

THEATRE IMPROV READING

Improv Workshop: Please read as you would like. However I would like you to take a look at...

- Lesson 3: Goal and Obstacle: Pg.22 – 28
- Lesson 4: Tactics: Pg 45
- Lesson 6: Tactics: Pg: 45 - 52

Book: Acting One/Acting Tao

Author: Robert Cohen

Fifth Edition

your level of sincerity (and being sincere basically means not “trying to put on an act,” which the “be sincere” command makes you do).

Sincerity, and good acting (and of course *great* acting), comes from fully throwing yourself into a situation, not “putting on an act.”

Please note: This exercise is not about your or your author’s politics! It is not about America or your belief (or disbelief) in God! It is only about *act-ing*. The improvisation is sheer fiction. If your ancestors came to the United States on slave ships, they moved from relative freedom to unspeakable oppression. Other immigrants came for business or family reasons; still others emigrated thousands of years ago, across the Bering Sea, long before anyone had conceived of “America.” And no one can seriously believe that America has provided liberty or justice for *everyone—all the time*. All you are asked to do, in this exercise, is *act the role* of a person who has had, and is having, the described experience. And you are asked to *imagine* that you could throw sand pebbles across an ocean, which of course can happen only in fantasy. Acting, and the imagination that powers it, create all the bulleted points listed above.

Summary

So, by *experiencing* this improvisation, you have learned—by doing it—the most basic nature of acting. You have taken a memorized text, written by someone else,* and, by accepting, elaborating on, and playing a situation, invested it with your own person. Almost everything in the rest of the book will build upon what you have experienced in this fundamental exercise.

* The Pledge of Allegiance was written by Francis Bellamy, a staff writer for *Youth’s Companion*; it was first published in the magazine’s September 8, 1892, issue. The phrase “under God” was added by Congress in 1954.

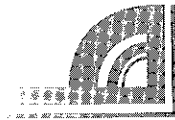
II

The Actor’s Approach

ACTING IS A PROCESS INVOLVING CERTAIN TRANSFORMATIONS: A PERSON is transformed into an actor; an actor is transformed into a character. This process is not sudden or magical (although it may at times appear to be both); rather, it is gradual and deliberate.

The actor’s approach is the series of steps the actor takes in that process. They are steps of exploring, feeling, trying, and doing; together they form a set of experiences. Every actor, from the beginner to the veteran professional, goes through these experiences. Every actor re-creates the process of acting with every performance.

The actor’s approach, therefore, is a process of self-transformation—of moving out of oneself and getting into a role or into a work of art. It is a series of first steps that, like all first steps, are very challenging.



Goal and Obstacle

Fundamental Principle

There is one fundamental principle in acting. It's that the actor must always play toward a goal. This is because characters, who resemble persons in life, are pursuing goals. *The actor acts by pursuing—often vigorously—the presumed goal of the character.*

Sometimes this goal is called the *objective*. Often, in the pages that follow, it is also called the *victory*. Some other teachers use the word *intention*, or *purpose*, or *want*. It doesn't really matter what it is called, as long as you pursue it. This is what makes acting represent life; it's what makes acting lifelike.

There is a corollary to this principle. It's that in a play the goal should be fairly difficult to achieve. This is what makes acting dramatic. "To take a breath" may be a real-life goal, but in everyday situations it is not difficult enough to engage our energies or to be interesting to an audience. If you were under water, however, "to take a breath" would be a goal sufficiently difficult to be dramatic.

Therefore, the actor must pursue a *goal* (e.g., "to take a breath") in the context of an *obstacle* (e.g., "you are under water"). You want to marry—a person who is reluctant. You want to overthrow—an adversary who is powerful. You want to win the race—despite your sprained ankle.

The goal is what you—your character—wants.

The obstacle is what stands in your way.

GOAL

The actor's intention is the only thing that counts. Everything else is just talk.

WILLIAM H. MACY

You have to try hard to achieve your goal, despite your obstacle.

This ties you to your character and makes your acting both lifelike and dramatic.

◆ EXERCISE 3-1

Reaching

Stand on your right foot; reach as high as you can with your left hand. Reverse: Stand on your left foot and reach with your right hand.

By itself, reaching is not an acting exercise. It is merely a physical exercise, or a calisthenic.

◆ EXERCISE 3-2

Reaching for Goals

Imagine that there is something you greatly desire above your head: a beautiful jewel, or a bowl of strawberries, or "the key to your true love's heart." Now, reach again!

When you are reaching for a goal, your action is purposeful and you are emotionally, physiologically committed. You reach farther, more intently, more energetically. You reach so hard that you pull yourself off balance. You bounce on the balls of your feet. You are not merely following an instruction, you are trying to *do* something. You are intent upon achieving your goal: You

want something and you want it badly. All these words—*purposeful, doing, trying, intent, winning, want*—are useful in describing the playing for goals. The actor's energetic pursuit of the character's goal is what makes the action of a play acting, not demonstrating; dynamic, not static.

In reaching, you are working against an obstacle: your own physical limitations. You can stretch only so far against the pull of gravity. Now, intensify that obstacle:

◆ EXERCISE 3-3

Overcoming an Obstacle

Imagine that you are sick to your stomach and fearful of losing control of your bowels. Reach up as in Exercise 3-2—only the more you reach, the sicker you feel. The more excited you get at reaching for your bowl of strawberries, the more fearful you become that you will publicly embarrass yourself.

In Exercise 3-3, your simple act of reaching has become an emotionally complex experience, even profound. You are acting.

