

What is Acting?

Every day we act without knowing it. We play practical jokes on our friends or colleagues, pretending and fooling them to believe something before we say, “We’re joking” or “April Fools”, etc. While my definition of acting is the art of creating reality on stage or screen, you must realize that acting is not “pretending”, this form of pretending doesn’t necessarily fall under the category of acting for the stage.

Unlike children pretending to be someone or something else, acting is a heightened art form. The words, the movement, the voice, the emotions, everything is in a heightened form and as an actor we must be able to do all of this and make it look natural and realistic as if it is real-life, a feat hard to do.

The common misconception by non-actors is that acting is easy; anyone can do it. If it was easy everyone would be an actor and it wouldn’t be seen as such a lucrative endeavor. However, it is not easy, not everyone can do it, and it takes a special person to be able to convey his or her emotions honestly and openly while living in a heightened state both physically, mentally, and emotionally.

A question I always pose to a group of new students is: What is Acting? While the answers may vary and it may seem a bit harder for some to answer than others, I find that generally I hear the same responses and only a few are from my list of what I believe acting is. So here are my thoughts on acting. Acting is the art of creating reality on stage and screen. Acting is being connected to your character. Acting is expressing emotion openly and honestly. Acting is observation, communication, and listening. Acting is being in the moment. Acting “is”.

There is a recurring argument among actors between two principles: acting is reacting and acting is doing. Actors will debate this for hours, making their cases and trying to prove the other

principle wrong. I don't believe in either of those single principles as being correct. In fact, I believe that acting is a combination of both principles: reacting and doing. You cannot do something before you've reacted to what has happened or been said, and you can't react to something and not do anything. Even standing still and not moving or saying anything is doing something.

You, the actor, are choosing to stand still, or move towards something/someone, or say a line. You observe, you listen, you react, you do. "Reacting" and "doing" go hand-in-hand. You cannot do one without the other. This is acting.

Now that I've shared my semantics on acting, it's time to get down to the nuts and bolts of it all. There are three basic principles that drive a character: objective, obstacle, and tactic. Without these firmly in place and fleshed out, your character will seem stiff, unconnected, and stale. Once an actor learns how to flesh these out, they will be unstoppable in creating a living, breathing character. They will be full of life, believable, and living "in moment" on stage. You must have emotional connection to the text to make it happen.

Other acting tools I will talk about in this chapter are relationship, status, trust, and listening. These basics will focus on you and the other actors on stage, aiding you in creating a strong foundation for your acting skills and help you when you proceed to CHAPTER 4: BEYOND THE BASICS.

Objective/Intention

Objective and intention are interchangeable and mean the exact same thing. These two words will be used throughout the book. Objectives or intentions are the driving force for every character. Each and every one of them, down to the smallest role has a purpose on stage. Their purpose drives them throughout the play. It doesn't matter if they are there for the entirety, are in one scene, have one line, or no lines. All of the characters have one thing in common. They want something. Your job as an actor is to discover what it is they want.

Objectives can be put into three categories: Super Objective, Main Objective, and Immediate Objective. The Super Objective is what a character wants throughout the entire play. The Main Objective is what a character wants throughout a scene. The Immediate Objective is what the character wants right now within the scene. Learn and understand the difference between these three categories and be careful not to confuse them with each other.

To help you define your objective easier, phrase it with “I want”, “I need”, or “I must have”. Phrasing your objective in this manner creates a playable and accessible objective for your character. Every character wants something that propels them through the play/film. Examples of objectives are “I want acceptance”, “I need power”, “I must have freedom”, etc. When you phrase your objective try not to use “to be” verbs. “To be” verbs are a state of being and not always playable by an actor. Examples of “to be” verbs are: to be happy, to be sad, to be angry, etc.

Let's look at *Oleanna* by David Mamet. John, a teacher at a University, wants to secure his tenure and is in the process of buying a house. His wife, (who John talks to on the phone but is never seen), is worried about losing the house and his ability to gain the tenure. His super objective is to resolve the crisis in his life

In the opening scene, Carol, a student who is having problems in John's class, approaches him at his office while he's on the phone trying to calm his wife. His main objective in the scene is to reason with Carol and help her understand so he can get back to his super objective. As the scene continues, he struggles to make Carol comprehend what he is talking about. His immediate objective changes within the scene; acknowledging her concerns, defending his teaching ability, reasoning with Carol, all in attempts to complete his main objective: to make Carol understand so he can get back to his super objective: to resolve the crisis in his life.

Sometimes it can be difficult to find the super objective in a play or the main and immediate objectives in a scene. If you can't hone in on them, keep reading the play or scene. Maybe you are missing something that another character is doing to your character. Possibly the way they are talking to them or physically encroaching on them will lead you to discover what your character wants. It could be a case of maintaining the status quo for that character, which becomes their main objective in the scene.

