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CONCEPTS

PROCESS V. RESULT

Stanislavsky Turns Gently in His Grave

I want to define the principle concepts of the techniques I use in rehearsal before I describe the actual process of putting them into practice. Some of them are based on Stanislavsky's System of Physical Actions, and of course you can read about that in many other books, not least his own. Most acting books refer to his techniques in some degree and most drama schools do deal with them, but I'm always suspicious as to how thoroughly. I've met few actors for whom the playing of actions and objectives is second nature, as I believe it should be. Most actors know about them, but seem to regard them as something interesting you might apply now and then, rather than essential to the craft of acting. Actors will say to me, 'Oh, yes, such-and-such a director used them with us. M'm, very good!' But, no, they haven't used them since. I think one reason that actors don't use them as a matter of course is that objectives and actions implicitly deny the possibility of a repeatable result. If you genuinely play an action, you can never exactly reproduce a moment you've played before. The principle of an action is process-orientated rather than result-orientated.

Fresh Air v. Stale Air

I stated at the start of this book that theatre is by its nature live. But that doesn't mean any old live-ness. It's not enough for actors to drag their bodies on stage and repeat some learned patterns of behaviour. That act alone doesn't guarantee the particular quality of life necessary to give theatre its vitality – or validity. It merely offers us the equivalent of poor-quality air recycled into the cabins of some airlines. Good acting functions differently. Understanding the distinction between acting by result (closed, dead) and acting by process (open, live) is fundamental to the creation of real life on stage and impinges on everything else to be discussed. You cannot play an action spontaneously if you already know how you're going to do it. All actors, I'm certain, would tell you they do sincerely try to play each moment as if for the first time. But surely it's easier and more natural to play it, not *as if* it were for the first time, but actually *for* the first time.

What and How

Of course, the actor can't avoid knowing *what* will happen next and *what* is about to be said. But in performance the *how* is the thing that matters. The *how* gives the *what* its vitality and specificity. We can read the *what* at home. The *what* (the

play) is a blueprint, not the thing itself. We return continually to see certain plays in the hope of discovering something new about them. This can only mean that each time we revisit a classic, we expect the actors to provide us with something fresh about the text, characters and situations; for no one else but the actors can do that: invest the basic *what* with a fresh *how*. Directors can – and do, with their designers – fill the stage with visual clues as to how we might look anew at a text and, of course, point the actors in certain interpretive directions; but *only the actor can play the specific, detailed, moment-to-moment choices*, choices which are frequently too subtle, too instinctive, too fleeting and too complex for verbal explication and are therefore, in a sense, *beyond the director's reach and exclusively the business of the actor*.

Any scene and any line of text can be played in an infinite number of ways; we know there's no such thing as a definitive performance. So if the text is always legitimately open to interpretation and if the interpretation can vary from production to production (in fact we expect it), why shouldn't it vary from performance to performance *within* one particular production. What law of theatre dictates that each production is allowed only one choice of interpretation per line or per moment!

Stanislavsky's work supports this flexibility. It's based on the simple perception that in life we're driven by WANTS – needs and intentions that motivate us to carry out a range of actions in an attempt to fulfil those WANTS. As in life, so in the theatre: the actor-character functions in exactly the same way. This way of playing is based on intention rather than result. Actors working this way ask a different question from that asked by actors who fix their performances: 'What does my character want at this moment?' as opposed to 'How shall I play this moment?': process versus result; open versus closed. The former *allow the how to reveal itself from moment to moment*; the latter *decide in advance on the how for the foreseeable future of the production*, either by choosing from several options that emerged in rehearsal, or by discussion (i.e. negotiating) with the director and other actors in the scene ('If you play your line like that, then I can play mine like this!'). Such a choice often depends on the determination of the person with the highest status rather than on the requirements of the text. This is a reductive option; a denial of the actor's full creative potential (a potential that even some actors deny themselves) or a refusal to accept it. Moments pregnant with who-knows-how-many rich possibilities are reduced by ego and fear to the false security of one.

Process and Results in Practice

Process-led actors build an internal structure of intentions and actions that liberates them dynamically through time and space. Result-led actors build an external structure of moves, business and line-readings that imprisons them in time and space; what feels to them like security is actually constraint. Process-led

actors pursue objectives through actions that spontaneously release whatever feelings are aroused in them by those actions and by their partners' reactions to them. Result-led actors repeat predetermined patterns and try to inject planned simulations of emotions into them. (Emotion is a can of worms I'll open up in due course.) Process-led actors think in character. Result-led actors think about themselves (how they're doing). Actors who play results may give performances that are intelligent (well analysed and well shaped), but incomplete (unfulfilled and unembodied). The external form, devoid of the inner life that created it, becomes a repeated formula, *life-like* but actually *life-less*. * What you get is what you see and what you hear. Such performances tend to lack dimension or subtext. They're exclusively linear. They offer the top line of the score, without any harmonics, any counterpoint, any orchestral richness. You get the simplistic, the obvious, the predictable, the cliché, rarely the revelation or the surprise. One reason why theatre so often seems dull is because the audience is ahead of the actor; they know what the actor is going to play before the actor plays it. At a head-based level of experience, they're as familiar as the actor with the conventionally accepted clichés of how people behave in particular situations. But we're all different, complicated and unpredictable. The actor who works through process is likely to produce an unpredictable choice, one that is revelatory and yet inevitable – because *it's true to that moment and that performance and that performer*.

Sarah and Eleonora

George Bernard Shaw, who wrote about acting with great perspicacity, describes these two sorts of actors by comparing and contrasting the performances of Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt in the title role of *Magda* (the English title of Hermann Sudermann's *Heimat*), both of whose productions of that play were fortuitously playing in London at the same time: Duse – process, spontaneity, experiencing the role; and Bernhardt – result, calculation, displaying herself in the role. I quote at length from his review in *The Saturday Review* for 15 June, 1895.

The contrast between the two Magdas is as extreme as any contrast could be between artists who have finished their twenty years apprenticeship** to the same profession under closely similar conditions. Madame Bernhardt has the charm of jolly maturity, rather spoilt and petulant, perhaps, but always ready with a sunshine-through-the-clouds smile if only she is made much of . . . her complexion shews (*sic*) that she has not studied modern art in vain. Those charming roseate effects which French painters produce by giving flesh the pretty colour of

* Again, this is the Deadly Theatre that Peter Brook identified and defined in *The Empty Space*.

** I doubt there are now many actors who would consider even the first three years of their professional work as an apprenticeship or ever think of themselves as apprentices.

strawberries and cream . . . are cunningly reproduced by Madame Bernhardt . . . She paints her ears crimson and allows them to peep enchantingly through the few loose braids of her auburn hair . . . Her lips are like a newly-painted pillar box; her cheeks, right up to the languid lashes, have a bloom and the surface of a peach; she is beautiful . . . and entirely inhuman and incredible . . . nobody believing in it, the actress herself least of all. It is so artful, so clever . . . and carried off with such a genial air that it is impossible not to accept it with good-humour . . . one is not sorry to have been coaxed to relax one's notions of the dignity of art . . . The coaxing suits well with the childishly egotistical character of her acting, *which is not the art of making you think more highly or feel more deeply, but the art of making you admire her, pity her, champion her, weep with her, laugh at her jokes . . . and applaud her wildly when the curtain falls.* It is the art of finding out all your weaknesses and . . . fooling you. And it is always Sarah Bernhardt in her own capacity who does this to you. The dress, the title of the play, the order of the words may vary; but the woman is always the same. *She does not enter into the leading character: she substitutes herself for it.*

All this is precisely what does not happen in the case of Duse, *whose every part is a separate creation.* When she comes on stage, you are quite welcome to take your opera glass and count whatever lines time and care have so far traced on her. They are the credentials of her humanity; and she knows better than to obliterate that significant handwriting beneath a layer of peach-bloom . . . Duse is not in action five minutes before she is a quarter of a century ahead of the handsomest woman in the world. I grant that Sarah's elaborate Mona Lisa smile, with the conscious droop of the eyelashes . . . not only appeals to your susceptibilities, but positively jogs them. And it lasts quite a minute, sometimes longer. But Duse, with a tremor of the lip which you feel rather than see, and which lasts half an instant, touches you straight on the very heart . . . Every idea, every shade of thought and mood expresses itself delicately but vividly to the eye . . . there will be no difficulty in understanding the indescribable distinction which Duse's acting acquires from the fact that *behind every stroke of it is a distinctively human idea . . .* Sarah did not trouble us with any fuss about the main theme of Sudermann's play, the revolt of the modern woman against the ideal of home which exacts the sacrifice of her whole life to its care . . . Duse, with one look . . . nailed it to the stage as the impending dramatic struggle before she had been five minutes on the scene. (*My emphases.*)

Shaw goes on like this for almost six pages. The whole review is worth reading.*

A Thought Experiment

Let's imagine the performance of a truly excellent actor, who has skill, charm, wit, expressive physical and vocal capacities; who observes people perceptively and is capable of recreating such observations; who, during the rehearsal period, has made a truthful and committed emotional and intellectual search of the text to discover fresh insights into the role. That actor then, from all those discoveries, has selected and polished a sequence of choices, deemed to be the most appropriate, exciting, satisfying and logical, to link into a performance that will then be more or less repeated for however long the play runs. It would seem to contain everything needed for excellent theatre. Indeed, it does have everything, *except the one thing that makes theatre what it is, that makes theatre unique: it lacks life.* Which means it lacks the truth that comes with immediacy, it lacks the possibility of spontaneous response to others, it lacks creativity in the moment, it lacks surprise, risk, initiative, adventure, lacks everything that brings it alive, everything by which we live from moment to moment. It might as well have been played on film. An artefact is displayed for us but, despite the fact that it moves in space, *nothing is actually happening.* It is not real, it is a simulacrum, a substitute; it is, in fact, a form of virtual reality; not really there, but the formalised memory of something that happened elsewhere (in the rehearsal room). It is not a creation but a re-creation; it cannot therefore be other than a demonstration and, in consequence, self-regarding. *Without playing a genuine action, the actor can do nothing else but demonstrate what he or she already found and shaped in rehearsal.* All this fine and serious work has been locked into a result. And that is what we get, *the remains of the work and not the work itself.*

The Fixed and the Flexible

The nonsense with all this, of course, is that, even in productions that are rigidly fixed, performances do minutely vary. This is because even actors wedded to this concept of acting are, despite themselves, simply not robots and couldn't, even if they wanted to, remain exactly the same. Consequently, actors talk about good nights and bad nights. Bad nights for them are when things *do* change, which they equate with things going wrong! Shows get imperceptibly slower or faster, begin to lose or blur details, the balance of moments shifts. With these actors, variations do not occur within *a creative context*, but by default, that is to say by mistake, out of the actors' control. These changes often cause disagreements ('Why did you move on that line? It totally throws what I do.') or dilemmas ('Oh, that was rather good, do you think we could keep it?'). Such thoughts are irrelevant, indeed inconceivable, for actors whose work is process-orientated, whose imperative is to respond specifically to whatever happens at each moment and to embrace change

* In fact, all his reviews are worth a read. He has an extraordinary understanding of what constitutes good acting. He's also very funny. Compare and contrast with our current providers of dramatic evaluation.

as a creative fact. They therefore would never be thrown by what a partner did since that is in fact their need, their stimulation, the *nourishment* of their performance; nor would they consider 'keeping' something, however special that moment had been. *Any future playing of the scene is unlikely ever to build in exactly the same way to that moment*; so they continue to act openly in the anticipation that this moment (and any moment) may contain something equally – or even more – special to be released by the spontaneity of their playing. After all, permanent change is a part of life.

WANT! DO! FEEL!

The 'System'

At its simplest, the Stanislavsky 'system' is: WANT, DO, FEEL.

I want something. Therefore I do something. Consequently I feel something.

What I WANT is an OBJECTIVE. What I DO is an ACTION. What I FEEL is of course an EMOTION.

I want something, but wanting alone will achieve nothing; I have to *do* something about it. To pursue what I want, I have to put my want into action, I have to engage with the world, which means engaging with other people who (I believe) could give me what I want. And this means *doing things to them, making an impact on them, affecting them* in such a way that *they give me what I want*. Otherwise, I remain passive, internally static, not the best condition for dramatic purposes.

Two Examples

AN EXAMPLE FROM ACTUALITY

Let's say my *objective* is to *persuade actors to embrace the principles of acting that I'm describing in this book*. So to (try to) make this happen, I have to put a series of tactics into action. Technically, I put a series of active verbs into action:

I *study, read and observe* material connected with my ideas; I *develop and nourish* my theories; I *assemble* them as coherently as I can; I *seek out* confirmation from other practitioners, past and present; I *corroborate* my work with theirs; I *eliminate* as many contradictions in my arguments as I can and *justify* those I can't to the best of my ability; I *enthuse* about my beliefs to my company of actors and *clarify* any grey areas; I *apply*

appropriate techniques so that I can *guide* them through rehearsals; I *instruct* them, I *urge* them, I *exhort, encourage, demonstrate, define, explain* *argue, debate, proselytise, suggest, provoke* . . . I *write* a book! I'm doing a whole complex of ACTIONS, large and small, long-term and short, in order to gain my objective – to get actors to work in a particular way (i.e. applying objectives and action!).

How do emotions fit into this equation?

If, having executed all these actions, I find that the actors *dismiss* my ideas, *deride* my enthusiasm, *resist* my blandishments, *express indifference* to my beliefs, *reject* my exercises, *denounce* Stanislavsky as out-of-date or *walk out* on me, I feel angry, frustrated, depressed, humiliated, unhappy, resentful, insecure . . . In short, I have a series of what I'd call *bad feelings*. If, on the other hand, the actors *express enthusiasm* for what I have to say, *work* with a will, *absorb* every pearl that drops from my lips, *extol* Stanislavsky's insights, *embrace* the process and *ask* for more, I feel happy, relieved, joyful, proud, excited, confident, triumphant, loving, complacent . . . I have a series of *good feelings*.

The point is that, *whatever the emotions I feel, they occur spontaneously, automatically, autonomically*. I can do nothing deliberate to elicit a particular feeling (except in the general sense that I lead my life in an attempt to be happy rather than unhappy). They come as a result of my efforts to pursue what I want; they arise in response to the success or failure of my objective. They surface unbidden and frequently *unexpected as to kind and degree* – it isn't always the expected emotion in a particular circumstance that emerges.

AN EXAMPLE FROM 'THE SEAGULL'

In the following scene, Trigorin's OBJECTIVE is to *persuade Arkadina to release him from their relationship* so he can establish one with Nina. Arkadina's OBJECTIVE is to *prevent him from leaving her* or, to rephrase it, *to hold on to him*. She responds with a full battery of tactics (ACTIONS) to get him to change his mind. She succeeds. The scene is a good example of playing a wide range of ACTIONS to get what you want.

A SCENE FROM ACT 3 OF 'THE SEAGULL'
BETWEEN ARKADINA AND TRIGORIN

TRIGORIN (*to Arkadina*). Let's stay one more day! (¹*Arkadina shakes her head.*) Let's stay!

ARKADINA Darling, ²I know what's holding you here. ³But try to exercise some self-control. ⁴You're a little drunk, ⁵sober up.

TRIGORIN You be sober, too, be understanding, be reasonable, I beg of you, look at it like a true friend . . . (*Presses her hand.*) You are capable of sacrifice . . . Be my friend, let me go . . .

ARKADINA (*highly agitated*). ⁶Are you so infatuated?

TRIGORIN I'm drawn to her! Perhaps she is exactly what I need.

ARKADINA ⁷The love of some provincial little girl? ⁸Oh, how little you know yourself!

TRIGORIN Sometimes people go through their lives sleepwalking, here I am, talking to you, but it's as if I'm asleep, and dreaming of her . . . I'm possessed by sweet, wonderful dreams . . . Let me go . . .

ARKADINA (*trembling*). ⁹No, no . . . I'm an ordinary woman, you mustn't talk to me like that . . . Don't torture me, Boris . . . I'm terrified . . .