There is no exercise, no acting challenge, that cannot be seen as a confrontation between an obstacle and an actor's pursuit of a goal. The job of the actor is to find and pursue goals in every role, even in every training exercise or calisthenic, and also to find and challenge the obstacles that stand in the way. Finding goals and obstacles sometimes involves research, but it always involves imagination. Frequently, imagination, properly focused, is all that is needed to transform simple, everyday acts into acting.

Imagination is the breeding ground for fantasy, and an actor's fantasy is often the source of his or her most compelling goals and obstacles. What did you think when you read "the key to your true love's heart"? Did you take that literally or figuratively? Would the image of Rapunzel in her tower prison or Leonardo DiCaprio in chains have made you reach higher and harder? The actor's job is not just to find goals and obstacles but to create them—and to create them with such vividness and enthusiasm that they can lead to an exciting and clearly defined performance, even in a simple exercise.

📖 OBSTACLE

For an action to be dramatic, it needs a counter-balancing obstacle; so make sure you know what it is.

JON JORY

Self-Consciousness

If playing toward goals and playing against obstacles are the fundamental principles of acting, self-consciousness is the actor's greatest enemy. Standing up and being observed, being "on display" for the presumably critical eyes of others, is a terrifying prospect to most of us.

◆ EXERCISE 3-4

Doing vs. Being

Do the following actions in order. Allow thirty seconds for each numbered command.

1. Stand up in front of the group.
2. Be dignified.
3. Look sexy.
4. Relax.
5. Count the number of men you see.
6. Count the number of women faster than you counted the men. If you succeed, you'll win a prize!

Chances are that the first two minutes of that exercise were agonizing. Being publicly commanded to "be dignified" or "look sexy" fills us with terror; how certainly we will fail! And how can we relax with all those people looking at us? How can we *really* relax—on cue? But counting the men—that's *doing* something; the focus moves away from us and onto the watchers. And counting the women—fast, so as to win a prize (even an imaginary prize)—that's *energetic* doing; that's even almost fun!

The actor cannot simply "be" something or somebody onstage, or simply "look" a certain way, without being acutely self-conscious, unbearably self-aware of being or looking. Nor can the actor be ordered to relax, because relaxing—real relaxing—means not worrying about obeying anybody's orders. The only way for an actor to avoid self-consciousness—and to truly relax—is to do something. And the more actors feel they are doing something important (as, for example, trying to win a prize), the more they relax into the task and think about things other than themselves.

Projection

Self-consciousness is your focus on yourself; projection is your focus on others, on the outside world, and your efforts to project your concerns outside yourself. Projection is also your ability to project your voice, to be heard by others, to *make yourself heard* by others. Projection, therefore, is basically the opposite of self-consciousness; it is the ability to escape the prison of yourself (self-doubt, self-indulgence, selfishness) and to enter into active, productive social intercourse. Every actor must learn this skill quite thoroughly.

◆ EXERCISE 3-5

Resonating

Do the following actions in order.

1. Face the wall and say "ahhhhhh."
2. Recognize that sound is simply the vibration of molecules. Face the wall, say "ahhhhhh," and feel the vibration in your throat.
3. Recognize that sound resonates and that sound may set up sympathetic vibrations in other objects. Face the wall, say "ahhhhhh," and try to make the molecules in the wall vibrate in harmony with your voice.

The three steps in Exercise 3-5 lead you from self-consciousness to projection. In the first, you are simply making sound. In the second, you are making sound with a purpose: to feel your own vibration. In the third, you are making sound with a purpose that *extends beyond yourself*: In other words, you are projecting your sound purposefully; you are pursuing a goal (trying to make the wall vibrate) and struggling against an obstacle (the firmness of the wall). It does not matter if the wall vibrates or not. (Actually, the wall does vibrate, but there's no way you can measure this.) The point is that you have created and acted upon a goal, using a real object (the wall), your voice, and your imagination.

Did your voice change on the third step? Of course it did. It became louder, more resonant, and more forceful. Chances are that you opened your jaw wider, dropped your Adam's apple lower in your throat, and straightened your posture. You may not know it, but these are exactly what a voice teacher would instruct you to do, and you have done it without thinking about anything except vibrating a wall!

◆ EXERCISE 3-6

Resonating (A Continuation)

Pair with a partner and space yourself away from others as much as possible. By turns, say "ahhhhhh" to the partner, with the goal of vibrating your partner's spine with the sound of your voice. With your fingers, feel your partner's spine to see if you can feel the actual vibrations. Try different ranges of your vocal pitch, different kinds of vocal sounds, and different positions of your body. Try to feel the vibrations as much as you can.

In Exercise 3-6, you are projecting sound not to a wall but to another person. Moreover, you are trying to sense the physical effects of that projection. Your concentration has gone entirely from the sound of your voice to the physical effect your voice has on your partner, and now your consciousness is not self-directed but other-directed. This exercise has led you to a moment—however simple—of "pure" acting: person-to-person communication at the most fundamental level.

Some acting moments in plays are precisely this: one character holding, cuddling, or embracing another, saying "ahhhhhh" as a way to lull the other character into relaxing, or into a romantic mood, or to settle the other character's nerves. Or the "ahhhhhh" could be an exclamation, accompanied by a raised sword, as Macbeth draws on Macduff, attempting (as his goal) to frighten him into submission. Not all acting involves lines, but all acting does involve person-to-person communication, at either the verbal or the nonverbal level.

