



introduction

Acting is the execution of specific actions for specific purposes.

Sounds simple enough. But if acting is so simple, why do actors need books, teachers, workshops, and lots of practice?

Well, things get complicated when you start *manufacturing* actions on a stage (or in front of a camera) — evaluating their effectiveness, manipulating them, and repeating them over and over. If you haven't learned how to maneuver effectively through all the contrivances that are part and parcel of a theatrical production, you're almost certain to lose touch with what a simple, specific action is. The difficulties begin with the fact that your actions are not initially your own; they are prescribed by somebody else, usually in the form of a script.

All in all, while an actor's job should very much be the same as *doing things* in real life, the artificial components of the craft can make this pretty challenging. It's essential to understand what your priorities should be — what to focus on. This can be tricky business, even when we reduce acting down to its most basic components.

Suppose I instruct you to carry a glass of water from a countertop to a table (a basic *action*). Let's say there's no context for my directive — no explanation behind it. You might pick up the glass tentatively, grin at me quizzically, set it on the table, and ask whether you did what I wanted. I might tell you, no, you did not perform the task adequately. I might tell you to do it again, but better. This time, I say, concentrate on the *action* you are performing, not on my reaction to it.

You try again, but now you focus too intently on the glass, trying to keep the water as still as possible. Your tunnel vision causes you to stumble a little. Still, you eventually get the glass to the table in one piece. "How was that?" you ask. Bad, I say. Do it again. But don't concentrate on *how* you are performing your action, just concentrate on the action itself. You start to get frustrated. "Why are you asking me to do this?" you demand.

It's an *excellent* question. You're on your way to understanding one of the keys to acting. *Every action has a context.* The more specific the context, the more specific the action. (That's a good thing.)

The problem is that, when I instruct you to concentrate on your action instead of how you're performing it, my directive is too abstract for beginning actors. It can mean any number of things to any number of people. It is not grounded in anything *ordinary* — anything that makes sense to a normally functioning human psyche.

Something more like, "Quick, bring me some water, I'm gagging on my vitamin!" can get you moving with a *purpose*, without self-consciousness. In a specific, tangible way, how should you focus your attention? How can you get your nerves, muscles and synapses to operate much like they do in ordinary life?

Would it help if I fragmented my instructions into microseconds? How about I tell you that, as soon as your finger touches the glass, you should take a short, shallow breath and, simultaneously cause your brain to fill with a particular urgent image, and then send that image to your gut, so that you feel butterflies in your stomach as you rush to move the glass to the table? Your brain could not possibly operate in a natural manner if it tried to concentrate on such an absurd list of directions.

This is the dilemma of teaching acting. The most simple instructions can still seem too mysterious — unless you're one of those people that, for some reason, just *gets it* right away. Which is why there's a common perception that actors either *have it* or *don't have it*, that the skill of acting is something with which one is born.

And why argue with this perception? If, after taking a few classes and performing in some community theatre, you still don't *get it*, why not just resign yourself to the fact that you're not a very good actor?

Because this would shortchange the very people who matter most: the audience.

Audiences go to the theatre to see a story that is animated – brought to life. It's brought to life because individual actors are engaging their unique sensibilities. Good acting reveals specific, personal human experiences and mental processes, not generic or stereotypical ones. To conclude that only "naturals" can act is to deprive audiences of some of the rich diversity of human nature. So if you want to act, that's terrific. Just be sure to learn some core principles first so that your theatrical experiences are not terribly painful to you and your audience.

The key is learning to focus your attention properly – both on your actions while performing, and on how you choose those actions while preparing to perform.

Learn the principles, but always return to simple, real actions.

Any time you dice something up, put it on a glass slide, and study it under a microscope, you run the risk of killing it. But there's value in this kind of analysis if it leads you to the realization that there *are* concrete steps you can take to turn in a solid performance – that you don't have to just rely upon luck or grace. Forget for awhile about whether you are blessed by something called Talent. Just do the work. Concentrate. You'll be amazed by the results.

There's an old Zen saying:

"First the mountain is a mountain, then the mountain is no longer a mountain, and, in the end, the mountain is a mountain again."

The idea is that, before you decide to be a Zen monk – before you even have any interest in enlightenment – all of nature around you is simply what it is. After awhile, after you begin your spiritual studies, you start to consider things like whether or not life is an illusion, and what deep Truths are buried beneath the surface of everyday reality. Eventually though, when you become an ancient, enlightened master, you again see and appreciate the world around you with simplicity and clarity, as if through a child's eyes.

Acting is kind of like this. At first, before you decide to try acting, your actions are simply actions – the things you do. Then, after you begin to study acting, after you see how significant your choices are, you turn the notion of "pure action" into your mantra, but you become so intently focused on it that you quash the actions themselves. In the end, though, you learn how to tune your mind and body back to simple actions. Once you *get it*, it's like riding a bike. You can hardly remember what it was like *not* to trust that, once you start riding, you'll find your balance.

the actor's onstage job

Balancing onstage life with the requirements of the story is the key to a successful production.

There are two main elements to theatre: story and production. They need to be in sync. The story, in a very real sense, is the whole purpose of a production. It is the carefully crafted mini-universe that anchors the audience's attention.

However, while it's true that everything in a production should serve the story, theatre artists need to provide audiences with a good reason for venturing to the theatre. Productions that portray only the most obvious interpretations of a story and its characters don't give spectators anything more than they could glean from reading a story in the comfort of their own living rooms. Theatre artists contribute several ingredients that make theatre a special experience: an especially adventurous sense of imagination, an elevated discernment that arises out of group analysis, and, above all, a commitment to bringing the story to life – that is, to *animate* it. This is the heart of the modern actor's task, balancing story with life; interpretation with spontaneity; personalizing the work without undermining the text.

In striving for this balance, we would all agree to certain obvious parameters. If you're playing a kind, committed family man, you would not "liven things up" one night by showing up with your teeth blackened, grunting drunkenly, and throwing chairs around. This might be fun for you, but you'd be robbing your audience of a coherent story. Still, many actors do this sort of thing all the time, only in more subtle ways. They are more focused on "being alive" than serving the story. They think they are being *real* because their commitment to their actions is strong. They don't stop to realize that they'd be treated as psychopaths if they behaved in such a way in real life. Such a performance can leave audiences admiring the actor's power, but puzzled as to why the play as a whole carries little meaning.

On the other hand, it's just as harmful to approach the work mechanically, never straying from the boundaries you've intellectually sketched out for yourself in rehearsals. Each actor must take responsibility for "challenging" the other actors to join her in "being alive" on stage. Onstage life is infectious. The story is the connective medium that allows it to be shared. As long as each actor is deeply and sensibly involved in her character's actions, and attuned to the affect her actions are having on other characters, a certain spontaneity will arise within the context of the story.

There are a lot of reasons actors have a hard time striking this balance. Plain laziness is sometimes the culprit. Some actors just don't like working very hard at understanding their character's purpose in a story. Most often, though, fear is to blame.

The "gut" actor fears turning in a "dead" performance. He's found that every time he intellectualizes his choices, and then tries to animate his intellectualizations onstage, he flops. So he convinces himself that the only path to success is to bravely throw himself into the fray without a safety net, without a plan. He must be a wild animal. Each night is a mystery to either conquer or be tormented by. He chews up everything in his path – including the story. He can proclaim that he nailed a performance, but if it's not nailed to a solid structure (the story) the audience will not care.

On the other side of the spectrum is the actor who writes reams and reams of character biographies, carries secret props in her pockets, marks up her script so it's barely readable, breaking down every beat, underlining every verb – no laziness at work there; but in trying to *control* everything, she runs the risk of robbing all life from each moment on stage.

Both kinds of actors need to get clear about why they're on stage.

giving your performance away

If you love to watch yourself act, you're out of luck.

We'll talk much more about everything that goes into preparing for a performance. Your performance cannot fly if your preparation is inadequate. But first, let's look into some of the basic requirements of the performance itself.

Rule number one: concentrate on what your character is doing, not on how you look doing it. One reason this can be so hard is because the task is counterintuitive.

The whole purpose for being on stage is to be *watched*. Everyone – audience and director alike – wants to see what you are up to. They're looking for clues in your expressions, your manner, and your speech. So it stands to reason that *you* should be on the same wavelength, watching along with everyone else.

This is the most basic mistake that amateur actors absolutely must overcome before they can turn in mature performances. If the thing you love most about acting is watching yourself perform, you're out of luck. You'll just have to get someone to videotape your performance so you can savor it later, because you *cannot* do serious work while watching yourself the same way the audience does. This is a pillar of most modern acting techniques.

By *doing* real things, not watching yourself doing them, you are giving a gift to the audience.

A gift, by definition, is something you *give away*. If your job in one beat of the play is to carry a glass from a sink to a table, the audience can absorb that as a moving image. You cannot. You're too busy picking up the glass and putting it down again. You can't be watching the performance and truly executing the action at the same time. You're doing one or the other. Yes, of course, the glass can still move when you're self-conscious, but your relationship to the movement is no longer "genuine." The action becomes largely *abstracted* when you watch yourself pick up the glass. You rob the audience of a simple event between human and object. The primary event has become self-consciousness itself. This causes the audience discomfort. They came expecting a treat: to watch some real actions, but all they were presented with was the tedious spectacle of someone all wrapped up in themselves.

You'll have a very hard time accepting this most basic principle as long as you think your job is about showing off, proving yourself, or even entertaining others. In truth, serious acting requires a genuine humility. The performance is a *craft*, like laying bricks. It is work. You need concentration, energy, attention to detail, alive senses – all while repeating the same basic tasks night after night. If you're not willing to enter a performance with such a craft-like spirit, you will deprive your collaborators and audience of the one gift you have to offer: *a unique being in action*.

You may have put a lot of wonderful thought into the motivations behind your character's behavior, and you may have mapped out a wonderful set of actions to play. But if you can't let go of watching yourself perform, you will be nothing more than a puppeteer, concentrating on whether or not your body *appears* to be carrying out actions, rather than *actually* carrying out your actions. The result will be a wooden, unflowing performance. You may seem to be making smart choices, but you won't be *believed*. Your words sound unnatural because they're not really being used to accomplish something; instead, they are just *indicating* an attitude that you're hoping to convey. Your movement from choice to choice becomes rushed and forced because nothing real glues each moment together; whereas, if you were engaging in authentic actions, you would discover a wellspring of organic sensibilities to ride on.

Swimming Upstream.

But let's not be too harsh. Just because you've fallen into the common trap of watching yourself act doesn't necessarily mean you're an awful, self-absorbed person! There are many other factors that can inhibit strong acting.

Your onstage actions are usually more sophisticated than carrying a glass across a room. Your job in a scene might be to convince another character to provide you with charity. You may think the audience expects you to employ certain facial manipulations that project "sadness." Your director may tell you to "look more pitiable," causing you to monitor your expressions to see whether they match expectations. It's the rare director who is careful to talk with actors about actions instead of outcomes. Most will tell actors that a beat needs to be funnier, angrier, sexier, etc. It's your job to translate

such directions into specific playable, actions, always bearing in mind the overarching principle that you must be the doer, not the witness.

If you're honest with yourself, it's not extremely difficult to tell where your consciousness is focused while performing. If you're attending to your expressions, your tone of voice, and your attitude for the purpose of gauging the impression you are making on your audience, then your head is in the wrong place. These habits can be broken if you make it a priority. Some actors are aware of when they're cheating, but they get enough positive reinforcement for their smart-but-predictable performances that they think they're getting away with it. But if they were to discipline themselves away from workhabits that misplace their focus, they would discover rich, exciting layers of real life.

overcoming obstacles through listening

Executing an action effectively requires monitoring those around you.

Your character's actions will usually be challenged by obstacles. Audiences don't want to see actors simply carrying glasses of water across the stage. They want to see *drama*. Drama is about struggling. An actor's actions, therefore, will take some work. Constant work.

To illustrate this on a purely physical level, we could spread marbles across the stage so that it's almost impossible to carry your glass of water without spilling it. Typically, though, a character's obstacles are of the psychological variety, and they involve other people.

If, at one moment, your basic action is to *convince* another character of something, you will need to monitor your progress, just as, while walking on marbles, you need to carefully watch every step. The most common way of monitoring your progress in a dialogue is to *listen*.

Listening is an action. And, like any other action, good actors don't merely *pretend* to engage in it – they actually *do* it. In other words, they absorb, and are affected by, as many of the other actor's verbal and physical cues as they can perceive. Good actors actively seek out this information. They are focused on it. They put energy into it. Even if your character is not what you'd call a sensitive listener, he will be monitoring how well he's, say, intimidating or impressing others.

It's a continuous feedback loop: trying to effect specific change, monitoring success, and making small (or large) adjustments accordingly – over and over again. Good actors *really* do this. Meaning, they are noticing the life that is actually, spontaneously, going on around them in real time and space.

Does this sound complex?

It is.

But the good news is that you already know how to do it. In fact, you're well-practiced at it. You do it in your own life all the time. The challenge is knowing how to home in on this natural process while in the artificial environment of a play. One of the secrets to this is making good choices while preparing to perform.

actions are the end result of goals

Your choice of actions comes from thoughtful preparation.

All of the preparatory work leading up to a performance should be for the sole purpose of finding *just the right action* for each moment your character is onstage. Every moment of every beat of every scene should be filled by a specific action. There should be no empty spots. Some of these actions will be crucial to the story, some will not. Some will draw the attention of the audience, some will be tiny, and for your benefit alone.

But if an action is not designed to draw the attention of the audience, why bother with it?

Whenever an actor drops the thread of connected actions her whole performance can be derailed (and the story will not be told effectively). Much of an actor's work is hidden. Like a mechanic, she's concerned that everything under the hood is always purring along so that she will be propelled properly to the landmarks that *are* crucial to the story and the audience. A good actor never turns her motor off because she is determined to stay alive each and every moment.

The most creative aspect of an actor's job is to find just the right roadmap of actions that will both support her "staying alive" on stage, and contribute something meaningful to the story. If her preparation is full of holes, if her *choices* are bad, then she'll have a very hard time settling into simple, flowing actions while performing.

Really, once you've discovered good choices, the rest of your job is relatively easy. As long as you've learned how to concentrate on your actions, monitoring your progress through active listening, your performance will flow. You've probably seen experienced actors in interviews scoffing at the notion that acting is a complex, mysterious thing. They're not just being self-deprecating. They're talking about the essence of what they do: simple actions.

On the other hand, there are plenty of actors who either haven't experienced simple actions onstage, or who are thwarted in their attempts to repeat them night after night.

Goals lead to choices. Choices lead to actions.

How is a simple, concentrated action different from a "choice," or a "goal," or a "motivation"?

Simple actions are "playable." This means a living, breathing human being can *do* it, immediately, in a living, breathing manner. It is not an intellectualism. It is the literal expression of the moment. Intellectual motivations behind actions are relevant, but they are not typically in the immediate consciousness of the actor while on stage.

Let's say, in real life, you are greatly affected by your desire to climb your way out of the ghetto. This urge motivates most of your choices – whether to go to school, whether to have a child, whether to do drugs, whatever. Your motivation adds a significant undercurrent of energy to your life. Some of that energy may come in the form of stress and tension.

Then suppose one day a clerk at a convenience store doesn't give you the correct change. You snap at him in such a cruel manner that you shock yourself. You had been so self-controlled and contained in your life that your outburst felt like an alien had temporarily taken over your body. After you get home, you reflect on what happened. You come to understand that there was a connection between your outburst and your stress. You may realize that your desire to change your life had something to do with that moment with the clerk. This is an intellectual understanding. *While* you were in the act of yelling at the clerk, you were not, consciously, motivated by anything except the fact that you were shortchanged. You probably weren't thinking to yourself, "If I am to be successful in elevating my status in life I need to react strongly when someone tries to screw me." The connection might have been real, but your consciousness of that connection, in the moment, was probably nonexistent.

An actor in performance should be focussed on her immediate consciousness, not abstractions. No matter how brilliant her choices, while in performance she is simply executing actions one at a time. E.g., trying to get the proper change from a clerk.

The problem is that "trying to get the proper change from a clerk" is not a specific enough assignment. As we've just seen, your background can greatly affect the *way* you try to get your money, which is important to the *story*.

Do you get the correct change by yelling? Do you do with a joke? Do you do it by violently grabbing a handful of bills from the cash register? This is what we mean by "making choices." Scripts will not (and should not) give all the information you need to know to make adequately personal choices. You often have the leeway to decide whether you are yelling or being quietly sarcastic or even warm and friendly. *But* that leeway is limited by your responsibility to the story.

Your line may simply say, "Are you going to give me the rest of my change?" Your job, while preparing for your role, is to figure out the best choice — not just that which is interesting in the moment, but that which supports the entire character and the entire play.

To get out of the ghetto is both a motivation and an objective. It's something that shapes the specific choices you make in life, and it provides energy to fuel those choices. You can think of all your character's goals as layers of an onion. Circles within circles within circles. The largest circle is the character's overarching objective. It could be: "To find safety from my fears." Or, "To prove to my father that I can be successful." Within that circle might be another circle you could label "Escaping the ghetto." Within that could be "Avoiding intimacy so as not to get trapped."