TRIGORIN If you wanted to, you could be extraordinary. Young, enchanting, poetic love, carrying you into a world of dreams – this is the only thing on earth that can bring you happiness! I've still never experienced such love . . . When I was young, I never had time, I was so busy, haunting publishers' doorsteps, struggling to survive . . . Now, it's here, this love, it's come at last, it's calling to me . . . What sense in running away from it?

ARKADINA (*angrily*). ¹⁰You've gone mad!

TRIGORIN Let me!

ARKADINA ¹¹You're all conspiring to torment me today. (¹²*She cries.*)

TRIGORIN (*holds his head in his hands*). She doesn't understand! She won't understand!

ARKADINA ¹³Am I already so old and ugly that one can talk to me about other women without embarrassment? (¹⁴*She embraces and kisses him.*)
¹⁵Oh, you're raving mad! ¹⁶My beautiful, wonderful . . . ¹⁷the last

page of my life. (¹⁸*She kneels at his feet.*) ¹⁹My joy, my pride, my rapture . . . (²⁰*She embraces his knees.*) ²¹If you abandon me, even for an hour, I'll not survive, I'll go mad, my marvel, my magnificence, my sovereign . . .

TRIGORIN Somebody may come in. (*He helps her to her feet.*)

ARKADINA ²²Let them, I'm not ashamed of my love for you. ²³My treasure, my reckless boy, you want to go berserk, but I won't have it, I won't let you . . .

(²⁴*Laughs.*) ²⁵You're mine . . . you're mine . . . This forehead is mine, these eyes are mine, and this beautiful, silky hair is mine, too . . . You're all mine. ²⁶You're so talented, so intelligent, the best of today's writers, you're Russia's only hope . . . You have such sincerity, simplicity, freshness, healthy humour . . . With one stroke, you can convey the essence of a character or a landscape, your people are like life. Oh, it's impossible to read you without rapture. ²⁷Do you think this is all 'incense'? That I'm flattering you? Well, look me in the eyes . . . look . . . Do I look like a liar? ²⁸So you see, I'm the only one capable of appreciating you, the only one who tells you the truth, my darling, my divine man . . . ²⁹You're coming? Yes? You won't leave me?

TRIGORIN I have no will of my own . . . I've never had a will of my own . . . Flabby, spineless, always submissive – how could a woman ever find this attractive? Take me, carry me away, but don't let me go a step out of your sight . . .

ARKADINA (*to herself*). ³⁰Now he's mine. (*Very casually as if nothing had happened.*) ³¹Do stay if you want . . . ³²I'll go by myself, and you can come later, in a week. ³³There's really no need for you to hurry back, is there?

TRIGORIN No, let's go together.

ARKADINA ³⁴As you like. Together, then, together . . .

A BREAKDOWN OF ARKADINA'S ACTIONS

1. She shakes her head/refuses/indicates 'No!'
2. She informs him she's on to him/knows what he's up to
3. She advises him to pull himself together
4. She points out to him that he's drunk
5. She orders him to sober up
6. She questions the degree of his attraction to Nina
7. She mocks his feelings/reduces his love for Nina to an infatuation
8. She sneers at Nina's suitability as a partner for him
9. She blames him for her suffering and vulnerability/plays victim
10. She accuses him of losing his judgement
11. She complains that everyone's against her
12. She cries (to arouse his guilt)
13. She challenges him to admit she's old and ugly (to embarrass him, exacerbate his guilt)
14. She embraces and kisses him
15. She accuses him of madness
16. She praises him ecstatically
17. She confesses he's the last page in her life/her last chance for love
18. She kneels at his feet
19. She intensifies her praise of him
20. She embraces his knees
21. She threatens him with responsibility for the state of her sanity and existence
22. She announces she's proud enough of their love for it be seen publicly/warns him she won't give up quietly
23. She states her determination to exert control over him
24. She laughs
25. She stresses her total ownership of him
26. She extols his brilliant talent
27. She dares him to accuse her of false flattery/lying to him
28. She insists that he acknowledge she's the only one who understands him (to tap his needy vanity)
29. She coaxes him to concede he's staying with her

30. She reassures herself she's managed to keep him*
31. She agrees he should stay if he want to
32. She suggests he follow her in a week's time
33. She points out he has no need to hurry
34. She accepts what he wants

A NOTE ON THE ACTIONS

Arkadina demonstrates great flexibility (*warns, threatens, refuses, accuses, praises, complains, cries, laughs, embraces . . .* and so on) in pursuing her objective. Trigorin has been pursuing his own series of ACTIONS, but with considerably less skill or variety, mainly appealing to her sympathy; until his OBJECTIVE changes from *trying to persuade her to release him to that of trying to modify her behaviour* ('Somebody may come in'). Her ability to break his OBJECTIVE and the breadth of her ACTIONS compared to the narrowness of his, are the reasons she's the more likely of the two to win her OBJECTIVE.

A NOTE ON ARKADINA'S EMOTIONAL LIFE IN THE SCENE

* 'Now he's mine' (30) gives an indication of how Arkadina feels after all this effort. The line is totally open to interpretation, but suggests possibilities such as relief, exhaustion, regained confidence, exultation, self-satisfaction . . . or a mixture of any of them. *But whatever she does feel now must be influenced by what she's gone through up to this moment when Trigorin gives in.* She's obviously been experiencing a stream of emotions throughout the body of the scene: anger maybe, resentment, disgust, jealousy, panic, despair, grief, uncertainty, insecurity, humiliation, determination, hope . . . ebbing and flowing through her with varying degrees of intensity. Because these feelings are out of the actor's control – EMOTION *being spontaneously aroused by the interplay of ACTIONS and OBJECTIVES* – they will fluctuate considerably from performance to performance. It's inevitable, therefore, that this line ('Now he's mine') will produce a different outcome every time it's played. And rather than trying to put a label on the emotions – a very subjective and approximate (and unhelpful) procedure – it would be better to concentrate on her action and allow what the actor's experiencing to inform *how* she expresses it (*see: EMOTION*).

RECAPITULATION OF WANT! DO! FEEL!

We attempt to achieve our *objectives* by pursuing *actions* whose success or failure cause spontaneous *feelings* to be aroused in us. Or, stated the other way round: we experience spontaneous *feelings* as a result of pursuing *actions* in an attempt to achieve our *objectives*. If we achieve them – good feelings; if we fail – bad feelings.

I want, I do, I feel. This is the ‘system’ in a nutshell. It is simple, obvious, and *it is how we function in life*. Any good psychological techniques we apply on stage are conscious recreations of how we function naturally. They create *specific, recognisable behaviour* in the actor from which the audience is able to recognise, interpret or intuit what is going on within the character. *This liberates actors from any need to demonstrate or ‘explain’ their characters.*

Want: Objectives

Definition

Objectives are wants. Every moment in our waking lives (and our sleep, too, if dreams have any meaning) we’re in a state of want. They accompany us from womb to tomb. We are drawn through our lives by a mesh of intertwined wants, long-term and momentary, all travelling together, over varying periods of time.

You want: to be a celebrity, to have a cup of tea, to find someone to love, to pay a bill, to change your life, to buy some clothes, to settle an argument, to borrow some money, to lead an honourable life, to recall the past, to take a holiday, to be left in peace, to feed the ducks, to prove yourself a good friend, to catch up on the gossip, to avoid confrontation, to get your own back, to learn the tango, to find that missing document, to recover from a painful relationship, to find the meaning of life, to get sympathy, to justify your behaviour, to have the last word, to win forgiveness . . .

All such wants dictate how we behave, that is to say, what we actually do. In this respect, characters in plays are no different from people in real life. The difference lies in the nature of stage objectives, which should be more selectively interesting than the rather shapeless collection of wants that we carry around within us (more about finding love than having a cup of coffee – although in the right context, even wanting a cup of coffee can have its dramatic uses, for example in Act One of *The Cherry Orchard*).

The above list comprises different sorts of wants. *There is, in fact, a hierarchy of objectives.* So let’s start with the most practical and immediate.

Scene Objectives

Definitions

A scene objective is what a character wants and is trying to obtain from the other characters throughout a specific portion of text. Indeed, an objective is what initially brings a character on stage. Without a strong purpose to come into a scene, a character really has no dramatic reason to be there. A character can have more than one objective during a scene. A UNIT, however, is usually defined by a single objective. The quantity and duration of objectives can vary. If a character’s objectives seem to be changing too frequently, it might indicate an uncertainty on the playwright’s part. *What the characters want from each other in a scene – their objectives – gives the scene its structure.* Scene objectives are the most immediate of the objectives in the hierarchy, the most practical and accessible.

I mentioned taking a directing class in New York taught by the playwright Joseph Kramm. After we students had shown him our scenes, he would, as a matter of routine, ask the actors what their objectives were, clearly a question we tyro directors hadn’t asked. The actors seemed able to reply with great precision as to what their characters wanted. He would then instruct them to play the scene again, this time making sure they fully engaged with those objectives. And, as I’ve said, on every occasion (or so it seems in retrospect), the situation being played became clearer and each scene acquired a dramatic vitality that it hadn’t displayed the first time around. It became compellingly watchable, suspenseful – you wanted to know what would happen next (although, of course, you already *knew* that!). Experiencing this, I felt that I’d been granted the revelation of a serious theatrical truth: *actors cannot play scenes if they haven’t endowed their characters with intentions (objectives).*

Think of it in this way: characters are unhappy or dissatisfied with their current situation and want to change it. They want to improve it, to rectify it in some way. *Pursuing an objective means trying to change the situation.* The situation can only be changed through the medium of another or other characters who (you believe) hold the key to that change. To change your situation, *you need to change the other characters. That is the event of the scene.* Your love is ignored – you want it acknowledged. You’re owed money – you want it repaid. You’re in a bad relationship – you want out. You have low self-esteem – you want reassurance. You feel guilty – you want forgiveness. More specifically: A ignores your love – *you want A to acknowledge your love.* B owes you money – *you want B to repay you the money.* You’re in an unhappy relationship with C – *you want C to agree to end it.* You have low self-esteem – *you want D to make you feel better about yourself.* You feel guilty about something you did to E – *you want E to forgive you.* Essentially, you’re unhappy and you *want to be happy*, you’re unfulfilled and *want fulfilment*, you’re dissatisfied and *want satisfaction.*

Think of it another way: pursuing an objective always means *trying to get something from someone else*. It's a two-way operation – you do something to other people in order to get something back from them. Young actors, when they first play objectives, tend to focus only on the first half of the transaction, bulldozing their way through a scene with lots of energy, but not allowing anything to come back at them from their partners, which of course renders the playing pointless. If I'm trying to have some sort of effect on you, i.e. *to get you to give me money, to get you to declare your love, to get you to forgive me*, I must stay open to your responses. How else can I know whether I'm getting what I want from you and whether I need to change my approach? If your response is not proving what I hoped for – if I'm *not* getting what I want – I can adjust the way I pursue my objective; *I can change my tactics*, i.e. my actions – more of which later. Good scenes have continuous adjustments and varying tactics. That's what keep them interesting. You already have such an example in the scene where Arkadina persuades Trigorin to stay with her.

Objectives and Conflict

You do things to other people *in order to get what you want from them*. At the same time, they'll be doing something to you *in order to get what they want from you*. The struggle to change the situation, and the conflict of clashing objectives are the dynamic of drama. Without struggle and conflict, there's no drama.*

Objectives and Plot

Objectives ensure that the plot is kept clearly on track. Objectives drive the characters forward to pursue their stories. *Objectives create plot*.

Objectives and Contact

The solution to the majority of problems for actors is almost always in the other actors, not in themselves. Objectives create a need to engage with other characters. Objectives, fully committed, ensure that actors are always in truthful contact with their partners so that *something actually happens between them*. Objectives ensure that actor-characters' focus is on their partners and not on themselves. Asides or soliloquies create a need for actor-characters to make contact with audiences; their objectives are to get some response from the audience: sympathy, support, understanding, complicity . . .

* Of course there are situations in which a non-human agent is causing the unhappiness, such as a snowstorm, an accident, an outbreak of war, an illness, but these are the devices of melodrama and are usually the framework for more interesting conflicts; they are also much more the material of film (*see: OBSTACLES*). Most Performance Art is devoid of drama. It has all the externals of theatre (lighting, staging, movement, sound, music – rich visuals and aural) but none of the internal life.

Objectives as Scenic Fuel

Objectives are strategies. They are the fuel that ignites characters into action. Objectives generate actions. You cannot literally play an objective. *Your objectives stimulate you to play actions*. (Actions are the only thing an actor can actually play.) Think of it like this: objectives are *propelling/moving/thrusting/urging/driving/showing/hurling/kicking/pushing/pulling/drawing/shifting/leading/coaxing/luring/seducing/encouraging/guiding/prodding you into appropriate action*.

Objectives are Holistic

Objectives do not just emanate from the head. They are not solely the result of conscious decision. They often stem from the unconscious. Characters are not always aware of their objectives. That is why actors have to embody them so deeply that, like lines, they become a natural part of their performance and need no longer be thought about. They should be holistically all-consuming, imagined so fully that they create an inner state of need that permeates an actor's entire being.

Objectives and Balance

Unfulfilled objectives are part of the condition in which characters exist. Actor-characters should feel incomplete, unfinished, in a state of dissatisfaction which only the success of their objectives can rectify. As objectives rarely or only briefly succeed (there'd be no drama if they did), characters are always, in a sense, off-balance. *Being off-balance creates suspense; it is a creative state*. Balance, in contrast, creates harmony and eliminates drama.*

Objectives and Lateral Thinking

I said objectives are strategies. In certain circumstances, characters feel that if ever they're going to get what they want, they'll need to manipulate the person from whom they want it, to handle that person with extreme caution. This can also happen at an unconscious level. Such manipulation involves the application of lateral thinking and an imagination of some wit to manoeuvre the other character (or characters) into the right frame of mind to concede to their wishes. This often means approaching the matter indirectly, circling around it, even appearing to retreat from the very thing that's wanted. As I've already indicated, the mistake inexperienced actors often make is to feel they're not playing their objectives unless they do so head-on, at full blast, with maximum energy and attack. Even accepting that they're playing truthfully and with intensity, a frontal attack, if overused, becomes an obvious and uninteresting choice. That way of playing only applies when the conflicts in a scene become unambiguously explicit and directly confrontational. Actors who apply an imaginative approach to their objectives create far more thrilling theatre. Technically, they are using interesting tactics (*see: ACTIONS*) in their attempt to succeed.

* Eugenio Barba convincingly elaborates on this in *The Paper Canoe*.

Le Mot Juste: Intention, Mission, Goal . . .

People often insist on using competing terminologies for an objective. If you prefer, you can think of an objective as:

a <i>want</i> to be got;	a <i>desire</i> to be sated;
an <i>intention</i> to be gained;	a <i>target</i> to be hit;
a <i>mission</i> to be accomplished;	an <i>aim</i> to be achieved;
a <i>goal</i> to be attained;	a <i>problem</i> to be solved;
a <i>destination</i> to be reached;	a <i>need</i> to be answered;
a <i>purpose</i> to be fulfilled;	a <i>task</i> to be done;
a <i>longing</i> to be assuaged;	a <i>drive</i> to succeed;
a <i>hunger</i> to be satisfied;	a <i>stake</i> to be won.

All these words – *objective, intention, mission, goal, destination, purpose, longing, hunger, desire, target, aim, problem, need, task, drive, stake* – are encompassed by the word *want*. The word is unimportant so long as you understand the idea behind it. The sign is unimportant so long as you understand what's signified.*

An Example of Objectives

A SCENE FROM ACT 3 OF 'THE SEAGULL'
BETWEEN KONSTANTIN AND ARKADINA

KONSTANTIN ¹Living in the country's not healthy for him [*i.e. his uncle, Sorin*]. He broods. Mama, if you would suddenly feel generous and lend him one-and-a-half, two thousand roubles, he could live in town for a whole year.

ARKADINA I haven't any money. I'm an actress not a banker.

Pause.