In playing a role, of course, the actor must project more than just sound. Words, gestures, ideas, feelings, commands, personality—these are among the intangibles that the actor must convey to other actors and to the back of the house, that is, the audience. These projections all enter into the stream of communication that every actor both generates and receives. Projections are the means by which actors involve themselves with the activity around them—and turn their focus outward, away from self-conscious self-absorption.

◆ EXERCISE 3-7

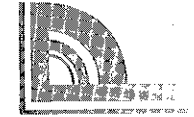
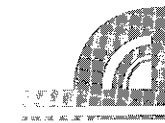
Goals

Do the following tasks. Afterward, define the goal, define the obstacle, and discuss the degree to which your involvement in each task projected yourself into the world outside yourself and dispelled your self-consciousness.

1. Untie and remove your partner's shoes.
2. Find the 126th word on page 56 of this book.
3. Balance this book on your partner's head.
4. Find the wall or piece of furniture or other object that best resonates with the sound of your voice.
5. Find the best pitch of your voice to resonate that which you found in item 4.
6. Neaten your corner of the classroom.
7. Move people from one corner of the classroom to another.

Summary

The actor always plays toward a goal and against an obstacle. Concentration on achieving the goal reduces the actor's self-consciousness; moreover, it demands that the actor *project* by focusing on something or someone. The mutual projection between actors—a person-to-person communication—is the foundation of all acting, even the most complex or most highly stylized.



Acting with the "Other"

The Other


In most plays, the actors do not try to resonate walls; they try to have an impact on other people. Usually those other people are the other characters in the play. For the purposes of acting class, the "other" is your acting partner.

Probing deeply into other people is one of the essential tasks of the actor. This does not necessarily mean long talks into the night, social involvements, mutual therapy sessions, or the baring of personal secrets. It certainly does not mean forcing confessions or outside relationships on other actors. It does mean a willingness to look clearly and directly at your acting partner and to take in *the whole person* with whom you are acting.

◆ EXERCISE 4-1

Making Your Partner Smile

Pair with a partner. Stand opposite your partner and devote about twenty seconds to each of the tasks that follow. At the end of the list, change roles and repeat the exercise.

 THE OTHER

I work very much with other people; I don't do a performance alone, and I want the other person to react with me and be honest with me. I need that desperately.

ESTELLE PARSONS

1. Study your partner's eyebrows.
2. Make your partner smile.
3. Study your partner's mouth.
4. Make your partner laugh.
5. Ask yourself: What makes my partner laugh?
6. Make your partner laugh *loudly*.
7. Study your partner's eyes.
8. Ask yourself: What does my partner see, looking at me?
9. Make your partner take you seriously.
10. Smile.
11. Take your partner's two hands.
12. See the four-year-old child your partner once was.
13. See the corpse your partner eventually will be.
14. Make your partner smile.

(While you're trying to make your partner smile, your partner should simply be studying your face, with the goal of trying to figure out how your mind works.)

When you try to make your partner smile, or laugh, or take you seriously, you are not merely "doing something." You are doing something to (or with) someone else—that is, you are participating in an interaction. All acting is interacting with other persons (even monologues, which are discussed at the end of this lesson).

Your acting partner is a person. He or she was an infant once and is as mortal as you are. Your acting partner (like you) is a sexual person, a fearful person, a caring person, and a person who has profound desires. In other words, your acting partner is not just "your acting partner." He or she is an individual and, potentially, a source of great inspiration for you.

The more fully you contact your acting partner, the more fully you will be acting. Acting is something you can never do entirely in isolation or entirely by yourself. In order to "live" onstage, you must first make the other characters, your acting partners, "live" in your mind. Your communication—your acting—will ultimately depend as much on them as on you and on the intensity with which you make yourself believe in them and care about them.

Interactive Dynamics

The actor's awareness of others is not merely a matter of dispassionate observation. Stage relationships that are properly dramatic must suggest a potential for dramatic change: usually the potential for love, on the one hand, or the potential for physical or psychological violence, on the other. These potentials are the dynamics of relationships. Because this potential for love or violence is always present, we say that the actors are vulnerable. Exercise 4-2 is a simple way of approaching actor-to-actor vulnerability.

◆ EXERCISE 4-2

Vulnerability

Pair with a partner and designate one of you to be A and the other B. Memorize and quickly "rehearse" this contentless scene. (A contentless scene is one in which the words, by themselves, do not clearly reveal any specific characters or plot; it is a scene that has no specified dramatic content.)

A: One.

B: Two.

A: Three.

B: Four.

A: Five.

B: Six.

A: Seven.

B: Eight.

A: Nine!

B: Ten!

"Perform" the scene while imagining each of these situations:

1. You have reason to believe that your acting partner may be planning to murder you and that he or she may have a concealed weapon.
2. You were separated from a beloved sibling when you were three years old, and you have reason to believe that your acting partner is that sibling.
3. Person A has reason to believe (1) above, and Person B has reason to believe (2).
4. Person B has reason to believe (1) above, and Person A has reason to believe (2).

Vulnerability, a crucial component of all acting, means that you are aware of the other actor as a complete person, and that you are also aware of *the potential good or harm that can come from the relationship* between you.

Interactive dynamics suggest that relationships are not merely static arrangements between agreeable people but are evolving interplays of mutuality and independence, attraction and separation, desire and fear. The person you meet in the cafeteria today *could* be your life companion twenty years from now; the person you are rehearsing a scene with *could* pull out a revolver and shoot you. The normal human impulse is to ignore such remote potentials. The actor's impulse, in an acting situation, should be to make them vivid, to create the dynamics of the relationship wherever possible and appropriate. Even a scene as content-free as "one, two, three . . . ten" can become a vivid and exciting drama if you explore the potential for both love and violence that might be imagined as existing between characters A and B and the vulnerability of the actors to those potentials.