Notice that these objectives are analytical (and they're often not from the character's conscious point of view). After awhile, though, you arrive at a circle that describes your character's conscious goal for a particular scene: "Making the other character think I'm kind of a jerk so she will not get too attached." But that's still not the *playable* action. Your character has to decide, from moment to moment, how to work for his self-stated goal. At the very center of the onion are all his final decisions. How, precisely, should he try to convince his friend that he's a jerk? He may decide to *ridicule* a comment the friend makes, perhaps by rolling his eyes. That (the specific way he ridicules) is his action within that moment. A living person can commit to it. He can judge its impact on the other character.

Since the choices you make about your playable actions are greatly affected by your character's larger objectives, it's important to *intimately* understand those objectives. Don't just read the script once or twice and then buy into the most obvious interpretations. This leads to an intellectualized character built upon facile conclusions, rather than one built upon your own unique sensibilities. Think of the process of understanding your character as solving a complex puzzle or mystery. Or, better yet, like forming a relationship with a poem. You don't expect to read a good poem once and understand all it has to offer. You read it again and again, each time making new discoveries that, in turn, unlock more discoveries. Your initial impressions may not be disproved, but you will find more profound, less obvious truths as you explore. While exploring, you can't (and shouldn't) avoid making initial judgments. Just be sure to keep those judgments flexible as you absorb the role over time. Challenge yourself to ensure that your judgments are honestly your own, not the property of some generic conventional wisdom based on a superficial reading. (More on this when we discuss text analysis.)

Never forget the most important thing that you have to offer is your own experience of the world. If you don't understand your choices at a highly personal level, you will not be able to engage in your actions as a living, breathing human.

the particular and the peculiar

Develop an antenna for zeroing in on that elusive "flow."

The final result of all the preparation and thought that goes into a role is a physical commitment to "the moment." While performing, don't wait around to see if other actors are joining you in the pool. Keep moving forward. This might feel awkward, or even cutthroat, if you are accustomed to politeness. The feeling is not unlike a boxer in a ring, taking advantage of every opening, showing no mercy. We're not talking about whether or not your *character* is aggressive, we're talking about your level of commitment as an *actor*. Are you willing and able to fully join up with your character's goals and actions, without looking back to see how you, the actor, are doing (or to see how the other actors are doing)? Mediocre shows are often the result of no one taking the initial plunge into *the moment*. The actors are all, in effect, winking at each other about the show they're putting on, rather than actually living together as their characters. The longer this kind of detachment goes on during the rehearsal process, the less likely anyone in the show will be able to break out.

Many performances are patchwork quilts: a funny bit here, a "naturalistic" moment there, but lacking what Stanislavski called a "through line," the *understanding* of what the character is up to overall in the play, as well as in each particular moment. Only after you have organically *made sense* of your character and how he fits into the world of the play, can you make the final leap, fully committing to every connected moment onstage.

If you've acted in at least a few productions, you might know what it feels like for a role to "flow" – to find yourself "flowing" as a living, breathing, spontaneous being. You might also know the frustration of when that flow remains elusive, when your performance never gains a foothold in reality, when your character is simply a string of disconnected bits and fragments. This flow is your primary goal, not because it's a more enjoyable way of killing time onstage (although it is), but because your job is to bring a character *to* life, with your *nervous system* taking charge, just as it does in the real world.

While an actor cannot escape certain onstage disparities between his character's mental life and his own (for example, he must remain conscious of his lines, his blocking, the audience's needs, etc.), he can still achieve a primarily unified nervous system, identical, for all practical purposes, to his character's – never fractured, always engaged. But this takes significant amounts of commitment, preparation, intelligence, courage, a certain level of emotional maturity, and a great, almost athletic energy.

When your performance "flows" your whole onstage life has an inevitable quality: each moment *must* follow the previous moment, because anything else would ring false and "life" would come to an end. It's an organic, athletic activity, but it's grounded in (and defensible by) thorough analysis and observation.

Many actors are, in theory, more than willing to bravely share themselves with audiences, even their unpleasant aspects. This willingness is on vivid display in acting classrooms everywhere: dramatic displays of anger in males, or tearful displays of vulnerability in women. But blind courage leads to bad acting. If an actor is relying *only* on his commitment, his work will not be well integrated into the arc of the character/story.

When your actions are not simple, clear and grounded in the story, you will feel like you're sliding around on ice, out of control, in a vacuum, disconnected from the other players and the story. Develop (and learn to trust) sensors, or antennae, that will reliably lead you to your "flow." The main job of your sensors is to answer the question, "Am I actually *doing* something in this moment?" Well-calibrated antennae can easily discern the difference between doing something and monitoring how it's coming across. Are you trying to manipulate the audience into thinking or feeling something? Are you just blank, waiting for your next line? These are not natural actions (from your character's point of view), and your antennae should tell you so. Always, always, always, we humans are *doing* things. While listening to someone speak, we are showing agreement, we are trying to be patient, we are deciding on our response, or we are trying not to yawn. While on stage you should *always* have at least this level of involvement with the other actors or objects. There should always be an unfolding relationship. It is physically demanding work because it takes real concentration. It never stops until you leave the stage. Your antennae, if you develop them properly, will steer you toward these kinds of actions, and away from self-consciousness.

Once you can rely on your "flow antennae" you will be able to quickly discern where the trouble lies. Sometimes the antennae simply serve to wake you up. But if they're telling you that you're consistently failing to bring a beat or a scene to life, chances are you need to go back to the drawing board and rethink some of your choices.

A free-flowing nervous system – your private oasis.

All we're talking about when we speak of developing "flow antennae," is that you are clear about your priorities while in performance, and that you are sensitive to the signals of how fully you are committing to these priorities. As with any skill, you will, initially, have to focus quite consciously on the basics, but soon they will become second nature.

Your "antennae" monitor various physical manifestations in your nervous system. In general, *self-consciousness* creates a constricted feeling, a sense of being shackled. Whereas *doing* produces a sense of calm and freedom. Learn to tune into these physicalized signals. Normal bodily functions such as breathing, throat-clearing, stretching, squinting, blinking, subtle nervous reactions, etc., occur naturally and unforced when you're engaged in unselfconscious actions. You can enjoy the benefits of an unobstructed nervous system. This is what we mean when we speak of being a real, live person onstage. It is within the nervous system that the actor finds his "spontaneity" each night. The audience will not be aware of most of the particulars within that nervous system, but they will be aware of the highly tuned-in nature of the actor, his commitment to his choices, and, generally, his ability to portray a live human being.

We'll talk more later about the actor's private, inner life when we discuss emotions. For now, keep in mind that the more you try to control your nervous system, the more you will lock it up. The manner in which you allow your true nervous system to function is a large part of what makes you unique. If your nervous system is constricted, you can offer nothing authentic.

Your actor's antenna (which should soon become second nature) helps you quickly spot all moments when your synapses are constricted. Once you know what it feels like to "live fully" onstage, you will be able to steer toward that at all times. It is in this sense that acting is "athletic" — that is, guided by the physical. Actions are physical, and they require the support of a physical nervous system, even if your action is to remain patient while someone else is speaking. Your job is still a physical one, a battle between your mind and your body. In an effort to avoid speaking, you might fold your arms; in an effort to remain calm, you might close your eyes; in an effort to convey acceptance, you might force a smile. These are physical actions. You may or may not have "mapped them out" in advance, but, regardless, in performance, you really have to *do* them. Your whole psyche needs to be involved. Don't just cross your arms; cross your arms in an effort not to talk. *Try* not to talk.

You should definitely map out your basic actions within each beat of each scene before you enter the stage. But it's your free-flowing nervous system that will take you, spontaneously, from point to point on your map. You may notice, one moment, that you're feeling a little drained of energy, and so you might widen your eyes a little to wake yourself up. This will not be planned. You may feel an itch on the top of your head and indulge in scratching it, perhaps as a way of subtly communicating your discomfort to the other character. This is being *alive*.

By discussing actions in such detail we run the risk of creating the misimpression that characters should be built upon scratches and twitches. This is not the case. And when you find yourself enjoying a good spontaneous scratch you would do well to not repeat it the next night (unless it has become a moment that carries real meaning). Save the domain of your free-flowing nervous system as your private oasis of spontaneous life. You will kill it off if you try to make it repeat itself. The point of discussing its myriad manifestations in this book is simply to exemplify the *kinds* of things that well-developed antennae can steer you toward.

A free-flowing nervous system requires a good roadmap of choices. I realize we're talking in circles here, but the process is a circular one. Your onstage life and your preparation are interdependent. Especially if you're working with a well-crafted text, it will simply not support you if you're lacking crucial understanding. You can see this frequently, even in above-average productions. An actor may be very believable and enjoyable to watch, but along comes a critical scene and she just can't seem to pull it off. She resorts to clichés, or to milking her emotions (instead of relying on clear actions). An observer's impulse is to say that the scene needs more work, but the problem is usually more systemic. The character as a whole, oftentimes, simply is not making full sense.

(Please don't confuse the concept of a character "making sense" with predictability or consistency. One thing human beings often do is *not* make sense. So, not making sense is quite often a sensible choice. Likewise, people regularly behave inconsistently depending on the circumstances. So feel free to make "inconsistent" choices if it "makes sense" to do so.)

Share the way your mind actually operates.

There is no single correct logic to a character. It is the synthesis of the demands of the text, the particular production (within the particular times we're living in), and, of course, the sensibilities of the unique actor portraying the character.

Applying one's unique sensibilities into a character requires courage. Many actors possess the *philosophical* courage to share themselves, but they're confused about *what* to share. So they resort to pushing emotions. Whereas the essence of what they should be sharing is, in a sense, the opposite of emotions. It is their logic. The way their minds actually *operate*. How they function from moment to moment. And *that* truly takes courage.

Our minds are our greatest defense mechanism against the perceived threats of the world around us. Our minds are our secret, crafty last bastions of self protection. And even the dullest among us have developed these defenses with great sophistication. We may present ourselves as transparent and overly gullible, or mysterious and wise, or kind and careful, etc., etc. — and while there may be some truth to such self-expressions, they also serve as comfort zones that we have developed to help us cope.

Storytelling in the theatre involves revealing aspects of characters – not just specific narrative secrets about the character, but the manner in which the character actually uses his mind. If an actor has effectively portrayed, say, an army general, we will likely leave the theatre praising him with language such as, "He was able to make the general both tough and vulnerable." This was possible because the actor *revealed* living, personal thought processes.

Every actor has a life's pallet of "thought processes" to choose from as she develops her characters in tandem with the story's logic. But the doorway into these processes is not, primarily, analytical. Usually an actor has better luck accessing authentic mental processes by tapping into the *rhythms* that accompany the thoughts. You can think of these thought processes as your various *natural intelligences*. Since they are natural, your experience of them goes deeper than the intellect. You access them viscerally.

For example, if you are playing a "wise simpleton" (Forest Gump or "Chance the Gardener") you need to uncover and exploit your personal rhythms that actually *affect* your intelligence (just as your intelligence affects your rhythms).

So you might imagine the last time you went fishing on a lazy afternoon with your nine-year-old nephew. It may put your mind into a dreamy sort of openness to fanciful idealism; quite different from a luncheon with business associates. Now substitute that lazy afternoon mindset for a business luncheon situation and, because of the transposition of *context*, you may have stumbled upon your "wise simpleton" who serves the story perfectly.

But let's not dwell just yet on how to go about discovering these rhythms. Suffice it to say that their discovery is highly relevant to your flow detector.

And this is why any successful technique cannot be built entirely on analytical discoveries. We are discussing the area of our minds that influence our bodies – and the areas of our bodies that influence our minds. The lazy afternoon fishing mind doesn't spring out of nowhere; it is from a combination of stimuli: the sun, the water lapping, the boredom, as well as the permission that we grant ourselves to relax our minds in a specific manner.

the thoughtful actor

A concrete, logical, non-mysterious technique leads to an animated, spontaneous performance.

All bad acting springs from one cause: an actor's misplaced focus. The correct point of concentration should be the specific actions of a character. The more well-chosen those actions, the stronger the performance. In bad acting, the performer is focusing on things like, "Am I being a good actor?" Such thoughts are one hundred percent destructive, and, unfortunately, all too common.

It's wonderful to see an actor working *easily* – not forcing the performance, breathing naturally, wielding common human sensibilities, such as a sense of humor, while simply *doing* things. But this is possible only after getting past what many actors experience as a crisis period in their preparation: understanding how they, *personally*, fit into the story. Having some intellectual tools, or criteria, can help guide one's experimentation.

Actors are beholden to a weighty infrastructure: a specific text that tells a specific story, a production that costs money, collaborators who collectively give thousands of hours to the production, and an audience who wants to be effectively entertained or enlightened. It's easy for an actor to abuse such a system simply by not taking his work seriously. Good actors are acutely aware of this and avoid draining the social system with self-absorption. If your only purpose is to show what a good actor you are, you will bring down the quality of the production.

The system operates on logical principles. For example, audiences relate to and understand a story because its characters behave in certain ways. If one character suddenly decides to behave totally differently, the audience's understanding breaks down. The actor needs to test all his choices with this big picture in mind. I'm all for exciting, surprising, and dangerous choices as long as they are also reasoned choices. The social structure will not support *arbitrary* choices.

When you present your choices at a rehearsal, if you are clear about them and their purpose, you will have no problem defending them if asked to. Your director may still want you to explore other areas, but at least you will have done your job of approaching your initial choices thoughtfully. Anti-intellectual actors may balk at discussions of *why* they're doing what they're doing, but it's an essential question. Obviously much of what you do will not be discussed by the group – there's simply not enough time. But *you* need to understand it. You need to know why you're taking one route instead of another. And you need to know when it's time to explore new routes. And you need to know *how* to explore.

While performing there is only one technique: executing your chosen actions with full commitment. Actors can build muscles and antennae that carry them easily into a proper performance mindset.

By contrast, the process of *preparation* is much more complex, more artful. It requires us to consciously embrace the full notion of *technique* – which simply refers to the establishment of pathways that can reliably guide us toward appropriate, exciting and personal discoveries. If, for whatever reason, you choose to shun the concept of technique, you will likely flounder through the discovery process, and your performances will be hit and miss (at best).

Don't cover up your problems.

Despite the necessity of a technique-oriented mindset, actors are right to consider technique to be a subset of what they do. Every actor has made the rather strange choice to play make-believe in front of audiences. Why? There are as many reasons as there are actors. But they wouldn't enter the performance space if they didn't have *some* compelling reason. It's their fuel. And it's part of who they are, part of what they have to offer audiences. Understanding it is a highly personal adventure, beyond any technique. But such understanding is not enough – at least not for those serious about the craft.

Some of the most brilliant performances I've seen were in nonprofessional or semiprofessional productions by actors who couldn't have been less "actor-like." Reclusive, clumsy, socially awkward, speech-impaired, whatever. I'm sure each had his own personal reasons for getting onstage. To some, perhaps, it was a form of therapy – facing their fears, etc. No matter. The important thing is that, when they were successful at executing concentrated actions, while revealing (not being ashamed of) their authentic sensibilities (in a role in which those sensibilities made some sense), then their work was simply captivating.

This is one of the wonderful perks of acting: it enables us to creatively utilize elements of ourselves that do nothing but cause problems throughout the rest of our lives. Whether we are excessively shy or excessively chatty, our flaws become gems when put to good use. It's *exceedingly* interesting to audiences – *if* you tell the truth. If you cover up, you offer nothing of value.

The purpose of a proper technique-oriented mindset is to ensure that you will effectively use authentic parts of yourself in the service of the play. A technique-oriented mindset is, above all, a thirst for exploration, outside of performance, for the purpose of making discoveries that will allow your performance to fly.

Rehearsals are usually a mixture of performance and exploration. While performing a scene for your director, you attempt to concentrate simply on your actions. While discussing the scene afterwards, you gain insights into choices that will strengthen your commitment.

Working at home by yourself is different. It never involves a true performance; you have no fellow actors and no audience. The quality of your exploration is different too. The dialogue is only with yourself. But, because you can indulge your every creative whim, at-home work is an invaluable part of the process.

working at home

Test your actions to see if the body approves. This will help you formulate a roadmap. Do not attempt to cement in place the way you perform your actions.

Working at home can create a lot of problems if you're not aware of the pitfalls and have not established good work habits. On the other hand, it's very hard for actors who do not spend time alone exploring a logical "roadmap of actions" to find their way effectively in rehearsals. If you rely solely on making your discoveries alongside other actors, tapping into the improvisational atmosphere that good rehearsals foster, your actions will likely be born from a performance mindset more than a personalized mindset. On the other hand, if you bring to rehearsals an initial clarity about what your character is up to – specific choices, even if preliminary – then you will be able to apply the improvisational energy of rehearsals more directly to the needs of the story itself.

There's a common danger when working in the vacuum of your personal space: you decide how your part should be played and then spend all your time watching yourself trying to play it exactly that way. This causes you to focus, not on what your character is doing, but on what you, as an actor look like – judging your success based on how well you are carrying out an imaginary performance. Then, in rehearsal, when you try to recreate your performance, it's an impossibility because the other actors are not behaving the way they behaved in your imaginary play. By perfecting your imaginary performance, you cement it into place. It then becomes extremely hard to enter your rehearsal alive to what actually takes place there. You've created deep ruts in the way you deliver your lines, react to others, and interpret each beat.

