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Telling the story

For an actor, actions speak louder than words

By Bruce Miller

CAN YOU DETERMINE the story in the contentless scene below?

A. Wanna play?
B. With you?
A. No, with my mother. Come here.
B. Wait. All right, let's play.

Initially, the above dialogue doesn't tell us much. But if you read the previous article in this acting series (November 2003), you'll remember that stories center on a conflict, and that it's necessary to know the context or given circumstances that surround the dialogue to help you determine exactly what that conflict is. Unlike a script from a play or movie, there are no given circumstances to draw from here, so we will have to make them up in order to provide ourselves with a story blueprint. No matter what we eventually decide on for our story ingredients, everything will have to be justified and be consistent with the script as it plays out.

Before we begin supplying the necessary given circumstances, however, let's see what we can determine from the existing dialogue. First of all, we must assume that there is something going on between A and B—they are the only two characters available to work with, so the necessary conflict must be between them. And we know that the central issue seems to be about the matter of *playing*—first whether B will accept A's offer to play with him, and then whether B will go along with A's order to "come here." The script implies that B eventually does so (since B says, "All right, let's play"). But since any good actor wants to create and use conflict effectively, it is important that B go through some process in which she decides that she will both go to A and that she *will* play.

Thought of in these terms, two possible conflicts quickly emerge: person versus person (will A get B to come?), and internal (will B decide to go to A and "play" or not?).

Now that we have made some decisions regarding the conflict, we can begin to develop the given circumstances that surround it. Of particular importance is the *what* of the scene—just what is the "play" that A is offering B? The script does not tell us, so whatever we come up with will make up the foundation of the scene and the source of the conflict. We will also have to decide on the other given circumstances—who A and B are, and when and where the scene takes place. All of these factors will be used to contribute to the story and how it must eventually unfold.

For now let's just focus on the *what*. Suppose we decide that the *what* of the scene is a game of pool. Once we establish that, we can automatically start to know something about the *who* as well. We also begin to imagine something about what the action of the scene might be like. A asks B if B wants to play some pool. B then asks for some clarification, considers the prospect of playing with A, or with A's mother, and then seems to agree to play. Deciding on the other given circumstances should further clarify the action of the story and help focus the many choices that remain to be made.

The concept of action

Before we talk any more about our scene, we're going to take a closer look at the concept of action. The concept of using physical and psychological action to tell the story was one of Konstantin Stanislavski's most important contributions to the development of acting craft. The word *action* has several meanings specific to the acting process, even to four-line snippets of dialogue like the one above.

Action can refer to:

- The arc or throughline of the story being told—what happens in the order in which it happens.
- The sum total of what the actor as character does in a play or scene.
- Those things an actor chooses to do psychologically and/or physically as a character in the play, the scene, or the moment.

All three meanings are equally important, but the third meaning will be the primary focus in this article.

In the early days of Stanislavski's search for a tangible acting technique, he believed that finding and focusing on emotional truth would give the actor the ability to best tell the story of the play. But later he came to believe that playing actions was a far more clear and reliable approach. He also decided that playing well-selected actions could lead to a full and truthful connection with the actor's emotions. (For example, if I bang a table with my fist as though I were very angry, I will feel something akin to anger.) Besides, audiences can more readily interpret what they saw through an actor's physical actions, and actors can more easily perform actions than emotions.

Playing physical action

An actor needs to play both physical and psychological action. We demonstrated the first kind of action in the November article. Basically, *physical action* refers to what an actor as character literally chooses to do and then actually does. These actions are sometimes spontaneous, but should not be left to impulse alone. By choosing what to do and how to do it, the actor can tell the story effectively and demonstrate a great deal about the character being played. Here is a quick example. Below, for convenience, I have repeated the dialogue presented earlier.

A. Wanna play?
B. With you?
A. No, with my mother. Come here.
B. Wait. All right, let's play.

Suppose that character A raises the pool cue he is holding in his hand when he says that first line. He then turns to the table, grabs the white cue ball with a free hand, places it in its opening position, and quickly hits a break shot. At least one ball falls into a hole. A turns back towards B smiling. B fans her face, then puts her hands on the sides of her cheeks and holds them there before saying the line, "With you?"

Based on the description above, what do you think B is thinking and feeling? Though no two audience members will necessarily agree totally about what B's thoughts and feelings are, most will have drawn some conclusions after watching this series of actions. The playwright has written nothing about B's reaction to the pool shot. Therefore, all of those physical action choices, either through planning or spontaneity, will need to come from the imagination of the actor playing character B rather than from the script.

