Character IS ACTIO

ON

The tools of acting, part two

BY BRUCE MILLER

JOHN VOLCK

ACTORS AND PLAYWRIGHTS have more in common than one might think. Both are charged with telling the story of the script. In the playwright's case, the responsibility is a creative one. For the actor, the effort is more interpretive. But both need to get the story right or the play or production is not going to work.

In the first article of this series on using the tools of acting, I said that actors, if their work is going to be successful, must be concerned with analysis as much as action. Put simply, you must be able to choose the right action before doing it. The wrong action, no matter how well executed, can lead the story in the wrong direction and destroy what the playwright has worked to create. The right choice, well executed, will always enhance what the playwright has provided.

When we left off last time, we had established that conflict (the engine of drama) and the playing of objectives, one of the most important tools an actor uses, are strongly interconnected. Playwrights know that conflict is what makes a story run, and actors must find the conflict in the story they are telling before they can determine the objectives they must play. Since actors play their characters' objectives (what the characters need) at every moment, it stands to reason that actors need to make the right choices. To do that, actors must teach themselves to view a script in terms of conflict and objectives if they hope to develop a craft that will allow them to tell the story clearly and compellingly.

In this article, we're going to use an imaginary scenario to help illustrate how actors can determine a story's conflict and make the right psychological and physical choices that will help them play their character's objectives. Here is the scenario:

You're involved in an independent film production of *H.D.—The Great Fall.* The money has been raised, the crew is in place, but all the director has to work with is the scenario that raised the money in the first place. In other words, there is no script. The director tells the cast to *make it happen*. "We'll shoot improvisationally," he says, "like an Altman film or *Curb Your Enthusiasm*." The scenario he's working from reads as follows:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
And all the king's horses
And all the king's men,
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

If you think this looks familiar, you're right—it's the Mother Goose nursery rhyme about an egg on the run. So what would you do with this little jingle to turn it into a story with genuine conflicts and actors' objectives?

This is where craft comes in. For the sake of review, here's the definition I gave for craft in first article: Craft is a set of tools that gives us a step-by-step process that can be used to make our acting work effective. In the last article, I also offered a general definition of good acting. Here it is again, succinctly: Good acting is acting that is believable, tells the best possible story, and serves the script. This is a definition that should become a part of your craft tool bag. Any time you're in an acting situation you can recite it and get clues as to how to proceed.

Let's take the definition apart, beginning with the term *believable*. In the first place, believable is not synonymous with realistic. Here's what I mean: realistic does not work with all material. The world of a Will Ferrell movie, for instance, is not realistic. That world is a dumbed-down place, but all the actors as characters buy into it even when they know that what's going on is too dumb to be believed. This allows the audience to buy into it as well. The plays of Shakespeare are not realistic, either. The language is heightened. If you were to be totally realistic you wouldn't buy his use of language, but you wouldn't want to change his words since the language is the most important element of Shakespeare's plays. Believability refers more to the style you use to make the material work, or to put it another way, it creates a consistent world for the play or movie to exist in.

Getting back to our fictitious example: in the film *H.D.—The Great Fall,* what is the story? To figure that out, you need to be asking what this world is as you read the nursery rhyme. Is the world a metaphor or is it literal? Is it a straight nursery rhyme or is it a representation of something deeper? In a fully fleshed-out script, you would have to determine the who, what, when, and where (the given circumstances) with careful analysis, looking for clues. But in this case, all we have is four lines. This may not seem like much but, in truth, it's enough to create a story that demands specific choices be made.

Collectively, the production team will have to make the decision about the world of the play and agree to it. Suppose there is consensus that you are going to make this movie literally and let the audience find the metaphor or deeper meaning on their own from what they see. You decide that the where and when of the given circumstances will be Mother Goose-like in look and style. But what about the who? Is H. D. a person? If so, what kind? Or is he (or she) an egg, as is often portrayed in Mother Goose illustrations? If he *is* an egg, that would certainly change things about the story being told. This decision and all the other decisions you make will all strongly affect the story you eventually tell.