The problem is not the ruts per se. In fact, while you do want to remain open to the spontaneous life that is onstage during rehearsals or performance, you need to do so with the help of a clear map of essential actions. Otherwise you run the risk of undermining the story. But making a map is not the same as getting in a *rut*. Let's give it a better connotation: how about *finding a groove*?

Your concern, primarily, should be the *process* by which the rut/groove was created. Is it formed in direct relation to the real life needs of a particular production, or is it formed solely in your own mind and then dropped into the production like a white elephant?

Some actors who are acutely aware of this pitfall refuse to ever "rehearse" at home. They prefer to memorize their lines in a monotone, with no attempt to *act* them. The idea is that they don't want to also be memorizing *ways* of performing the lines before they are in rehearsal. It's a nice sentiment, but it can bring you into rehearsal either with an overly intellectualized roadmap of actions, or no preliminary roadmap at all.

However, even more problematic than the purism of these actors is the crippling approach of actors who practice *the way* they will perform in rehearsals.

There is a middle way. It consists of *trying on* actions, testing them, to see if the body approves, to see if they make sense through the course of the scene and the rest of the play. Trying on actions is not the same as memorizing the way they are performed and then attempting to recreate the same performance in rehearsal. It's a way of discovering choices via the body, instead of purely through the intellect. If you understand the proper role of your imaginary home performance, you will not try to recreate it in rehearsal; instead, you will be able to take basic roadmaps of goals and actions into rehearsal and reanimate them in spontaneous ways.

Memorizing your part.

Generally, the early stages of getting acquainted with your character, while memorizing your lines, is the time to make your first discoveries. This is when you first "audition" your initial roadmap of actions. (We'll talk much more about this later.)

It's very helpful to memorize as much of the play as possible before the rehearsal process begins; it's hard to get serious about really *doing* things onstage while your head is still buried in a script. You'll find that memorizing your part early on forces you to scrutinize your role in much greater detail than just reading it. It's easy to gloss over a lot of question marks until you personalize the language by committing it to memory; because, really, what you are doing while memorizing (if you approach memorization productively) is imbuing the words with specific, if preliminary, *meaning*. You might be wary of entering your first rehearsal with a strong roadmap – before you've even seen what your

collaborators have in mind; but as long as your initial roadmap is supported by the text, and as long as you remain open and flexible, you will probably be doing your collaborators a great favor. The sooner each actor engages in clear, crisp, real actions, instead of sloshing through the play with generalized, demonstrative behavior, the greater the chance the production will come to life.

Bring to each rehearsal a clear, sensible understanding of every moment you are onstage. Of course your understanding will deepen and change with time, but don't wait around. Get started immediately with something concrete that allows you to commit to each and every moment. Insist, from the beginning, that your work not be mushy. Spend energy even on trying to make sense of single words in your script.

These words might even be in italics: "*pause*," for instance. Perhaps the script specifies a short pause after another character tells you she wants you to leave the room. Don't gloss over it. Commit to some preliminary understanding of that pause. Insist on finding preliminary *meaning*.

Free exploration of all the clues, circumstances, and motivations that you are juggling while trying to understand your character's actions is a lot of fun. Many realizations will occur immediately, effortlessly. Still, have patience; it's natural that your character won't *fully* flow until your understanding is deep and precise.

In the following chapters we'll be discussing many examples of how to approach your exploratory work at home.

avoid the generic (like the plague)

Problem spots provide important clues to understanding.

Give your audience the benefit of the doubt. They are capable of appreciating intelligent choices. And give your writer credit. She is capable of not thinking in clichés.

Too often actors latch onto the first, most obvious interpretation of an action (or a line), even if that interpretation makes little sense in the greater scheme of the play. Sometimes the interpretation makes sense okay, but it's just plain boring.

Question everything. Take nothing for granted. If the most obvious interpretation seems dumb or mundane, it probably is. If a choice is not aesthetically appealing to you, why would you imagine your audience would enjoy it? So dig deeper. You'll probably find some fascinating nuggets. Even if the text is, in fact, not written by a great writer, you can still elevate the writing by personalizing your understanding of it.

Let's say you're playing a therapist who is talking with the mother of a murderer. The mother tells you of her son's violent tendencies when he was a child. You tell her: "All boys have those tendencies."

At first glance, the line seems like just a throwaway form of providing comfort to the mother. And maybe that's all the writer was thinking. But the more you work to understand the line specifically, personally, instead of generically, the more you realize the line is *problematic*.

"Problematic" is a good thing. Good actors are *delighted* by the "problematic."

The line is a strange thing to say to a mother whose child is a murderer, isn't it? If you're a therapist, are you really going to try to convey to a mother that her murderous son's violent tendencies were *normal*? Was the playwright just sloppy when she wrote the line? Maybe so, maybe not. It doesn't matter. The playwright is not the person responsible for bringing the line to life. That's *your* job. *You* need to make specific sense of it. Do not overlook the problem. Do not play it the way it strikes you at first glance just because you're having a hard time making more full sense of it.

Maybe the therapist is baiting the mother, to see if she's the kind of person who avoids reality. Or maybe the therapist does say the line thoughtlessly, but then, after the fact, she would probably realize the absurdity of what she said. That could be interesting. It's your responsibility to find something that makes real sense of each beat, and fits well within the overall story. This is not to say you need make a big deal out of your choice. Audiences may not even be consciously aware of it. They will, on the other hand, lose patience when they are asked to repeatedly overlook gaps in common sense.

Even a "casual" action should be specific.

Let's look at another example of a (made up) "throwaway" line:

"Oh, your brother's in Omaha?"

On first reading, assuming there's no obvious, weighted implication associated with a brother being in Omaha, the line comes across as casual, non-important conversation – and perhaps it is. But don't fall into the trap of thinking your approach to the line can be nonspecific. Casual and nonspecific. are two different things. You *have* to make a clear choice each time you tackle this little line. What are you actually trying to accomplish when you say it? Be specific, or you will be false.

Perhaps you're using the knowledge that the brother is in Omaha as an opportunity to shift the topic of conversation. In which case your action might be to *express* great interest in the new topic; the rationale being that the more interest you express the more likely the new topic will prevail among everyone in the room. Don't telegraph this intention to the other players or the audience. You simply want to do an effective job of expressing interest. That's your action. Don't feel like everyone needs to be aware of what you're up to. In the scheme of things, the fact that you want to change the topic of conversation is probably not particularly significant. What is significant is that the life of the scene is fed, unbroken, so that the story can continue flowing. Any single action that is fuzzy (meaningless) impedes the story. It forces the

audience to have to work harder to suspend disbelief in the fiction. If it happens too often, they will give up entirely and start watching the production merely as a performance to be judged.

Get into the habit, as you work at home, of fulfilling each action in various ways. Don't confuse clarity of purpose with *how* you read the line. Do not make a decision about the best reading. Eventually, as you get into performances, you will deliver a lot of lines very close to the way you delivered them the night before, and that's nothing to be ashamed of. But if you are self-disciplined early on in the process, so that you think in terms of clarity of action instead of what you sound like (and look like), you will find that your actions in performances will always be filled with subtle particularities.

Be warned: it's quite easy to lazily memorize a specific physicality or vocal pattern. Focus, instead, on mapping out two things: the purpose of each action (what you are trying to accomplish), and the *energy* with which you approach each action. Your mapping work will be guided by the discoveries you make about your character's larger objectives and motivations.

Each action should unlock the next.

Fiddle around with various approaches to each action to see which one unlocks more pieces of the puzzles that make up each beat, each scene, and the entire play. You might be quite satisfied with your initial understanding of the brother-in-Omaha line, but if the rest of the beat never seems to come to life in rehearsal, your choice may not be properly feeding the scene. Maybe the other actors aren't really doing what you expected them to do; maybe they're doing nothing that would *cause* your character to need to change the course of the conversation. So experiment. Shake things up a bit. Don't become wedded to your choice as being the only thing that makes sense. Chances are, your choice is not so brilliant that you need to waste a lot of energy (and, perhaps, the good will of your collaborators) lobbying everyone to accommodate you. Come up with something new — but, again, keep it specific.

Imagine some context, some history, some circumstances, fueling your choice. This can help imbue a moment with precise specificity. What if your character already knows the brother took a trip somewhere? You just didn't know until now that it was Omaha. "Oh your brother's in *Omaha*?" (Subtext: "Wow, that's way out in the boonies, I thought he'd probably gone to Houston or something, being the mover and shaker that he is...") Again, this specificity needn't be significant to the story. Its purpose is to animate the moment. As long as the personal meaning behind your choice doesn't get in the way of the greater meaning of the play, it can serve to help unlock the life of a beat.

We're purposely exploring an incidental line right now, because it's the kind of action that typically gets glossed over and, therefore, *stymies* the beat — so that when you get to the more significant actions, there's no life flowing to support the reality. The scene is fragmented. If there's no life flowing to support the reality, then your full commitment to that important action will occur in a vacuum. You will strike audiences as inauthentic. Actors (and directors) usually give a lot of attention to the big turning points, so, in a way, such moments are less of a problem (that is, when they're well thought out). Smaller actions make up the rest of the play. When your character "flows" you have found a roadmap that strings together action upon action with perfect contiguity. "Oh your brother's in *Omaha*?" is only an effective action if it unlocks successive life.

It hardly needs to be stated that your character's life does not come to an end while another character speaks. Let's say you're taken mildly by surprise that the brother's in Omaha, of all places. Another character elaborates on what the brother is doing there, giving you a chance to process the new information. You might be thinking, "His brother must be less hip than I pictured him... Hmm... You learn something new every day..." Or whatever. You remain alive.

Perhaps you will underline the word "Omaha" in your script. This will remind you of your choice. Don't confuse it as a directive to stress the word the same way each time. It's just a reminder of your preliminary choice, which you must then convert into "real life" each time you're on stage.

Trying to literally repeat all the subtext that occurs after, "Oh, your brother's in Omaha?" will bog you down. Assembling a beat as if you're painting by numbers will kill it. To avoid this, get specific with as many points along the way as necessary to ensure that your live mind and body will be able to flow between them. If you keep losing the alive state at a particular point in the scene, that's a good sign that you need to make some new discoveries in that area. If you find that whole sections of the play are de-energized, it is almost certainly because of gaps in logic that you're not attending to.

Life is not black and white.

Let's say your character listens to a long monologue by his wife about her childhood, then gets up, says he's late for an appointment, and leaves the room.

If you've been lazy in your homework, you might have taken his words at face-value, and not been very interested in the fact that he expressed no empathy in his wife's story. In fact, his non-reaction could unlock much of the puzzle. And it may not be remotely spelled out by the playwright. You need to explore various, specific things that might be going on with him *while listening* to his wife. Maybe the wife's story, quietly, slowly, builds a fire inside him, a realization that he married the wrong woman. But that realization could spark a new commitment to try harder in the marriage and stop subconsciously sabotaging the relationship. This kind of complexity adds specificity – and it's interesting. Still, no one except you needs to know that this particular inner process is going on. The audience will be mainly watching the wife anyway while she speaks. Your character may come back in the next scene being very kind to her, offering her a cup of coffee. But think how much more powerful and personal the scene will be *to you* if you have invested such specificity as described above.

It's the way real life works. We are kind to someone for all sorts of reasons. It's too generic to merely say we're kind because we love them. Love is far more complex than that, and if, when we search our story for clues as to what our character is really up to beneath the surface, powerful, real-life moments will start to pop out. Our character doesn't even need to be a central character to the story. He can still, quietly, be a "hero" – as far as we're concerned – for making certain, strong choices.

Often we unlock great choices by paying particular attention to the very pieces of the text that mediocre actors throw away. Which is not to say that the playwright necessarily had your particular idea in mind when she wrote the scene. Other good actors will find other specific choices that work well in their productions. But *your* choices need to be born out of your unique sensibilities if they are to be powerful in your production.

the text and your character

Trust a good script to provide the clues to your character. Do your best to understand the intent of a flawed script. Stay away from bad scripts altogether.

It's too bad how many actors routinely look to other performers as the starting point for their preparation.

"I'm looking for that quality John Malkovich had in 'Death of a Salesman.'"

"I want that Reese Witherspoon attitude in 'Election.'"

Attitude? Attitude is death to an actor. Attitude is what a teenager has – from his *parents'* point of view. It's a *description* of behavior. The teenager doesn't go around consciously copping an attitude. He does things for specific reasons. Then the parents (the audience) describes the teen's actions as springing from an "attitude." Directors fall prey to this way of thinking too, asking actors to rent certain movies to get certain qualities. If they're not careful, actors will mistake this as license to work on their role descriptively, from the audience's point of view. The reason John Malkovich or Reese Witherspoon are interesting is that they personalize their work instead of appropriating someone else's attitude.

By focusing your exploration outside yourself, the development process becomes one of casting about for actions that can possibly be forced into a certain quality, rather than going directly to the source of the quality – the action itself. The action that is specific to the text, to the actor, and to the production. Don't come up with a description of how your character's mind works, and then start searching for actions that support that description.

Start with the text.

It can be off-putting: a black and white map with obscure or ambiguous meanings. It's easy to get into the habit of glazing over everything that doesn't immediately make sense, but if the text is a good one, the hardest spots to understand are often the keys to understanding deeper levels.

A popular rule of thumb says that the first thing an actor should do to a script is cross out everything in italics. The original purpose of this axiom was to avoid getting locked into stage directions that might not be appropriate to your theatre. Fifty years ago most stages were simple prosceniums. Writers would often write specify how everything was to be laid out behind the arch: *Joe enters from up-left*. But if your production takes place on some sort of L-shaped modified thrust, your set will not look anything like what the author had in mind, so you'd be foolish to try to make sure Joe enters up-left.

The problem is that a lot of actors and directors have taken the axiom and applied it to *all* the author's directions. In doing so they ignore much of the author's intent.

A "pause," or a "silence," or a "she sits," or a "he stares" are just as important actions (and clues to the characters) as the dialogue. Does this mean you should absolutely never remain seated when the author says to stand? Not necessarily. But you must have a good reason for making the change, a reason that doesn't violate the author's general purpose. You need to understand *why* the author wrote what she did. Don't just ignore it.

This is not simply purism for the sake of purism. Undermining an author is similar to undermining a director. You may not think either one has the perfect vision for a production, but if you ignore their vision, then the audience is left with *no* vision at all, just a mess of actors strutting about. You need to work especially hard at understanding where writers are coming from before you slash and burn. With directors you can at least have dialogues about their vision. Whereas with writers, typically, the only contact you have with them is in the form of the text itself.

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Substitution comes to the rescue.

Use common sense when deciphering a script. Be aware that each text has its own purpose and style. Honoring what a text is trying to accomplish does not generally have to involve compromising your fundamental acting priorities, but it may take some creativity.

Suppose you've been cast in a commercial. The script calls for your character to be taking a shower in his home bathroom. A famous athlete enters the bathroom uninvited and starts talking to you about a cell phone service. Your director tells you she wants you to play the part very "realistically." Your character is totally surprised by a strange athlete showing up in his bathroom, and you're told to treat the intrusion *realistically*.

Hmm.

Imagine how you would *really* act if a professional athlete were suddenly in your bathroom while you were showering. You'd likely be extremely frightened, perhaps thinking the athlete had severe mental problems and was going to kill you. This is probably not the kind of realism that your director had in mind, assuming he's producing a typically "witty" commercial.

Look to the text for clues. Perhaps it says your response to the athlete's hawking of a cell phone service is "surprise." Your first line might be "Huh?!" The scene might proceed with your character nervously asking the athlete questions about the phone service. Common sense says the writer was focused more on the scene being *cute*, than realistic. Realize this and accept it.

But does this mean you throw your technique out the window and just resort to generic cuteness? Absolutely not. Your job becomes an exploration for a proper *substitution* of actions. If you've determined that the most realistic choices are not appropriate (e.g., fighting desperately to ensure that your life is not in danger), then imagine a parallel set of choices that could be inserted into the story with the desired effect. Maybe if you pretended that, instead of a stranger barging into your home, a buddy was playing a practical joke on you in the gym shower. Your initial reaction of surprise might quickly turn into an attempt to recover your composure after your initial embarrassment. That could be cute.

Notice how you are utilizing your analytical and common sense skills to plan your way into the scene, but you are doing so with the purpose of finding a roadmap of actions to which you will eventually be able to genuinely and fully commit (in a non-analytical manner).

There are many ways to discover substitutions, and we'll touch upon some of them in the the following chapters. One efficient trick is to, on your own (at home), play the scene superficially, but physically, with the quality of cuteness that you imagine the writer is looking for. Just do typical bad acting. Watch yourself act. Then ask yourself what real-life situation reminds you of your physicalized behavior. Instead of arriving at your substitution intellectually, you've found it physically, using the words of the text itself. Now you can start mapping out a set of concrete, logical actions to which you can fully commit in performance. They will be real actions (e.g., regaining composure), so you will satisfy the director's desire for "realism," but, at the same time, they will protect you from turning a cute commercial into a horror movie.