◆ EXERCISE 4-3

Discovery

Pair with a partner and designate an A and a B. "Play" the following interchange. Try to discover as much as possible about your partner by studying his or her tone of voice, expression, and changes in breathing pattern, and by speculating on his or her possible thoughts or fantasies.

- A: Can I see you on Monday?
 B: How about Tuesday?
 A: How about Wednesday?

OUTWARD-DIRECTEDNESS

In "real life" the mother begging for her child's life, the criminal begging for a pardon, the atoning lover pleading for one last chance—these people give no attention whatever to their own state, and all attention to the state of that person from whom they require their object. This outward-directedness brings the actor in "real life" to a state of magnificent responsiveness and makes his progress thrilling to watch. On the stage, similarly, it is the progress of the outward-directed actor, who behaves with no regard to his personal state, but with all regard for the responses of his antagonists, which thrills the viewers.

DAVID MAMET

- B: How about Thursday?
 A: How about Friday?
 B: How about Saturday?
 A: How about Sunday?
 B: OK, then, Sunday.

Don't make any effort to give clever readings, and don't worry about your own delivery of the lines. In fact, don't think about yourself at all. *Concentrate entirely on your partner* and on finding out what you can about him or her. Direct your focus sharply outward, not inward, and you will both lose your self-consciousness as an acting student performing for a grade and intensify your full engagement in winning an interpersonal goal.

Try this alternate scene, too, with the same instructions:

- A: I know you will.
 B: I know I won't.
 A: I know you will.
 B: I know I won't.
 A: I know you will.
 B: I know I won't.
 A: I know you will.
 B: I know I won't.

The dialogues in this exercise were chosen because they can be memorized instantly. Memorized dialogue from scenes that you work on later also can be used in this exercise, if you wish to return to it.

The Character

Here's an important question that may have occurred to you already: When you make your partner smile, or when you imagine your partner as a long-lost sibling, or when you ask your partner if he or she can see you on Sunday, is your partner a classmate, or an actor, or a character? Philosophers may answer that question in a variety of ways, but for you there is only one answer: *Your partner is always a character.* The moment an acting exercise begins, it exists within a theatrical context. At that point, all participants are characters, and all behavior is acting, or "playing."

This is a liberating answer. It means that the interactions between your partner and yourself take place within an overall context in which you have already agreed to "play," or to interact as characters. Therefore, you can experience your feelings fully; you can experience the depth of love, lust, violence, and ambition within a dramatic context (even in an exercise or improvisation) without committing yourself in any personal (outside-of-class) way. Indeed, you can explore the extremities—and profundities—of feelings within the "playing" arena and return to your more private personality when the exercise (or play or improvisation) is over. The ability to see your classmates as characters—which extends to seeing your best friend as Iago and your worst enemy as Romeo—is the ability to free your feelings so as to act vividly and intensely with other people.

Tactics

Tactics are the strategies of human communication; they are the active ingredients of dynamic interactions. Most of the tactics of everyday life are simple and benign, generated more by spontaneous impulse than by conscious plan. Smiling, for example, encourages agreement and tolerance; raising the level of the voice encourages compliance. Some tactics are used to seek the support of other characters; some to silence their opposition.

In the effort to achieve goals and overcome obstacles, the actor continually tries to put *pressure* on the other actors—who are, of course, characters in the play or scene. This pressure is real; it may be the seductiveness of a raised eyebrow, the menace of a clenched fist, or the bedazzlement of a brilliantly articulated argument, but it is a pressure felt by the other actors and

by the audience alike. Your power in playing tactics will determine your authority and magnetism on stage.

◆ EXERCISE 4-4

Using Tactics

Pair with a partner. Imagine that the nonsense word *beetaratagang* means "Get out of here!" in some foreign language. Imagine that the nonsense word *cleridipity* means "Come over here" in the same language. Take turns playing the following situations.

1. Order your acting partner away by saying "beetaratagang!" to him or her.
2. Urge your acting partner to come toward you by saying "cleridipity" to him or her.
3. Send your partner away with "beetaratagang" and then draw him or her back with "cleridipity." Reverse.

To communicate with your partner, use body language, tone of voice, inflection, gesture, facial expression, threats of physical force, seductive postures—everything you can think of *except* physical contact.

Full contact with an acting partner depends on your willingness to engage in genuine emotional interaction with another person: to frighten, to encourage, to alarm, and to entertain your acting partner. The desire to achieve your goal, coupled with a willingness and ability to translate that desire into effective person-to-person behavior, creates the baseline of your acting performance. Your ability to make "beetaratagang" so unsettling as to force someone to go away, or to make "cleridipity" so evocative as to induce someone to approach you, is a primal acting ability, coming wholly from you and not from a text or a dramatic staging or interpretation.

◆ EXERCISE 4-5

One Two Three Four Five Six Seven

This exercise is intended to deepen your concentration and extend your repertoire of communication tactics. Trying is more important than succeeding in these tasks.

Without touching your partner, and using only the words "one two three four five six seven" on each task, try to elicit the following actions or feelings from your partner.

1. Make your partner sit down next to you.
2. Make your partner kneel before you.
3. Make your partner feel sorry for you.
4. Make your partner happy.
5. Make your partner nervous.
6. Make your partner aroused.
7. Make your partner feel chilled.