Now we have to figure out how to tell the best possible story. For the moment, you don't have to worry about serving the script because there isn't much hidden in what's provided. If we break down the nursery rhyme we know the following: H. D. is falling from the wall and breaking. The king's men and horses are trying and failing to fix him up. If you want to get specific, you might ask why H. D. is referred to in the familiar "Humpty" in the line following "All the king's horses and all the king's men." Did the writer say it that way to elicit sympathy or was the author making fun of him? How you interpret the line could affect how you portray the story. This is the kind of detail work worth doing, by the way, when you're dealing with a skilled playwright. Everything in a script will be there for a reason. It is your job to determine the reason and then use it.

Here are some more questions to ask about our film. First of all, is this a story? Well, no, not really. Stories have characters who encounter a problem, face it, and either triumph over the problem or don't. They go on a journey, either literal or metaphorical, and are changed by that journey by the time the story is over. But in order for that journey and therefore this story to be interesting, the problems that come up need to be fleshed out. In other words, what this film needs is conflict. Let's move on to that now.

Conflict: the engine of drama

As I pointed out in the previous article, playwrights rely on conflict to make stories interesting. Actors must learn to do the same. There are three basic kinds of conflict:

- Person versus person.
- Person versus himself or herself (internal conflict).
- Person versus, nature, society, etc.

Playwrights, for the most part, rely on person versus person or person versus self, but most of the time conflicts usually end up being person versus person. If there are two characters sharing the stage, look for the conflict between them. That's a good basic acting rule to follow.

Once actors find the conflict or conflicts their characters face within the story, they can determine their objectives and play them. The objectives that actors as characters pursue always come from this conflict. (Objectives, by the way, are known by many other names depending on the acting teacher or technique. Intentions, needs, tactics, goals, and actions, essentially refer to the same thing.)

The next question regarding the H.D. scenario then becomes, what are the possible conflicts that can arise from this situation and how do I play them to make a good story? Take a moment and write down all the conflicts that you think can be mined from the nursery rhyme.

Here's what my list of possible conflicts looks like from the point of view of H.D.:

Should he go to the wall?

Should he climb the wall?

How to handle the danger of sitting on the wall

How does he get down from the wall?

Should he get down from the wall?

How could he save himself as he falls from the wall?

Next, let's look at the possible conflicts from the point of view of the king's men. (Bear in mind that some of conflicts depend on when they see H.D.—before, during, or after the fall):

If before the fall, how do they try to stop H.D.?

During the fall, what is their reaction? What can or should they do, be doing, have done?

How do they deal with the pieces?

How do they decide they can't put him together?

What do they do with the pieces that can't be reassembled?

Now let's take a look at how some of these conflicts work. Why H.D. should go to the wall and climb it depends on the given circumstances included in the script, or must be determined by the production team if not provided by the script. Since we have nothing more than the nursery rhyme to go on, we have to make our own decisions. These decisions have to be consistent with the script as it exists, yet should be choices that make the story as compelling as possible.

If, for instance, we decide that Humpty is a fragile, uncooked, and most importantly, *suicidal* egg, he wants to get atop the wall so that he can do away with himself. He simply *must* find a way to get up that wall to fulfill his objective. This will be difficult. Eggs are not built for climbing. If his overall objective, to kill himself, is strong enough, however, he will make every effort to find a way. His immediate objective, to get up the wall, will be risky and dangerous. And, if the king's men—whose policing purposes include keeping the population safe—discover him trying to get up that wall, they will do everything in their power to prevent him from committing the action. That will be their immediate objective. The two objectives are clearly in conflict.

If H.D. succeeds in getting up the wall, he will be ready to carry out the next part of his objective or action. Or he might have second thoughts. The view from that height might weaken his resolve. He might have an internal conflict about carrying out his objective. That doubt will provide a big obstacle to his fulfilling his objective. In the meantime, the king's men will continue to try to stop him—perhaps by changing his mind by using any and all tactics. Each of these plot devices would work to make the story interesting. Because the actors have been converting conflict into playable actions, a tangible narrative is beginning to take shape.

There is an infinite number of choices available for making any story unfold logically, but each choice must serve to make the story clear, compelling, and consistent with the plot and characters playing them out. These choices must also be consistent with any and all information the playwright has provided. When an actor approaches a script in this manner, he gives himself the opportunity to make choices that will make him look good and serve the script as well.