(Hopefully, by now, you're getting the idea that *anything goes* while working on your role at home — as long as you are crystal clear about how to convert your work into appropriate, playable actions when you get back to the performance space.)

Another, similar trick involves temporarily getting away from the text altogether. If you are having a hard time making a line your own, find another way to say it. Do your best to interpret the meaning of the line using your own words. This can help you personally understand the essential action beneath the line, which can then be transposed onto the original line. But use this trick sparingly, especially if you're working with a serious text. It can cause you to gloss over important clues and rhythms in the original language.

mapping your actions

"Understanding" your character's actions involves the intellect, the body, and the synapses.

As we've mentioned, you can approach your character as a puzzle that fits together so that all of your choices throughout the play support one another. The process of figuring out the puzzle can involve "trying on" actions for size. In this chapter we'll begin to walk through exactly what that experimentation can look like by examining a few more tiny beats individually under a microscope. Later we'll learn to piece these partial roadmaps back together, showing how they can physically be *lived*, not just orchestrated by the intellect. After that, we'll examine in some detail the task of creating a character that, while seemingly quite different from you, is actually born out of your personal experiences and sensibilities.

So, how do you go about finding the right set of details for your roadmap? And how do you test them to be sure you're on the right track?

Even a short pause can contain rich meaning. You can't really explore its possibilities if you don't give it some special, conscious attention. But trying to understand it in a vacuum— out of the context of the rest of the play — leads to a disjointed performance that rings false overall.

But how is it possible to gain insights into the nature of each tiny beat without losing the overview of your character's journey, especially if that overview is only going to become clear after you've figured out the purpose of the tiny beats?

This is the puzzle that constitutes the building of your roadmap.

Auditioning actions.

Perhaps your action within a short pause is to try to decide whether to continue an argument with another character, or to let it go. One way to execute such an action could be to search the other character's face for signals.

If you watch a skilled actor perform such an action it will seem quite simple to you — something you could easily have done. And you'd be right. But, remember, the initial script probably did not spell out his action at all. It likely just said "pause." The actor, then, was left with the task of specifying a particular action that made so much sense that the choice seemed inevitable to the audience. It might appear like the actor is hardly doing any work at all.

Sometimes the insights do, indeed, come easily, but all actors struggle with certain moments that demand extra attention to unlock. Because they demand extra attention they become "keystone" moments: in order to understand them, the actor is required to gain a new level of insight into her overall character.

If you're having trouble understanding the precise purpose of a moment or a beat, start digging for clues. They can be found anywhere, but a good place to start is in the immediate vicinity. For example, what comes right *after* the trouble spot in the text?

Let's say the script says that the other character asks you to leave her house. Then there's a pause. Then, let's say, your line following the "pause" simply ignores the other character's request that you leave the house. Perhaps your character offers a total non sequitur. From a blurry beginning of a roadmap, you need to come up with a very specific, even if preliminary, plan of action.

Let's say your non sequitur line is: "I saw Amber yesterday."

Before you even enter rehearsal you should be digging deep into this meaty and ambiguous terrain. It won't suffice to simply define the beat in surface terms (i.e., the other character is mad at you, wants you to leave, and you, indirectly, refuse). This kind of approach leads to vague or nonsensical choices. Productions across America are filled with actors falling into this trap. It's exceedingly common to find actors who can't seem to bridge a fundamental disparity between their generalized definition of each beat ("having an argument") and the specific requirements of each line or action in the text ("I saw Amber yesterday."). The result is often a ludicrous misreading of the line.

Get religious about deeply, personally understanding each and every action and line. They should not be occurring on a parallel track to your goals; they should be deeply integrated with your goals.

With keystone (challenging) moments, there's no way around the fact that you just have to start digging.

"I saw Amber yesterday."

Your first thought may well be to use the line as an attempt to defuse the tension. From what you know of the script, does it make sense that your character is the kind of person who would want to defuse the tension? If so, fine; you've got a tentative beginning of a roadmap.

Step one: she tells you to leave. Step two – the pause itself – is still a question mark. Step three, for now, is going to be you trying to defuse the tension.

Now, while working at home, how do you go about unlocking step two without just resorting to an intellectual analysis? You can start by *imagining* the other character as she tries to get you to leave the room.

(If, in rehearsal, you find that the other actor is not making such an obvious choice – perhaps she's *really* trying to get you to stay, even though she *says* she wants you to leave – then you can make adjustments accordingly. But, for now, just imagine she's really trying to get you to leave.)

If you think it makes sense that your character would want to defuse the tension, go with it for the time being. Let your *body* try out its reaction to her telling you to leave (in your imagination). Play with it. Don't rush to your line. Your job at the moment is to find a clear, appropriate action for the little pause. Don't leave it fuzzy. Don't just explain it away as "I'm going to wait for a minute to let her statement sink in." That's a cop-out. What are you *doing* exactly? Rely on your immediate sensibilities. What does your body (and nervous system) want to do when the other character asks you to leave? Are you looking at her when she speaks? Try it out. Just imagine the other character is standing in front of you. Allow yourself to be affected by her. Do you want to look down at the ground afterwards? Do you want to take a deep breath? Try it. What is the resultant *action*? In other words, how might your behavior affect the other character? Use your imagination, but notice everything. Maybe, if you look down at the ground, you realize you might convey the impression that you think she's off her rocker. Like you're giving up on her. Like she's being hopelessly unreasonable. Is that the impression you want to convey to her? If you're pretty sure your next action is to defuse tension, then you may *not* want to look down at the floor if it feels like doing so might subtly accuse the other character of being kooky. Look for clues throughout the text. Do other characters, directly or indirectly, refer to your character as condescending? If so, you may find that the simple action of looking down at the floor for a second could be the perfect choice (*much* better than generic, overplayed "condescension"). If, on the other hand, the text provides evidence that your character is unusually empathetic and sensitive, you *may* be veering off course.

The important thing I'm trying to get across here is the level of specificity that you need to be interested in while you explore. I'm not saying you necessarily should map out whether or not you look at the floor. But you need to understand from your character's point of view how even his most subtle actions affect his environment. This is the kind of homework that leads to unique, fully personalized performances.

If your character is *not* particularly sensitive to others around him, then your actor's sensibilities will be calibrated differently. You probably won't be aware of what's conveyed by looking at the floor. Your focus might be more on your desire to *control* the environment around you. You might be pacing, scrutinizing your environment, even doing a bit of shadowboxing – whatever. Your line about seeing Amber might be a way of showing the other character that you're in charge, that you won't be pushed around.

But that doesn't mean you would necessarily shout the words. Be loyal to the details inherent in the text. The line "I saw Amber yesterday" is inherently simple; it provides you a valuable clue to your character's *way* of controlling the environment around him. It's much more interesting than jumping to the conclusion that, since your character is supposed to be controlling, you should handle everyone with a sledgehammer. You could say the line quietly, with apparent kindness, and still cause the other character to feel smothered because of the way you ignore her feelings.

If you explore your character and his actions with this level of detail you will be on your way to creating a roadmap that is not only appropriate to the story, but terribly interesting and unique. There's not just one right approach; but whatever your choices, remember that you need to be very clear and specific. It's amazing how many actors don't understand this. They gloss over each and every moment they're onstage, never getting clear about what they're actually *doing*. This can come from not knowing the right way to work at home, or simply from a fear of making firm choices.

Raising the stakes, even in tiny ways.

In the early stages of character development, observing the effects that tiny choices have on oneself and on others is extremely helpful. Fragmented performances are those in which an actor likes the feel of a certain choice – perhaps because he thinks it telegraphs something useful to the audience – but then, in the next moment makes another choice that conflicts with the logic of the first choice. Your job is to be truthful and careful about the consequences of each choice.

If your character *really* wants to defuse the situation, you should be sensitive to behaving only in ways that don't fuel tension. If you are careless, if you make some choices that perhaps look interesting, but defeat the character's logic, even in tiny ways, it will leave the audience feeling confused, and it will propel you out of the scene's logic. Is your character a two-faced Pecksniffian? If not, just looking at the floor for the wrong reason might force the audience to ignore the fact that you, even in a tiny way, poured gas on the fire. The audience has no choice but to ignore this, because they see no flames erupting afterward (no logical consequences). If they see someone behaving in a patronizing manner, even subtly, they expect to see that behavior reflected somehow in the world of the play.

Not that there's anything wrong with a character being complex enough to be both patronizing *and* empathetic, just that you need to be aware of what you're developing. This awareness comes from remaining focused on your actions from the characters' point of view, not from the audience's. You may look at the floor, realize that you've just been condescending to the other character, and then try to mitigate your behavior by defusing the tension with your non sequitur about Amber. If your partner is a skilled actor she should be able to notice and reflect your "error" in a manner that serves the story.

But for now let's say, after you've tried sighing and looking at the floor, you do decide the behavior is too condescending. You want to get to your next moment another way. Good. You've learned something from your first attempt. You've learned, for starters, that the pause is an important moment within the overall beat. You are *raising the stakes*. Even this tiny moment has become more important, more challenging, to your character.

It's starting to sink in that the other character has all but abandoned any possibility of reconnecting. So you have to approach your little pause with extreme delicacy if it's important to you to not lose her. Maybe you can search the other character's face for some tiny chink in her armor, some sign that she may not have *totally* dismissed you. But there's nothing there. Only hardness. You wonder how the two of you have gotten so far away from the easy, normal life you used to share. You used to tell each other everything. Then you remember seeing a mutual friend the day before. Amber. You remember how, in better times, the mere mention of a mutual friend would have been a pleasant topic of conversation. You decide to take a risk by "casually" telling your partner about Amber. You know your casualness might make her angrier, because you might come across as dismissive of her strong feelings, but it's a risk that might be worth taking. You want to gently remind her of how nicely the two of you used to interact, and you want to invite her back to that place. You realize it's kind of contrived to act so casual at a time when feelings are running so strong, but, right or wrong, you want to send her a message. You suddenly widen your eyes and emit a little surprised gasp, as though you've remembered something quite pleasant you've been meaning to tell her. You smile warmly. You say your line: "I saw Amber yesterday."

Converting discoveries into simple actions.

The way to stumble across strong, specific choices is to walk yourself – your psyche and your body – through very specific thought processes, as just described. This does not (necessarily) mean you go through such a process every time you repeat each particular beat. Real people are not usually so calculating. Or, at least, their calculations are more automatic, less conscious. But your exploration has led you to something that makes a lot of preliminary sense. Now your job is to break your discovery down into its essential actions. This will be your roadmap.

No, you don't have to write your roadmap down, but, particularly if you think the moment might be a key to unlocking other actions, you might jot in your script (in pencil – you're a long way from setting anything in stone) something that will remind you of your discovery. Something like: "Search her face," or "Oh, I forgot to mention...!" The important thing is to remember the key points on the roadmap, the main actions that will keep you on track.

In this case, you could boil them down to, first, "search for some sign of softness in her," followed by "inject a pleasant, casual topic." Yes, this will all get refined or thrown out during rehearsals, when you find out what the other actor and the director bring to the scene. But you enter rehearsal with an initial clarity about your character's basic goals. You have a feeling for how your character might work for his goals. You know what kind of things your character is sensitive to. You'll know how your character will define success and failure in each and every moment. If success is based on his

ability to defuse tension, that's what he's going to be tuned into. If success is based on his ability to control his environment, he won't care whether or not he elevates tension.

The roadmap of actions you bring into rehearsals should be detailed enough to help you find your way from one little goal to the next. It should almost never specify things like "widen your eyes" or "emit a little surprised gasp." It might, however, specify a quality of energy fueling your active behavior, such as "*gently* try to defuse tension."

Use adverbs sparingly, though, as mnemonic devices, and always be willing to drop them on the fly. If you're clear about your essential action, you will often surprise yourself with extraordinary ways of executing your action while in rehearsal – *if* you're not too locked into preliminary adverbs. The important thing is to defuse tension. If the stakes are high enough, you may find yourself *screaming* to defuse the tension – and then immediately bending over backwards to do damage control. This could be quite interesting. And it's the kind of choice that will probably only occur to you spontaneously in rehearsal because of the nuances of the way the whole beat unfolds with the other actors. It's the kind of choice that, if you planned it, could feel quite forced and unnatural, because it arises in an illogical manner. It only works because of the *particular* manner in which both actors end up striving for their goals.

If you enter rehearsal with clarity about what's important to you, then you will be treated to many such surprises.

The (evolving) roadmap of essential actions.

There's no hard and fast rule for how detailed your roadmap of actions should be. In actuality, you will have many maps. The scale of your maps will range from your overarching objective in the entire play, to your goal in each scene, each beat, or even to several actions during one tiny pause. In general, you need to map out your actions in significant detail to ensure that you are never aware of any dead air while rehearsing — where you're doing nothing but waiting for the next action at the next mile post. Your body and nervous system learns to sense when it is repeating, by rote, actions that have lost their meaning. (Remember your "flow antennae.")

If another character launches into a speech, your first action may legitimately be "to listen." But this goal will only take you so far. Very soon you should find yourself facing more sophisticated challenges. Listening while pretending not to be angry. Listening while trying not to fall asleep. Trying *not* to listen. Whatever. If your synapses go dead, you might need more specific actions.

Do not think that you need to, intellectually, insert smooth *transitions* into your map of actions. On the contrary. Real people seldom add conscious transitions to their life. This is one of the common pitfalls of *thoughtful* actors; they exhibit gears turning that, in real life, don't usually exist. That's why, in the example of our little pause, we didn't insert all the subtext that was part of our discovery process into our rehearsal roadmap. Our character can *instantly* jump from searching his partner's face to sharing a slice of normalcy in a relaxed manner. Human beings are sophisticated enough for this. The motivations for the jump can be subconscious. A character's "subconscious motivation" helps the actor make good choices while preparing his role, but it is not something that can be literally played. The actor might have discovered them in slow motion, as it were, while exploring at home. But when he brings his discoveries to rehearsal, he needs to put his trust in the simple actions themselves, not the thought processes behind them. If his body can't execute them comfortably, if the jump is jarring, then he should tweak his roadmap.

Treat each action on your roadmap matter-of-factly, as if you're laying bricks. Instead of spreading mortar, you're simply trying to convince another actor you're sorry about something. Yes the energy involved may be different, but your fundamental job is the same: you're trying to accomplish something. Actually, laying bricks is harder, because, with acting, if you are focused properly on an appropriate action, *there's really no getting it wrong*. Your action is to *try*, because that's all we human beings can do. If we end up making our partner laugh because we've tried a little too hard to show her how sad we are, then we deal with the new reality. It's all part of the humanity we are sharing. It will propel us into our next action from a slightly different angle. This is one of the most enjoyable parts of acting. Whatever happens, you progress naturally, spontaneously, to the next point on your map. If the turn of events causes you to have to work harder or longer to get to that next point, fine – just do it. Take the time you need to do it thoroughly. Beginning actors panic when things don't go according to plan. They rush. They glaze across the surface, racing to get to the next planned point. Mature actors *love it* when things don't go according to plan, when they have to work harder – as long as they are clear about the essential points on their roadmap.

You may find your eyes welling up with tears. Should this become part of your map? No. Trying to repeat emotions is a big trap. Stick to your actions. What you personally feel as a result of those actions will change from performance to performance. This is natural, and will not present a problem unless you're unclear about your basic actions.

(We'll talk later about how to approach the overall problem of emotions.)

Insights into a key action can unlock discoveries elsewhere in the play.

So far we've only discussed finding, through trial and error, individual points on your roadmap of actions. But your job is to make sense of an entire play. Normally, you wouldn't start your exploration with a pause midway through a scene in the middle of the play. Normally, you'd begin with the beginning of your first scene.

Actually, you should start *before* the beginning. It's very important to always have a concrete image in your mind of what your character has been up to that propels her into each scene. This is such a basic rule of thumb, it's surprising how many actors don't do it. You don't need to write the whole story of your character from the time she was born, but you do need to know what she has just been doing for the past few minutes. Remember, your goal in creating a roadmap is to connect all the moments of a scene in a coherent, fluid manner. Since every beat builds upon the previous beat, a single disconnected moment will throw off all the following beats. So, if your first beat in a scene exists in a vacuum, your entire scene will be built on a shaky foundation.

Still, don't forget that the process of creating your roadmap is a layered, circular one. Every piece of your roadmap needs to connect, both logically and dynamically (i.e., your body and synapses need to understand the connections, not just your intellect). If a scene is giving you headaches, the chances are good that discoveries in other scenes will help with the roadblock just as much as if you work on the trouble spot.

For instance, your work on one little pause may prove to be the catalyst for gaining insight into a central truth about your character, perhaps an understanding about his moral underpinnings. He may value kindness above everything else, and, so, when he is forced late in the story to commit a ghastly, but Utilitarian act, he may do so with surprising cruelty, as a way of lashing out against his fate. But please remember not to telegraph your interpretation to the audience. The interpretation is for you, and you alone. What the audience will witness is a live being making his way through a provocative situation. Trust the text to reinforce what the audience needs to hear. If the play is well done, the audience will vigorously debate character motivations over coffee after the play. Your job is not to come up with the definitive interpretation, but to come up with an authentic, animated one that serves you well at the same time that it serves the play. There's no definitive explanation of Captain Vere's behavior in *Billy Budd*, but the actor playing Vere needs to have great *personal* clarity about how each moment making up the entire arc of his actions leads to the next – until, finally, a scrupulously moral man finds himself executing an innocent boy.

a thoughtful approach to "character acting"

The secret is context – pieces of you, consciously taken out of context.