Let's look at the example from *Oleanna* again. If you gave John the super objective "I want to be happy" or "I want to be successful." You placed his objective as a state of being and set yourself up for an unplayable need. You could, however, rephrase it and give him the objective "I want happiness" or "I want to succeed."

Also keep in mind that you want a strong, specific objective for your character. Try to dig deep so you can find the strongest choice possible. If you were analyzing John and couldn't think of anything but "I want to be happy" then take it a step further. Ask yourself, "What would make John happy?". You might answer with "I want to buy this house", "I want to secure my tenure", or possibly "I need to get my life back in order". Keep asking yourself questions about the character and eventually you will come up with a stronger and more specific "want".

One last thing to remember: keep it simple when working with intentions. Don't over-complicate it. This will make it too confusing and impossible to act. Using our previous example, let's look at the wrong way to approach an intention and over-complicate it. Instead of a simple intention of "I want Carol to leave my office" the actor decides to use "I want Carol to leave so I can calm my wife down and concentrate on getting my tenure so I can be happy and have peace of mind."

You can see how this overly complicated sentence would be extremely hard to act out. You put three or four intentions into one and they cannot be played all at once. This is why we use the super, main, and immediate intentions. It separates them and makes it much easier to act.

Obstacle

For every objective our character wants, there is always something that prevents them from obtaining it. If there were no obstacles to overcome, the action would stay status quo and there would be no reason for them to exist. Without obstacles, everyone would be happy and that would make for a pretty boring play.

An obstacle can be a person, an object, a state of mind, a state of body (physical hindrance), natural (weather), socially driven (laws, morals, ethics, etc.), time, or anything that makes it impossible to continue unless it is removed or overcome. Obstacles can range from easily handled to extremely difficult. No matter the difficulty of the obstacle the character **MUST** keep fighting to overcome it. The minute they give up, the hope of achieving their goal is lost.

Let's examine how obstacles work using a fictional scene about Bob Jones. Bob is an executive who has an important meeting to go to regarding his job. This meeting will determine if he keeps his job or not. He's wearing a suit and about to leave the house. He doesn't have a car and has to walk to work. He opens the door and it's raining, pouring down hard. He can't go out like that and get his suit wet.

His super objective is to keep his job. His main objective is to get to his meeting. Nature is his obstacle. The rain is a simple obstacle to overcome. He needs an umbrella. His immediate objective is to find an umbrella. He looks around and can't find it. He looks at his watch and realizes he's going to be late. Time has become an obstacle in addition to the rain. Now he must make a decision. Does he walk to work in the rain to get there on time and in the process getting drenched, making a bad impression at the meeting or does he take time to search for his umbrella and being late but dry?

Bob's obstacle has switched to panic. Panic is a state of mind. The playwright has written that, eventually, Bob leaves for work without the umbrella. He overcomes all obstacles in order to get to the meeting, although when he arrives at the meeting, he will have a new obstacle to overcome: explaining why he is late, soaking wet, and why he should keep his job.

There can be more than one obstacle in a scene. Find all the obstacles and find ways to overcome them. Even though you, as the actor, know that the character does or doesn't beat the obstacle, you must make it life or death for the character. They must continue to fight for what they want even if it means negative consequences resulting from the decisions made.

Tactic

The way a character approaches an objective or obstacle is called a tactic. Characters use tactics to get what they want. Tactics are action verbs that can be played by the actor. It is necessary to pick verbs that you can put into action. When approaching a tactic use the phrase “I am going to...” followed by the verb of your choice. Avoid using “to be” verbs. Instead of using “to be manipulative” replace that with “I am going to manipulate”. By turning the “to be” verb into a playable verb you have more freedom and flexibility to explore your character both physically and vocally.

There are two different ways to look at tactics: what you are doing and how are you saying it. The “doing” is referred to as “tactic” and the “saying” is referred to, as I like to call it, the vocal gesture. Let’s look at the “doing” tactic first. While the intention is “what you want”, the “doing” tactic is “how you are going to get what you want.” If you choose the verb “to convince” as your intention, you may pick the verb “to sweet talk” as your tactic. This tactic works with the objective you’ve chosen.

As in real life, if you aren’t getting what you want, change your tactic. If you find that “sweet talking” isn’t working, you may try “to seduce”. Remember that your tactic should support what you want. Keep exploring and don’t settle for the first tactic you choose. Acting is made up of choices. Play around with different tactics until you find the right one.

You can use numerous tactics to get what you want. Your choice of tactic is dependent upon what your character wants to accomplish in the scene or do to the other characters. Sometimes your first verb choice isn’t always the best choice. One line can have many tactics to choose from using the actor’s arsenal of verbs. Your job as an actor is to fully explore your options.