KONSTANTIN ²Mama, change my bandage. You do it so well.

ARKADINA (*takes iodine from the medicine cabinet and bandages from a drawer*). The doctor's late.

* Among the adherents to particular acting systems there can be a certain amount of wilful semantic confusion, of pedantic nit-picking about precise terminology. Often through lack of real understanding, they cling to the word rather than the spirit. This is unhelpful. Arguments over words immediately get actors out of their bodies and into their heads, where we'd prefer them not to be.

KONSTANTIN He promised to be here by ten. It's midday already.

ARKADINA Sit down. (*Takes off his bandage.*) You look as if you're wearing a turban. A stranger in the kitchen yesterday asked what nationality you were. It's almost entirely healed. Just a little bit left. (*Kisses his head.*) While I'm away, you won't go click-click again?

KONSTANTIN No, Mama. That was a moment of insane despair when I couldn't control myself. It won't be repeated any more. (*He kisses her hand.*) You've got such clever hands. I remember long ago when you were still working in State Theatres – I was very small then – there was a fight in our courtyard, a washerwoman was badly beaten up. You remember? She was picked up unconscious . . . you used to visit her with medicine and wash her children in a tub. You must remember?

ARKADINA No. (*She puts on a new bandage.*)

KONSTANTIN Two ballet dancers lived in the same house then . . . They used to visit you for coffee . . .

ARKADINA That I remember.

KONSTANTIN They were very religious. (*Pause.*) Lately, these last few days, I've loved you as tenderly and as fully as I did as a child. I've no-one left beside you. ³Only why, why do you let yourself be influenced by that man?

ARKADINA You don't understand him, Konstantin. He has a fine character.

KONSTANTIN However, when he was informed I was about to challenge him to a duel, his fine character didn't prevent him from playing the coward. He's leaving. Ignominious flight!

ARKADINA What nonsense! I asked him to leave myself. You may not like our intimacy, but you're a clever and intelligent person and I have the right to demand that you respect my freedom.

KONSTANTIN I respect your freedom, but please don't deny me the right to think what I like about this man. Fine character! You and I are on the verge of having a fight because of him, while he's sitting somewhere, in the drawing room or in the garden, laughing at us . . . contributing to Nina's 'development', trying to convince her once and for all that he's a genius.

ARKADINA You enjoy saying unpleasant things to me. I respect this man and I ask you to refrain from speaking ill of him in my presence.

KONSTANTIN And I do not respect him. You want me to think him a genius too, but, forgive me, I can't lie, his work makes me sick.

ARKADINA That's envy. People without talent but with pretensions to it have nothing better to do than abuse real talent. Some consolation, I must say!

KONSTANTIN (*sarcastically*). Real talent! (*Angrily*.) ⁴I'm more talented than all of you, if it comes to that. (*Tears the bandage from his head.*) You hacks, you lovers of stale routine have grabbed all the first places in art, and consider only what you do to be real and legitimate, everyone else you try to stifle and suppress. I don't recognise you people! I don't recognise you or him!

ARKADINA Decadent!

KONSTANTIN Go back to your lovely theatre and act in your rotten, worthless plays!

ARKADINA I have never acted in such plays. Leave me alone! You aren't capable of writing even a third-rate vaudeville skit. Petit Bourgeois from Kiev! Parasite!

KONSTANTIN Miser!

ARKADINA Tramp! (⁵*Konstantin sits down and cries quietly.*) Nonentity! (*She walks up and down agitatedly.*) Don't cry. There's no need to cry . . . (*Cries.*) Don't . . . (*Kisses his forehead, cheeks and head.*) My darling child, forgive me . . . Forgive your sinful mother. Forgive this wretched creature.

KONSTANTIN (*hugging her*). If only you knew! I've lost everything! She doesn't love me and I can't write any more . . . all my hopes have vanished . . .

ARKADINA Don't despair . . . Everything will work out. He's going away, she'll love you again. (*She wipes his tears.*) Enough. We've made it up now.

KONSTANTIN (*kissing her*). Yes, Mama.

ARKADINA (*tenderly*). Make it up with him, too. No need for a duel . . . Now is there?

KONSTANTIN Alright . . . Only, Mama, don't force me to see him. It's hard for me . . . more than I can bear.

KONSTANTIN'S OBJECTIVES DURING THE SCENE

1 (a) To encourage his mother to give her brother some money; (b) to elicit from her some show of concern for her family.

2 (a) To get her to be the mother he remembers (to nurse him, to share childhood memories with him); (b) to get her to demonstrate her love for him by her willingness to be his exclusively; (c) to return to a secure place in his childhood; (d) to become a child again.

3 (a) To make her break up her relationship with Trigorin; (b) to reclaim his mother for himself.

4 (a) To make her understand how much he despises her sort of theatre; (b) to humiliate her professionally; (c) to get her to acknowledge/bow down to his superior artistry.

5 (a) To share his unhappiness with her; (b) make her feel guilty.

(1) + (2) + (3) have the overall objective of trying to get his mother to become exclusively his again.

(4) + (5) have the overall objective of wanting to punish her for not doing so.

NOTES ON THE OBJECTIVES

These objectives are of course interpretive: the 'a's are obvious at a surface level; the 'b's, 'c's and 'd' probe deeper. Note that the same objective can usually be phrased in a variety of ways (e.g. 2c or d); often, actors will find a particular choice of words more stimulating to their imagination than another.

An objective also often implies one or more corollaries (e.g. 2b, c & d; 4b & c). The actor can choose to let one of these dominate, but whatever he chooses to play should contain all the implications of the others. Whichever one he does emphasise will give the scene a different tone and texture.

Through-Lines

Definition

The next level in the hierarchy of objectives is the through-line. This is the character's main objective through the story (play) and links all that character's scenes and behaviour with a dramatic logic. *It is the character's essential plot-drive through the play.* In the Aristotelian sense, this is what gives a drama its cohesion – the character's pursuit of an all-encompassing goal, which they may (comedy) or may not (tragedy) achieve. It should inform every scene in which the character appears and, therefore, each scene objective. The sum of the scene objectives should add up to the through-line. *The through-line both generates plot and functions in response to the circumstances of the plot.*

Sometimes, towards the end of the play, circumstances force the characters to adjust or change their through-line. The last scenes of a play are often about how the characters deal with the success or failure of their through-lines.

Sometimes, a through-line doesn't kick in until activated by a circumstance, usually early on, in the play.

A through-line could also be defined as the way in which the character's SUPER-OBJECTIVE (coming up next) motivates and guides the character through the specific circumstances of the play in which the character finds itself.

The through-line is also known as the *main-line-of-action*. It could also be called *the play objective*.

SOME THROUGH-LINES

Nina – to succeed as an actress [*The Seagull*]

Hjalmar – to contain his wife within what he believes a wife's role should be [*A Doll's House*]

Claudius – to rule safely, therefore to control Hamlet [*Hamlet*]

Oedipus – to discover the cause of, and therefore end, the plague in Thebes [*Oedipus Rex*]

Hamlet – to avenge his father's death [*Hamlet*]

Hedda Gabler – to exert influence over Eilert Løvborg [*Hedda Gabler*]

Nora – to keep her secret from her husband, Torvald [*A Doll's House*]

Arkadina – to hold on to everything she possesses, particularly Trigorin [*The Seagull*]

NOTES ON THE THROUGH-LINES

The first four through-lines exist before the play begins. The last four hover potentially at the start of the play until clearly activated by specific circumstances, respectively:

The Ghost's injunction to Hamlet to avenge his death

Thea Elvsted's news of Eilert Løvborg's rehabilitation

Krogstad's threat to reveal Nora's secret

Nina's appearance in Konstantin's play

SOME ADJUSTED THROUGH-LINES

Hamlet's – from his sense of futility concerning his previous actions – *to resign himself to his fate*

Oedipus's – once he discovers that he himself is the cause of the plague (because of his unwitting acts of patricide and incest) – *to punish himself/ to appease the Gods*

Hedda Gabler's – once her attempts to influence Løvborg threaten her either with social disgrace or subjugation to Judge Brack's will – *to kill herself as the only way out of this impasse*

Nora's – once she is disillusioned by Hjalmar's response to her 'secret' – *to (leave home and children and) test her ability to live independently*

Hjalmar's – once he discovers that he no longer has any power over his wife – *to preserve their marriage by acceding to Nora's wishes in anyway he can*

Arkadina and Nina keep their through-lines going to the very end of the play; Claudius keeps his until his death.

The adjusted through-lines are of course influenced by the characters' super-objectives.

Super-Objectives

Definition

Most comprehensive of all in the hierarchy of objectives, super-objectives are characters' *life-wants*, their overarching drive through life. They extend beyond the duration of the play in which the characters live out that part of their lives: conceivably, they exist before the play begins and, assuming the character is still alive at the end of the play, continue afterwards. *Super-objectives define character; through-lines define plot.*

A super-objective is usually stated in very general terms, and deals with large concepts such as *to want to*:

conquer the world;	avoid commitments;
embrace all that life offers;	belong somewhere;
hide from life's vicissitudes;	seek justice;
be a good person;	find love . . .

It informs a character's journey through life, both a goal and a guide to conducting one's life. In the play, the super-objective influences all the choices that characters make – their through-lines and therefore their scene objectives. That means *characters create plot* – as they should.

Suicide

Our own lives are motivated by some overarching drive, though what that might be would be hard for most of us to identify. It is usually broad enough to allow us a reasonable flexibility of choices as we move through the varied circumstances of our existence. If one desired avenue closes for us, we are able to see the possibility of others. The concept of super-objectives may become clearer by looking at people who take their own lives. Suicides have super-objectives that are too narrow, too specific to leave them room for much manoeuvre. When we hear of someone's suicide, we often find it hard to understand; to us, their life seemed happy and fulfilled. Nevertheless, whatever it is that they wanted from life must at some point have become an impossible goal – or so they *felt* it to be. What for us would have been a minor setback seemed for them the end to any hope of obtaining their super-objective.

In the early '60s, among the celebrity cast list of the Profumo Affair was an osteopath called Stephen Ward, who had found his way into the circle of the rich and well-connected. As something of a scapegoat for the whole scandal-filled business, he was brought to trial for living off the earnings of prostitutes and pimping for

his socialite client-friends. After he heard the judge's summing up, before the actual verdict (he *was* subsequently found guilty), he took an overdose. A psychiatrist's report put forward the view that because, during his trial, none of the great and the good, who had availed themselves of his various services and purported to be his friends, had come forward to give evidence on his behalf, he believed that he would never again be *persona grata* in that particular society. Sensing (rightly or wrongly) that there was no future possibility for himself in a world he wanted to be part of more than any other, he did away with himself. His super-objective (something along the lines of '*to belong to/be accepted by the rich and famous*'), being an unusually narrow one, left him no options. The cause of this sense of hopelessness may well have been unconscious.

In *The Seagull*, Konstantin is an example of a dramatic character with a narrow life-drive, focused exclusively on one person. His super-objective is to win his mother's love and respect. Chekhov brilliantly flags this up for us by giving him, soon after he first appears, a long diatribe about his mother; then, just before his final exit to shoot himself, a few last words of concern for her. From Nina's visit, he realises that he will never be a great writer and this (in *his* mind) removes any hope of ever winning his mother's love. Without her reassurance of his worth, he has total lack of self-esteem. Deprived of this – or the hope of it – he cannot continue to live. Whether this is unconscious (in which case, his *conscious* despair is fixated on his failure as a writer, with *no awareness* of his deeper need to succeed) or whether it is conscious (in which case, his despair comes from his certainty that his mother's love can now never be won) is a matter of interpretation. I would probably opt for the former; Konstantin, like most of the other characters in the play, exhibits very little self-knowledge. Fortunately for us and for drama, most people and most characters have broader drives.

Chicken and Egg

Discovering the super-objective is a chicken-and-egg process. The super-objective defines the character's choice of objectives from scene to scene. The sum of the scene objectives reveals the super-objective. Either, from your overall sense of the character's movement through the play, you can make a reasonable conjecture as to the super-objective, then work through each scene objective, testing it against your conjecture. Or you can decide on your scene objectives as you work through them, one at a time, and see what super-objective they cumulatively suggest. You are working from the general to the particular or from the particular to the general. In practice, you'll probably work from both. There's a certain amount of pulling and pushing as you adjust your scene objectives to fit in with your conjectural super-objective, or as you modify your super-objective to accommodate your scene objectives. It's an ongoing process. If, for example, the objectives in a few scenes seem to have no connection with the others, either you need to adjust your super-objective to accommodate them, or rework those scene

objectives until they seem to connect with the super-objective. (In a poorly written play, this problem may well be the writer's lack of consistency or understanding of action, in which case the actors and director have to do a lot of smart manoeuvring to bring the scenes into an artistically integrated whole.)

SOME SUPER-OBJECTIVES

Hedda Gabler – to exert power in a male-dominated world (*through-line*: by having influence, first over her husband's possible political career, then over Eilert Lövborg) [*Hedda Gabler*]

Oedipus – to (be seen to) be a powerful and responsible ruler (*through-line*: by discovering and destroying the cause of the plague that is ravaging the citizen of Thebes, the city-state he rules) [*Oedipus Rex*]

Ranyevskaya – to (go where she can) find unconditional love (*through-line*: by being accepted unreservedly back into the bosom of her family) [*The Cherry Orchard*]

Imogen – to exist in truth and loyalty (*through-line*: by finding a way to be reunited with her husband, Posthumus) [*Cymbeline*]

Nora – to experience herself as an independent human being within the confines of a male-dominated society (*through-line*: by keeping her secret of forging a signature to save her husband's health) [*A Doll's House*]

Konstantin – to win his mother's love and respect (*through-line*: by impressing her with his talent as a writer) [*The Seagull*]

Nina – to embrace life to the full (*through-line*: by becoming an actress) [*The Seagull*]

Arkadina – to receive the world's adulation (*through-line*: by holding on to all she possesses: looks, career, youth, money, lover . . .) [*The Seagull*]

The Language of Super-Objectives

A super-objective can be stated in many ways: Ranyevskaya's could be, simply, *to be loved; to live for love; to gain everyone's love; to be adored*. Nina's, *to experience everything that life has to offer, to explore life to the full, to seize life in all its dimensions . . .* It very much depends on what combination of words stimulates an actor's imagination. Even though there may be subtle shifts of emphasis in different rewordings, it's more important that a super-objective is phrased in a way that energises the actor. Anyway, there's no such thing as a definitive super-objective.

Like all objectives, its interpretation is a matter of informed and reasonable conjecture, and more constructive if expressed through language that triggers the actor's creativity.

Super-Objective as Synthesiser

The super-objective is where the head meets the viscera. The actor is making discoveries about the character's drives in the sweat of rehearsal through scene objectives, and analysing and synthesising this information intellectually through super-objectives.

The Embodiment of Super-Objectives

The super-objective is not playable. It is both too generalised and usually unconscious. The purpose of the super-objective is to give aesthetic integrity and structure to a role. At a deep level, it can resolve a character's apparent contradictions. Although a super-objective is not playable, it must nonetheless be psychosomatically absorbed into the actor's organism, so that eventually it functions creatively at a semi-conscious level. It defines how the character looks at life – the character's world-view and values – and should find expression in the character's physical life. As human beings are holistic, the way of absorbing a super-objective into the essence of the role is through physical work (*see*: EMOTION AND BODY and TECHNIQUES TOWARDS CHARACTERISATION).

The Super-Objective of Plays

In a good play, the sum of the characters' super-objectives reveals the play's super-objective (or theme). This must make sense as plays can only be about the characters that exist in them. Themes are not mental constructs somehow hovering above a text. They're ingrained in the characters' journeys and aspirations (stories) that create the play. So what the characters want and do *must* contain (and reveal) the play's themes – what it's 'about'.