"The easiest way to make people believe you are a good man is to be a good man."

– Socrates

Today's best actors follow two axioms. We've discussed them both: First, concentrate on your actions, not on how you look doing them. Second, everything you do should be *you* doing it. The prevailing sense among the general public is that actors get to "be other people." This notion can easily steer actors off course into falseness.

On the other hand, this notion carries a degree of truth. It can also help correct one of the biggest problems that many of today's "method actors" share, actors who are so afraid of falseness that their unimaginative performances end up harming the story.

A method actor's first approach to a role comes in the form of a question: what would *I* do if *I* were this character?

This is a good start, because it immediately gets the actor away from thinking of the character as divorced from himself, someone he "puts on," and, therefore, someone who will exist only in two dimensions, without any fundamental life force. But what if the character is a sick murderer? (And you, the actor, are not.) How far will the "what if" question take you? All too often it leads to a misguided intellectual analysis of the character, as you try to remain loyal to your character. You can twist yourself into a pretzel with imaginary "what ifs" to help motivate such a character — how would I act if I were abused as a kid, if my parents had died when I was four, if I'd won the lottery and then had it robbed from me? Might I then become a murderer? The truth, of course, is you'd be a totally different person.

But *how* would you be a totally different person?

Let's introduce the term *moral*.

Your moral sensibilities would be totally different. Your perspective on life, how you fit in, what your duties are, how you manage your energies and impulses, etc. In short, who you *are*. If you try to import your own moral sensibilities into your murderous character, you may get praise for "humanizing" the role, but you will likely undermine the story.

Certainly there are plenty of movie stars who make good incomes presenting their moral perspective, especially if they find roles that properly exploit it (we might call it their *charisma*). These actors are not character actors. Audiences are not particularly interested in seeing them explore characters very far removed from their typical sensibilities.

We enjoy character actors because of their ability to so completely shed their personal morality in favor of their character's. But what of *themselves* do good character actors bring to their work, if not their moral perspective?

This is where the "art" of acting gets interesting.

Substitution and exploitation.

Everything an actor does onstage should be genuine – in the sense that she should intimately understand it. Let's say she has to *brashly* persuade someone to ask her out on a date. The first thing she, as a method actor, will explore is her own typical flirtation techniques. But what if her flirtation technique in real life tends to be tastefully underplayed? She may try to play "against the text," rationalizing that the character will be stronger if she makes her more dignified. But, let's say the director doesn't let her get away with this. He wants the humor of the scene to come out, and thinks it won't unless the character has a pronounced *brashness*. So he badgers the actor into *putting on* a brashness that she's not comfortable with because it isn't genuine. The word itself – brash – becomes the goal. She puts on a "brash" mask. The director is disappointed that she isn't as good an actor as he thought when he cast her, and she's embarrassed that her work is false. But at least the audience can sort of enjoy a rough portrayal of the play as the author intended it.

One way to view this all too familiar scenario is to say that the actor was miscast. And perhaps she was. But, more often than not, a solution to such a problem can be found if the actor knows how and where to look.

Her impulse to look within her own experience is correct. But she needs to broaden the search beyond, say, her experiences with dating, because this constrains her to certain moral and aesthetic sensibilities. She will need to separate herself from these sensibilities in order to tap into other pieces of herself that may be more appropriate to her character's flirtatious behavior.

Chances are the actor can find *something* inside her that's akin to "brashness," something that can be inserted (substituted) into a flirtation scenario. Perhaps her brashness only comes out when a certain obnoxious cousin visits her once every three years. But that can be enough to start with. Maybe she's found that a certain flip frankness is the only way to deal with her cousin. This behavior, to her mind, might be the *farthest* thing from flirting. But if she separates the behavior from its original (moral) purpose, she has the opportunity to exploit it.

And how, technically, would she carry out such an exploitation?

First, she would analyze the behavior in terms of *actions* (rather than moral purpose). She would find clarity about the specific, tangible nature of her actions while she is with her cousin. This is different from mimicking herself (which pulls her back into the trap of watching herself). She needs to understand what she is *doing* when she's with her cousin. For instance, she's *putting him in his place*, or she's *shocking* him, or she's *dismissing* him. She is not analyzing goals so much as she is analyzing playable actions.

Then the actor does a peculiar bit of alchemy when she conjoins her simple action (dismissal) with her character's action (trying to get a date) with her character's words ("Is that your real hair?"). If the alchemy doesn't work, the actor keeps searching until she finds something that does. She may find just the right actions to propel a key scene early on, and then other actions for other scenes reveal themselves fairly effortlessly. But don't be fooled. As the play becomes more and more formed, you need to keep *testing* all the moments you are onstage to make sure you're always clear about what you're doing and why. Remember, a sure sign that you've got more work to do is when you find yourself "skipping over" beats, coasting fuzzily, until you get to the next moment in which you really know what you're doing. Eventually you should get to the point where you've created someone so coherent that she really is a whole *new* person, with her own particular synapses firing, her own breathing patterns, rhythms, energy waves, etc. – all pieces of *you*, put together creatively, intuitively and intellectually – in a *context* that serves the audience and the story.

Let's look at some other examples of how to manipulate context early on in the character-building process.

You may be an absolutely fabulous father to your six-year-old girl. You may communicate to her with the utmost respect and care. But if you *exploit* that exact quality of communication *in the form of actions* (monitoring her carefully to be sure she understands what you're saying, or animating your facial responses while listening to her, so as to convey to her that you understand, etc.) you can get some very interesting results. If you treat your adult employees in the same way, you will likely be thought of as pretty creepy. Merge such behavior with actions and speech from a text and you might find the key to your character. Note that you are importing authentic behavior (in the form of actions (communicating with your daughter), but you are divorcing it from its moral context (being a good father). Because the behavior already belongs to you, you will have no trouble animating it once you give yourself license to exploit it.

Let's say you're playing a criminal mastermind. The trap is to play it generically: crazy and ruthless, putting on a sense of personal power that is not genuine or fully understood by you. It's a façade that the audience smells the falseness of. So how do you, an average, insecure person, take on such a misguided moral sense of yourself that it propels you into ruthless power? The key comes from taking a part of yourself that you *do* understand, detaching it from its moral or aesthetic underpinnings, and then fully exploiting it. If you're playing a condescending boss, you may get a lot of good mileage out of talking to your employees in the same manner as you talk to your child. It can elevate your performance from the cliché of an obnoxious boss to a *particular* (alive) obnoxious boss. But what if you take the exploitation further by applying it to your crazy murderer? What if, right before you kill someone, you listen to them with the same care with which you'd listen to your little girl? Suddenly (if it's indeed a good choice) you've found your power. Because you are engaging the other actor with the same clarity that was originally fueled by moral certainty. And your choice is *interesting and original*. You are creating a live, specific person, not a boring stereotype. Of course, while performing, you should not be concentrating on whether or not you're interesting; you should concentrate on your action (e.g. listening to your victim with extraordinary care). But there's nothing wrong with seeing the value of interesting choices while you are preparing for your role!

What if your character commits a murder, but not because he's an evil villain? Maybe the murder was a terrible outburst of temporary insanity. You'd need to find a very different piece of yourself to exploit. How can you realistically relate to such a horrible act of violence? Many actors don't even try. They just fly into a generic "rage," thinking they could never find personal experiences that could possibly match the extraordinary mindset demanded by such a scene.

Maybe you honestly can't ever remember even being in a rage. But if you think about times you felt unusually self-righteous, for example, you can start to unlock specific, personal behavior that can be effectively inserted into the play. Maybe you're a very calm individual except at times when you feel ambushed by a perceived injustice. You remember a time when a store manager refused to honor a warrantee on an item you just purchased. You tried to reason with him, but he just kept saying, "Sorry, can't help you, ma'am." His gross unfairness took you by surprise, so much so that you started feeling like a cornered rat. You lashing out.

When you transpose this lashing behavior into the part of the play where you commit the murder, you find that your high level of self-righteousness serves you quite well to convey the sense that your character has gone over the edge. In the context of your real life, the self-righteousness was understandable, but in the context of the play, it's evident that your character is going crazy, because she has no apparent reason for being so self-righteous and turning that self-righteousness into murder against an innocent person. Your action – the murder – becomes something specifically playable and personal: trying to get your victim to hear that he's being unfair to you (while you stab him).

Don't get hung up on being so loyal to your character that you need to concoct an elaborate history to justify his actions, to provide him with reasons (e.g., his bad upbringing) for behaving so irrationally. Dig deeply into such terrain only if it helps you unlock appropriate, playable discoveries.

However you arrive at it, substitution of context is one of the greatest tools to keep you from wandering, fudging and faking.

At some point in the rehearsal process you have to make the artistic judgment that you're on the right track with your roadmap. This judgment is based on various criteria. Do other scenes connect well to the key (problematic) scenes? Do interactions with other characters flow easily (are they full of life and conflict)? Does the director feel the story is unfolding nicely? There is always some danger in finding a "key" to one scene, a different key to another, and then failing to bridge the two scenes in the form of a single, believable character. But you can be aware of such problems and take actions to fix them. Chances are, if you are exploiting ill-fitting aspects of yourself, problems will pop up throughout your performance. There will be beats in which you just don't know what to do. The solution is to keep working on your understanding of the overall puzzle until these problems are resolved. Sooner or later the whole picture *will* make sense, as long as you're willing to put in the necessary legwork.

discovering well-fitting thought processes

It takes real vulnerability to share the way your mind operates.

As we develop our characters we need to balance an analytical approach to the text (and the circumstances of the individual production) with an experimental "fiddling about" with our thought processes — *as physicalized rhythms*. Through trial and error, we make some discoveries, go back to the text, test our discoveries, etc. Like a crossword puzzle, good discoveries will open up new possibilities, inspirations, and sets of logic. Like a crossword puzzle, we can be fooled into thinking we've pretty much wrapped up a section, until one stubborn, tiny, uncooperative annoyance forces us to finally abandon our tack in favor of something else.

You're playing a tough-talking army general. Your immediate task is to bark out an unethical order, seemingly without hesitation. Simple enough. But if you do not find the live thought processes of your general while doing this task, you will fail to give the audience more than a wicked caricature.

Another character, a lieutenant, makes a request of you. You turn. You answer: "Negative." That's all the script provides. As you play with this "simple" beat (keeping in mind the context of the rest of the play), your job is to stalk out a meaningful thought process to accompany the action. We will not call that thought process "subtext," because the word carries too much baggage. It's too often associated with an artificial creation of false inner dialogue: "Ahaa, you impudent subordinate, you have fallen for my evil ploy!" Instead, you should engage in a highly personalized set of thought processes that are discovered more spontaneously and physically (at the nervous-system level) than intellectually.

It takes courage; our thought processes are often not the most noble parts of ourselves. They are often composed of petty, egoistic, mundane, even twisted elements of our personality that we, generally, manage to keep fairly well under wraps. To share them doesn't mean we have to show them off per se. It simply means we have to *use* them. This is the gift we are giving the audience. These petty, mundane processes become elevated when they are put to the service of our story. So, perhaps your general, rather than barking out his order with typical evil ferocity, betrays a more interesting pathology when he finds himself only mildly irritated with his lieutenant's bothersome request. Dinner is getting cold. This is war. Don't make a big deal out of it.

But let's be clear: these mental processes are not (usually) comprised of "inner dialogue" in the literal sense. More, they are mental rhythms that are authentic parts of you, inspired by your exploration of the story. As you develop your character, there's a constant interplay between logical and intuitive processes. If you have discovered choices that serve the story and your character's arc appropriately, and these choices are advanced by specific, personalized mental rhythms, then the actions themselves will lead you repeatedly back to the spontaneity of the mental rhythms without a great deal of effort or forcing. If, on the other hand, your foundation is patched together in piecemeal fashion, based on your (or your director's) desire to play one beat this way, another beat that way, you will have a hard time sustaining the life of your human being on stage.

How to find a mental rhythm.

You're playing a character who, on the surface, seems to have very few of your everyday sensibilities. Let's say you — yourself — are a pretty smart, well spoken guy, but your character is just plain dumb.

Now, calling your character dumb is sacrilegious talk to some method actors who would never dream of commenting critically about their character. The idea behind their sentiment is that you can't effectively commit to an action if you are judging it at the same time. This is, of course, true. But let's face it, some characters in some stories need to be *dumb*. If you play them with your own natural intelligence and your personal moral (or aesthetic) underpinnings, you may pride yourself on bringing dignity to your character, but all you have really done is undermined the story. On the other hand, you don't want to create a cardboard stereotype. So what do you do?

Your goal should be to search for authentic pieces of yourself that can be built into someone dumb. But already, if you describe your task this way, you are limiting yourself. By starting intellectually, apart from the text, you are much less likely to discover a true understanding of your own particular dumbness, not to mention the particular sort of dumbness that fits the story (angry dumb, good-natured dumb, psycho dumb...).

Let's say you remember that whenever you are with your Great Aunt Gertrude you always feel a little ignorant because she's so good at chess. Whenever you play a game with her, you start feeling like you're Mr. Bean, getting yourself into one pickle after another. This memory may, indeed, serve as a building block that leads to a coherent character. But there's often a more direct route to understanding the "dumbness" required of you, a route that's triggered by the text itself.

You can't literally transport the piece of yourself when you are with Aunt Gertrude into the new character you are developing. So your real goal is not to tap into your "Aunt Gertrude Self," but to find an understanding of the required dullness on a personal, physical level – an energy level, a nervous-system level. Thinking of Aunt Gertrude may or may not be a good mnemonic device to help you properly place your nervous system before a performance, but discovering suitable actions in the first place is best done by probing the text itself, because then you will be sure that you are not forcing your own intellectualism onto the story. Aunt Gertrude, often, can be most helpful as an afterthought, not as the original inspiration. In other words, you may arrive at a visceral understanding of a beat through the text alone, and then that understanding *reminds* you of Aunt Gertrude. You may then jot in the margin of your script: "Aunt Gertrude – chess." This may help you remember the next night how to initially place your consciousness.

But let's not get too hung up on the exact time Aunt Gertrude may or may not pop into your head. Above all, do whatever it takes to avoid the trap of starting with physicalized dumbness: vacant eyes, slack jaw, etc. This will lead, at best, to a caricature. Instead, try to make sense of precisely what your character is up to in the particular moment. He says something dumb. Why? Why did he *really* say it? Was he trying to be nice? (Surely he wasn't *trying* to be dumb?) Was he rushing to convert his thought into action in order to avert people from making fun of him? Think about it; but more importantly, try it out, physically, at home. Little bits at a time. You'll be using your imagination, because you'll be talking to imaginary people. The point is to allow your body (including your voice) to feel its way through a multitude of different actions, so that eventually a *pattern* that makes sense, both to the script and to your body, starts to develop. Your nervous system needs to try out how it performs various actions. When it finds actions that fit the text, it will signal you by flowing, by *being alive*.

It's exciting, this process of discovery. This is what we mean by "finding a piece of yourself" that can be applied to the character. It's far less important to identify it as "that piece of me when I'm with Aunt Gertrude" than it is to recognize the bodily sensation of being able to perform an action with real synapses firing.

"internal" vs. "external"

This is not your father's hunchback!

Do you develop your character externally or internally?

This is a common question put to actors by TV interviewers. Historically, if you were an "external" actor it meant that you were a traditional character actor who worked in front of a mirror to gauge your effect, concentrating on physical manipulations, vocal dialects and accents. "Internal" actors were the "method actors," who drew entirely from their own life and would never dream of working in front of a mirror.

These simplistic distinctions are limiting to today's actor.

For starters, there are a lot of very different ways of working "externally." One is watching yourself, as just described. Another is exploring physical impulses of the body (ranging from subtle nervous system responses and breathing patterns to the constriction of entire muscular systems), and being aware of their resultant effect on one's consciousness. This type of external exploration is not for the purpose of judging your affect on an audience, it is for unlocking actual dimensions of ourselves that we may not have otherwise stumbled across. As we build a character, we benefit greatly from a broad search, one that ensures we've considered some of the more interesting choices available to us. Physical explorations can help us tap into a wellspring of facets of ourselves that we might not otherwise think about.

If you are ordinarily very spry, you may have a hard time finding pieces of yourself that work well when applied to the heroin addict you are portraying. The problem may be that, while you have effectively mined many of your psyche's "darker" regions, you've yet to fully understand the required detrimental impact on your *physical* energy. So, unless you want to actually become a heroin addict to see what it's like, you'll need to consciously physicalize your exploration in order to discover an appropriate countenance.