Monologues

How do you act with the "other" when there seems to be no other: in, for example, a monologue, soliloquy, or one-person show, where you are alone onstage with no one else—physically at least—listening to you? You might say you are talking "to yourself" or "thinking aloud" in these cases, but that's not a very dramatic solution, nor is it particularly true to life.

Before mulling this over further, try the following exercise, in which you invent an imaginary other to act with.

◆ EXERCISE 4-6

Inventing the Other

Do Exercises 4-4 and 4-5 without a partner but with the following "others" that you create in your imagination:

1. As a "rehearsal" where you practice how you would frighten a bully away by saying "beetaratagang!" to him or her. Practice it out loud and to a variety of imagined bullies, big and small.
2. Speak to an imagined god-figure (Zeus, let's say, or Buddha, or the Judeo-Christian-Islamic "God") in whom you believe or can imagine you believe. Try to bring this deity into your physical presence by saying "cleridipity" or "one two three four five six seven." Vary the deity: Replace Zeus with Venus, then Satan, then a revered ancestor or role

model of your own. Such an exercise is, in fact, essential for playing characters (Oedipus or Dr. Faustus, for example) who worship or fear higher powers.

3. Imagine you learn that your hated uncle has murdered your beloved father. You know you will have a chance to confront him in court. Rehearse pointing your finger at him and crying these words of public accusation: "Bloody, bawdy villain!" Rehearse the line several times, trying to find the most persuasive tone.
4. Imagine a god-figure hovering above or around you as you contemplate a life-threatening adventure. Pose this dilemma to the god: "To be or not to be, that is the question." See if the god—by word or silence or gust of wind—answers you in any way or gives you any hint as to your best course to follow. Repeat several times, imagining the god-figure in different forms.
5. Speak to an imaginary audience that you cannot see (as would be the case onstage, with stage lights in your eyes). Try to get listeners to answer this question:

"What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed?"

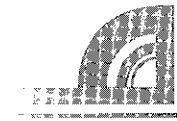
See if—and how—they answer you. They won't answer, but keep trying to get them to do so, repeating your question three or four times.

The speeches in items 3, 4, and 5, as you probably know, are from soliloquies spoken by Shakespeare's Hamlet. All dramatic speeches, even monologues and soliloquies, are spoken to "someone" else, even though that someone may be nonpresent at the time, dead, otherworldly, or imagined. This subject is taken up more fully in Lesson 28. If you're interested in tackling such a speech now—for an upcoming audition, for example—you might skip ahead to that lesson.

Summary

Acting is not something you do by yourself; invariably it is something you do to, with, or for at least one other person. Most of what the audience eventually sees in an acting performance is a *relationship* between characters—a relationship created by you and your acting partner. In order for

that relationship to be a dramatic one, it must be dynamic. The actors must be vulnerable to one another. A potential for good or harm—preferably for both—must be clearly implied by the relationship, and the actors, through the use of interpersonal tactics, must put pressure on each other to change or improve their relationship.



Beginning to Act

Contentless Scene

In the preceding pages we have introduced several foundations of acting: goals, obstacles, vulnerability, projection, and the person-to-person contact and tactical interplay that characterize dynamic relationships. These fundamentals can all be explored in a series of contentless scenes—so called because they are devoid of fixed plot or characterizations.

A contentless scene can be memorized quite rapidly—usually in about ten minutes. In a group situation, actors should pair up and memorize their parts aloud, one person of each pair memorizing part A, the other person memorizing part B. During memorization, no attempt should be made to create an interpretation with the lines or to “fix” readings or inflections of individual lines; the lines are to be learned simply by rote.

When the scene has been memorized, the actors should then switch partners so that each A is paired with a B with whom they have not rehearsed or spoken this dialogue. The contentless scenes may be performed many times. Switch partners each time, so that each time the scene is produced, it is produced without prior rehearsal between the paired actors.

◆ EXERCISE 5-1

Contentless Scene I

Perform this scene without rehearsal or planning of any kind. For each performance, however, use one of the seven situations on the following list.

Scene: "What did you do last night?"

- A: Hi!
 B: Hello.
 A: How's everything?
 B: Fine. I guess.
 A: Do you know what time it is?
 B: No. Not exactly.
 A: Don't you have a watch?
 B: Not on me.
 A: Well?
 B: Well what?
 A: What did you do last night?
 B: What do you mean?
 A: What did you do last night?
 B: Nothing.
 A: Nothing?
 B: I said, nothing!
 A: I'm sorry I asked.
 B: That's all right.

The Seven Situations

1. A is a parent; B is a teenager. The scene takes place at the breakfast table; B eating a bowl of cereal, A entering.
2. A and B (different sexes) are a young married couple. Last night, after an argument, B left the apartment. It is now the following morning. A is washing dishes. B returns.

3. A and B (same sex) are roommates. Both have been involved with the same boy (or girl) during the past few weeks, both are still interested in pursuing the relationship, and both are somewhat suspicious of the other's secrecy. They meet while returning to their room after a night's absence.
4. A and B are classmates who have been romantically interested in each other for some time. They meet in a cafeteria by accident, and A sits down next to B.
5. A and B (same sex) are auditioning for an important role. It is rumored that the director plays sexual favorites in casting. A and B meet at the bulletin board to await the announcement of callbacks.
6. A and B are siblings. B has recently been released from a psychiatric unit after a suicide attempt. After B has stayed out all night, A finds B in the waiting room of a bus depot.
7. A and B are friends. B has recently been released from a psychiatric unit after maniacally attacking a friend with a butcher knife. A, aware of this, comes upon B in an isolated spot.