In *Cymbeline*, all the characters are motivated by loyalty or disloyalty: parent and child, husband and wife, master and servant, ruler and subject, citizen and country, descendant and ancestors, man and Gods. They divide into three groups: those who operate by disloyalty and betrayal and are ultimately destroyed; those who act with unwavering loyalty; and those who lapse into disloyalty but are ultimately redeemed by repentance with their loyalty implicitly renewed. These last two groups are rewarded by reunion and reconciliation. The play's theme might be stated: *Those people who lead their lives with loyalty and fidelity win love and redemption*.

In *Hedda Gabler*, all the characters, but one, are governed by bourgeois respectability and the fear of scandal which encourages them to keep low profiles. They can only operate behind and through other people (they don't enter by the front

door, but, in Ibsen's words, by 'the rear entrance'). For example, Hedda tries to be the power behind the throne, first of Tesman, then of Lövborg; Tesman researches other men's work; Thea Elvsted inspires Lövborg to write, and hopes to do the same for Tesman; Judge Brack operates by entering other people's marriages – 'the third in a triangle'; even Aunt Julie looks after her sick sister until she dies, whereupon she starts looking around for another sick person to tend. In counterpoint, the exception, Eilert Lövborg, is motivated by his defiance of society and is the cause of most of the other characters' through-lines in the play. The theme might be: *In a bourgeois society, dominated by fear of scandal, people avoid overt action and dare operate only through or behind others.*

In *The Three Sisters*, all the characters are looking for a place where they can belong – geographically, socially, professionally, domestically, emotionally and, quite simply, by having a room of their own. In fact, the subject of rooms recurs over and over again through the play. Rooms become a metaphor for the need to belong somewhere. The soldiers are periodically on the move to another army base and always living in temporary quarters (rented rooms); Natasha wants to move up in the world and takes over the Prozorov household, pushing the sisters out of their rooms to make room for her babies; Andrei wants a life free of responsibilities and hides in his room, playing the violin, trying to avoid the problems, largely of his making, that engulf his family; Irina who longs for some idealised form of work, keeps changing jobs throughout the play as she and Olga are slowly pushed out of the house by Natasha; Anfisa, the old nurse, despite Natasha's threat to get rid of her, ends up rejoicing in having a room of her own at the school where Olga has moved . . . The theme might be: *In a period of social disruption and radical change, most people are searching for a place where they can belong.*

In *The Seagull*, the theme might be: *Most people create performances of the failures and disappointments of their lives in order to render the pain more tolerable.* There is also a sub-motif in the way the characters batten on art to give themselves some sort of prestige. They use art, not as a means of genuine creative expression, but as a means to solve some other need (status, image, celebrity, money, admiration . . .). Nina is the exception. She comes to realise that art is not, as she'd once thought, about acquiring fame, but about acquiring the honesty (and therefore strength) to cope with life.

Super-Objectives v. Through-Lines

Super-objectives are character-driven and more concerned with inner needs – hopes, longings, ambitions. *Through-lines* are more involved with externals – events, situations, contexts. *Super-objectives* are ingrained in their characters, whatever their story might be, and are the prime instigators of plot. *Through-lines* are specific to the concrete circumstances of the play and are plot-driven.

Counter-Objectives

Definition

Finally, the *counter-objective*. This is a critical character-driven need that is almost equal in strength to the *super-objective*, but works in opposition to it. *The counter-objective* causes characters to be in conflict with themselves. We live with inner contradictions. We can have needs that pull us away from our *super-objective* – from the very thing we most want. That's why, often, we remain with our ambitions unfulfilled. At times, it may take patience and perceptive analysis to decide which is a character's *super-objective* and which their *counter-objective* (see: OBSTACLES).

Some Examples of Counter-Objectives

I've suggested that Hedda Gabler's *super-objective* is to exert power in the world. In her closed and male-dominated society, the only route she sees open to her is through her influence over a man. By marrying Tesman, she hopes to manoeuvre him into some political or high academic position. However, as the daughter of a general, she has an overvalued perception of herself. She is a snob, a product of the *haute bourgeoisie*, its values and conventions, and her *counter-objective* is to remain aloof from others, and, it goes without saying, to avoid scandal. These two large objectives collide when, failing to shift Tesman, she becomes embroiled with Eilert Lövborg, a man to whom scandal easily adheres. Her involvement puts her under the power of Judge Brack. Caught between the Scylla of threatened disgrace and the Charybdis of being under someone else's power, which excludes the possibility of exerting any power of her own – her *super-objective*, that is – she 'sees' no alternative but suicide.

In *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopakhin's *super-objective* is to belong to the world of Ranyevskaya, more specifically, to be accepted by her (he probably has an unconscious childhood-fixated love for her). For the first half of the play, he's trying to help her to save her estate. But in the third act, he buys the estate for himself. His motive for buying it, his *counter-objective*, is to *avenge the injustices done his family who were serfs on her family's estate, to get amends for the wrongs done them.* By an act against the woman whose acceptance he so deeply desires, he ends up destroying any chance of gaining the very thing he wants, his *super-objective*.

In *The Seagull*, Konstantin's *super-objective* is to win the love and respect of his actress mother. His *counter-objective* is to *prove that his talents and ideas about theatre will make her see the vulgarity and mediocrity of hers.* She, of course, is totally committed to her sort of theatre, a necessity in her life, possibly *the* necessity. His blindness to her needs puts him on a course of action that antagonises her and totally precludes any chance of his gaining his *super-objective*. When he finally 'sees' the inadequacy of his writing, he tears all of it up (a metaphorical suicide) and then shoots himself.

Also in *The Seagull*, Arkadina's *super-objective* is to receive the world's adulation. Her *counter-objective* is to hang on to all that she has: her income, her appearance, her career, her 'youth', her lover. She's reached an age when she fears that everything that's made her what she is will start to erode or be taken from her unless she defends it. This makes her ungenerous and demanding, creating tension in others rather than the adoration she craves. So, despite the routine flattery that comes her way, she is in a continual state of dissatisfaction, irritation and anger. In each of the first three acts, she loses her temper!

RECAPITULATION OF OBJECTIVES

The super-objective is the character's overarching purpose in life; *the through-line* is the character's purpose through the context of the play; *the scene objective* is the character's purpose from situation to situation. *Super-objectives* motivate *through-lines* that motivate *scene objectives*. *The counter-objective* is a strong character drive in conflict with *the super-objective*.

Do: Action and Actions

A Mnemonic

Active Actors Actually Enact Actions & Activities in an Actuality, (Acting Out, Acting Up, Acting on Impulse, Acting as If, Acting the Fool, Putting On an Act, Getting In On the Act, Getting Their Act Together,) Reacting and Interacting, to Activate the audience – even to DistrAct them!

The Essence of Theatre

The profound nature of theatre, its essence, is action – not language, not image, nor the interpretation of great texts, not political engagement, but action. Action is how theatre expresses itself. *The purpose of theatre is the revelation of action and revelation through action.* The life of theatre is created by characters in action, that is to say, acting out their lives through meaningful and revelatory deeds and behaviour.

The Actor's Art

Action can only be – well – activated by human beings. That's why actors are the *sine qua non* of theatre. *The actor's art is the art of action.*

Technically, *actions* are what characters do to try to achieve their objectives; therefore *actions* are what actors play. Playing actions is the actor's main task. It's what actors do. This is their job. This, technically, is all they can play. In *True and False*, his book about acting, David Mamet – if I understand him – believes that the playing of actions encompasses *everything* a good actor need do.

To repeat: actions are what characters carry out in order to try to get what they want. They use them to change their current situation, to improve or rectify it in some way. In good drama, that situation is always dependent upon other characters. Therefore, to achieve the desired change, *characters* have to effect a change in *other characters*. Which means that *actors* have to effect a change in *other actors*. They can only achieve this by pursuing actions.

Many actors don't play actions. That's why many performances are inartistic. By which I mean that these actors' focus is not on wanting to move the story forward through meaningful, imaginative and imperative action – which means through seamless, active contact with their partners – but on other preoccupations, such as affecting the audience with aspects of their performance: their ability to communicate difficult texts, their capacity for expressive emotion, their 'comic timing', their charm, their vitality, the wit of their choices, the virtuosity of their skills and so forth – totally the wrong sorts of objectives, even if executed with honest intentions on behalf of the playwright and the play. Wrong because they are implicitly saying 'Look at me acting', rather than just acting.* 'Good' actors also use such skills, *but in the service of their actions*, as the means to an end, rather than as ends in themselves.

'Bad' actors may be tempted to believe there are other things they should 'play', such as character, mood, style . . . But this sort of acting is essentially demonstrative rather than active. *Character, mood, atmosphere and style will quite naturally be created if actors play their actions and objectives within the context of their GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES.* 'Bad' actors invite the audience to watch them trying to move, amuse, disturb, enlighten and delight them. 'Good' actors invite the audience to watch their characters struggling to work out the story of their lives through action. They trust that by playing actions truthfully and imaginatively, they *will* move, amuse, disturb, enlighten and delight their audiences.

There is a world of difference between an actor who plays a result and one who plays an action: a result strikes a single note; an action resonates with infinite harmonic possibilities. Actors who play results can do no other than display themselves in their performance because what they're playing has nowhere to go; results and demonstrations are essentially dead ends. This sort of acting is inevitably – even if unintentionally – narcissistic because its outcome is to show off the actor. By contrast, actors who play actions generate energy and spontaneous life

* This is exactly what Shaw is criticising in Bernhardt's performance.

with their partners. Actors who are absorbed in themselves draw attention to themselves. Actors utterly absorbed in playing their actions will utterly absorb the audience in the play.

Action and Text

Sets, lighting, music, sound, costumes, *mise-en-scène* cannot supply action. The text itself can only provide the possibility for it. Good plays offer the opportunity for lively, meaningful and varied action. Natural playwrights instinctively conceive and write in actions. Plays often don't work because they lack the potential for action. Playwrights who have a lot to say and say it through words rather than through action create, oxymoronically, static drama – an impossible object. Characters should talk, not to score points for the writer, but because what they say is part of their actions in pursuit of their objectives. Dialogue is one of several means employed by characters to get what they want. (Others might be physical expression, gesture and attitude, demeanour, behaviour, 'business', activities, degree of energy, appearance . . .)

Action and Plot

Actions are the steps along the spine – the through-line – of the plot. *Actions turn story into drama.*

Action and Space

To fulfil their actions, actors, whose bodies are trained to be flexible and spontaneously responsive, instinctively employ appropriate physicality. Actions will move them naturally and dynamically through space, both in relationship to their partners and to their environment. Spontaneous actors don't have to be told, nor need to set, where or how they move. The need of the action will motivate their physical life as well as their psychological life. The two – the physical and the psychological – are intertwined. The physical is the manifestation of the psychological, the one can't happen without the other. By playing actions, actors automatically bring the whole physical world of the play alive: not only their own bodies, but the space around them, the objects they handle, the clothes they wear, the other actors on stage . . .

Action and Time

Actions move the characters through time; actions pull them forwards in pursuit of their objectives. The sum of their actions is their journey through the play. Theatre is as much concerned with time as with space. When actors play actions, they and the audience live through an event together. By contrast, actors who play results or demonstrate their acting are essentially static. Watching that sort of

performance is experiencing dead time. That is why so much theatre can feel heavy and tedious, why even short shows seem to take for ever. We have difficulty in sustaining our concentration. It's because *nothing is happening, nothing engages, nothing's in action.**

Action and Dynamics

In matters of volume, tempo and rhythm, actions proceed with the appropriate energy that each moment dictates. Actions create natural dynamics; the intensity of the dynamic depends on how much energy the actor-characters feel they need to invest in each action, how high they place the stakes of their objectives. Any other means of achieving energy is generalised and false. Directorial exhortations for 'More energy!' or to play 'Louder!', 'Faster!' induce forced and mechanical performances. Actions endow a performance with appropriate, organic energy, with specificity and with life.

Action and Character

Actions reveal character. The type of actions they employ reveals something of their psychology. What they *do* is more likely to tell us what sort of people they are, rather than what they say, which usually tries to disguise the fact. A character's tendency periodically to resort to certain types of action is a clue to personality. The actor might find that a character *argues* a lot or *flatters* a lot or *boasts* a lot. In *The Three Sisters*, Olga frequently *complains*. In *The Seagull*, Konstantin keeps *criticising* his mother. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopakhin continually *exhorts* the others to embrace his business plans. Such actions are clues towards characterisation. After all, we *are* what we do. What we do makes us what we are.

Action and Contact

Actions ensure that actor-characters contact each other. To play actions truthfully, actors have to be in genuine contact with one another. They must truly affect each other, not merely as character to character, *but as actor to actor* – no polite

* It's worth noting that, unlike a novel or film, theatre rarely, if ever, succeeds, when it disrupts our normal experience of time. I can think of no theatre equivalents of *Last Year in Marienbad*. Even experiments, like J.B. Priestley's Time Plays are more about 'What if . . .', offering alternative developments to a story. Plays that move 'backwards', like *Betrayal* or *Merrily We Roll Along*, do, at least, move consistently in one direction. Plays that cover many years and deal with generations rarely have the dramatic impact and punch of plays that happen within a contained period. We want to stay with the same characters, not jump to their descendants. Shakespeare totally ignores the logic of time, allowing events that happen in swift succession and those that logically would occur over longer periods of time to coexist, so that we always have a sense of immediacy. We never question their literal impossibility, because of the power of his *dramatic action*. There's something to be said for the Classical Unities of Time, Place and Action. Because we're experiencing a play as it happens in front of us, our sense of 'real time' is very powerful.

pretence at contact. Actors have to have the courage to engage with one another. Playing actions truly and fully makes this inevitable.

Action and Emotion

Actions lead to feeling. As I've said, the need and the effort exerted in pursuing actions – and their success or failure in achieving the objectives that have initiated them – generate *spontaneous and therefore truthful feelings* in the actor. If actors are not in action, what passes for their emotional life will of technical necessity be dredged up, simulated, contrived, strained and often clichéd.

Actions as Tactics

Whether you agree or not with the perception that we are by nature manipulative in everything we do, the fact is that *actions are tactics* we employ to get what we want. (Objectives are strategies.) The more flexible we are tactically, the more likely we are to succeed. Actors who play unvaryingly the self-same actions throughout a scene become uninteresting and unrevealing (unless this is clearly meant to be an aspect of character). It's hard for an audience to sustain its attention; we find we've stopped listening and are barely watching. Not only is it uninteresting; more to the point, it's unreal. In life, we are infinitely varied in the ways we relate to each other, there seems no end to the range of our human expressiveness as we interrelate. Therefore it's somewhat perplexing that actors, human beings who in their actual lives will be quite naturally full of expressive variety, can become creatures of such limited colours on stage. This is often the result of planning. Actors who make decisions in advance inevitably close off access to their imagination and to unexpected possibilities. By making prior choices, their heads limit them to what is obvious and clichéd, what is consciously available to them. Actors who play spontaneously will automatically play with variety and freshness, because they've dared to leave themselves open, uncensored, to what instinctively occurs.

The objective of a scene should stimulate actors to a wide variety of tactics (actions) on its behalf. These tactics should be in direct response to the reactions they are eliciting from their partners in the scene. Actors should be continuously adjusting with appropriate, fresh actions to the OBSTACLES that are presented to them. (Refer back to the scene in *The Seagull* between Arkadina and Trigorin, in which she is continuously adjusting her actions to his.)

Not only do a succession of varied actions create liveliness, so will *the variety of ways in which the same action or tactic can be played*. Even if an actor has planned an action, so long as it only the *what* of the action rather than the *how* that has been decided upon, it can still be played with spontaneity. Think of the incalculable number of ways in which you can, for instance, *threaten* someone or *disagree* with them.

Action as a Constant

Actions are the actors' constant factor in performance. They are the source of their strength and security: literally and metaphorically their lifeline. A sequence of actions is the actor-character's journey through the play. You could see them as beads threaded on a string, except that this is too static an image; slightly better is to think of them, as I've suggested, as numerous vertebrae that compose the long spine that supports the complete skeleton of the play. Or, simply, think of them as steps on the play's journey. Actions are playable right from the start of rehearsals. On the first day, it's possible for actors to play them with complete commitment, even before they have much or any knowledge of character, objectives, or GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES. The actors play the situation from themselves to the best of their understanding.