Whether spontaneous or planned, there is no doubt that these choices are very telling. If they arose spontaneously out of the rehearsal process, the actor will eventually have to decide whether his or her choices are effective and appropriate for the character and the story. If they are, the actor may want to further develop or modify them.

While making spontaneous choices is certainly a useful exercise during the rehearsal process, those choices also can lead away from the story that the playwright has provided in the script. Among other things, spontaneous actions during a performance, whether ideal or not, require the other actors to make new choices too. Several of these spontaneous choices strung together can so bury the intended story and characterizations that the play seems to make no sense whatsoever, regardless of the power and believability of the performances.

If the script is a good one, then the words and actions provided by the playwright, stated or implied, are there for a specific reason. Always remember the playwright has written more lines that have yet to be spoken, and those lines must connect with all dialogue and actions that have preceded them.

Specifically selected physical actions forward the story of the play, keep it on track, and reveal character that puts flesh on the bones of the blueprint we call the script. They also add colors and levels not necessarily apparent when we read the script on the printed page. For example, in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*, the way Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lector sniffs the air as Clarise Starling approaches his cell is every bit as powerful and frightening as anything

the screenwriter has given him to say. Some if not all of Hopkins's actions came from the actor, not the script, and they forward the story and add dimension to the character. These choices came from the mind and imagination of a thoughtful actor using more than his instincts.

All this is not to say that there is no place for spontaneous, in-the-moment choices or the use of instinct. There is. But only a small percentage of actors are truly able to rely on their instincts alone to produce actions that propel the story forward compellingly and reliably. Craft is about having a set of tools on which you can reliably depend. There is nothing wrong with exploring with instinct and being in the moment, but the choices that develop from this approach must be examined, edited, and refined if they are going to be reliably more than self indulgence at the expense of the script.

Playing psychological action

Psychological action refers to what the actor as character is trying to accomplish at every moment of his or her stage or film time. This kind of action is more often referred to as an *objective* or *intention*. It can also be referred to as a goal, need, or want. But no matter what you call it, as an actor you must be playing one at all times during your stage life.

Adhering to this rule creates one of the biggest differences between real life and what an actor does on stage. Much of our real-life time is spent doing things and saying things spontaneously as we react to the moment-by-moment progression of our day. We seldom give our words and actions much introspective thought. Too often, it is only as we push our shoes off at the end of the day that we get to replay and think about the movie of our lives that has played out for the previous eighteen hours. We may at that time say to ourselves, "Why the hell did I do that to Roger?" or, "What was I thinking when I spoke to Janet that way?" We may even get introspective and come up with a reason or two. But most of our moment-to-moment transactions in real life are reactive and spontaneous, at least on a conscious level. They are seldom part of a specific game plan.

This should not be the case when we are acting. Our acting choices should be part of a game plan. When it is done well, acting often seems like real life, but it is not. As an actor you must play out a series of actions that correspond to the story you are telling, and support it. Not any choice will do. Only choices that serve the script by forwarding the story and making clear the thoughts and feelings of the character you are playing will be useful. Though your objectives may change during the course of the play as circumstances cause them to, you will never be without the need to play a specific single objective.

Remember, the playwright or screenwriter has set down the railroad tracks of the story, and your choices must keep the story on the rails. When living a life on stage, all of the choices that you carry out must seem like they are happening for the first time here and now, as if they are new. That is the illusion you create as an actor. The fact is you, as an actor, have read all the pages that follow the moment you are in, and your choices in the moment must lead to the next as prescribed by the script.

That means that in some ways your life on stage is simpler than the one you actually live. Your range of choices is limited to choices that serve the play and get you what you need—always. The script will ultimately determine whether you get what you need or not, but as the actor playing the character you must try to fulfill your need at every moment.

Determining conflict, playing objectives

Remember the C word? That's right, it's conflict—engine of drama. Since the playwright has built his or her story on some kind of conflict, you must assume that whenever you are on stage, you are somehow a part of it, because you are part of that story. Once you understand what the conflict is, you can determine what your part in it is. What you figure out should result in an action, need, want, or objective that you can play. This objective will be in conflict with another character's objective, usually one sharing the stage with you, and magically the center of the story will be created and maintained.

Let's take another look at the dialogue.