When many variations on contentless scenes are performed, with the actors switching partners each time, several things become evident.

The content of the scene is created entirely by the given situation and the actors: The words become instruments of the action, not the dictator of plot, character, or behavior. Thus the acting becomes a way of creating a spontaneously changing relationship—and the plot develops entirely out of what happens between you and your acting partner.

The scene is happening in real time—that is, it is being *experienced* while it is being performed. One often talks, in acting, about “creating the illusion of the first time.”* In Exercise 5-1, “the first time” is no illusion; you are indeed experiencing the interchange for the first time, live and unrehearsed.

You will find that there is nothing you can do in Exercise 5-1 to succeed “on your own.” Whatever happens in the contentless scene depends not on you or on your acting partner, but on what happens between the two of you. Person-to-person contact, tactical interplay, projection, and vulnerability are demanded by the exercise itself. In these situations, feelings come to you naturally.

* The notion, first expressed by nineteenth-century American actor-playwright William Gillette, that acting should appear unrehearsed, that each speech should be delivered as though the character was uttering the words “for the first time.”

The scene is unpredictable. One of the problems in the theatre is that scripts, by nature, are predictable: The last act has already been written and rehearsed when the curtain rises on Act 1. Exercise 5-1 helps you avoid—for a time at least—the problem of making a predictable scene look unpredictable: The scene *is* unpredictable, and neither you nor your acting partner knows, at the outset, how it is going to end. Such a condition keeps you alert, involved, and mentally active throughout the scene, often to an extraordinary degree.

Intensifiers

Exercise 5-1 can be repeated almost indefinitely, inasmuch as there are hundreds of possible situations and thousands of implications that will make every rendition fresh and different. The exercise can also be intensified by adding obstacles to the situations.

◆ EXERCISE 5-2

Intensifying

Replay the dialogue in Exercise 5-1 using one of the seven situations, plus one of the obstacles on the following list. Repeat the exercise by varying both situations and obstacles.

1. Your acting partner has been known to carry a revolver.
2. You feel sick to your stomach.
3. The odor in the room is noxious.
4. You suspect your acting partner is dying.
5. Your acting partner is partly deaf.
6. It is very cold.
7. Your acting partner seems sexually frustrated.
8. Your acting partner seems especially flushed.
9. You do not feel that you can stand up without losing control of your bowels.
10. You feel that if you speak loudly, you will start crying.

The intensifiers are not things that you play or that you have to show in any way. Indeed, they are actually obstacles that you will have to struggle *against*: against showing them and against their standing in your way. The struggle against obstacles makes you perform more intensely. When speaking to a partly deaf person, for example, you must speak louder and with clearer articulation. Obstacles cannot be so great that they inhibit action altogether (that is why we specify a *partly* deaf person), or so insignificant that you can forget about them entirely. They must be bold enough to make you work harder, and difficult enough to make your quest dramatically interesting.

Physicalizers

Sometimes extraordinary changes occur in scenes simply when the locale is changed or when the actors are asked to carry on some sort of underlying action, such as jogging. Physicalizing a scene frequently brings out subtler undertones and more poignant transitions; it also gets the acting “into the body” more than simply sitting and talking.

◆ EXERCISE 5-3

Varying Locale or Action

Replay the contentless scene in any of these physicalized variations:

1. While jogging
 2. While setting the table together
 3. While lying down at the beach
 4. B lying in bed, A seated at foot of bed
 5. While playing basketball
 6. While arm wrestling
 7. While dancing to music
 8. While doing push-ups
 9. While eating a real banana
 10. While giving a back rub, one to the other
- Invent your own variations!

◆ EXERCISE 5-4

Contentless Scene II

Memorize the following dialogue. Then, using the new dialogue, repeat Exercises 5-1, 5-2, and 5-3.

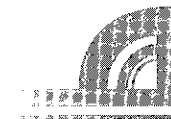
Scene: "I'm going away."

- A: Hi!
 B: Hello.
 A: You all right?
 B: Yes.
 A: Are you sure?
 B: Yes, I'm sure. A little headache, that's all.
 A: Oh, good. You want some aspirin?
 B: No. Don't be so helpful, OK?
 A: You are upset.
 B: Good Lord!
 A: OK, OK. I thought you might want to talk.
 B: About what?
 A: About anything.
 B: I'm going away.
 A: What do you mean?
 B: I'm going away, that's all.
 A: Where?
 B: Not far. Don't get excited.
 A: When?
 B: Now. *[Starts to leave]*

The situations in the previous scene will work here, but you can invent dozens of other situations as well.

Summary

The contentless scene—in which the dialogue is essentially ambiguous, trivial, or both—provides an opportunity to explore the playing of goals, tactics, and relationships in a fresh, improvisatory manner, without planning or rehearsing. The personal interaction can be intensified by establishing obstacles to the basic goals. Physicalizing the scenes may bring out subtle meanings and pointed moments that are valuable in an acting performance.



Tactics

Punishment and Reward

To the actor, goals are more than just wishes or daydreams. They are what the dramatic character actively wants to win, gain, acquire, or achieve. Acting, by definition, is *action*, and it is *active*. We in the audience do not want to see you simply thinking about your goals; we want to see you working hard to achieve them.

