makes to produce interesting acting. The more chances taken in a situation, the more interesting the acting; another term for this concept is "the big choice."

Simply doing what's believable and expected can produce boring acting. Interesting acting is more watchable and memorable, such as when the actor surprises you yet you recognize the rightness of the choice. In rehearsal, stretch beyond the obvious and make a big acting choice. It needs to stay within the realm of your character and the script, but that still gives you plenty of room to dare to be bold.

Sense memory

The use of personal memory relating to smell, sound, taste, touch, and sight to enhance the emotional power of an acting moment or situation.

The actor who must smell the imaginary flower on stage will enhance his work by recalling specifically the beautiful fragrance of a flower he actually smelled. Sense memories are among the strongest we possess. We can often remember the moment we heard a song for the first time, the dinner-time smell of the house we grew up, the taste of the first lobster we ate. An actor must make real for himself all that he does on stage and find ways to communicate those experiences to an audience.

Stakes

What is at risk as a character pursues her objective.

Discovered stakes can add significance to a situation through urgency or potential danger, which helps the actor make the scene as interesting as possible. As Amanda pressures Tom to bring home a suitor for Laura (*The Glass Menagerie*), what is at risk for Laura? When Romeo climbs the orchard wall, or when Juliet agrees to meet her new lover at Friar Laurence's cell, what chance is each taking? In each case, the character is willing to sacrifice an enormous amount in order to get what he or she wants. Awareness of what is at stake keeps the danger factor high and tells the audience quite a bit about the characters. Finding the stakes in less obviously intense situations is trickier. But since plays tell stories filled with conflict, the playwright has given her characters many potential risks. It is up to the actor to find the high stakes and use them to make the work as exciting as it can possibly be.

Substitution

A technique in which an actor enhances his emotional connection to a moment by using a parallel personal memory from his own life in place of a similar one in the play.

Substitution was often used by Strasberg in his Method approach to acting. Though the technique was developed by Stanislavski, he later abandoned its use. Stella Adler found substitution to be a distracting approach because it separated the actor from being in the moment of the play.

Tactic

The specific strategy a character uses while pursuing her objective; discovered by breaking down objectives into smaller units when analyzing a script.

Each strategy is employed until there is a recognition that the tactic has succeeded or failed, which continues until the objective is fulfilled or abandoned. For instance, your objective is to get your father to let you use the car tonight. He is against the idea. How many approaches can you come up with to get the car before your father finally gives in to you?

Make a list of your strategies. Those are your tactics. You use them one at a time until you accomplish your objective and get your father to put the keys in your hand. In a scene, an actor as character often goes through the same process, whether planned or spontaneous.

Throughline (See Action.)

Transition

The actable moment when one objective is given up and replaced with another. This transition occurs as a result of an objective being lost (defeat), won (victory), or abandoned because of new information, interruption, or discovery.

Often the transitional moment provides the actor with a wonderful opportunity to show the audience what he is thinking or feeling. The rapid switch to a new tactic or objective without hesitation can be extremely interesting as well, but only if the audience understands the jump.

Here are some examples. You have been pressuring your father for the keys to his car. He gives them to you. A victory moment is played followed by finding a new objective—to get him to give you gas money. Your father threatens that if you say one thing more on the subject of car keys he will ground you for a month—a defeat. While you are sweet-talking your father, there is a phone call for you and you find out that Billy got his dad's car for the evening—new information changing the situation. During your tactical advance on Dad, your mother enters with news that Aunt Joan has been in a car accident—an interruption and new information that changes the situation completely. While Dad is denying your advances he is very funny and charming. You realize that you would rather stay home with the family than go out—a discovery that forces you into yet another transitional moment.

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THE LIST OF ACTING TERMS above is far from comprehensive. Other acting tools can provide further insights into the process and expand on what is presented here. Many general theatre terms also relate to the acting process.

In addition, actors must understand playwriting terms in order to properly hone their analytical and choice-making skills. However, the concepts and tools described above can go a long way toward helping the beginning or developing actor get a picture of what he must do to strengthen his craft in an effective and efficient way, and with a necessary sense of artistic integrity.

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