Tactics also change throughout a scene. There is a well-known phrase that defines insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.” This is actually from Rita Mae Brown’s mystery novel, “Sudden Death”¹. This concept applies to tactics as well. You can’t keep playing the same tactic with everything your character says and expect anything to change. We, the actor, know what is happening or is going to happen in a scene but our character doesn’t. They would not continue to do the same thing over and over again, (unless the character is written that way) and expect anything to change. That is why it’s important to change up your tactic when you find your character isn’t getting what they want.

Let’s revisit the *Oleanna* scene with John and Carol. When Carol accuses John of calling her stupid, he replies, “I did not say that.” His main objective of making her understand is blocked by her tactic of attacking him. He can choose many verbs to push his line “I did not say that.” He could choose “to attack”, to defend”, to push back”, “to put up a shield”, to recoil”, to laugh off”, “to shrug off”, etc. Each of these verbs will affect the actor in a different way when responding to Carol. They are all acceptable and there are more that the actor could choose from if he wanted.

Be careful when choosing your verb to use for your tactic. It must fit the objective that you are trying to accomplish in the scene. Don’t be afraid to try different tactics when analyzing your monologue or scene. Never settle for the first tactic you choose. Doing this will stall your creativity. You will find yourself in a rut and unable to follow your impulses and instincts because you will find yourself wanting to play your thoughts and actions the same way every time. Often in a scene, a character may say or do many

¹ The Business Insider, 12 Famous Quotes That Always Get Misattributed, Article, Christina Sterbenz, 2013

things to get what they want. If you play the same tactic or verb throughout the scene it will become flat and predictable.

TACTIC EXERCISE #1

Take the phrase, “I won’t do it.” Say it once without any tactic (verb) attached to it. Now try it with these vocal tactics in mind: “to tickle”, “to slap”, “to mock”, and “to rally.” How do these tactics affect the way you say that line? How does this inform your choice for an objective?

Suppose your main objective is to flatter a character on stage and your line is “I love that dress”. If you use the tactic “to mock” or any tactic that would have an imposing or attacking nature to it, the tactic would not suit the objective. Instead you might try “to melt”, “to cajole”, “to embrace” or even “to stroke.”

You can add to the verb as well. Let’s say you are using the verb “to twist” but you want it to be more potent, you can adapt it by saying, “to twist his arm.” You aren’t actually twisting his arm but you are using your words to vocally do what the action of the verb is implying.

The words you say are like wet clay and the tactics you use are your sculpting tools. Finding the right tool for the clay will produce the effect that you are looking to achieve. Keep exploring. Wet clay can be sculpted over and over again until you are satisfied with the result.

Vocal Gesture

The vocal gesture is a little different than the “doing” tactic and it works underneath your tactic. To use the vocal gesture, pick a verb that is a physical action and imagine that your voice is doing that action. Let’s say that you are using the intention “to convince” and your “doing” tactic is “to manipulate”. Your vocal tactic may be “to entwine. The words might come out slower and more controlled. You may imagine the words are slowly twisting around like a vine. The vocal gesture is used to help shape the words you say and the way you are saying them. This, in turn, should support what it is you are doing to get what you want.

Sometimes it helps to physicalize the verb you are you using for your vocal gesture. This will help get the action in your body and hopefully, expressed through the voice. However, when using a vocal gesture, there should be no physicalizing of the actual verb, unless it helps support the movement for your character (See CHAPTER 7: MOVEMENT).

Using the same example, if you chose the verb “entwine”, besides using your voice to explore this verb, you may choose to move your body slowly, in order to get the feel of what you want your voice to convey.

Once you have found your tactic and the vocal gesture, you can put the two together. You may find that the vocal gesture helps inform you in regards to the character’s movement. This, in turn, might lead to some physical discoveries, such as, wrapping your arms around them, or bringing your mouth close to the side of their face and whispering into their ear. The tactic and vocal gesture could lead your character to circle them like a predator around its prey. A verb can have many interpretations and options so play around with your choices and see where it leads you.

Also, be aware that the vocal gesture doesn't have to be in the same family of verbs as the tactic you've chosen. For instance, when using the same verb "to manipulate", the vocal gesture "to twist" would work and it could fall under the same category as manipulation. However, what if you are trying to manipulate them but don't want to use a strong approach, you might implement the vocal gesture "to tickle". The high-pitched rise in your voice with the slightly quickening of your vocal tempo might provide a different way of using the tactical verb "to manipulate". Tickling is not normally associated with manipulating but the sound of tickling in your voice can.

Explore your vocal gesture with different verbs, even those you might not think would work. You may very well surprise yourself and make a whole new discovery for yourself and your character.