Characters pursue their goals just as real people do, by employing *tactics*. They argue, they persuade, they threaten, they seduce, and they inspire. They try to influence other characters in the play to support them and to discourage other characters from opposing them. Indeed, this is why drama is *dramatic*. Tactics are the moment-to-moment work of truly dramatic acting. Tactics drive and define the basic interactions of the play.

Do we use tactics in our own lives? Most of us would like to believe that we don't, that we simply live and let live without trying to manipulate our friends and acquaintances. But as we saw in Lesson 4, this is not the case. When someone is talking to us, we smile to invite more talking or look skeptical to shut the fellow up. We frown at a disobedient child and raise our voices to make sure our instructions are followed. Or we squat humbly at the feet of a celebrated guru and beam upward to indicate the respect that may draw forth a word of wisdom. These are interpersonal tactics, and we use them whenever we are in the presence of others.

Dogs, cats, and two-month-old babies use tactics too; any thinking species with needs and wants uses tactics to seek and achieve its moment-to-moment goals and victories. Acting requires that the actor learn how to play tactics forcefully, winsomely, and engagingly.

There are basically two kinds of tactics: those that threaten and those that induce—punishment and reward, in other words. Tactics that threaten say, “Do what I want or I’ll make your life miserable.” Tactics that induce say, “Do what I want and you’ll be happier for it.” Raising your voice is a threatening tactic, smiling an inductive tactic; both are common in everyday life and on the stage that mirrors life.

Playing Tactics

When you play tactics onstage, you *really* play them. When your character is trying to threaten another character, you try to threaten your acting partner. But if your character is trying to encourage warmth from another character, you make every effort to induce that warmth from the actor who is your partner.

But remember this ground rule: The actor must never physically or sexually abuse another actor during an exercise, a scene, or an improvisation. Any acting involving physical force, combat, or overt sexual behavior must be rehearsed and talked through until both actors are fully comfortable with it. It is often useful to have a general understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse in an exercise situation, as this definition may vary depending on the age, experience, and cultural milieu of the actors involved.

◆ EXERCISE 6-1

Frighten Your Partner

Pair with a partner. Using one of the phrases below, try to *actually frighten* your partner.

1. Shut up!
2. Get out of here!
3. Leave me alone!
4. Go to hell!
5. Go on, kill me!

Study your partner's expression. Has color or animation drained from his face? Does she seem to be trembling or fidgety? Are his eyes widening? Remember, it's not essential that you *succeed* in achieving these results, only that you *try* to achieve them—and that you *really* study your partner to find out whether you have in fact succeeded or failed (in which case, try harder!).

◆ EXERCISE 6-2

Building Intensity

Using the phrases in Exercise 6-1, again trying to frighten your partner, repeat each phrase three times, building your intensity each time, as in “Shut up! Shut up!!! SHUT UP!!!!” You might even add a mild oath to the last invective, as “Shut up! Shut up!!! SHUT UP, DAMMIT!!!!” Try to increase your intensity in several ways—not just by increasing your volume (although that will be part of it) but by a more vigorous pronunciation, an increasingly commanding (and threatening) physical presence, and a deepening emotional commitment to your goal.

◆ EXERCISE 6-3

Try to Make Your Partner Cry

Repeat Exercise 6-2 with a different partner, and try to make a tear well up in your partner's eye. Again, don't worry if this doesn't happen; the point is not to succeed but to try. Plays are filled with characters who don't succeed at their goals; actors need only to make the effort of the character—the genuine effort. Trying to make your partner cry gives your tactic a physiological reality. It gives you a specific and human psychophysical goal to pursue, and you will succeed—as an actor—merely by pursuing that goal convincingly. But really try. And try hard.

Trying to make the other actor cry is one of the strongest goals an actor can pursue, inasmuch as it brings to the surface thoughts and emotions, often repressed from childhood, that unlock a great deal of subconscious behavior. Our earliest tears stem from pain, rage, and fright—often the fright induced by a seemingly omnipotent parent—and any improvisation or dialogue that brings back those primal situations can be an immensely stimulating acting discovery. Trying to make somebody cry brings out qualities of behavior that are rarely seen in the classroom, and it liberates much

of the inherent power of the performer. So don't be afraid of *really* trying to make your partner cry. It will make you a better actor—and your partner a better actor as well! (Professional actors never complain that their partners give them “too much,” only that they don't give them “enough.”) So come on to your partner with power and intensity. He or she will be the better for it, as will you.

FRIGHTEN HIM

The other actor is the most important thing in a scene. I'll try to frighten him or to make him laugh, because the better he is, the better I am and the better the scene is. If the scene stinks, everybody in it stinks. If I can make him have a couple of great moments, the scene is good and therefore I'm good.

JAMES CAAN

◆ EXERCISE 6-4

Movement and Contact

Repeat Exercise 6-3 several times, adding physical gestures and movements that intensify the pursuit of your victory. Use *agreed-upon* physical contact: a soft shove on your partner's shoulder or shoulders, seizing your partner's wrist, or slapping your partner's arms and torso. Be sure to use the physical business simply as a means of adding force and emphasis to your lines—not as a way of making your partner cry by inflicting real pain. The threatening tactics of an actor are psychological only; physical violence, onstage, is *always* simulated.

You will quickly tire of threatening or frightening exercises, which can be sustained only for a very short time in any event. Ordinarily they should be alternated with inductive exercises, such as this one.

◆ EXERCISE 6-5

Encourage Your Partner

Pair with a partner. Using one of the phrases below, try to encourage your partner to come closer to you, to sit down, or to engage in behavior that you suggest would be enjoyable.