The same basic principles apply as when you're exploring your thought patterns, as described earlier. You want to start with an authentic piece of yourself that you already understand. Maybe you only experience it for a few seconds after you wake up in the morning, and, perhaps, only when you haven't had enough sleep or are hung over. You sit on the edge of your bed in a sickly daze. Something physically real to you like this – even though it comes in very small doses – can be the key to unlocking a whole range of responses that you might not have found otherwise.

All is fair in love and war and acting.

But let's back up for a second. We want to be careful not to get on a high-horse about the proper kind of external work versus the improper kind. It's perfectly okay to try any technique or freeform exploration that might help unlock pieces of the puzzle, particularly while doing exploratory work at home. If walking around in front of a mirror helps stimulate your creative juices, do it. Primal screams, dancing, costumes, singing your lines as operatic recitatives – whatever gets you going. Just remember to keep coming back to the text itself. And, most importantly, remember the fundamental differences between exploration and performance. Check in with your "flow antenna" to be sure you are focused in rehearsal on clear actions, not on what you look like. If you're going to work in front of the mirror, it needs to be only the first step, a search mechanism. The next step is to consciously convert your discoveries into clear actions that support a particular beat, in a particular scene, in a particular production. If, while performing, you find yourself trying to recreate an affect you saw in the mirror, then you haven't done this conversion and you will not be authentic.

Don't forget, we are talking about *theatre* here. We're concerned, ultimately, with presenting an illusion of reality. The reason we actors strive to be authentic is not because there's anything sacred about an authentic actor. The reason we strive to be authentic is because then we will contribute something more touching and interesting to the overall illusion. It is a conscious self-exploitation. If we are disciplined about our technique, and rigorous about the priorities we have set for ourselves, it is because we have found that this discipline leads to more satisfying theatre for audiences and performers alike. That's all. If, for whatever reason, we are required to break with our self-imposed rules, then we should break them consciously without regrets. If we are breaking them out of confusion or laziness, that's another story.

If you're playing a hunchback you may well have to perfect an image that projects well "in front of the mirror." Similarly, when on camera, you are required to land on very finite marks with your face, or hands, or shoulders to achieve a specific

effect. Accept such unnatural necessities. Rehearse them as much as you can so that you'll have to think about them as little as possible, and then return to your technique for the important things (actions) that are going on simultaneously. You can *authentically personalize* your hunchback even as you trod the boards with your hands dragging behind. You can still convince another character you love her while making sure exactly half your face is in a pool of light.

borrowing from the world around you

There's a time and a place to be a derivative actor. Be careful with it. Don't forget your fundamental priorities.

Does your character-development process always have to focus on your own reactions and experiences? Can you successfully incorporate traits that you observe in other people, not in yourself? Or is that *inauthentic*?

Theatre is filled with contrivances. It makes endless external demands on actors. It's impossible to succeed in acting without sometimes bowing to these demands. You can't simply refuse them on the basis that they are inauthentic. Your job is to *make* them authentic.

The first external contrivance an actor encounters is the text itself. Every text, for example, has its own *rhythm*. Your energy – the very quality of it – won't feel the same if you're in a Tennessee Williams play as it would if you were in a David Mamet play. You cannot fight the rhythm and do justice to the text.

But you do need to make the rhythm your own. That is, you need to personally, viscerally *understand* it. The understanding comes, not from putting it on like a costume, but from tapping into pieces of yourself that match the rhythm. You may be one of the most laid back people on the planet, but, if you're in a Mamet play, you're going to have to recall how you function when your nerves are frayed, when you're fueled by ambition, or when your mind becomes manic. Otherwise you'll undercut Mamet's rhythms. It may take some digging, but you need to find an energy level that is natural to you *and* allows the playwright's language to flower. You'll know you've found a successful balance when the words no longer feel alien to you, when you've made them your own. As long as they feel at all artificial, you still have work to do.

Study people thoughtfully, not to mimic.

Another external influence that some actors rely heavily upon is the behavior they observe in the people around them every day.

Conventional wisdom says actors have to be avid people watchers, but, in truth, the practice can lead to bad acting if misused. This is not because the practice is inherently harmful, but because many actors get into the habit of using their observations carelessly, simply mimicking the behavior they see — which, of course, does not lead to three-dimensional characters.

But, like any other external influence, people-watching can be productive if it's applied smartly.

Let's say you enjoy observing your neighbor: his forced, wooden laugh, the way he invades others' personal space, and his grossly flawed listening abilities. If you study him enough, his behavior, in a way, *becomes* yours, at least in the sense that you basically understand the way he fits together. You may be misjudging him, but at least in your mind you've created an animated character. Can you effectively portray this character onstage?

The short answer: no.

You could "do" him at parties if you wanted to make fun of him, but you couldn't put him on like a costume and get three-dimensional results.

But... if you approach your character development in a disciplined manner, you can successfully incorporate external *elements* of your neighbor. But you need to be very clear with yourself about what you are doing and why you are doing it. Remember to check all your choices against your fundamental priorities. Don't adopt your neighbor's wooden laugh just because you (or others) think it's funny. You are likely to create a fractured character that undermines the humor.

One of the most basic ways people-watching can help you with your choices is by giving you intellectual insights into the nature of how different people function. Your neighbor may help you see that, for example, your character could use laughter as a defense mechanism. After gaining this insight, your first impulse should be to explore the ways that *you* use laughter as a defense mechanism. Discovering your own authentic response will yield a much richer, funnier performance than aping your neighbor's behavior. Further study of your neighbor might help you understand some of

the myriad ways that operating with such defenses on a continual basis can affect a person. Maybe the only time *you* really use laughter as a defense mechanism is once a year, when you're around Aunt Gertrude. This can be a piece of yourself that you can extract, amplify, and, perhaps build some of your character around. But this might not be enough to help you get a feel for the consequences of being such a person year-round. Your neighbor may help you understand the way one part of his behavior affects another. You may notice that his bullish communication style comes from a bravado that masks great insecurities. This realization may lead you into exploring the more insecure aspects of yourself and injecting them into the character. In other words, the study of your neighbor may give you useful, intellectual insights into the overall arc of your character, which can help you make richer choices throughout the play. This is different from literally borrowing your neighbor's specific actions.

So, is it *always* wrong to "put on" someone else's mannerisms?

Not necessarily. But you need to be aware of the risks and of ways to mitigate them.

the fallacy of emotions

The labels we apply to our emotions every day are not the emotions themselves. It's crucial that actors understand the difference.

For most actors, emotions are one big, fat stumbling block. They needn't be.

If you pay some attention to how emotions actually operate in your real life, you will relieve yourself of much anxiety, because you will remove many misconceptions about the role they should play in your acting. What relationship do emotions have with our organism? What exactly *are* emotions? What are they *not*?

Most people associate acting with emoting. Even directors tend to use the language of emotions as a shorthand for communicating with actors about a scene. "Bigger and meaner." "Slower and sadder." So actors tend to put a lot of stock into how successful they are "feeling" the moment. This is a shame because "feeling it," while not necessarily a bad thing, should never be an actor's point of focus. When it's used inappropriately it can get in the way of the audience's experience of the story. If an actor has convinced herself that nothing beats "true feelings," she will not be clearheaded about her choices. If a choice tends to trigger a strong emotion, she will prefer it to a choice that doesn't — even if the choice that doesn't would serve the story better.

The only important emotion is the one that each audience member creates inside his head.

Remember, an actor's job is like an illusionist's. Amidst a complex set of contrivances, we try to convince spectators to temporarily imagine they saw something that really wasn't there: a real life story. It is in the audience's mind that the gaps get filled in (if the production is effective) so that they can forget that the story and its characters are not real. This is known as "suspension of disbelief."

A good actor knows that if he can successfully exploit the fact that he actually *is* a live being in a real place with real impulses, engaging in real activities, he can be most effective in fostering the overall desired illusion in the audience's mind. But he knows his spontaneity must be applied smartly and consciously via a logical roadmap of actions. His stage life must be organized with specific intent and manifested with non-spontaneous repetitions and restrictions. Technique exists to ensure that spectators will do their part to complete the story in their minds.

In the same vein, an audience's experience of an actor is never his emotions. The audience cannot know an actor's emotions. Despite the sense of communion that can occur between audience and actor, truly the relationship is primarily an empirical one. That is, the audience can only observe words, actions, eyes blinking, chest moving with breathing, someone carrying a glass of water across the room, etc. The audience can't read the actor's mind or get inside her heart. The audience simply imagines it can do so based on the cues given by the actor. Experienced actors will tell you how common it is for audiences to feel totally tuned into performances in which the actor felt out of it, and vice versa.

So, don't fall into the trap of thinking it's your responsibility to spoon-feed spectators their moment-to-moment emotions.

But back to our question: What exactly are emotions? In real life, they are something more abstract than we tend to think.

Most of us *label* our emotions. The labels are not the emotions themselves. Spend some time observing your own emotional movements. We may stop in the middle of the day to tell ourselves that we're feeling especially happy. But having a happy day is not like wearing a certain-colored shirt. It is not a static fact so much as it is an energy in motion. When we stop and tell ourselves we are happy, it's just a passing thought, a concept. It's like stopping and noticing a sunset. The thought is not the thing itself. Then we go on doing other things. After the fact, we may describe our actions as "happy," but while we are doing them we are concentrating on what we are *doing*, moment to moment, punctuated with thoughts like, "Gosh, I'm feeling happy and energetic today." Or, maybe we are too distracted by these "happy" thoughts that keep popping into our minds to concentrate well on the things we are doing. Still, what is actually happening is not "happiness" per se, it is a series of actions, followed by descriptive thoughts.

Emotions are highly complex, rapidly changing combinations of physical and mental occurrences that affect our activities. Actors who focus on emotions are trying to lasso the wind. If they are effective in controlling their emotions,

they, invariably end up forcing them on the audience in a trite or superficial way. We've all seen performances in which the actor is obviously "feeling it," yet the performance is meaningless and embarrassing. It's embarrassing *because* it's meaningless. It is nakedness solely for the sake of nakedness. The problem is that the actor is not focusing on logical actions.

Our real-life action might be to try especially hard to concentrate on a particular activity while thoughts of the future keep entering our mind. Our mind groups these cumulative thoughts together and gives them a name (*worry*, for example). This "emotion" then affects the way we think and act; i.e., our actions are colored by that emotion. An emotion can also contribute to exceptional energy, attentiveness, blurred vision, etc. — all of which can serve as obstacles *or* aids to our actions.

A roadmap of incidental actions?

When a director gives an actor an emotion or quality to play, the actor has to translate that into something that can be acted.

The direction may be that you should be "happy."

If you press your director about how being "happy" might affect your interactions with other characters, he may tell you something like it causes you to be very *kind* to them. Okay, you're getting closer to something playable. But kindness is a quality, not a specific action, so it still needs further translation. To be kind, you might be very attentive, listening carefully, seeing what the other person sees. Reflect the other's body language. Raise your eyebrows to show that you understand their point. Note that these are all physical things an actor can do without needing to *feel* anything.

This is where an actor is like an athlete. When you figure out what you need to be doing, then you *just do it*. When you figure out how a certain "emotion" affects your energy and actions, then you can go about your business concentrating on those actions *as they are punctuated* by interruptions (obstacles), which can be mapped out, as necessary.

If, for example, in one beat your character is trying to concentrate on laying bricks, but is having a hard time because "happy" thoughts of the future keep interrupting, your preliminary roadmap of actions might specify that you:

1. Stop spreading mortar
2. Look at your hand
3. Smile
4. Look at something in the distance
5. Take a deep breath
6. Quickly refocus on spreading mortar

The audience will fill in the emotions in the context of the story. If you are working properly, concentrating on a well-conceived map of actions as a living, breathing being, *you* will experience some kind of an emotional life as well. Don't get hung up on whether you would label that emotional life as "happy" or "sad."

Try it for yourself. Perform the list of actions above (you can just pretend to spread mortar). Do nothing except what is listed, but do them fully. Take your time. Do not attempt to control your feelings. Don't even worry whether the smile is "genuine." Are you able to execute these six simple tasks as an alive human being? Congratulations, you have just created an entire beat that is capable of deeply moving an audience when inserted into the context of a good story.

Of course when you repeat your actions night after night, you need to be sure you are still actually *doing* them, not just coasting on automatic pilot. Many actors focus on their inner emotional life to try to keep such actions fresh, when they ought to be focusing on the actions themselves. The very first time you execute an action (such as studying your hand), it's pretty easy to perform fully because it's a new activity. But how do you make sure to see that hand with fresh eyes each night?

Your private inner domain.

To tell the truth, this is one of the areas of acting that is so personal and idiosyncratic, it's almost better to not talk about it. (But we're going to try!)

Describing how to keep an action fresh is a bit like trying to describe why you would want to watch the sun set over the ocean night after night. Same old sun, right? Doesn't it get old? Some people witness the phenomenon in a meditative or religious manner, others marvel at the scientific wonder. It all depends on the way your brain works. The same holds true with acting. There is actually less getting it wrong than you might imagine; as long as you navigate properly within your well-conceived roadmap of essential actions, your private (inner) life can flow pretty much uninhibited – as long as it flows. Trying to overly control it – either by pinching out emotions, or by forcing inner dialogue, or by dictating what stimuli you allow in – can lock you up, like a frozen computer. Once you realize you don't have to be afraid or ashamed of your true thoughts and feelings each night, your nervous system will largely be liberated and you will find yourself behaving like a real human being. As long as you don't forget what you're supposed to be doing (executing your essential actions) you'll be okay.

If you were a bricklayer, you'd be able to concentrate on your work without shutting out (and even being affected by) the spontaneous events going on around you – clouds moving in, people walking by, a distant siren. Don't feel the need to shut out this kind of stuff while you're working onstage. We talked earlier about not being audience-oriented, but this doesn't mean you have to shut them out. If you hear someone drop her umbrella, it's perfectly natural to make a mental note of it. Of course you don't want to externally acknowledge it, but, actually, there are worse things you could do. For example, if your onstage action is to find some missing keys, and you're getting more and more frantic (focused on the search), you may find your nervous system naturally reacts with a start to the sound of the umbrella. This is not a crime. You have nothing to apologize for. If they want, the audience can imagine that your character heard the mailman outside, or whatever. Similarly, don't punish yourself for having human thoughts ("Boy, I'm tired tonight.") Remember, your nervous system and your thoughts are identical to your character's. Your inner life, and the things you notice, *will* be different every night, and this is a good thing. Your performance will be alive precisely because you spontaneously make your way to each point on your roadmap of actions in a slightly different way each night.

Some actors find it helpful to employ "inner dialogue" to flesh out a beat: "Please, God, tell me what I'm getting myself into." But here's a little secret: If you are sharing a private moment (e.g., "worrying about the future") it can sometimes be more effective to do something entirely unrelated to the story, such as studying the workmanship of a knot on the back of a certain stage flat. Or trying to decide which light is throwing a certain shadow. Such simple actions can often be more evocative than specific "inner dialogue." Noticing a shadow can come closer to approximating the day-dreamy quality of a real-life "emotional" interruption. Study your own life if you don't believe this. Tiny movements in nature – sounds, light shifts, odors, not to mention physical sensations within our own bodies – our awareness of these types of things is intimately connected to our energy and mood, even if that awareness is fleeting. The exact focus of our awareness is less important than the fact that our awareness has been diverted by something.

Feel free to change your incidental actions (such as the six on our list) from night to night if doing so helps to keep your performance full. Remember, these small actions (and whatever inner dialogue you may choose to employ) is part of your private domain. Let them flow naturally. Their purpose is to keep your organism alive and unselfconscious as you move from point to point on your map of essential actions.

Inner Dialogue

The correct way to use inner dialogue is just as we use it in real life. *Actually* talking to ourselves, usually silently.

Typically, we talk to ourselves in order to rehearse something for the future or re-play something in the past. We may also do it as a form of self-affirmation or self-flagellation. These are all clear, specific actions that we engage in, as opposed to conceptual thinking. Our normal conceptual thought processes are not usually transcribable into literal language. They are riddled with shorthand, jumps in logic, images, free associations, etc. If you try to turn your ordinary thinking process into a scripted inner monologue, it can come across as insincere or trite, and it can constrain the flow of your inner life. You may find exceptions to this rule of thumb, depending on the character you are playing, but, ordinarily, the only time we think in such a precise, word-for-word manner is when we are having actual dialogues with ourselves, as if we're split into two people:

"John, stop, get a hold of yourself. Focus."

"I am such a genius!"

Or we may mutter to someone who can't hear us. For instance, while driving, we might caution someone in another car:

"Don't do it! Don't be an idiot!"

Or compliment someone nearby:

"Oh babe, you are one fine piece of..."

Or coax an inanimate object, such as a rusted bolt:

"Almost there... just another half turn..."

You can practice inner dialogue out loud while you work on your role. If it doesn't feel like something you could actually say to yourself, it's probably not going to help you. You may decide to keep the inner dialogue as a physical action; that is, you may actually make utterances, even though they will be unintelligible to the audience. Or, you can completely internalize the words, but in the same concrete manner in which you spoke them. The words remain as actions, not abstractions. You just don't happen to be moving your lips.