For a simple example, the first scene of *The Seagull*, deals with Medvedenko's declaration of love to Masha and her rejection of him. His first line, 'Why do you always go around in black?' is clearly a question. So his action is to *ask, find out, question, enquire*. This is undeniable. The actor playing Medvedenko at this point probably knows nothing certain about his character, nor exactly what his objective is; nor what the GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES are. Nevertheless, *he can still play the action*, using whatever ideas he does have at this point about his character and the scene; or simply by playing from himself – what this situation might mean to him. What he uses is unimportant, *so long as he plays an action*. Whatever he does use, he is still playing the basic situations of the scene (e.g. *asking* that question) and thus learning its basic structure. By the end of rehearsals, this action will still be the same (*to ask, find out, question, enquire*), but by then it will be informed and conditioned by the appropriate GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES of the play: character, environment, story, relationships and so forth. The vertebrae will have acquired muscles and tendons, joints and tissue, veins and arteries, skin and fat, blood and genes. But the bones themselves, no matter what new conditions affect them, will be a constant; they may become arthritic, bruised, even broken, but they will always be there.

An Analysis of Actions

In this speech of Lopakhin's from the first act of *The Cherry Orchard*, his scene objective is to *persuade Ranyevskaya and Gayev to build dachas on their estate and rent them out in order to pay off their debts*.

LOPAKHIN ADDRESSING RANYEVSKAYA AND GAYEV
IN ACT I OF 'THE CHERRY ORCHARD'

LOPAKHIN I want to tell you something very pleasant, encouraging . . . (*Glances at his watch.*) I'm leaving now, no time to talk . . . So, in two or three words. As you know, your cherry orchard is up for sale to pay your debts, the auction's set for the twenty-second of August, but you needn't worry, my dear, sleep peacefully, there's a solution . . . Here's my plan. Please listen! Your estate is only fifteen miles from town, the railway runs nearby, and if the cherry orchard and land along the river were divided into summer lots and then leased out for summer villas, you'd have, at the very least, an annual income of twenty-five thousand roubles . . . From each summer visitor you can get at least twenty-five roubles annually per each two-and-a-half-acre lot, and if you announce it immediately, I guarantee you anything you like that, by autumn, you won't have a single piece of land left, everything will be taken. In one word, I congratulate you, you're saved. The location is wonderful, the river is deep. Just one thing, of course, it needs to be tidied up, cleared . . . let's say, for example, you tear down all the old buildings, this house here which has become worthless, and cut down the old cherry orchard . . . Up to now, there have only been landowners and peasants in the country, but now summer residents are appearing. Every town, even the least big, is surrounded by summer villas. It's likely that in about twenty years, your summer residents will have multiplied enormously. Now he only drinks tea on his veranda, but soon he may take up cultivating his two-and-a-half acres and then your cherry orchard will become happy, rich, splendid . . .

Some of the many actions he uses to pursue his objective in this speech are:

- To *encourage them* to listen to him
- To *remind them* of their situation (debt)
- To *put their minds at ease/reassure them* that there is a solution
- To *get and keep their attention*
- To *detail for them* the ideal nature of their family estate to become real estate for rentable dachas
- To *emphasise for them* the certainty of success if they take this line of action
- To *inform them* as to how much they could earn
- To *stress for them* the popularity of such dachas
- To *assure them* of a new class of potential customers
- To *paint a picture for them* of future happiness and abundance

From Action to Objective: Revealed and Hidden Objectives

The actions in a scene lead towards the discovery of the scene objective. Some actions in a scene can very clearly reveal the scene objectives motivating them, such as Lopakhin's in this speech. This is because it's directly connected to the plot and the situation the characters find themselves in. However, many actions function at a less obvious level of intention. In *The Three Sisters*, Olga, the eldest of the three, frequently *complains*. These are her complaints, scattered throughout the first three acts:

OLGA'S COMPLAINTS IN 'THE THREE SISTERS'

(Act 1) I'm at school every day and then giving private lessons till evening, so I've got a constant headache and my thoughts are like an old woman's. Really, during the four years I've been teaching, I've felt, day by day, drop by drop, my strength and youth draining out of me . . . I've got old, very thin, probably because I get upset with the girls at school . . .

(Act 2) I'm worn out. Our headmistress is ill and I'm deputising for her. My head, my head aches, my head . . . My head aches, my head . . . Andrei lost . . . the whole town's talking . . . I'll go and lie down . . . My head aches, my head . . .

(Act 3) How dreadful it is! I'm sick of it! . . . I'm tired, I can hardly stand on my feet . . . I shan't be headmistress . . . I'll refuse. I can't . . . I haven't the strength . . . Forgive me, I can't bear it . . . Everything went dark before my eyes . . . Maybe we were brought up strangely but I can't bear that sort of thing. An attitude like that oppresses me, it makes me ill . . . I simply give up . . . Any rudeness, even the slightest . . . upsets me . . . I've aged ten years tonight . . .

What is she up to? What's her objective? She's letting people know she's worn out and feels that she's aged. But why? The actor playing Olga will probably have to search harder than the actor playing Lopakhin needs to in his scene before she discovers what's motivating her character. Her actions are not connected with an obvious plot so much as with some internal needs of character that possibly even she herself isn't totally conscious of. There appears to be a gap between her need and others' seeming indifference. No one ever offers any response to these complaints of hers. What *does* she want? Attention? Sympathy? Love? To be noticed as an individual rather than as a schoolmistress?

The audience will not experience these expressions of pain and unhappiness as a serious revelation of a character in crisis *unless the actor transforms the character's portrayal of herself* (tired, prematurely aging, having a headache) *into actions that*

reach out for a response from the other characters, rather than merely demonstrating them as naturalistic character traits, illustrations of tiredness and so forth . . .

Some Technical Concerns about Actions

TYPES OF ACTION

There are two basic categories of action:

Physical (external) actions: e.g. *pushing, pulling, pointing, gesticulating, sighing, weeping, laughing, knitting, cooking . . .*

Psychological (internal) actions: e.g. *threatening, coaxing, praising, obeying, ordering, denying, reproaching, reassuring, clarifying, refusing, encouraging, confiding . . .*

ACTIONS, GRAMMAR AND SEMANTICS

Actions are defined by (mainly) active, transitive verbs. Some enterprising practitioners have brought out a dictionary of actions.* But some of the verbs listed there are not always *playable* actions. There are certain groups of verbs that can't function as actions.

1. *Verbs which imply result or achievement* such as: *seduce, persuade, convince, surprise, stimulate, frighten . . .* These express *an already completed action*, the successful result of other actions (such as *urge, coax, tempt . . .*) and are usually employed in the past tense e.g. *I persuaded him; I seduced her; I surprised them*. In the present tense they usually describe an attribute of a person e.g. *I persuade people to buy my products; he surprises people by his resourcefulness; she seduces young men on a regular basis; his presence frightens me . . .* These are not playable as actions. How can you persuade someone before they've actually been persuaded? In the process of *trying to persuade* someone, you can have no idea whether you'll succeed or not. Such verbs technically function as objectives (wants) – e.g. *I want – therefore I try – to persuade you* – which then invoke into play specific actions such as *suggest, beg, explain, flatter, coax, tempt, exhort, challenge . . .* Such actions as these, effectively executed, may eventually succeed in *persuading* someone.

2. *Verbs of emotion and relationship* such as *hate, love, regret, revere, suspect, doubt . . .* These are actually emotional states of being: *I love you, he hates her* are not actions; they're usually sustained over a long period of time. To become active they have to be specified as *I declare my love, reveal my hatred, share my dislike, offer my regret, express my admiration, accuse you of my suspicions, air my doubts* (in fact, what the character *is doing* with the emotion).

* *Actions – The Actors' Thesaurus* by Marina Caldarone and Maggie Lloyd-Williams.

3. *Verbs of secret intention* such as *lie, deceive, trick, mislead, confuse*. You cannot play *I lie to you, I confuse you*. (Again, these function as objectives: e.g. *I want to deceive him*.) You have to play the action that you're employing to effect the lie or deception. That is to say, *you play the action you want the other characters to 'see' and accept*. Instead of 'I pretend that I was at home last night', the action might be something like: *I inform you I was at home last night, I assure you I was at home last night, I give you proof . . ., I insist . . ., I confirm . . ., I repeat . . .*

4. Some purists are resistant to the use of prepositions with verbs, but it's perfectly acceptable to use such verbal phrases as 'sympathise *with*', 'confide *in*', 'run something *by*', 'defer *to*', 'retreat *from*', 'size *up*', 'laugh *at*' and so forth.

5. Even if the verb used is *not obviously transitive towards another person* (e.g. *conjecture, ponder, realise, conclude . . .*), it must always be played transitively, for the *benefit of* and *to* the other actor-characters in the scene. For example, Lopakhin, in the opening scene of *The Cherry Orchard*, *recalls* or *reminisces about* Ranyevskaya. Dunyasha, his partner in the scene, has no text specifically responding to his recollections. This sort of situation tends to encourage actors, wrongly, to treat such texts as soliloquies to be acted by and for themselves. But the actor playing Lopakhin must always play this action *for* Dunyasha. She's in the room with him, so he can't avoid that fact and merely talk to himself.*

LOPAKHIN AND DUNYASHA IN THE OPENING SCENE OF 'THE CHERRY ORCHARD'

LOPAKHIN Lyubov Andreyevna's been living abroad for five years. I've no idea what she's like now . . . She's a good person. Easy, simple. I remember, when I was a boy of about fifteen, my father – he had a store here in the village then – he punched me in the face and blood poured out of my nose. The two of us had come onto the estate for something or other and he was a bit drunk. Lyubov Andreyevna, I remember it like now, she was still a slender young girl, she brought me to the washstand here in this very room, the nursery. 'Don't cry, little peasant,' she says, 'it will be better in time for your wedding' . . . (Pause.) Little peasant . . . True, my father was a peasant, as for me, here I am in a white waistcoat and yellow shoes. A pig in a pastry shop. Only, I'm rich, lots of money, but however you look at it, a peasant's a peasant . . . (He thumbs through the book.) Here I was, reading this book and didn't understand a word. Tried reading and fell asleep.

DUNYASHA (after a pause). The dogs didn't sleep all night, they can feel their masters are coming.

* The scene between Konstantin and Sorin in the first act of *The Seagull*, in which Konstantin talks a lot and Sorin says very little, could similarly fall into this trap.

NOTES ON THIS SCENE

He could restate his action: *to share my memories of Ranyevskaya with Dunyasha*. But this might slightly overstate their relationship and encourage the actor to play the text in a too overly frontal way, rather than allowing his need for contact with her to be more subtly expressed.

This is an example of extremely delicate writing, where what Lopakhin wants from Dunyasha is not immediately obvious. As one grows familiar with the play, it becomes clear that he's extremely nervous about meeting Ranyevskaya after so many years. It clearly matters to him a lot. He has left his business affairs and made a train journey from Kharkov especially to welcome her home. He wants to be the one to give her the advice that will save her family estate from auction. Then he has to hurry to catch his train back. He is anxious to make a good impression on her, to be accepted by her, to have her appreciate how much he wants to reciprocate the kindness she showed him when his nose bled; at some level he probably wants to win her 'love'. He's unsure whether she'll recognise him. He's also very conscious that he still looks and behaves 'like a peasant', or so he thinks. He castigates himself for having already damaged her first impression of him by falling asleep and failing to go with the others to greet her at the station. Hence his anxiety.

Often, in a state of unease, we can find ourselves talking to complete strangers about the most personal matters. While waiting in a doctor's surgery, we may give the person next to us the most intimate details of the symptoms that are currently worrying us. We don't do this deliberately, consciously anticipating some solution from them. But at an intuitive level, we feel the need to unburden our anxieties for the sympathetic ears of another human being who might somehow reassure us that all will be well. I would suggest that something like this is happening to Lopakhin in this scene with Dunyasha. Possibly, at some submerged level, he feels he can unburden himself to Dunyasha because they're both peasants. His objective, unconsciously, is probably along the lines of: *to elicit something from her – sympathy, agreement, possibly reassurance that Ranyevskaya will still remember him and, still feel the same affectionate concern for him that she once demonstrated when he was a boy . . .*

But it would be precipitate to try to pin this down too early in rehearsal. Therefore you need an action that is true to the scene but doesn't force the actors to run before they can walk. *I recall or I reminisce* are perfectly sufficient, appropriate and accurate actions, so long as the actor plays them with an awareness of Dunyasha's presence; and so long as the actor playing Dunyasha responds to what he's saying. Eventually, between them, as they start to know their characters and understand the scene, they will

discover the subtler levels of actions and objectives underpinning it. But whatever Lopakhin is finally playing, he will nevertheless *always, at a 'surface' level, be reminiscing about or recalling an incident from his youth.*

I've gone into what might seem like excessive explanation about this brief moment in the play. But it's to emphasise the point that, *early in rehearsals, the best way into a text is to use the simplest, least interpretive action, rather than cluttering yourself with complicated guesswork that could well turn out to be inaccurate.*

I would advise actors and directors not to let any bullying constraints issued by the Action Police inhibit them from using an occasional intransitive verb, so long as they play it *to* and *for* their partners in the scene!

What and How: Discipline and Freedom

The *what* is clearly the text the playwright has created: the words for the characters to speak and the stage directions for them to carry out. *The what is the incontrovertible body of facts* about the characters, their world and the details of the plot. The characters in *The Seagull* are undoubtedly living during the last years of the nineteenth century in Czarist Russia. Konstantin definitely directs Nina in his play. She indisputably acts in it. He indubitably stops the performance when his mother loudly comments on it. He unarguably lays a dead seagull at Nina's feet. She irrefutably runs away to Moscow, has an affair with Trigorin and a child with him, who dies. Trigorin does go back to Arkadina. Nina does become an actress. Konstantin does have some short stories published under a pseudonym and he does shoot himself. So *what* the characters do and say are constant and unchanging, never to be altered or ignored.

The *how* is the manner in which the actors play their actions (and therefore how they play the text). *The how is open to change* and totally in the actors' domain. The variation in the playing of *hows* is predicated on what happens between the actors during any performance. From performance to performance (and rehearsal to rehearsal, of course) the *how* may alter, from the subtlest shift to the most radical change.

The *what* holds the actors in the scene, gives them a spine and eliminates tendencies towards caprice and arbitrariness. The *what* provides the *how* with the security of defined parameters within which the actors are free to explore possibilities, respond with spontaneity and allow their imaginations to take flight. *The what gives actors discipline and control; the how gives them creative freedom.*

Actions and Verbs

The *what* includes – to a less fixed degree – the choice of objectives and actions. In many cases, what they are is clear and indisputable, but their choice, nonetheless, will always be a matter of some interpretation. They are vulnerable to the imprecision of language and to an actor's subjective understanding of words. They are therefore open to a certain degree of variation.

Let's take the action *to admonish*. Is it radically different from the actions *to chide*, *rebuke*, *reprimand*, *tell off*, *haul over the coals*, *have on the carpet*, *reprehend*, *reprove*, *upbraid*? Does it also imply *blame*, *warn*, *reproach* . . . ? For all of us, a particular verb or verbal phrase may have some slight subtlety of implication that differentiates it from the others and makes it seem a more appropriate choice. But whatever the nuanced difference might be, we all understand at a non-verbal level the 'area' of the action that has to be played. To insist on an 'exact' choice of verb may render the actor totally head-bound. This is why, beyond a certain point, it's counterproductive for a director to be too prescriptive in defining the words of an action or objective. A word that excites the imagination of one person may be a very damp squib for another. You may want to *castigate* me, I may prefer to *chastise* or even *chasten* you. You may feel you can physically inhabit the word *rebuke* more imaginatively; I may find *admonish* more creatively stimulating.

Actions: To Plan or Not to Plan?