1. Come on over here.
2. Sit down next to me.
3. I want to talk with you.
4. I have something I think you'd like.
5. Please . . .
6. [Make something up yourself.]

Repeat Exercise 6-5, building on your original phrase with improvised elaborations. Use your body, your intonation and inflection, the sound of your voice, and the manner of your gesture and expression to induce calm, trust, and amusement in your acting partner. Work to make your partner *smile* or *laugh*. As a physicalizer, take one or both of your partner's hands in yours. Try to coax your partner into a genuine rapport with your desires.

Induction tactics (which tend to induce behavior rather than threaten noncompliance) are the common stuff of everyday human interaction, much more common than threats both in life and on the stage. When well played, they give an actor magnetism and charm, just as threatening tactics, when well played, lend an actor a commanding forcefulness.

Both threatening and inductive tactics are efforts on your part to influence the behavior and ideas of the other actor—to interfere with the other actor's state of tranquillity or direction. By playing tactics, the actor creates a character who is trying to shape the scene, the only kind of character that is dramatically interesting. Characters in plays are never merely observers. Even those characters who describe themselves as observers, such as the title character in John Van Druten's *I Am a Camera*, are active in interpersonal engagements. Characters in plays are all interpersonally active: They are always trying to influence, to overthrow, to impress, to seduce, to win over, to suppress, to engage somebody. This is why tactics are so important to the actor: They are the actual “happenings” onstage; they are what is going on between the characters—and therefore between the actors.

Alternating Tactics

Tactics are almost never monolithic onstage; most of the time they alternate—often with mercurial speed—between threats and inducements. Actors who can switch between hair-raising forcefulness and ingratiating charm in an instant—actors such as Sean Penn, for example—are widely admired for encompassing this range of interpersonal effectiveness, which is dramatically thrilling because it suggests an almost explosive unpredictability.

◆ EXERCISE 6-6

Mixing Tactics

Pair with a partner. Improvising with phrases from Exercises 6-1 and 6-5 (or similar phrases), create a sequence of varying tactical approaches to your partner. For example:

1. [*threatening*] Get out of here! I said get out of here! [*inductive*] Will you get out of here? Come here. Come on over here. Please? [*threatening again*] Please! Oh, shut up! Shut up! Dammit, John, shut up!
2. [*inductive*] John, come up here. Come on, sit down. I want to talk to you. Will you take off your shoes? Come on, take off your shoes. [*threatening*] I said, take off your shoes. Dammit, John, take off your shoes! [*inductive*] Please? Everything will be OK, I promise. Come on.

Alternate threats and inducements as a way of *increasing the pressure* on your partner. Employ the art of surprise; shift tactics suddenly and without warning.

Try this exercise in three successive stages:

1. With your partner saying the word *no* between each of your phrases.
2. With your partner just nodding *no* each time.
3. With your partner remaining wholly impassive each time—but still not acceding to your demand.

Learn to vary your tactics—and to try harder—not only when your partner specifically turns you down (i.e., says “no”), but when your partner remains impassive. In the latter case, you have to “read in” the obstacle yourself. This will prove important in more complicated acting assignments later on.

The Middle Ranges

Making someone cry and making someone laugh are at the extreme ends of tactical behavior. In the middle there is making somebody listen, making somebody care, making somebody proud, or worried, or happy, or agreeable. These are the middle ranges of acting, and this is where most of an actor's time is spent.

◆ EXERCISE 6-7

Eliminating the Extremes

Pair with a partner and designate one of you as A, the other as B. Memorize and play the following scene, escalating steadily from inductive tactics at the beginning to threatening ones at the end.

1. A: I know you will.
B: No, I won't.
2. A: I know you will.
B: No, I won't.
3. A: I know you will.
B: No, I won't!
4. A: I know you will!
B: No, I won't!
5. A: [*Pulling out all the stops*] I know you will!!
B: [*Ditto*] No, I won't!!

Repeat several times, each time intensifying the escalation by adding facial expression, gesture, and whole-body movements.

Now, with the pattern of five exchanges fairly set in your mind, repeat but do not escalate the last (fifth) exchange. In other words, hold the last exchange down to the level of the fourth.

The first and fifth exchanges in Exercise 6-7 are the extremities; the second, third, and fourth are the middle ranges where most acting occurs. The extremities must always be there, in the actor's mind at least, for they define what's finally at stake in a scene or play. But most acting exchanges take place at the level of forceful—but not extreme—tactical interaction. Working on the middle levels and on the continuum from powerful induction to electrifying threats, actors explore and develop their tactical range.

The exercises in this lesson should be considered *études*, or studies, that allow you to explore a mere fraction of acting, but an important fraction: those moments, usually at the climax of a scene, that require you to be deeply committed to succeeding in some cause or other—and trying to succeed by influencing the feelings and behavior of your acting partner. When

these études are put into a play, with all your power at their service, they become the key moments in your performance.

Summary

The two basic types of tactics are those that threaten and those that induce. A successful actor learns how to play both types strongly and in rapid alternation. Between the extremities, there is a broad middle range of tactics, which are in process most of the time—although the extremities are always latent in the actor's mind. Tactics are *real* interpersonal behaviors, designed to influence other people; they should be played onstage as intensely as in real life and should aim at creating real reactions (including physiological reactions) in the other actors. Playing tactics forcefully, intensely, and physically brings to the surface human emotions—both from you and from your acting partner—and creates vivid and dynamic acting relationships.