You can try it right now. Vocally greet yourself in the mirror in any way that seems natural to you. "Dude, you're looking good today." Whatever. Tell it to yourself realistically, with purpose, with energy. What are you trying to accomplish? Are you giving yourself a little pep-talk? Now, with the same clarity of purpose, say the line to yourself silently. This is the active quality that's required of inner dialogue.

Take charge of your energy.

The quality of the actions you're executing, and the nature of the obstacles you are facing, will dictate the quality of your awareness. If you're at the office crunching a deadline you're not very likely to make room in your consciousness for noticing the way dust motes dance in a shaft of sunlight. But if you're having a hard time concentrating on your work, those little dust motes can be quite captivating. Don't worry if there are no dust motes on stage – there are plenty of other tiny things to be captivated by.

While in preparation, how do you determine whether an action (or an awareness of something) is appropriate to the scene? Listen to your body and synapses. If it helps you flow naturally to the next action (e.g., taking a deep breath and returning to your bricklaying) then keep it. If it doesn't, find something else.

But what if your director thinks the quality of your "emotion" is not right. She tells you that you should be *extremely* joyful in the scene, not so serene or meditative. What concrete adjustments can you make?

For starters, you can commit to physically operating with a higher level of energy and verbal acuity. The words you say and the actions you choose move the story along in an appropriate manner, and the audience "believes" the whole thing because you have made appropriate commitments – not because you somehow "feel it."

As a result, you will probably have to adjust your choices. When, purely physically, you boost your energy level, you are not likely to want to stare at dust motes.

Translate Emotional Directives into Personal Actions

Do not settle for formulaic or clichéd responses when your director gives you an emotional reading. As you analyze your role, try to gain insights into how your energy and focus is affected when you are in parallel situations to those of your character. Your character may have to kill someone "in a rage" – which you (hopefully) will never fully understand. But you probably can understand the way your energy and physicality is affected by an injustice that takes you completely by surprise. Fool around with the particulars of how you relate to your adversary in such a situation. When you find the right energy source it will fuel a certain truth (i.e., an ability to fully commit) as you carry out the actions and speak the words that are required of you in your scene.

The main thing to remember is that when a text or director calls for an explicit emotion, your job, as usual, is to turn the directive into playable actions. Oftentimes the "emotion" amounts to an obstacle to your actions. You should make the obstacle as real as possible to you.

There's an old theatre truism that says if you're playing a drunk, concentrate on trying to act *sober*, not on acting drunk. Focus on trying *not* to slur your words and *not* to walk wobbly. These are the real actions of real-life drunks. Real-life drunks don't *try* to slur their words. You shouldn't either. Similarly, real-life people don't *try* to feel sad, they try *not* to cry. Trying not to cry, or trying not to stumble – these are examples of playable actions.

Emotional and Sense Memory

A lot has been written on a technique known as "emotional memory." It is similar to another technique called "sense memory." Both techniques can be helpful if, *while preparing* a role, you need a reminder of what goes on in your body while it is afflicted with acute sensations. This can help you discover a more full and appropriate roadmap of actions.

Emotional memory involves privately recalling an emotional experience or time and mapping its affects upon your body so that they can be repeated in the form of actions.

Emotional memories are not, as popularly misconstrued, for the purpose of creating the same emotional state onstage. They are for understanding the personal ways you breath when trying not to cry, the way you gasp as you clench your eyes tight, trying to force in the tears, the way you desperately search another's face for some sign that everything will be okay. It takes guts to commit fully to such actions in a scene, because they are highly personal. They can leave you feeling quite exposed. On top of the sense of nakedness is an awareness that audiences may be wondering if you really *feel* the emotion, or if your tears are real. How should you handle such insecurities? The same way you always do: concentrate on your actions instead of your self-consciousness.

Sense memory, like emotional memory can be an effective technique if it is used properly in preparation. Its purpose is to help you recall your bodily responses to physical sensations. Perhaps your character needs to savor a warm cup of tea (but, really, you're sipping from an empty cup). If you're having a hard time mapping actions that lead to a free-flowing scene, then, at home, fix yourself a nice warm cup of tea and pay attention to how it affects you and what actions it provokes. Choose some relevant details to add to your map: inhaling the steam, playing with the handle, etc.

All very pleasant work. But what if your character gets her hands chopped off? Are you going to chop off your own hands to see what it's like? Of course not. So how can you personalize the experience for your character (so that you don't resort to clichéd horror)? Sense memory work can help guide you to some specific personal memories of your reactions to past physical sensations that you can convert into playable actions.

Most commonly, though, you will use sense memories to flesh out your action map with everyday reactions, shivers, startled "double-takes," stretches, yawns, etc., so that you can perform these behaviors, as necessary, with confidence and fullness.

It's beyond the scope of this book to detail the process of discovering emotional and sense memories. I do believe they can be quite helpful for people who have a hard time stumbling across natural physical responses on their own, or for unlocking a personal understanding of specific moments in a play (remembering your own idiosyncratic reactions to an emotional state can lead to a more interesting roadmap of actions).

Just keep in mind, if you use emotional and sense memories, their purpose is for preparation, not for performance. Yes, some actors, just before going onstage, consciously recall specific personal memories. But they are doing so only momentarily, as a mnemonic device to remind themselves of the first details in a map of specific actions. An actor may have discovered that a certain memory predictably causes him to start shallow breathing. This might be all that's necessary to get him flowing into a series of actions that make up a beat. He does not dwell on the memory itself.

the sane actor

Self-acceptance – at least in the limited sense as it applies to the craft – is essential. If you don't believe you have something unique to share, then you will be unable to share anything unique.

Nobody is under any illusion that acting is an easy profession. Almost everyone — actors and non-actors alike — are aware of the toll that a ninety-percent rejection rate takes on the psyche. The hard reality is that it's impossible to engage in your chosen craft if producers don't *choose* you to engage in it.

Let's spend a little time talking about such realities and how they can affect an actor's approach to the work. Often the dynamics of the profession conflict directly with one's execution of the craft. By analyzing the way these inherent problems affect us we can learn to reduce their negative impact.

You're lucky if you enjoy acting for its own sake, and don't count on it to fulfill you (or to pay your bills). Your reasons for acting might be similar to someone who enjoys painting or writing poetry in their spare time. It's a form of self expression that can occasionally be shared and enjoyed by others. Of course the big difference is that acting is a *collaborative* art — so it's impossible to *do it* without the willing cooperation of others. Additionally, theatre is a temporal art. You can hang your paintings on your own wall at home with some degree of satisfaction, but a live audience is integral to an actor. Nevertheless, actors who can arrange their lives in such a way that their entire well-being is not dependent on securing this or that role have a great advantage, in my opinion. If you don't *have* to act, you can approach each audition and role from a purely craft-oriented mentality, rather than from an I'd-do-anything-to-get-this-role mentality — a mentality that focuses you in precisely the wrong direction.

Some actors will disagree with this perspective, arguing that an uncommon "hunger" for success drives good performances. I disagree. More often than not, the mature working actor has moved past such a fierce ego-orientation and has learned to concentrate simply on the work itself.

Of course this is easier said than done. Actors can't help being aware that each role gets them more exposure and more chances of being asked to perform in other productions. And in the commercial world, high salaries are powerful carrots. Even the most well balanced actors get fearful that, if their string of rejections gets too long, their agents may stop calling them for auditions.

You may not be right for every role!

All in all there are tremendous pressures to give producers what they're looking for at auditions, rather than showing them what *you* have to offer.

Keep in mind that improving your range as an actor will probably help you get more acting jobs. Understanding, through experience, how to creatively adapt to the requirements of diverse roles is an exciting, complex aspect of the craft. But this is quite different from approaching an audition with a determination to prove that you're the right man for the job. Usually you are not! Think of yourself as the owner of a particular palette of particular colors. A producer/director — the "artist" — holds auditions to peruse the various colors currently available on your palette. If he's looking for a cheery, fire-engine red, but you're more of a dark, brooding purple, you probably won't get the part. If you're experienced in exploiting pieces of yourself out of context, you may be able to quickly find the requisite fire-engine red. The greatest danger, however, is that you fail to show the producer *anything* that you have to offer because you're too caught up in trying to give him something you're not. This is very much controlled by your whole approach to the profession. If your goal is to share genuine aspects of yourself in order to participate in the telling of a worthwhile story (even if that story is a commercial) your focus will be in the right place. And, ironically, you will find yourself winning more roles.

But let's be honest. More commercial producers are looking for fire-engine red than brooding purple. So if you're not fire engine red, you'll just have to face the fact that you'll need to be more patient for the right roles (and the right luck) to come around. Robert DiNiro can certainly play a cheery fellow, but maybe not with precisely the right quality of energy to make him a wildly successful Toyota spokesman. He's inherently too shy, too nervous, too complex, too whatever, to allow him to compete. Of course the Toyota guy might have a harder time fitting into a Scorsese movie. That's the breaks.

Your mess of a life.

What we're talking about is what the great acting teacher Uta Hagen described as "respect for acting." What she was referring to was respect for *yourself*, as an individual, worthy of sharing within the context of a story (rather than feeling like you have to put on a mask).

The first thing an actor needs to digest is a certain level of self-acceptance. It needn't be total; the individual's life goes on, as she struggles with her spirituality, sexuality, family, etc. But, *as an actor*, she needs to assimilate the fact that all of her impulses as a human being – even the problematic ones – are fundamentally valuable and worth being shared as they can be applied to a worthwhile story. She is, in very real terms, a pioneer exploring a personal terrain that no other individual has ever, or can ever, explore. As an actor, she reports back to the rest of us about what she has seen. She does this, not by describing it, but by literally sharing it. When she does so, she hugely broadens the impact and scope of the story in which she is acting. Without her, the story is a cartoon. It won't touch our souls in the way a story does that captures unique slices of the lives of real people.

It takes a lot of courage to be such an actor, because it necessitates giving up the judgments we hold dear about ourselves – at least while we are acting. Only when we fully understand that *all* aspects of ourselves, even the darkest impulses, are worthy of sharing, can we offer something unique. Yes, we do discriminate among which aspects we share, but our discrimination is based on the needs of the story rather than our social desires to reveal only certain impulses.

Can a neurotic person be a successful actor? Well, it depends on what we mean by neurotic. A certain level of sanity is necessary in order to accept the entirety of one's being, even within the limited domain of one's craft. But that's what we need to strive for. A good actor has learned to look *fondly* enough (as Rumi put it) at all his turmoil and pain and ugliness and pettiness to see that they can have some creative, healing value if these things are put to good use. If a person's level of self-delusion prevents her from seeing herself with such clarity, she probably cannot act effectively. Her approach to self-expression will be too fragmentary. She will latch on to this or that impulse without any clarity about how each impulse fits into the work. Every impulse will be self-absorbed, as she constantly tries to prove herself. She focuses only on showing that she is capable of power one moment, sensitivity the next. This is her relationship to the work. She is not interested in genuine actions or the creation of an authentic character. She is just interested in accomplishing one *state of being* after another. It's not that she *tries* to sabotage the story. She *wants* to bring the story to life. Paradoxically, as she attempts to prove how alive she is in each moment, she ends up killing the whole thing.

Practicing good technique can correct the problem. The "neurotic" actor does not have to eliminate all her neuroses before she can learn to focus properly. What's needed is for her to realize that her self-absorbed approach is self-defeating. Her acting will improve tremendously if she finds the discipline to focus on three fundamental commitments:

- 1) Learning to observe and share one's unique impulses
- 2) Learning to objectively explore the logical requirements of a character within a particular story (within a particular production, at a particular time and place)
- 3) Learning to subjectively explore the connections between one's unique impulses and the requirements of the story

Step three is where it all comes together, where the actor learns to engage in something approximating real life. But step three can't come about without the actor first understanding how to engage in the first two steps. If, in the first place, she hasn't learned to appreciate the value of her unique impulses, she won't be capable of observing them with a compassionate eye and, therefore, willing and able to share them. In fact, she'll probably be incapable of even recognizing an impulse when she sees it.

Once she is able to recognize and appreciate her unique impulses, she'll need to learn to discriminate among them. If she is not effective in supporting the story, she will not be able to string her impulses together in the context of a logical set of actions that approximate real life. There will be no flow. Any reality the impulses originally reflected will be lost.

But when all three elements come together, the role "flows." As Emerson said, it "rides on its own melting, as ice on a hot stove." This is when acting is most enjoyable. This is when audiences are taken for a real ride.

real world challenges

Come to rehearsals prepared to defend your character.

Most of our discussions have focused on the actor's essential priorities. If you can master them, you can act. You can contribute something valuable to a production — if, that is, there is an appropriate role for you. Does that mean you'll be a star? No, not everyone who can act becomes a star, or even a consistently working actor. If your goal is to make your living as an actor, you will have to study specific techniques for auditioning, commercial acting, film acting, self-marketing, etc.; you'll have to gain a realistic understanding of how you might fit into the market; and, of course, you'll need some luck.

Most working actors, consciously or not, apply many of the principles of good acting outlined in *The Actor's Roadmap*. Good commercial actors, for example, even though their work may be ridiculed by starving artists, are extremely clear about what their simple actions are. But to work in the commercial world you'll need to feel your way about, make some compromises, choose your battles, work with lousy scripts and directors, and, generally, be under-appreciated. Producers don't always recognize an actor's "gift" if it doesn't match the producer's expectations. Even in the world of theatre, actors are merely *elements* of a production, elements that either add or take away from it. Don't waste your energy faulting producers who treat actors this way; their job is to juggle *many* diverse elements into a meaningful story for a specific purpose. They needn't have great sympathy for actors who aren't supporting that purpose, even if the actor is trying to do something special.

All in all, working actors face a lot of challenges trying to incorporate their creative priorities into the real world. The prescription common to all is to keep refocusing on the essentials. Usually — not always — you can discover actions that are true to your character, to the story, and to the requirements of the particular production.

Commercial actors simply aren't allowed much room when it comes to arguing for the coherency of their choices. They're simply expected to do as they're told. Smile here, chuckle there, end with a wink. If you're having a hard time translating these directives into sensible actions... tough. You'll just need to do as you're told. Hopefully you can make your translations quickly and effectively. If not, you can only hope that the producers know what they're doing and, after the editing, you won't be too ashamed of the result. One way to minimize your involvement in such productions — if you indeed want to avoid them — is to make sure you don't get miscast. At auditions, only give what you're comfortable giving (within the parameters of your essential priorities). If it's not what they're looking for, they probably won't cast you. If you abandon your priorities and, instead, tackle the director's instructions superficially, you probably won't get the role anyway — but if you do, you will be less credible whenever you feel the need to defend your personal roadmap of actions.

Generally, in the theatre, even in some of the most challenging situations with directors who don't have a clue about what an actor does, you can salvage a strong performance. But you may have to work overtime to translate their directives into concrete actions that make all parties happy.

You need your director!

The director's primary job is to provide a production with an articulated, cohesive vision. Obviously, it's pretty important to make sure your choices as an actor support that vision. But there's another reason you should place your trust in a strong director.

The actor's job is to *do* things, not to watch himself doing things. The director serves as his mirror, to help the actor make sure his work is adequately serving the greater production. In a very real way, the director enables the actor to not watch himself.

Because the director's primary job is manifest the production's overall vision, actors must follow him faithfully. Even if you don't agree with his vision you will serve no one by fighting against it. You will only contribute to a fractured production. For better or worse, you have no choice except to give his vision a chance. Don't fool yourself into thinking that, even though the overall play ends up failing, at least *you'll* look good. Despite all your wonderful acting, you'll just end up sticking out like a sore thumb if you undermine the director's vision.

If you find yourself in certain *experimental* productions, all bets are off as far as your ability to remain faithful to your acting technique. Richard Foreman is known to create works of genius by being a virtual puppet master. He'll do things like dictate to his actors the exact number of seconds their fingers should remain lifted, or the exact word that should trigger each tiny movement. Perhaps an actor can effectively call upon her technique under such conditions, perhaps not. Obviously, if the genre of your production is not dependent upon the audience's suspension of disbelief, your commitment to "flow" and "staying alive" may become of secondary importance.

Unfortunately, regardless of the genre, most actors don't often find themselves working under genius directors. Many directors are largely muddling their way through a production, with only bits and pieces of a vision. Under these average conditions, actors should be anything but puppets, they should be *collaborators*. The actors' *contract*, as it were, does not stipulate that they never argue for their perspective. On the contrary, the average director of the average play *expects* actors to bring a lot to the table. But it can be a messy business. If a director has a quality firmly in her mind for a particular moment, no amount of pleading will sway her. In such a situation, your technique will help you more than ever, because it gives you the tools to search for choices that *do* make sense, but fulfill her needs at the same time.

It's quite common for directors to issue an emotional reading of a beat, when what they're *really* concerned about is a certain pace or image. They think they're helping you out by giving you a way to play that pace. They might want you to get on your feet and talk real quickly at a certain point, and they may jump to the conclusion that the obvious way for you to do this is for you to get angry. They try to do your work for you in order to achieve the cinematic effect they're looking for. They direct you to get angry, but the anger itself is not the primary effect they desire. Really, they should just tell you to get on your feet and talk quickly (which would be a relatively straightforward direction to find motivation for); instead, they muddy the direction by telling you to get angry, even though it makes little sense to you personally. The more successful you are at finding out what your director *really* wants, the more you'll be able to turn to your technique to find an action that works much more appropriately than your director's facile emotional reading. If a director is not effectively getting on your wavelength (communicating in terms of logical actions), then don't be afraid to get on hers – asking what *effect* she's looking for, and then converting that effect into a logical action.