Are actions meant to be worked out in advance and firmly set – or not? As we will see when we come to the application of actions early in the rehearsal process, the actors can and do work out actions suggested by the text at their least interpretive – most factual – level. However, they never become locked into an idea of *how* they will be performed. The actions function as tendencies that are open to spontaneous variation or change depending on the way a scene develops during a performance. Such variations are influenced by where the actors find themselves emotionally in the heat of playing and, above all, by the need to deal with the responses of their partners, which will almost certainly vary from show to show. Most of the time, the initial actions, which should have become instinctively embedded in the actors' psyches and bodies, will stay reasonably close to the 'world' of their initial analysis (the 'worlds' say, of *admonishing* or *threatening* or *complaining* . . .). But the more the actors immerse themselves in the play and the more they discover about their material, they may well find that on occasions they shift to very different actions. If actors have a sudden flash of fresh insight into an action, they can then play it, secure in the knowledge that their partners are ready to respond to whatever they are offered. The important thing is that they do play an action.

Even if the early choice or interpretation of an action (the *what*) does remain, it's still open to be played in a wide range of expressive ways (the *how*). If I do choose to *admonish* you, I may do so with more or less aggression, more or less regret, more or less self-righteousness, more or less sympathy, more or less

impatience . . . I may admonish you staying firmly seated, I may move about restlessly or stand over you threateningly or face you challengingly, or I may take you by the arm and walk you about while I admonish you . . .

The analysis of actions helps to hold the actor in the *logic* of a scene (the *what* of discipline) while giving them a secure foundation from which they can develop, grow and change 'in the moment' of performance (the *how* of creative freedom).

RECAPITULATION OF ACTIONS

Theatre is the Art of Action – Action is the Art of the Actor

Actions are what the character does and what the actor plays. In fact, it is the only thing an actor can play. It provides the life and truth of the performance. Even before actors know anything much about their characters or the WORLD OF THE PLAY, they can still play, through actions, each situation with truth and intelligence to the best of their understanding. Gradually they will enrich these actions with their growing knowledge of the WORLD they're learning to inhabit through the process of rehearsals. So, when or if in doubt, the actor's security is in action. It is always there to hold the actor in the scene and to ensure a continuity of truthful contact with partners. By playing actions, actors make discoveries about a scene. *Without actions, the performance flies apart. Nothing happens between actors.* There is no event. We end up with demonstrations of acting, displays of emotion and mood and line-reading – nothing but generalisations and results.

Actions are *absorbent*, imbibing all the other elements of the play. (This I'll explain fully when we get to POINTS OF CONCENTRATION.) Whatever is needed – the revelation of character, the motivation of objectives, the influence of GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES – is contained within the playing of an action.

Theatre is the art of action because actions, played with truth and wit, ensure the fluency of the physical, emotional, intellectual and aesthetic life of the performance. Actions are central and essential to the craft of acting. They connect with every area of an actor's work: intention, contact, energy, tempo, rhythm, emotion, space, time, movement, gesture, vocal expression, story, plot, theme, characterisation . . . *Actions unite them all in a single resonant form of expression.*

Beats

An action can conceivably last the duration of a play (e.g. Oedipus's through-line *to discover the cause of the plague*). At this level, it is too generalised to be playable. It becomes more like a guide pointing the actor-character in the direction of more detailed actions; in fact, it really functions like an objective. Such actions break down into successively smaller, more digestible actions. These are called beats.*

A beat is an action at its most precise and unable to be broken down any further. A new beat occurs with every transition, with the slightest change of thought, and can be as short as an intake of breath or an exclamation. However, its criterion is not its length, but its *indivisibility*. *Beats are what actors actually play.* The concept of beats is to alert actors to be specific and consequently gives due weight to details of text that they may tend to ignore or dismiss as of little or no significance, such as Shakespearian 'O's, that are frequently thrown off without much thought or intention, when not totally ignored.

Let's say an actor plays the action: *to greet some friends*. This may have several components, such as *hailing them from the distance, showing surprise, exclaiming with delight, shaking hands, embracing, patting arms and shoulders, asking after their health, nodding with interest at their news* – and so on. These are beats. The larger action (*greeting friends*) is comprised of a lot of smaller actions (beats), all of which must be fully honoured.

As an example, here is a breakdown of beats from the opening dialogue of *The Seagull*. The slashes (/) represent transitions and therefore the start of a new beat. Note that punctuation is *not* necessarily a guide to defining beats. When breaking down a text into beats, you must ensure that each beat is *a complete thought or idea*.

BEATS IN THE OPENING SCENE OF 'THE SEAGULL'

MEDVEDENKO *Beat/Why are you always in black?*

MASHA *Beat/I'm in mourning for my life. B/I'm unhappy.*

MEDVEDENKO *B/But why? B/(Ponders.) B/I don't understand . . .*

B/You're healthy, B/your father's not rich, B/but he's comfortable.

B/My life's much harder than yours, B/I only get twenty-three roubles a month B/and then from that they take something for the pension fund, B/but I don't wear mourning.

* Beats should not be confused with Stanislavsky's *bits*. These are closer to units and are dealt with in Bella Merlin's excellent *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit*.

B/They sit down.

MASHA *B/It isn't a question of money. B/Even a pauper can be happy.*

MEDVEDENKO *B/In theory yes, B/but in practice it works out so: B/myself, B/my mother, B/two sisters B/and a little brother B/all on a salary of twenty-three roubles. B/People need to eat and drink? B/Need tea and sugar? B/Need tobacco? B/It's hard to make ends meet.*

When Actions Become Objectives: the Layering of Actions and Beats

The through-line – or main line-of-action – is the largest action in a play; a beat is the smallest. Between the two, there can exist simultaneous layers of actions, becoming more and more precise as they're successively broken down, until there are no further actions to be revealed. In this process, *each action that generates a more precise action automatically becomes the objective that motivates that action.* To play accurately, actors can break down scenes into detailed beats. To understand the idea of layered actions, let's analyse a short exchange between Konstantin and his uncle Sorin from Act One of *The Seagull*.

KONSTANTIN AND SORIN IN ACT ONE OF 'THE SEAGULL'

SORIN *Why is my sister out of sorts?*

KONSTANTIN *Why? Bored. Jealous. She's already against me, against the performance, against my play, because that novelist of hers might take a fancy to Nina. She knows nothing about my play but already she hates it.*

SORIN (*laughs*). *You're the one who's inventing things, really! . . .*

KONSTANTIN *She's put out that on this little stage Nina will be the one to have the success and not she. A psychological oddity – my mother. Undeniably talented, intelligent, capable of sobbing over a book, of reeling off all of Nekrassov by heart, of nursing the sick like an angel, but just try praising Duse in her presence. Oh-ho-ho! You must only praise her, write about her, rave, rant, go into raptures over her extraordinary performance in *Camille* or *The Haze of Life*, but here in the country she doesn't get these narcotics, so she's bored and bad-tempered, we are all her enemies, we are all to blame.*

ANALYSIS OF THE DIALOGUE FOR LAYERS OF ACTIONS
THAT BECOME OBJECTIVES

When Konstantin first enters, his *scene objective* is to ensure that everything is ready for the performance of his play. Consequently some of his *actions* are: *to get rid of the audience members (Masha and Medvedenko) who have arrived too early; to warn his stagehand, Yakov, to be back on time from his swim; to show off his unique stage setting to Sorin; to express his anxiety that Nina might not show up; to ensure all the special effects are ready . . . and so on.* When his uncle, Sorin, referring to his mother, the actress Arkadina, asks him: *Why is my sister out of sorts?*, this triggers a new action: *to prepare himself for – or steel himself against – his mother’s likely criticism of his play.* This action still remains within his overall scene objective: *to ensure that everything is ready for the performance* (which includes his own state of mind and anticipation of the audience’s reaction). It also generates his need to explain why she might criticise his play. So his action becomes: *to blame his mother’s jealousy as the cause of her criticism.* (He believes that his mother can’t bear anyone else to be involved in theatre, especially pretty young women like Nina.) In order to justify this attack on his mother, his action then becomes: *to itemise the reasons for her jealousy.* This action proliferates a sequence of specific actions – *beats* – that specify those reasons. These beats are the bottom line: they generate no further actions, and are *what the actor actually plays.* *Each preceding action has become the objective of the fresh action it generated.* The scene breaks down as follows:

BREAKDOWN OF KONSTANTIN’S ACTIONS–TURNED–OBJECTIVES

(SCENE OBJECTIVE:) I want to make sure that everything is ready for the performance of my play

so my *action* in this section of the scene is:

(therefore) *I prepare myself for my mother’s likely criticism of my play*
which becomes the *objective*:

I want to prepare myself for my mother’s likely criticism of my play
which generates the *action*:

(therefore) *I blame my mother’s likely criticism on her jealousy*
which becomes the *objective*:

I want to blame my mother’s likely criticism on her jealousy
which generates the *action*:

(therefore) *I justify my accusation by itemising the reasons for her jealousy*
which becomes the *objective*:

I want to justify my accusation by itemising the reasons for her jealousy
which breaks down into the following detailed actions – beats – that
specify the reasons for her jealousy:

*Beat 1/Why? B2/Bored. B3/Jealous. B4/She’s already against me, against
the performance, against my play, because that novelist of hers might take
a fancy to Nina. B5/She knows nothing about my play, B6/but already she
hates it. B7/She’s put out that on this little stage Nina will be the one to
have the success B8/and not she. B9/A psychological oddity – my mother.
B10/Uddeniably talented, B11/intelligent, B12/capable of sobbing over a
book, B13/of reeling off all of Nekrassov by heart, B14/of nursing the
sick like an angel, B15/but just try praising Duse in her presence.
B16/Oh–ho–ho! B17/You must only praise her, B18/write about her,
B19/rave, B20/rant, B21/go into raptures over her extraordinary
performance in *Camille* B22/or *The Haze of Life*, B23/but here in the
country she doesn’t get these narcotics, B24/so she’s bored B25/and bad-
tempered, B26/we are all her enemies, B27/we are all to blame.*

These beats cannot be broken down any further or smaller.

A PYRAMID OF ACTIONS

Each of these beats is informed by and carries the intentions of all the
layers of Actions–Turned–Objectives within which it is enscinded:

I (want to) ensure everything is ready for the play, therefore

I (want to) prepare myself for my mother’s likely criticism of
my play, therefore

I (want to) blame any such criticism on her jealousy,
therefore

I (want to) justify my accusation by itemising
the reasons for her jealousy, therefore

I play Beats 1 – 27.*

* Compare this with the section: A PYRAMID OF TITLES IN PREPARING THE TEXT.

NOTES ON THE BEATS

These 27 beats are indivisible. They are the bottom line. *They are what the actor plays*. Each beat is a new thought and played as a fresh and specific action.

When breaking down a text for beats, you must ensure that each beat is a *complete thought or idea*. For example: *B23/but here in the country she doesn't get these narcotics* cannot be split into two, because '*but here in the country*' on its own doesn't mean anything. A conditional sentence such as *If you do such-and-such, I'll do such-and-such* is one beat; because '*If you do such and such*' by itself has no meaning, it's an incomplete idea. You can recognise a beat by whether it makes sense played on its own.

However, in some cases, the beat that has gone before can support a *subsequent beat*, e.g. *B7/She's put out that on this little stage Nina will be the one to have the success* supports *B8/and not she*. And '*not she*' takes its full meaning from the previous beat. Or, in *B12/capable of sobbing over a book*, the word '*capable*' supports the sense of the two subsequent beats: *B13/of reeling off all of Nekrassov by heart*, and *B14/of nursing the sick like an angel*.

In many cases, actors have an interpretive choice as to how to break up some sequences. For example, *B21 & 22* could be played as one beat '*go into raptures over her extraordinary performance in Camille or The Haze of Life*'. If the actor lumps the titles of the two plays, *Camille* and *The Haze of Life*, together as one beat, that is a justifiable choice and maybe he could run them together dismissively. However, by splitting them into two, he has the possibility of getting extra mileage for his contempt for her sort of theatre by characterising each play with a different sort of mockery.

Konstantin could also play *Beats 10-14* and *Beats 17-22* as one beat each. But if so, he similarly loses the possibility of several different shifts of thought, variety of expressive colours and revelations of his own psychology. The more detailed the beats, the more vivid the performance. We, the audience, are being kept on the *qui vive*, continuously alerted to new information, continuously refreshed and surprised. A positive side effect of this attention to the specificity of beats is that *language becomes more vivid* without any self-conscious demonstration on the part of the actor.

IMPORTANT: Konstantin must play all these beats, actions and objectives *to and for Sorin* (he is the only other person in the scene).^{*} So, to state

* Refer back to the discussion of Lopakhin's scene with Dunyasha in FROM ACTION TO OBJECTIVE in the section on ACTIONS, in which one character has what is virtually a monologue, to which the other character makes very little response or none at all.

them absolutely accurately, we need to add some more words to his objectives, along the lines of: *I want you, Uncle, to agree with/sympathise with/support me* – in blaming my mother's jealousy as the reason for her likely criticism of my play.

This no doubt seems inordinately elaborate, but I want to stress that to be detailed, specific and truthful, the actor has to play accurately rather than approximately. *He does not necessarily have to think this process through or work it out intellectually*. It's usually sufficient for him to arouse in himself the intention: *I want to prepare for the performance* – or *I want to prepare myself for my mother's likely criticism* – in order to launch himself into a creative, active state in which he'll go through this process instinctively, possibly making some of the choices I've suggested here, in all likelihood making others of his own. But if he doesn't, he always has this structure and method of analysis to fall back on for guidance and support. Actors very easily become generalised, especially under emotional pressure.

Infinite Possibilities

The text will of course suggest some choices of action, but not necessarily all the possibilities. As I've said before and will no doubt repeat frequently, a line, a speech, a scene can be played in an infinity of ways. Finding a way to say a line of text is *not* the ultimate purpose of a performance; it is, *rather*, using that line of text to pursue the character's objectives through action. Their dialogue is just one tool (though probably the main one) used by characters to assist them in attempting to get what they want. *Planning or working out how to say a line is deadly*. *Using a line in order to pursue an objective is lively*. The *how* should happen instinctively in the moment.

And, as I've already said, even if an actor has 'decided' on an action, there is *not just one way* of playing it. Konstantin's action '*to blame*' can be played in many ways: the *how* of blaming has endless possibilities. He can blame his mother with reproach, with regret, sarcasm, defensiveness, resentment, defiance . . .

His *homs* will largely depend on the other actor in the scene – in this case, on Sorin and the way he reacts to Konstantin's need for his support. Sorin's actions and attitude to each beat will influence *how* Konstantin plays his next beat. It will depend on whether Sorin agrees with him, or tries to avoid being drawn into criticising his own sister, or tries to laugh off his accusations, or expresses his disapproval, or his embarrassment . . . and so forth. In short, the actor playing Konstantin responds specifically and spontaneously to what he's getting back from his partner.

So you can see how much potential mobility, flexibility and variation there is in the playing of the smallest moment; and, correspondingly, I hope you can see how artificial and how limited planned choices of *how* to play a moment or line must be.

Despite such close analysis, you are *never* instructing actors *how* they should play a beat. *You never ask for a result.* You use the concept of beats to point out (a) that they've missed a transition, or (b) that they're in danger of becoming generalised because of running several beats together, or (c) you're encouraging them to explore the smallest beats for greater variety and more detail, or (d) for the possibility of an apparently unimportant beat yielding unexpected dividends.

Obstacles

Obstacles stand in the way of the character's objectives. They are what characters have to overcome in order to gain their objectives. Consequently, obstacles create conflict, the lifeblood of drama. They come in three modes:

1. External Obstacles

First, the external obstacle: this comes from outside the action and is usually a matter of chance – an avalanche, earthquake, traffic jam, coincidence, war, fire, famine, drought . . . These are usually the material of melodrama or heavily plot-driven cinema. Sometimes the conduct of the Gods comes into this category if it appears unmotivated by anything other than caprice. Usually these obstacles are metaphorical and provide a context for other, more interesting personal conflicts.