A. Wanna play?
B. With you?
A. No, with my mother. Come here.
B. Wait. All right, let's play.

Suppose the conflict of this scene is centered on who is the better pool player, but the players themselves aren't sure. Let's say both are pool sharks, but B is not on home turf. A is. Since A has the home court advantage, his objective is to first get B to play; and second, beat B in a big game. There is strategy involved in this. At first A may want to make B feel intimidated by his pool skills. Or A may choose to shame a hesitant B into playing by showing off. The smaller objectives you choose to play are sometimes called *tactics*. They are moves you use to get your overall objective—in A's case, to get B into a game of pool, and to win.

Ultimately, B also wants to win as well, and once she commits to playing she will also have to develop a strategy or a set of tactics. B's initial tactics, then, might be to demonstrate to A that his skills do not intimidate her, and, in fact, B wants to establish her own superiority.

If this is the case, how might A and B carry out the physical actions already described above? Would B carry out the described actions differently if she was truly awed by the ability A shows at the top? Probably not. If B's objective is to not let A intimidate her, she would have to carry out the actions in accordance with her objective, even if she now realizes that A is the stronger player. Perhaps there is a transitional moment of doubt that the actor can reveal, but if the objective is to establish her superiority, that is what the actor must do.

On the other hand, if B's objective were to make A like her rather than to establish superiority, then showing awe at A's shot might help achieve that goal. How can the actor playing B decide what action to play? That depends

on knowing the playwright's entire story and what happens in the overall arc that the playwright has set down.

In our four-line scene, unless we completely determine the given circumstances, we will be unable to know the entire story. However, from the lines, we do know that character B agrees to play. That means that we know that whether the character feels intimidated or not, she is not going to allow any self-doubt to stand in the way. We know that any internal conflict about whether to play has been overcome. We also know that the original challenge and conflict between the two characters has been met. So that in itself is a story, and certainly gives the actors enough to play. Keep in mind that your job as the actor is to find and tell the story of the play, the story of the scene, and even the story of the moment.

Once you come to understand any story and its core conflict, you will learn how to find and play your character's objective. Playing only an action might seem simplistic and make you think that if you do only this, your work will be one dimensional or boring. But an audience takes in the entire story and sees your actions in terms of the bigger picture that the playwright has created. The audience comes to know and understand your character through what you do and what you say. It also learns about you through what other characters say about you. By sticking to your chosen objectives and helping the story get told, the audience will, in fact, perceive much of the complexity of your character, regardless of how prosaic it might seem to you from the inside.

Now, while I have insisted that you as an actor must select and play an objective for your character at all times, that does not necessarily mean that your character is *aware* of that objective. This is the tricky part. As actors working on a role, we exist on two levels. Ultimately, we all try to inhabit the characters we are playing, but we must never forget that we continue to be actors making choices to tell the story. As discussed earlier, if we simply allow ourselves to do anything as the characters we are playing, then the story will quickly lose its shape and direction. By choosing to play the needs of our characters, we keep the story on course because playing those objectives insures that the conflict will be maintained and the plot forwarded.

For some fine examples of playing objectives, check out the work of Meryl Streep, Robert DiNiro, and Jack Nicholson—three of our finest film actors. Just about any of their films will do, but easiest to find will be Streep in the recent *The Hours* or *Adaptation*, DeNiro in *Cape Fear* or *Taxi Driver*, and Nicholson in *The Shining* or *About Schmidt*. In each of these performances you will encounter case studies in actors finding strong and clear objectives to play, and staying on them. You will see complex, well rounded characters, yet the clarity of what each of them is thinking and feeling will be both a marvel and an inspiration.

Kinds of objectives

At first, the idea of finding an objective to play may seem difficult. If it does, try thinking of it in terms of a strong verb. Under no circumstances is the verb "to be" strong. You cannot play a state of being—an is—and effectively tell the story. Being sad doesn't take you anywhere. Being angry doesn't take you anywhere. But asking yourself what you *do* when you're sad or angry does. You can always play an action—psychological and physical.

Ask yourself what you want from the other character on stage when you feel sad. To make him cheer you up? To make him compliment you? To make him share your pain? What will you do to get what you want? Flatter him? Tickle him? Make him feel sad too? How badly do you need what you want? How far are you willing to go to get it? These are the kinds of questions that will lead you to your objectives, your physical actions, and to the creation of your character.

It might help you to break down the idea of objectives into categories to make the process seem more manageable. An acting teacher I once had suggested six possible broad categories of objectives. I don't think this is by any means the only way to divide your objective possibilities up, but since I first heard the list, I have found those categories useful to my personal selection process. Thinking in terms of categories helps narrow your field of possibilities and makes them more manageable. Feel free to adapt the list below to your personal needs:

To give information
To get information

To make someone do something
To keep someone from doing something

To make someone feel good.
To make someone feel bad.