In an ideal world, directors would learn to communicate always on the level of actions. But it's not going to happen. Too many directors know nothing about what a good actor actually does. And besides, their minds are properly on the audience's perspective, a perspective in which labels like "he's sad," or "she's jealous" make perfect sense. We need to accept this reality, and learn to translate such directives efficiently and artfully. If we fail to translate them we will fall into the most common acting trap there is: playing for effect.

Rehearsals – enter with dignity.

Also in the best of all possible worlds is a rehearsal process where much of the necessary exploratory work is accomplished by the ensemble. The company would have in-depth discussions of the story, the characters, historical factors, etc. But more often you'll find directors concentrating on things like staging, rhythm, whether a particular bit is funny, or whether your characters are "slimy" or "sexy" enough. If you've not done your homework, you won't have time to translate their directives into actions. You'll be forced to abandon depth and personalization, resigning yourself to operating on the director's wavelength permanently. You can try your best to pull off her funny bits, but there will be very little thread connecting your actions together if you haven't done your homework.

You need to come to rehearsal prepared to defend yourself (your character) as a live human being, I don't mean you should be defensive and argumentative as an actor. I mean that you should not be an amorphous blob, pushed around by this or that whim. There is a dynamic tension between director and actor: the director asks for specifics, you accommodate as best you can *as a human being* with a set of values, relationships to others, tendencies in the ways you see the world around you, etc., etc. This is very much like real life. You don't walk around in a daze all day, waiting for people to tell you what to do and how to do it. When something is asked of you, you respond with a fully formed set of boundaries, accommodations, and manipulations which allow you to retain your basic — shall we say — dignity.

The work we do at home as actors is to zero in on which set of our sensibilities serves the particular role we're playing. Then we take these sensibilities to rehearsal, and we function with our fellow actors and director with a pretty good sense of what our character is *capable* of doing, and why. Then, when we are asked to perform a specific action, it's usually pretty easy to execute. Because we bring a real life that is already flowing. We can *just do it*. If we are asked to move here or laugh there we usually don't have to wrangle with motivations and intent. We just do it. If we're not struggling with basic stuff like who we are, we don't have to think much about how to do these things.

Of course there will be times when we are asked to do something that seems nonsensical within the life of the person we have been working so hard to flesh out. And so there are times when we have to defend what we are *capable* of doing, to defend the logic of our characters — in which case it helps to have a good bedside manner so that you don't come across as overly stubborn. Choose your battles. More importantly, approach such directions with the same curiosity with which you approach your script. Look for patterns. Decode what the directive is really pointing to. The whole thing is a puzzle-like process. You will always have to make adjustments as you go. Give the director the benefit of the doubt.

If he tells you to "be more funny," your homework will become an exploration of personal sensibilities that support the text and, at the same time, are likely to get a laugh when translated into simple actions. Often you'll just need to raise the

stakes within a particular scene or beat. Your initial sensibilities and actions might be fine, but you can still find reasons why your character might *try* a lot harder to accomplish whatever it is she's trying to accomplish.

Theatre Craft in rehearsals.

A lot of actors and directors overemphasize theatre practices and traditions, especially when they're bereft of any real insight into a play's meaning. About halfway through the rehearsal process, like clockwork, when they discover to their horror that the production is a mess, many directors start barking, "Pick up the pace! Louder! Turn *downstage!*" All "pauses" in the text get totally wiped out. "Silences" become two-second pauses. The hope is that, even though no one has any idea what's going on, if the cast rushes through the play "professionally," audiences will think they saw something worthwhile.

No doubt you'll sometimes find yourself working under directors who are hopelessly devoted to old-fashioned theatre craft. They love to fill a scene with crosses and counters and unnecessary movement and business. The less they understand what's actually going on in a scene, the more junk they throw in to cover up the holes. Some directors just don't have a whole lot of interest in *meaning*; their love of theatre is simply for the craft itself.

Your job, in such a situation, is to convert their directives into meaningful movements. If the only reason you are getting up is because you were told to, that's exactly what will show. Do your best to fill each directive with specific meaning. But don't be afraid to offer alternatives; if you are clear about what you're offering to do, and why you're offering to do it, directors will often welcome it. Just be smart. Pick your battles. Directors have a lot at stake and you don't want to undermine their efforts. Often, if, in good faith, you *try* to do what they ask for a few days, and allow them to see whether or not it works, you'll find they will be more receptive to another choice. And, who knows, you might end up appreciating what at first seemed an alien directive – if you give their choice a chance, and find appropriate actions for it.

In the end, if your director stubbornly adheres to the rules of musical theatre, forcing you to always act with your partner on a 45-degree angle, then you will have a real challenge finding the life of each scene. So don't work with that director again.

Start small.

Try to talk your director into allowing you to rehearse your actions *intimately* through at least the first half of the rehearsal period. Forget about whether or not an audience would be able to see or hear you. Rehearse small. Discovering and setting authentic actions is the crucial part to creating a coherent play. You don't want to sabotage it from the beginning by imposing too much craft on the process. *Sharing* those actions – making sure they are properly seen and heard – is the easy part. It involves simple adjustments most actors can make in one afternoon. Plus, today's audiences are much more accepting than audiences of 50 years ago, even *appreciative*, of a "naturalistic" production where every word does not need to be heard, and every action does not need to be seen. Audiences are more likely to be impatient with the actor who telegraphs her intentions to them. Furthermore, today's audiences are accustomed to seeing theatre in unconventional spaces (e.g., a small arena stage) where they can't always see what every actor is up to. So, even if your production is on a traditional proscenium, you should avoid "cheating downstage" if it interferes with the reality of the scene. Trust that your audience is sophisticated enough to enjoy the drama of the hidden, the darkness, and even, sometimes, the backs of heads. As long as your director is conscious of how she uses these techniques, you needn't worry.

If you speak to your director early on about your desire to initially "work small," you're demonstrating to her that you recognize the importance of sharing the work when the time comes, and that you have some control over the matter. As the rehearsal process nears an end, the director can communicate to you the things that need to be tweaked for optimal audio/visual effect. You should be clear enough about what you're doing by this point that you can allow such externals into your consciousness without getting off track. But starting with a primarily external concentration usually leads to deadly theatre. It's fine that directors want to create specific, pleasing stage images, but, hopefully, they will not bow to clichéd blocking traditions merely out of habit.

The challenges of incorporating rhythm and pacing directives.

Some directors focus on pacing very early in the rehearsal process. The idea is that, by capturing the natural rhythms of the text as soon as possible, the actors will be more likely to find appropriate choices. This can be a problem if everyone is focusing on trying to create polished performances before truly understanding what they're saying and doing. It's one thing to be aware of the rhythmic clues the writer provides as you explore your character's actions; it's quite another thing to be governed by a performance mentality.

In general, especially in early rehearsals, try to allow the scene — and yourself — a chance to breath. If you rush, there's little chance your nervous system will connect in a natural manner to your words and actions. If you're not finding the reality of the scene, slow down, check to see if you're breathing naturally, notice the environment around you, and breath some more. Don't worry if the scene is twice as long as it could be. Give yourself a chance to be a living human being. Expect that you will not immediately understand how each beat connects to the next. That's what rehearsals (and homework) are for. The worst thing you can do is pretend that you understand the scene's logic when you don't. It's too easy to gloss over a loss of meaning, and never fully recover it. If a scene is fractured in rehearsal, fine. Acknowledge it. Figure out what's causing the problem. Don't pretend the problem's not there.

Good playwrights have a good sense of rhythm, and they usually infuse that rhythm into their work, both in overt ways ("pause" or "quickly"), and in ways that are intrinsic to the actions and dialogue. If actors and directors work with care to understand the text's meaning and the way the writer intended moments to interact, the rhythms will largely take care of themselves. A good director is the writer's watchdog to ensure that the natural meanings and rhythms of the play are not ignored. He will not, however, insist upon theatricalized rhythms that exist to artificially build excitement or cover up problem areas. Audiences easily smell the difference between a beat in which tension builds because two characters are truly pushing and pulling one another, and a beat in which only the *appearance* of tension builds because two actors are performing rhythmic gymnastics.

Don't be a sucker for theatricality. Audiences much prefer originality born out of the actors' personal sensibilities. Your director may think it's as clear as day that a certain rhythm is necessary to draw a laugh or other emotional reaction from the audience. Okay. But *you* need to find non-theatrical (authentic) actions that will create the effect the director is looking for. He may have a hard time understanding why you're struggling with the effect, thinking you should be able to just pull the rhythm out of your bag of actor's tricks; but, if he's patient, he'll be doubly pleased when you give him the required rhythm *and* personal authenticity.

Filling Pauses.

Conventional wisdom says beware of pauses unless you work real hard to "fill them." The only problem with this sentiment is that it implies you can go around *not* filling other moments on stage. Every single moment should be filled with clear action — whether or not you're the one who's talking. *Of course* pauses should be filled with clear action as well.

Really, there should be no essential difference between any moment you are on stage. Speaking, listening, reading in the background — it should all be the same stuff to the actor who's in the middle of doing it.

Lovers of traditional theatre craft are acutely aware of where the audience's focus should be at each moment of the play, and they are skilled at knowing how to direct that focus. For example, they would never dream of engaging in a nonessential action while another actor was talking. They "generously" divert all their attention to the speaking character. The effect is nothing like real life; they just look like *actors* — ugh!

Today's audiences prefer authentic behavior to choreography. If you're worried about stealing attention from the central action, don't give up your own actions, just be sure to make quiet, simple choices. Be smart about it.

Sharing your performance vocally with the audience can require some training

We've discussed approaches to your vocal quality in the context of exploring your character. This is quite different from what you need to do when your director tells you to talk *louder*, to project your voice. You need to trust his ear. As an audience member, sitting through a barely audible performance is just as annoying as sitting through a performance in a 95-degree auditorium. This is simply one of those real-world compromises that you must learn to make. You may be on a loveseat whispering in your partner's ear, but, since the audience has to hear the dialogue, you just have to pretend your vocal qualities are more intimate.

Vocal coaches can teach you some helpful techniques (like the "stage whisper" and how to support your voice with your diaphragm), but, even if you're forced to practically yell through the whole play (say, in an outdoor theatre), your chances of an authentic, intimate performance are greatly improved if you can convince your director to allow you to postpone the practice of vocal projections until your roadmap of actions is solidified.

Really, though, with today's intimate theatre spaces, and the increasingly prevalent practice of electronically amplifying actors in larger spaces, vocal projection is much less an issue than it was in the past.

Give the gift of spontaneity, night after night.

Keeping your performance fresh is another real-world challenge. Once you are confident that you've mapped out a coherent, appropriate course of actions for your entire role, a course that your body and nervous system can *live in*, then you get into the business of repeating it, night after night.

How do you ensure that you don't start "phoning it in," walking through your paces without actually *doing* your actions?

The short, heartless, answer is that you just keep working and concentrating. This is what you signed up for. It's your job.

But there's another, more enjoyable, answer:

If you thoroughly understand what your character is trying to accomplish moment to moment, as long as you are aware of what is going on around you, you will be forced to strive for your goals in slightly different ways each night. You will inevitably notice that you are not impressing your partner with your vows of love if you always make your proclamations in exactly the same way. I'm not talking about changing your essential actions. I'm just talking about the need to keep trying to *actually* accomplish what you need to accomplish. If you need to convince your partner you love her, you will need to stay aware of her reaction to your actions and words. This awareness alone will lead to the spontaneity you need to maintain a strong commitment. Resist the temptation to make big changes (of the sort the audience might notice). Actors do this out of boredom, and it just dilutes the strong choices that were made in rehearsals. You've probably admired actors who can maintain the same basic performance night after night, but without ever losing a certain spark, a certain twinkle in the eye. That spark is not a trick, nor is it a gift from God. It is simply the ability to stay aware — alive — even while repeating the same basic actions each night. It is work. It requires constant concentration.

But it is also a very enjoyable aspect of acting. The upside of repetition is that invites relaxation, which helps you notice all the tiny effects you are having on the other characters. The more you can fully open up your ears and *listen*, the more you will naturally, in small ways, adjust your strategies — just as you do in real life. If you notice your partner is looking especially tired, you might be a little extra gentle. Or, if you're playing a bullyish character, you might take advantage of her fatigue to sharpen your attack. Either way, on stage, these little reality-based adjustments are *gifts* to your fellow actors. They're not big enough to take you away from the scene; they are the perfect size to keep the thread of life going through the run of a play (or through multiple takes while filming).

The Chinese term *wu wei* comes to mind. It means, roughly, *effortless effort*. While you cannot afford to ease up on your concentration in the face of so much repetition, you can usually find a state of flow in which the concentration is so enjoyable that it does not require a Herculean effort. Strive for this balance. While you certainly don't want to "phone in" a performance, you also don't want to burden the audience by pounding out each beat like you're slogging through concrete. Every actor finds his own *wu wei* in a unique, personal way. But if you lose interest, the process of staying aware will no longer be enjoyable, and then the work will be forced.

If you've ever baby-sat for a demanding, creative child, you know that it can take great concentration to stay on her wavelength, especially when she wants to play the same games over and over again. But if you give yourself permission to *let go* for awhile of all the little and big worries that tend to invade your mind, you can easily get lost for a few hours in the child's rich imaginary world. If, on the other hand, you don't allow yourself to escape from all the things you think you ought to be doing, if you don't allow yourself to become *interested* in the child's world, then forcing yourself to stay on the child's wavelength will take great effort.

Ultimately, how you, personally, "get lost" in such an imaginary world night after night is something you'll need to figure out on your own.

At auditions, remember your fundamentals.

Auditions, unfortunately, are part of the real world. They are a breed unto themselves. It's hard to generalize an approach to them, since they come in so many forms: cold readings, callbacks, cattle calls, readings opposite good actors, bad actors, non-actors — you name it.

My main advice is to go into an audition as prepared as you can be. If you have the opportunity, you simply *must* read the script beforehand, and form some preliminary ideas about the story's meaning and your character's purpose. The more times you can read the script, the clearer you can be about your choices. The more concrete your actions, the

better. Even if you are not sure whether a choice makes sense in the greater context of the play, it's better to show that you understand how to commit to a strong action, than to water down, making it ambiguous.

Directors will often give you a directive just to see "how well you take direction." These directives may well be arbitrary. Your job is to transform the directive into clear action as best you can. The immediate adjustment can be hard, especially if it involves calling upon aspects of yourself that you hadn't yet thought of using in your acting. Whenever possible, try to obtain a few minutes to think about the directive in light of these new aspects. It may significantly shift your energy and physical qualities, as well as your basic choices.

The more experience you get, both auditioning and building characters, the more you will be able to make quick shifts. For the sake of an audition you may tap into aspects of a character that you fleshed out for a previous role. This can give you instant clarity about how to commit to many of the actions required of you in a scene. Then, as you rehearse (assuming you win the part), you should explore the specific requirements unique to the new role.

emmisary from another planet

Anyone can act — anyone, that is, who's willing to truly share what's inside.

Acting is very much an egalitarian sport.

Despite the common perception that it's mainly for people with sparkling teeth and sparkling personalities, any individual who is serious about acting can contribute something potent and unique to the craft.

Before you worry about how you may or may not fit into the marketplace, before you decide on plastic surgery, before you plan your steps to stardom, spend some time understanding the essence of the craft itself: sharing your unique sensibilities. Don't even worry about whether someone likes you enough to cast you in their play. Yes, acting is a community endeavor; you can't do it by yourself in your garage office, as if you were painting water lilies or writing a novel. Yes, if you want to act, you'll need to convince others to let you share the stage. But trust that, if your foundation is strong, you will eventually find productions that can use what you have to offer. Like building the proverbial baseball stadium: if it's solid, you'll find people who will want to play. No, you won't be right for every role, although the range of roles you can effectively play will grow with time if you approach the craft and yourself with curiosity. Meanwhile, commit to fully understanding how to always bring authentic parts of yourself into the work. The only real requirement is that you be genuinely willing to share yourself — warts and all.

Are you the kind of person who neurotically worries about the impression you make on others?

Good.

Are you obnoxiously self-confident?

Great.

Do you experience existential loneliness and spiritual angst?

Fine.

Has your life been blessed with an extraordinary ability to love and receive love?

That's okay too.

If you choose to be an actor, you are serving as the official emissary from your own personal planet. Your job is to honestly share with the rest of us what it's like to be you. Because you are unique, you have something unique to share.

This is a fact about good acting, not some sort of self-help diatribe. Too many actors can't imagine anyone wanting them to share what their lives are really like, so they spend their time trying to invent someone more interesting. *Acting is the art of human experience*. That means *your* human experience. If you don't fully assimilate this fact, you cannot fully contribute something of value to a theatrical production. If you do assimilate it, you have an opportunity to give audiences quite a gift. This is what an actor does. He learns to recognize the beautiful aspects of *all* his experiences and sensibilities.