2. Obstacles Created by Others

Second, the obstacle caused by other people: people who don't want to give you what you want, or want something from you that you don't want to give them. This is the central device of drama. Sometimes the conflict is overt such as that, say, between Stanley and Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* or that between Konstantin and Arkadina in *The Seagull*. Sometimes it is, initially, more hidden, such as the one between Hedda Gabler and Thea Elvsted or between Lopakhin and Ranyevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard*. In many cases, you could say that *one character's objective is another character's obstacle*.

3. Inner Obstacles

Third, the obstacle from a conflict *within* the character itself: this is the most sophisticated and complex for the actor. The obstacle can be a trait within the character – prejudice, selfishness, low self-esteem – that inhibits the pursuit of the very thing the character wants. The *counter-objective* exists totally in this category. Characters don't automatically proceed in a straight line towards what they

want. They can be pulled in other directions and do in fact pursue their *counter-objectives* in direct opposition to their *super-objectives*. Think how often in your own life, you fail to pursue something you really want because of some other need that takes you in the opposite direction. (You want the job but you also want to avoid rejection – so you don't go for the interview.) Characters are often unaware of their obstacles in this third category.

SOME OBSTACLES

Konstantin (*super-objective*: to win his mother's love and respect); *some obstacles*: his lack of confidence in himself; his lack of social skills; his inability to pursue a career/earn a living; the blindness of his need for his mother's love; his inability to understand her situation and her needs; his contempt for her sort of theatre; his rejection by Nina; his talent for self-dramatisation; the failure of his play; his emotional self-righteousness; his double jealousy of Trigorin; and his *counter-objective*: to prove himself a revolutionary writer . . .

Arkadina (*super-objective*: to receive the world's adulation); *some obstacles*: Nina's youth and freshness; her own fears of getting old, losing her looks and therefore the roles for which she is known, losing her career, losing her status, losing her lover; losing her money, being unsupported; the threat to her financial situation from her family's requests for money; her guilt at not dealing sympathetically and generously with her son and brother; Trigorin's interest in Nina; her boredom in the country; and her *counter-objective*: to hang on to what she has at all costs . . .

It is important that the *actor* recognises what the character's obstacles are, even if the *character* doesn't always register them consciously. An awareness of the obstacles will encourage the actors to play with greater variety. Each new obstacle should elicit a new sequence of actions from the character who faces it.

The Hierarchy of Actions and Objectives

A Text is a Score

A text is a score potentially composed of detailed OBJECTIVES, ACTIONS and BEATS that lie dormant awaiting the actor. The actor translates the language of dialogue and stage directions into the language of OBJECTIVES, ACTIONS and BEATS.

RECAPITULATION

The Super-Objective exists before – and continues beyond – the play. This is the character's main goal in life. It is character-driven and motivates ►

The Through-Line – the main objective that the character is pursuing through the specific circumstances of the play. This is plot-driven. It is also known as The Main Line of Action. It breaks down into ►

The Scene Objectives – what the character *wants* from situation to situation, scene to scene. The sum of these should constitute the through-line and help reveal the super-objective. They break down into – or more accurately *are* – the motivations for playing ►

The Actions – what the character *does* in order to achieve those objectives. These in their most detailed manifestation are ►

The Beats – the most precise actions. *These are what the actor actually plays.*

[*The Counter-Objective* exists on the same terms as the super-objective but is in conflict with it. This is an important drive in the character's life. This is also character-driven.]

[*The Obstacles* – whatever conflicts with an objective.]

EXAMPLES OF THE HIERARCHY OF OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS: LOPAKHIN IN 'THE CHERRY ORCHARD'

His Super-Objective: To be accepted (appreciated/loved) by Ranyevskaya and her world

His Counter-Objective: To get reparation/vengeance for the injustices done to his family who were serfs

His Through-Line: To help Ranyevskaya save the estate

His Adjusted Through-Line: To gain her forgiveness for buying the estate himself

SCENE FROM ACT ONE OF 'THE CHERRY ORCHARD'

LOPAKHIN I want to tell you something very pleasant, encouraging. (*Glances at his watch.*) I'm leaving now, no time to talk . . . So, in two or three words. As you know, your cherry orchard is up for sale to pay your debts, the auction's set for the twenty-second of August, but you needn't worry, my dear, sleep peacefully, there's a solution . . . Here's my plan. Please listen! Your estate is only fifteen miles from town, the railway runs nearby, and if the cherry orchard and land along the river were divided into summer lots and then leased out for summer villas, you'd have, at the very least, an annual income of twenty-five thousand roubles.

GAEV Excuse me, what nonsense!

RANYEVSKAYA I don't quite understand you, Yermolai Aleksyeyevitch.

LOPAKHIN From each summer visitor you can get at least twenty-five roubles annually per each two-and-a-half-acre lot, and if you announce it immediately, I guarantee you anything you like that, by autumn, you won't have a single piece of land left, everything will be taken. In one word, I congratulate you, you're saved. The location is wonderful, the river is deep. Just one thing, of course, it needs to be tidied up, cleared . . . let's say, for example, you tear down all the old buildings, this house here which has become worthless, and cut down the old cherry orchard . . .

RANYEVSKAYA Cut down? Forgive me, my dear, you don't understand a thing. If there's something interesting, even remarkable, in the entire Province, then it's our cherry orchard.

LOPAKHIN The only remarkable thing about the cherry orchard is that it's big. The cherries make an appearance only once every two years and then there's nothing to be done with them, nobody buys them.

GAEV This orchard is mentioned in the Encyclopaedia.

LOPAKHIN (*glancing at his watch*). If we don't come up with something, don't reach a decision, then on the twenty-second of August, the cherry orchard, as well as the entire estate, will be auctioned off. Take courage. Do it! There's no other way out, I swear to you. None, none.

FIRS In the old days, about forty – fifty years ago, they used to dry the cherries, soak them, pickle them and make them into jam, and they used to . . .

GAEV Keep quiet, Firs.

FIRS And they used to send the dried cherries by cartloads to Moscow and Kharkov. There was money then. And the cherries were soft, juicy, sweet, fragrant . . . Then they had a method of . . .

RANYEVSKAYA And where's that method now?

FIRS Forgotten. No one remembers.

S-PISHCHIK (*to Ranyevskaya*). What's happening in Paris? How are things? Did you eat frogs?

RANYEVSKAYA I ate crocodiles.

S-PISHCHIK Think of that . . .

LOPAKHIN Up to now, there have only been landowners and peasants in the country, but now summer residents are appearing. Every town, even the least big, is surrounded by summer villas. It's likely that in about twenty years, your summer residents will have multiplied enormously. Now he only drinks tea on his veranda, but soon he may take up cultivating his two-and-a-half acres and then your cherry orchard will become happy, rich, splendid . . .

GAEV (*exasperated*). What nonsense!

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SCENE

Lopakhin's *scene objective* in the above sequence:

To convince Ranyevskaya to sell off some of her estate and with the proceeds to build summer villas that will generate rents to pay off the family's debts.

His *obstacles* in this sequence:

His low self-esteem (he feels like a peasant in her company); uneducated, unrefined, not knowing how to behave or how to talk); his more profound awkwardness around her because of his buried feelings for her; Ranyevskaya's apparently faint recollection of him (as opposed to his vivid childhood memory of her – she's on stage for a good fifteen or twenty minutes without addressing a word to him though she has spoken to everyone else, including the servants);

he's the one who has to initiate a conversation with her); her inability even to conceive of his suggestions as viable solutions; his inability to understand her point of view; his embarrassment at the jokes and gossip about his non-existent 'engagement' to Varya; his busy schedule (he has a train to catch); the fact that he missed greeting her at the station because (like a peasant) he fell asleep . . .

His *actions* in this sequence:

(His first speech): *To promise her good news. To explain to her why he has to be succinct. To calm any anxiety she has. To remind her of the situation. To get her attention. To point out to her the suitability of the property for the transaction he has in mind. To encourage her by predicting the financial rewards of such a transaction.*

(His second speech): *To impress upon her the certain financial rewards. To urge her to act promptly for maximum success. To congratulate her. To praise/make her see the location's viability. To advise clearing the place up by tearing and cutting down whatever is no longer of any use.*

(His third speech): *To refute Ranyevskaya's unrealistic idea of the cherry orchard.*

(His fourth speech): *To warn her of the risk she takes by not making a decision. To urge her to be courageous. To insist there's no other way out for her. To reiterate this.*

(His fifth speech): *To describe to her the contemporary social situation. To inspire her with his vision of the future.*

His *beats* in his first two speeches are:

LOPAKHIN *Beat 1*/I want to tell you something very pleasant, *B2*/encouraging. *B3*/(*Glances at his watch.*) *B4*/ I'm leaving now, *B5*/no time to talk . . . *B6*/So, *B7*/in two or three words. *B8*/As you know, your cherry orchard is up for sale *B9*/to pay your debts, *B10*/the auction's set for the twenty-second of August, *B11*/but you needn't worry, my dear, *B12*/sleep peacefully, *B13*/there's a solution . . . *B14*/Here's my plan. *B15*/Please *B16*/listen! *B17*/Your estate is only fifteen miles from town, *B18*/the railway runs nearby, *B19*/and if the cherry orchard and land along the river were divided into summer lots and then leased out for summer villas, you'd have, at the very least, an annual income of twenty-five thousand roubles.

GAEV /Excuse me, /what nonsense!

RANYEVSKAYA /I don't quite understand you, Yermolai
Aleksyeyevitch.

LOPAKHIN B20/From each summer visitor you can get at least
twenty-five roubles annually per each two-and-a-half-acre lot,
B21/and if you announce it immediately, I guarantee you
anything you like that, by autumn, you won't have a single piece
of land left, B22/everything will be taken. B23/In one word,
I congratulate you, B24/you're saved. B25/The location is
wonderful, B26/ the river is deep. B27/Just one thing, B28/of
course, it needs to be tidied up, B29/cleared . . . B30/let's say, for
example, you tear down all the old buildings, B31/this house here
B32/which has become worthless, B33/and cut down the old
cherry orchard . . .

The point of this very detailed structure of actions and objectives is to give actors a practical, creative, open-ended technique to fall back. Should their instincts fail them anywhere within the process, instead of throwing their hands in the air and dumping everything in the director's lap, crying 'I don't know what I'm doing!' (not an infrequent *cri du coeur*), they can, by asking themselves enough questions, come up with provisional choices of actions to be tried and discarded until they arrive at an approach that seems appropriate for that part of the text that's causing them trouble.

Commitment to Actions and Objectives

Super-objectives and objectives are *not* just mental guides, they must also be fulfilled physically and sensuously. They need the total commitment and concentration of the actor. Actors who commit to embodying objectives and playing actions *lose all self-consciousness*. I stress again: they become *fully absorbed* in what they're doing and *therefore absorbing to the audience*. Without actions and objectives, there is only indicating, commenting, demonstrating, playing results and playing for effect, all of which add up to untruthful – therefore bad – acting.

Feel: Emotion

The Unactability of Emotion

Stanislavsky's search was to discover how an actor could produce truthful, spontaneous emotion in performance. When he began his exploration of acting, despite his admiration for such actors as Salvini and Rossi, he was, presumably, exposed to predominantly what we used to call ham actors – performers with grand gestures and even grander voices, demonstrating their emotionality with great *élan* but not much truth. To display themselves and their emotional expressiveness was the purpose of their craft. Nowadays, with more than a century of film and half-century of television behind us, we're unlikely to see acting so overtly fake. (However, I'd contend that there's still acting on display that is essentially doing the same thing, albeit by subtler and more sophisticated means.)*

The last chapter of Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares* is called 'On the Threshold of the Subconscious'. He understood that emotions cannot be summoned up to order. In our own lives, we have little control over how we feel. When we're depressed, we can't just 'snap out of it'; if we're angry, it takes time to calm down. How on earth, then, can an actor – truthfully – fall madly in love at 8.30, become overwhelmed with jealousy at 9.00, be filled with hatred at 9.30 and die of despair

* Naturalistic – as distinct from truthful – acting is a matter of fashion. We tend to confuse the two or see them as synonymous; understandably, because in contemporary naturalism we're seeing and hearing, superficially at least, behaviour, language, clothes and environments that mirror our own. But naturalism is as much a style as any other, and vulnerable to the manners of the moment. If you revisit the films of actors you admired in the past, you may be in for huge disappointments. James Dean, who seemed to be the last word in naturalism – truth itself – when I first saw him in *East of Eden*, looks, years later, immensely mannered, a compound of tics and self-conscious inarticulacy. Ironically, Raymond Massey, who next to him (he played his father) had then seemed rather stolid and dull, can now be seen to be playing in a more durable manner. Garbo, certainly compared to the actors around her, originally seemed 'real', full of imaginative psychological details and spontaneity. Now she is clearly playing in a rather *souffrante*, drooping manner, vocally in a minor key, very much within a Romantic convention. I once saw a brief clip of Duse, by then quite an old woman, but it was hard even to glimpse the naturalness that was so admired in her heyday and so extolled by Shaw. She seemed very stiff and restrained. I also saw Olga Knipper on film, again when she was old. She had been Chekhov's leading lady (as well as his mistress and wife) and had created the main women's roles in his four great plays. Here she was playing Ranyevskaya in scenes from *The Cherry Orchard*. She was very much the theatrical grande dame, discharging emotion with total lack of charm and no concern at all for her partners. Garrick? Siddons? Irving? Maybe we should be thankful we're spared glimpses of *them* on film. We can still imagine them in any way we choose. The criterion is not whether any acting is naturalistic, but whether it is truthful. Any style of acting can be truthful. It is a matter of transforming a truthful impulse into a particular form without losing the truth *en route*, and of believing in that reality (see: WORLDS).

at 10.15? Emotions aren't on tap like water, to be turned on and off at will. They have to be coaxed from the unconscious. He discovered that playing objectives and actions was a way to open up the psycho-physical channels through which they might *possibly* emerge.

Emotion in performance is a paradoxical matter, of considerable confusion to many practitioners. Acting is not about 'being emotional' and 'trying to feel'. It's about doing. Nevertheless, we expect actors to express true emotions, and when appropriate, strong and vivid ones. But an actor *cannot play* an emotion. Emotion, how and what we feel, is *an outcome*: the outcome either of succeeding or failing to get what we want. If actors pursue their objectives by playing appropriate actions honestly and openly, that's to say, trying genuinely to affect their partners and, in turn, allowing themselves to be affected by their partners' responses, then *feelings will quite naturally be aroused without any conscious effort*. In fact, throughout a performance, actors, by playing a continuous, seamless flow of actions, should consequently experience a seamless flow of feelings that shift and adapt to the ever-changing circumstance in which they're evoked. Our emotional state is never static, it's always adjusting in degree and quality and kind.

States of Pure Feeling

The only exception to the concept of being constantly in action may be those rare moments when we're suspended at the extreme peak or trough of an emotion whose intensity engulfs us to the exclusion of everything else: a moment, say, when we're overawed by the beauty of a view and can do nothing but experience that sensation; or we are stunned into shock by sudden bad news and remain immobilised, beyond tears or any sort of response. Those are states of pure feeling, momentarily beyond objectives and actions, into which nothing else can intrude.*

I once had the chance to revisit a Chinese theatre company I'd worked with some years earlier. I'd never expected the likelihood of seeing them again, and presumably they'd never expected me to reappear. They insisted on laying on one of those generous Chinese 'banquets' to mark the occasion. I sat at the table, surrounded by the warmth of people wanting to express their pleasure at seeing me again and by many hands pressing food onto my plate. For a moment, some sunlight lit up the rather shabby room where we were all squeezed together. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed by a sense of complete joy. I could still hear, distantly, the sound of everyone laughing and chattering around me but I felt that I had levitated out of myself and was suspended in time. I could do nothing else but give myself to the intensity of that feeling. I have no idea how long it lasted. Then it gently subsided. For the rest of the day and for some time afterwards, I went

around saying to myself, 'That was happiness! That was real happiness!' According to Dylan Evans, in his book, *Emotion*, I was experiencing what the Japanese call '*amae*', for which there is no equivalent word in English. It means something along the lines of 'comfort in another person's complete acceptance' – a sense of joy in belonging, of being wanted.