Notice that all six objectives are connected to a receiver—someone on the other end of the objective. In the first two these receivers are implied. You've got to give or get information from someone. In the remaining four the receiver is a stated part of the transaction. Any objective that you choose to play should have such a receiver. Keep in mind that your objective comes out of some conflict so your objective should be connected to another character to ensure that the created conflict is being played out with whomever you're sharing the stage or screen with.

Of the six objectives listed above, which do you think is the weakest—the one that gives you the least to do, and, by its nature, is the least dramatic? To make someone do something, or to keep someone from doing something, conjures conflict just by the saying. The coercion factor implied automatically creates conflict. To make someone feel good or bad also implies a resistance and suggests an emotion at the end of the transaction. Certainly, this suggests some dramatic potential. To get information also implies some resistance or the necessity of making someone give that information to you.

So among the six kinds of objectives, giving someone information is the least dramatically fraught. Simply by giving it, the objective is accomplished. Therefore, that objective should be avoided if other possibilities exist. Only when the

receiver of the information is likely to be moved by what is delivered does such an objective give the actor a strong action to play. The messengers in a Greek play, for instance, can play "to give information" because the message he delivers is invariably filled with blood, gore, and terrible news; the conflict and stakes emerge as a result of the fact that delivering the message can put the messenger in a dangerous position.

Keep in mind that the six objectives listed above are broad categories only. They are intended for use only to get you started when you are stuck. Even a weak objective like "giving information" can be further refined to make it specific. That Greek messenger, for instance, might want to "make the King see what he saw or feel what he felt." The possibilities are endless.

Making positive choices

You are now armed with an understanding of the two kinds of actions—physical and psychological—and you know that in any acting situation you must tell the story provided in the script by first determining the conflict and analyzing the given circumstances. We already know that in the four-line scene above that there are at least two conflicts to develop. We also have a clear understanding that the arc of the story is based on the "what" of a pool game. But there are still some elements of the story we have not discussed. Let's take one last look at the lines.

A. Wanna play?
B. With you?
A. No, with my mother. Come here.
B. Wait. All right, let's play.

Do you think that A really suggests that B should play with his mother? And where is the "here" that A wants B to come to? And why does B say "wait" and shortly thereafter is ready to play? All of these questions must be answered and justified.

Let's continue with the established *what*—that the given circumstances center around a pool game that seems to be important to the characters. Is it likely that A was really intending for B to play A's mother? Yes, it could be possible, but the simplest strong choice would be that A is using sarcasm to help with his intimidation objective. To use sarcasm would be a positive choice—a choice that helps A get what he needs. Remember, actors should always make positive choices, even if in life we do not always do so. If a choice does not help us get what our characters need, then it should not be made. Positive choices keep the conflict strong and the actor on track.

Why does B say "wait" followed by a line that indicates he is now ready? Simple logic suggests that she did something to make herself ready. What is that action? Actor's choice. Perhaps she pulls out her own pool cue and chalks it up. Or carefully puts powder on her hands in preparation for play. Either would show that she too has come ready to play. This sequence of actions works in terms of telling the story physically and is consistent with B's stated objective—to make A know that she can't be intimidated, or to make A feel intimidated.

That is just one of many possibilities. B might have said "wait" in order to give herself a moment to decide to play, if she did have an internal conflict about playing, and following the line "wait" B could be convincing herself to take the challenge. There is no right or wrong answer—only the best answer in order to tell a compelling story that is consistent with the provided dialogue.

Challenge yourself to come up with other scenarios using the pool situation. Make sure that for each scenario, you play a strong objective that comes from a conflict between you and the other character. Your objective's completion should always be connected with your acting partner. Play your objective positively at all times, and create a throughline that is justified by the lines and tells the best story you can come up with. Use the basic six objectives listed above for help if you cannot think of an objective to play on your own. Remember that starting your objective with *To make the other character* _____ is a good way to keep the objective strong and connected with the conflict of the scene and with your acting partner.

Once you have tried out variations of the script by making adjustments in the given circumstances, you could take the process several steps further by completely changing the four w's. Suppose, for instance, that the characters were young children. Or, suppose the game was Russian roulette rather than pool. Or Monopoly. Or jacks. Manipulate all the given circumstances or a few; each change will produce a new story—one that requires adjustments of how you can and must play out the scene.

In an actual script many of the choices will already be provided, but it will be your job to make sure that you discover them in the script and find ways of employing them effectively. If you do, as an actor you'll tell a story that is clear and exciting to an audience, and serve the script as the playwright has intended.

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