

PLAYING OBJECTIVES

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Acting is a process. It is a journey that must be traveled each time the actor prepares a new role or a new scene.

More precisely, acting is a THOUGHT process. What does the actor think during rehearsals? What does he think during performance? Learning to act is learning a way of thinking. How you perform is determined by what you think.

In this article..., I'm going to give you an outline of a process that I have worked through with my students. It has served them well, and if you use it, I think you'll have a much better chance of giving your best performance every time you step out on stage.

The first area we will focus on is pursuing objectives, which I think is the most basic and important of all the building blocks.

Objectives -- or action, intentions, goals, or needs, as they are also known -- refer to an inner drive, something your character needs to do to, or wants to get from, another character. This drive causes the character to do and say things to get what he or she wants. Just as in life all our words and behaviors stem from what we want from the people around us, our characters are likewise driven by needs or objectives.

In the course of a play a character's dramatic through-line is made up of behaviors that are propelled by need. It must be an unbroken chain: "I have this need, I take this action, I watch for your response to see if I'm succeeding, I adjust based on your response, I try again." It is a continuous, unbroken thread that, as an actor, you recommit to each time you go to work. Every moment of the performance, we -- as characters -- must be focused on achieving our objective. The minute we stop playing our objective, we stop acting. It is that simple.

Playing an objective has the collateral benefit of releasing us from nerves and self-consciousness because we are not longer focusing on ourselves. Instead we are focused on our acting partner and how we are going to fulfill our objective. It releases us to be creative, spontaneous, and open to our partner's influence, the point at which true theatre magic happens.

Actors talk about objectives in the verb form: "I want to embarrass her." "I want to comfort her." "I want to torture her." "I want to tease her." The more active the verb, the more vital will be your acting.

Examples of weak verb choices would be "to explain," "to tell," "to ask." Stronger verbs: "to lecture," "to proclaim," "to announce," "to demand," "to interrogate." Weak verbs lead to generalized, stereotypical acting. Stronger verbs excite the imagination and give the actor specificity, depth, and a higher level of believability.

It is your job to make objective choices. Of course, some directors will be actively involved in this process, but often they won't. It is your job to translate anything you are given by a director into something that isactable. Verbs areactable. If the director says, "be louder," you could translate that

into, "I want to force the other characters to hear me." A director may ask you, "Can you be more angry?" Anger is not actable. If you play anger your acting will be stereotypical, phony, generalized. Translate that bit of direction into, "I want to tear him apart" or "I want to scare here." You will be giving the director what he or she wants, but also you will be keeping your acting specific and believable.

How do you know of your objective choices are correct, actable, and strong? There are several questions you can ask yourself when choosing an objective that will help you test the strength of your choices.

1. Can it be physically done? Such verbs as "to push," "to beg," "to defend" can readily be put into the body.
2. Is it rooted in the other person? Is it other-directed? "I want to marry him" is other-directed; "I want to get married" is not. "I want her to notice me," not "I want to be noticed."
3. Does it trigger a sense of fun? Does it excite your imagination? Does it stimulate you to action? "I want to find the answer: does little to excite; it's not very much fun. "To interrogate," "to probe," "to dig" do much more to get the juices flowing.
4. Is it a quality or an attitude? "Angry," "shy," "moody," "motherly" are examples of some very dangerous words for the actor. An emotional quality or mental attitude may be present but it is death to try to play them. Translate such qualities or attitudes into strong, other-directed verb phrases.
5. Is it consistent with the playwright's intention? Does it fit with the spine of the play, the overriding idea behind what the play is about? In Terrence McNally's play *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*, it's clear that the playwright intends for the actress playing Frankie to resist at every turn Johnny's attempts to get close to her. Now, an actress could decide that Frankie actually wants to seduce Johnny. Every scene could conceivably be played with that super objective in mind. But to do so would kill the conflict and eliminate the tension that McNally so carefully structured.
6. What will signify success? How will you know if you have won or lost your objective? If your objective is "to win her love," how will you know when you have succeeded? Will she kiss you? Will she cry? Will she simply smile? You play your objective to win that specific thing, and specificity is the key here.

If the verb phrase you have chosen is physical, is other-directed, excites the imagination, is an action rather than an attitude, is consistent with the playwright's intention, and has an identifiable goal that will indicate success, you have probably made a strong choice.

Now let's examine how these principles can be applied to the play. In making your objective choices, you will look in three places. First, consider the play as a whole; then each scene your character is in; and finally, the smaller moments within each scene.