Take a few moments to think about the conflicts you have listed on your own and the conflicts listed above. Try to convert those conflicts into objectives that Humpty and the king's men could be playing. Try to find objectives for each that maintain, as much as possible, a connection between the opposing characters and their needs. For example, an objective for Humpty could be to make the king's men back up so that he has the space to think or to jump. An objective for the king's men could be to try and convince Humpty to let one of them climb up the wall to talk to him. These kinds of opposing objectives always create conflict.

Note the internal conflicts listed, and think through how these internal conflicts can be thought of as objectives with obstacles that stand between those chosen objectives and their completion. The bigger the obstacle, the bigger the conflict, the better the story. Based on the things I've listed in my potential conflicts, you will find an example below of what the story is like when further developed or realized.

Humpty sits atop the wall, exhausted from his climb. As he looks down at the hard ground below, he becomes dizzy. His nausea weakens his resolve. He has thoughts about the happier moments in his life. He becomes less sure he wants to jump, yet he knows he must. He has never carried out anything to fruition in his life. He feels he must do this. It is essential to his broken eggo. Back and forth his thoughts go, his internal conflict, an obstacle to carrying out his objective—to end his miserable life. In the meantime, the king's men yell from below ordering him to stay seated, and to wait for them to get to him. for them to get to him. They shout up reasons for Humpty to not kill himself. The king's men cajole, flatter, threaten, and warn him. Finally, Humpty jolts himself out of his internal conflict and tries to stand. The wind pushing against him makes this difficult to do, but faced with his own expectations and the approaching army trying to save him from himself, he overcomes self-doubt, nausea, fear of heights, and even death. Humpty pushes himself to his feet as the king's men continue to shout to him from below and look for ways to get up the wall.

The part of the story recounted has life and death conflict, strong objectives, lots of risky business, obstacles, and plenty of high-stakes physical and psychological action. In short, it has all the elements needed for making good stories and good acting. As an actor who wants to develop a reliable craft, you must learn to think about scripts as puzzles that can be solved through logic and common sense.

Here again is the sequence of analytical steps that will make your choices effective and clear:

- Establish the given circumstances.
- Determine the conflict.
- Convert the conflict into objectives that are life-and-death.

• Make sure these objectives are connected as much as possible to the other characters sharing the stage.

• Find and use all obstacles available to insure that the objectives selected are not easily obtained.

• Find physical actions to execute that correspond with the conflict and chosen objectives.

Physical actions

In the first part of this series we mentioned that actions come in two varieties—physical and psychological. Up to now in this installment we have focused mostly on psychological actions—what the characters need or want—in other words, on their objectives. We have learned that strong actions that come from the determined conflict connect the characters on stage and use the conflict—the engine of drama—to make compelling stories. But as the description above suggests, psychological actions are strongly connected to physical actions as well, and it is often the physical that actors use to communicate thoughts, feelings, and the story.

Actors must be able to physicalize the story through their bodies. When an audience watches a play or a movie, they are getting the story through what they see as well as what they hear. What characters do and how they do it tell us as much about who they are and what they are all about as any amount of emoting. An audience cannot read thoughts or feeling. They do not read minds or have the power to peruse the soul or heart. If an audience knows, or thinks they know, what your character is thinking and feeling, either you have told them directly through dialogue (which may not be the truth—characters lie, you know) or it is because they have inferred it through what you do and the way in which you do it.

Ironically, the physical part of acting is something that too many beginning actors take for granted, but do not necessarily do well. In life we respond to situations automatically. What we do physically is connected, often without any conscious thought, to our brains and emotional systems. If we get angry, our bodies react in a specific way. Frequently, when actors get on stage, their bodies are disconnected from the action. They're so busy thinking about the lines to be said, their choices regarding the script, and their own nerves, that their bodies freeze up. Two actors standing on the stage nose-to-nose saying their lines to each other seldom look believable and almost invariably are boring. Yet more often than not, this is what happens when I watch a first put-up of a scene in my intermediate acting classes. My students often complain about the flat line delivery of this or that young TV actor they have just seen, but seldom do they complain about those young actors' movement. There is seldom a believability problem when these same actors go from place to place, engage in activity, or communicate with some kind of physical gesture. More to the point, despite the perceived flatness of the lines, these kids are working and making money. They seem to be behaving in a believable manner and what they do makes sense and adds to the story. Seldom do you see a working actor who can't move.