From your reading of the whole play, you choose your character's super objective, the need that drives the character's every action. In *FRANKIE AND JOHNNY IN THE CLAIRE DE LUNE*, Johnny's every word, every behavior stems from his desire to make Frankie fall in love with him. He wants "to win her," "to marry her," "to sweep her off her feet." Frankie's super objective is in conflict with Johnny's, the stuff that drama is made of. She wants "to get him out of her life," "to scare him off," "to push him away." In each case, any of the possible statements of a super objective would work. But the strongest dramatic choice for both characters would be the last of the three: "sweep her off her feet" and "push him away." "Sweep" and "push" are strong physical verbs that the actor can do. They are easily put into the body; they have their test in the other person; they are in keeping with the playwright's intention. They do not

imply an attitude or quality.

In each scene, a character tries different objectives in order to attain his or her super objective. For example, Frankie may want "to scare him" in Scene One. In Scene Two, she may try "to lecture him." In Scene Three, she could try "to coax him" or "to inflict guilt." By Scene Four, she may decide she has "to insult him."

Within each scene we look even deeper for tactics, the various small behaviors that help us get what we want moment by moment. In order "to inflict guilt," Frankie could try crying, whispering, demanding, shouting, whining, accusing.

Level one, the super objective, is part of your homework and is finalized in rehearsals. Level two, the objectives for each scene, are also chosen during homework and in rehearsals. Level three, the selection of tactics, is more fluid. Actors generate choices: "I could tease, beg, seduce." The actual tactic used in the moment should be determined by what the actor is getting from the other character, how it makes him feel and how he or she spontaneously responds. This is the level of acting that is improvisational. When blocking is set, dialogue is set, level one and level two objectives are set, and that "first time" fell is achieved at the tactical level. When actors are truly focused on getting what they want from one another -- truly listening, responding, and adjusting at the tactical level to what they are being given -- then the desired spontaneity, vitality, and honesty is assured.

The first step in using objectives as the cornerstone of your acting is the personal homework you do early in the rehearsal process. This involves reading the play -- the whole play, not just your lines or the scenes that include your character -- several times. Jot down images the play suggests or personal responses that you may have to it. Underline key points in the dialogue. If you understand the spine of the play, your character's super objective will be clear. Spine is the play's super objective, the central idea or theme -- stated in verb form -- that summarizes the main action.

Once you have chosen your super objective, move on to the individual scenes. Read the lines carefully; your clues to scene objectives lie in your character's language. Jot down some possibilities. Don't let the fear of being wrong keep you from making choices. Make them, try them on, rehearse with them, and change them if they don't fit. Remember the six-point test for verb choices. And always ask yourself: "Is this the strongest possible dramatic choice?"

Next generate as many tactic options as you can think of. Write a list of strong action verbs and keep it handy, so you can be vivid and varied in your choices.

Then you're ready for rehearsal. If your partner has done as much homework as you, you can move on to the next phase of the acting process -- experimentation. The proof of any choice is in the playing.

I frequently find there is a gap between homework and the playing of those choices on the stage. It is one thing to have marvelous verbs on paper, but if they remain in the actor's head, rather than in the body, they are lifeless. An exercise that I find helpful in getting objectives firmly into the body can be used as a warm-up for each rehearsal session. Take the super objective statement you have chosen and plant it firmly in your center. Face your scene partner, look him in the eye, and say your verb phrase. Exchange your objective phrases as dialogue, constantly repeating the single statement. Put it in the body, physicalize it. Try different tactics with the voice and body. Struggle to get what you want. Let it play long enough so that the choices get richer, bigger, more physical, more fervent. Keep it going until the feeling of the need is deep within you, and the body is alive and moving. Without taking a break, start the dialogue of the scene. You will probably notice more vocal and physical variety and a higher level of

commitment to the choices you have made.

A few key points to remember:

1. Objectives are the basic building blocks of the acting process. At all times during a performance, you must be going after what you want.
2. Think and talk of objectives in terms of verbs. The more active, physical, and other-directed those verbs are, the better.
3. There are three levels of objectives: the super objective, scene objectives, and tactics moment to moment.
4. Memorize your objective choices just as you do lines of dialogue.
5. Objectives live in the body. Get them out of your brain and into your body.
6. Remain other-directed as you pursue your objective. Focus on your partner, observing the effect you are having on him or her. Keep yourself open to those subtle changes that occur in the moment as you and your partner struggle to get your needs met.

These guidelines for objectives apply to audition pieces, scene work, and full productions. It is your responsibility to come into rehearsal with choices made, ideas to try. Remain flexible to the needs of your partner and the director, and to discoveries you make in the moment. If your goal ultimately is to be a quality, consistent actor, then choosing objectives and playing them with commitment must be your credo. It is the first step that must be taken each time you walk on stage.