Here are some examples of what I mean. Think about what you would do with the following lines (consider each to be a separate scene). As you read, try to decide what you have to do physically to communicate the line.

"I'm leaving, butthead."

"Give me that candy, right now!"

"I'll do anything you ask, anything. Please."

"Oh God, I love you, baby!"

Each of these lines implies some kind of strong emotion that is more than likely going to be accompanied by some kind of physical action. "I'm leaving, butthead," strongly suggests that this character will be heading for the door even as the line is said. But how many of you would be still standing in place even after you said the line? This is not unusual in a beginning actor, especially if there are more lines that your character says. But if you're not moving on the line or right after it, it probably means that you're not in the moment. In life we seldom if ever announce we are going and then make no effort to go. But this happens all the time in acting class. If you were still just standing there, you were probably thinking about the fact that you have more lines to deliver and that you'd better stay in order to say those lines. But in reality, the playwright has set up the dialogue so that the other actor will stop you if you attempt to leave, and that is just what the other actor must do. If you try to leave, the staying becomes the other actor's problem. This will be far more interesting and believable, and produce further physical action that is both believable and compelling.

"Give me the candy right now" suggests that you want the candy really badly. Your line would most certainly be accompanied by a gesture, by some movement toward the candy holder, or even an attempt to take it. The grab away would certainly be a high-staked choice, both interesting and believable. Your job as an actor is to tell the story through what you do as well as what you say. Remember, the bigger the conflict, the more interesting the story. In addition, physical action conjures emotion. Physically fighting for the candy insures that your emotional connection will not have to be generated from a mental or emotional fiction. Where your body goes, your emotions will follow.

"I'll do anything you ask. Anything. Please." Sounds like begging, doesn't it? What do you do when you beg? Do you think that would be interesting to watch? Interesting to do? Does it have high stakes and is it powerful? Why would a good actor want to avoid such an opportunity? Did you accompany the line with an appropriate physical response?

"Oh God, I love you, baby!" Saying this believably without appropriate physical action has to be twice as

hard as committing to a physical action. People don't say things like this in a controlled or calculated way. It is the kind of statement that explodes out of us because our emotional levels are so high. Our bodies, emotions, and thoughts are linked, interacting to make moments where the attempt to communicate overwhelming feeling, simply put, takes charge of our entire beings. Doing less on stage simply reads as inadequate and unbelievable. It reads as "acting" in the bad sense.

Ultimately, all of our physical action and dialogue must seem spontaneous in performance. With proper rehearsal, the good actor gets to the point where she can forget her homework and rehearsal, and be confident that what she has practiced will be available when called for in each moment. Athletes and musicians practice and drill, but in performance they are in the moment. So too is the skilled actor.

It seems to me that when an actor fails to make choices because he wants to be spontaneous, there is a disservice being done. The playwright and the audience must be served, and will that really happen by leaving so much to the chance of spontaneous behavior? For most actors, the answer is no. That doesn't mean there is no spontaneity. We find good things to use through spontaneity in rehearsal. We keep what works as we discover things, or we add what we learn to what we already have established. In other words, we build a performance—by thinking, by finding things, and by refining constantly. And, of course, we continue to this work by being in the moment in performance. We change and evolve every time we step onto the stage. What we do from moment to moment, from performance to performance should be evolving in accordance with what we see and hear—just like in life. But spontaneity, for most actors, occurs within the process not in spite of it. We'll discuss this in greater detail in the final article in this series next time.

Before we leave the subject of physical action, however, let's reread the earlier paragraph summarizing our imagined H.D. story.

Try converting each of the suggested actions above to actual physical actions instead of emotions. Specifically write down each of the things you would do to fulfill and actualize the description. Don't write down what you will think or feel, just what you will do physically. Once you have completed writing all your actions down in chronological sequence, you will have what is called a *physical action score*. Like the score to a piece of music, your physical action score contains all the notes you will need to play a role physically.

Try rehearsing your physical action score until you can execute all the actions from memory. Once you can, try connecting each action to the thoughts and feelings appropriate to the scene moment by moment. You may surprise yourself (and those who watch you) with how clear and compelling your work has become. You may even want to operate in the future by thinking far more in terms of what you do—that is, what you do physically as well as psychologically. Keep all this in mind until next month's article, when we'll talk about listening and being in the moment. ▾