I would suggest that such intense and extreme moments, rare enough in life, are even less likely in a performance. However, such an occurrence is not beyond the realms of possibility. It's more likely to be so in the heat of rehearsal when the actors have none of the self-consciousness connected with performance. I heard Imelda Staunton, in an interview about her role as the eponymous amateur abortionist in the film, *Vera Drake*, discussing an improvisation when, totally unanticipated by her – neither as character, nor as actor – the police showed up at her home to arrest her. She described not being able to breathe, feeling that she was about to die. Presumably, and impressively, she totally believed herself within the circumstances of her role, and underwent such a state of pure emotion. Whether she could have responded to such a moment as intensely and freshly, performance after performance, had she been doing it on stage, I have no idea. Nevertheless, this condition of total belief is what actors should ideally be aspiring to at all times.

Emotional Recall: Pros and Cons

During my training in the States, we did exercises on emotional recall, the purpose of which was just that – to bring back a previously experienced state of intense feeling. I have the distinct image of us seated around the room, heads in hands, elbows on knees, straining to squeeze feelings out of ourselves as though we were all in the throes of acute constipation. Rather than trying to dredge up the feeling itself, we should have been trying imaginatively to recreate the physical circumstances of the situation containing the feeling we wished to recall. Feelings can be evoked by concrete, sensory memories: the sound of a ticking clock, the sight of rain running down a windowpane, the smell of freshly brewed coffee, the feeling of a rough woollen sweater, the taste of a madeleine, you know, that sort of thing . . . I'm sure everyone, in an intensely emotional moment in their life, has experienced the sensation of time seeming to slow to a halt and their senses becoming fixated on some such available sensory image. Clearly, these moments penetrate deep into our psyches and lie there doggo, forgotten, until particular circumstances provide the necessary trigger that cause them to resurface to our consciousness. I was once driving along a street in London when I suddenly felt a surge of the sort of excitement that is aroused when you're looking forward to an especially pleasurable event. I was so surprised by this that I tried to figure out what on earth could have caused such an access of feeling on an ordinary day with nothing especially pleasurable ahead of me. I eventually narrowed down the cause to the combination of the grinding sound of double-decker buses revving up and

* Even in these cases, it could be said that we still commit some sort of action, albeit one beyond our conscious control: in the first example we *surrender ourselves* to the beauty of the moment; in the second, we *numb ourselves* against pain.

the sunlit sight of a 1930s block of flats evoking the excited anticipation I used to feel as a very young child when I was brought up to London for a day's treat. (No doubt to see a film starring Carmen Miranda.)

Exercises for emotional recall can be helpful for acting students as a way of stretching their emotional muscles. But now, for several reasons, I find them, even accurately executed, unhelpful in working on a performance. They evoke feelings connected to a specific personal experience that may only be remotely analogous to the emotional context of a particular scene. Therefore this work is not only emotionally inappropriate for the scene in question, it also involves the actors in imagining circumstances unconnected with the **WORLD OF THE PLAY**. It further implies that the actors are anticipating *how* they think they should feel in the scene and have automatically closed off the chance of allowing something more specific and spontaneously true to emerge in the moment. You really cannot slide the emotions from one experience across to another, even seemingly similar, situation. A particular state of emotion is never identically repeatable.

Emotionalism

Emotionalism occurs when actors are busy showing you how emotional they can be; no doubt at times very effective and impressive to the easily impressed, as those ham actors must have been in their heyday. It is, self-indulgently, more about the actor than the role. Some actors produce tears very easily and will do so at the drop of a hat. Demonstrating emotional availability is not the business of acting. Emotional availability should be placed at the service of expressively pursuing appropriate actions and objectives.

You cannot force emotions to appear. Some actors, however, insist on trying to do just that. If you observe tendons standing out on an actor's neck, tightness in the head and shoulders, stiff gestures, an increasingly red face, a choked or squeezed voice, shortness of breath or no breath at all – symptoms that have no recognisable connection with any emotion, and only communicate tension (rather than the desired intensity) – you're watching a bad actor, or, at least, a desperate, misguided one.

Block v. Flow

Some actors, mistakenly, try to play scenes in emotional blocks: 'This is my "angry" scene', 'This is my "sad" scene', and the like. What they achieve is a generalised display of how they think an emotion should look. Being unnatural, this is frequently accompanied by signs of strain. Unfortunately, these false expressions of emotion – or, more accurately, these expressions of false emotion – are often accepted by audiences as (a convention for) the real thing. You see a lot of such effort and tension in performances of Shakespeare where the actors realise the emotional stakes are vertiginously high but aren't in the creative state to reach them organically. Certainly, every *Lear* storm scene I've ever seen has

ended up as an exercise in rant – strained, generalised and incoherent. The frequent reason for this is that the actors are more preoccupied – or daunted – by the emotional peak they're psyching themselves up to scale, rather than trusting that the sequence of beats contained in the scene, played specifically, would release an organic flow of feelings to accompany them on their upward climb. However intense an emotion, it's never static, but constantly shifting in quality and degree.

Release v. Restraint

In most states of high emotion, we are released. So released, in fact, that many emotional states are accompanied by the release of bodily fluids from several possible orifices. There's no strain in losing your temper, bursting into tears, cursing the Gods or laughing ecstatically. They may be highly energetic and full of intensity, but they are not executed through tension.* They are in fact necessary *releases*. Our problem is that culturally we're so used to restraining our emotions, that *we confuse the constriction with the release*. To some degree, some of us (the British) are still influenced by that Victorian legacy that decreed displays of emotion to be an embarrassingly vulgar loss of control we should never impose on others. Displays of emotion(alism) in nineteenth-century theatre were formulaic, codified and therefore contained within some sort of aesthetic decorum. They were never messy or ugly – or real.

I think that nowadays it's particularly difficult for actors who live in potentially violent, crowded cities easily to release themselves. As we move around the streets, we tend – women especially and understandably – to give away little that might draw unwanted attention to us. In the Tube, we sit facing each other like zombies. Whatever we're feeling and thinking, we keep our face muscles firmly under control.** How anxious we are in case the 'nutter' talking to himself in the corner might come and sit next to us! We've taught our bodies to disconnect the expression from the emotion. And then, in rehearsal, actors are expected to reverse this emotional vasectomy and maintain themselves in a continuous flow of expressiveness, to release those muscles they've learned to keep firmly gripped, to relearn what was once a natural process. It's of no help for actors to reply, as they often do when I complain that I can't see anything happening, 'Well, I *was feeling* it.' Audiences aren't clairvoyants, and it's only through our behaviour (what is expressed by our bodies – which includes our faces and our voices) that we can be 'read'.

* Intensity good; tension bad. The one is vital to theatre; the other destructive.

** This situation may be exacerbated by the fact that the bulk of most actors' employment is now in television where actors, more used to working on stage, are often exhorted not to 'act', not to 'do' anything, not to 'show' anything!

Generalised Emotion and Emotional Clichés

A theatregoing friend I hadn't seen for some while announced that he now only goes to opera (!) and film. 'Theatre?' he replied to my inquiry, 'Who wants to see those same old emotions being trotted out again and again?' His remark initially left me feeling rather defensive; then deflated, for I had to acknowledge the justness of his comment. Actors, for a large part, don't observe life, they take their observations from theatre or film or – younger actors nowadays – from television soaps; their performances are based on other performances, twice or more times removed from actuality. For actors unwilling to observe 'real' people or to get in touch with their own behaviour, a repertoire of well-wrought emotional clichés stands in for the real thing and these are unfortunately accepted by many audiences as such. Displays of emotion are reduced to expressions almost as formalised as those codified in the nineteenth century by François Delsarte in his system of gestures: the choked-back tears with twitching cheek muscles while staring into the middle distance (incipient distress), the smooth, tight-lipped smile (incipient violence) . . . The complexity and variety of human expressiveness is reduced to a few handy, recognisable signs. The actors are not in the creative state to allow spontaneous emotion to be released, so they resort to what is most readily available: what they've done before and what they've seen other actors do in similar circumstances. Of course, these forms of emotional expression do – or once did have – a basis in reality. And if they're executed with commitment, they will elicit some residue of the feeling that initially caused them. This is because our somatic and psychic experiences are totally interconnected (i.e. movement can induce feeling just as much as feeling can induce movement – more on this later). But they're now being mass-produced, coming off the assembly line rather than being handcrafted. And even if such forms of expression do evoke some sensation of genuine feeling in the actor, they have been imposed *on* the scene rather than discovered *in* the scene at the moment of playing. This accounts for the lack of freshness, that clichéd quality which so bores my friend with its wearying sense of *déjà vu*.

Misguided (and misguiding) directors instruct actors with unspecific adjectival requests to *be* angry or sad, less frenzied or more suspicious. But what degree of anger exactly? What sort of sadness? What exactly is frenzy? In what way suspicious? Generalised directing gets generalised acting.* Better to change such loose

* A lot of acting in Shakespeare is generalised, often because the actors don't really understand what they are saying in any depth or detail; and if you don't understand what you're talking about, it's almost impossible to be specific in your intentions or feelings. Peter Brook, in *The Empty Space*, brilliantly pinpointed this:

Of course, nowhere does the Deadly Theatre install itself so securely, so comfortably, so slyly as in the works of William Shakespeare. The Deadly Theatre takes easily to Shakespeare. We see his plays done by good actors in what seems the proper way – they look lively and colourful, there is music and everyone is all dressed up, just as they are

demands for emotional states into suggestions for playable actions, such as: 'threaten him with a punch on the nose if he does it again'; 'get her to sympathise with your feeling of loss'; 'try to pull yourself together so you can communicate more clearly'; 'check out his story thoroughly'.

If actors aren't having a good night, straining to reach some required or imagined emotional state only moves them further out of touch with themselves. In a sense, there's no point in actors worrying about emotion. It will either be there or it won't. All actors can do is to pursue their objectives and carry out their actions truthfully to the best of their abilities, focusing on good contact with their partners, and allowing whatever feelings that do emerge *to* emerge without censorship or inhibition – and in whatever form they take.

Accepted Emotional Truth and Experienced Emotional Truth

I heard an actor in a radio interview, eager to demystify the process of acting, referring to David Mamet writing in *Truth and False* that the actor's job is to stand in the right place, say the lines and tell the truth. She threw off the quote as though it were a matter of obvious common sense, some support for a no-nonsense approach to acting. Yes, it's easy enough to stand in the right place and say the lines, but the problem is the bit about telling the truth. If telling the truth on stage were so easy, I with a million others would be packing the theatres every hour of every day that God gives us. And I wouldn't feel compelled to fill so many pages in an attempt to offer possible ways in which actors might work towards some expression of it. I repeat: what is accepted as the real thing – truthful acting – is mainly a collection of well-executed formulas.

But we do know the real thing when it happens. Truly truthful acting makes us sit up and pay attention; truthful acting turns us hot and cold, makes us sweat, makes us blush, makes us gasp, makes our stomachs churn, makes us hold our breath, makes us laugh with joy, gives us a sudden, intense sense of breathing sharp clean air, of being thrillingly alive and in touch with our humanity. And how often do we experience such sensations in the theatre?

supposed to be in the best of classical theatres. *Yet secretly we find it excruciatingly boring* – and in our hearts we blame Shakespeare, or theatre as such, or even ourselves. To make matters worse, there is always a deadly spectator, who for special reasons enjoys a lack of intensity and even a lack of entertainment, such as the scholar who emerges from routine performances of the classics smiling because nothing has distracted him from trying over and confirming his pet theories to himself . . . Unfortunately, he lends the weight of his authority to dullness and so the Deadly Theatre goes on its way. (*My emphasis.*)

Unfortunately, some critics seem to have learned nothing from this celebrated book, and are still unable to distinguish between what's dead and what's alive.

Emotion and Culture

In the extremes of primal emotion – those that transcend cultural values (fear, for instance, surprise, anger, disgust . . .), all human beings behave – that is, our bodies function – in exactly the same, autonomic way. In anger, for example, the blood rushes to our heads and our foreheads jut forward. When we're afraid, we recoil, bending at the waist in an attempt to make ourselves smaller, protecting with one arm the vulnerable areas of our bodies, at the same time thrusting out the other to ward off the source of the threat. I've worked a lot on melodrama, one condition of which is that the characters make no effort to hide what they're feeling, but totally give in to the expression of their emotions at their fullest and most intense. Investigating this genre, we found ways for the actors to exercise so that eventually the expression of emotions that we normally experience only in situations of extreme intensity became truthful and natural for them. (I take melodrama seriously.) In exploring the extremes of big emotions, all the actors' bodies would tend to move in basically the same way for a particular state. So it was possible to define very accurately the physical tendencies of various peaks or depths of emotion. (One interesting aside from this work was the striking visibility of the armpit!)

All human beings have the capacity to experience the same feelings. (How else could we identify with characters from the past or in foreign plays or novels – or even real people! – when their circumstances and values are so different from ours?) It may seem that people of one culture experience certain feelings more intensely than those of another, or even experience emotions exclusive to themselves. This is not the case. This perception occurs because an emotion and the expression of that emotion are not synonymous. *Culture dictates what values we put on particular feelings* – those that we admire, those we disapprove of; those we are encouraged to display, those we are expected to hide. Depending on when or where we were brought up, we have, or would have had, very different attitudes towards loud lamentations at funerals, stiff upper lips, weeping men, honour killings and suicide caused by social disgrace. Dare we assume that the woman who withholds tears at her child's funeral feels any less grief than the mother who throws herself weeping on the coffin of hers? These are entirely matters of cultural indoctrination, absorbed from birth.* Let me refer back to my experience of

* Steven Pinker, in *The Blank Slate*, gives the example of the Ifaluk people (a Micronesian culture) that apparently have no word for or concept of our *anger*, but experience what they call *song*: 'a state of dudgeon triggered by a moral infraction such as breaking a taboo or acting in a cocky manner. It licenses one to shun, frown at, threaten, or gossip about the offender, though not to attack him physically.' In simple terms, it indicates that culturally, we take offence at different things. Whatever we call it, the fundamental mental-emotional mechanism is the same. In *How the Mind Works*, he makes a similar point, this time referring to Darwin's research for *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, in which Darwin writes: 'The same state of mind is expressed throughout the World with remarkable uniformity . . . evidence of the close similarity in bodily structure and mental disposition of all the races of mankind.'

amae in China: Dylan Evans conjectures that the reason that the Japanese have a single word for an emotion that requires several words to identify it in English (joy in a sense of belonging, being valued and accepted) is because of the difference in cultural attitudes to the group and the individual, the Japanese being far more concerned to fit in with their community than English individualists. *But anyone can experience the emotion*. In my lifetime, attitudes to guilt, shame or sexual openness have changed totally – they now barely cause a tremor: politicians brazenly deny obvious lies when once they would have blushed deeply at being caught using the wrong knife! Now the demand for sexual ubiquity requires Jane Austen's lovers to appear in wet clothes to reassure a present-day audience that they do have sex organs.*

So: we can distinguish between primal feelings of such intensity that transcend cultural conditioning and in which we all behave alike, and those feelings that have been culturally structured to express themselves according to the values and rules of that society. This means that actors working on material both foreign and from the past, should, as part of their research and transformation, train their psychophysiological systems to learn new behaviour patterns and responses, much as I've indicated in my remarks on melodrama. This work requires serious rehearsal time (see: TECHNIQUES TOWARDS CHARACTERISATION in the REHEARSAL process).

Emotion and Body

There are two fundamental approaches to acting: working from the inside-out, in which the inner life (thoughts, feelings, objectives) influences the outer life (physical behaviour); or vice versa, outside-in, when the state of the body can induce feelings and thoughts. When I was training in the States, the Actors Studio and the Method were at their height, and I was totally indoctrinated into the former approach. Both are valid, of course, and actors with a healthy mix of the two at their disposal will find themselves with more options and greater flexibility. No point in becoming doctrinaire one way or the other about this. But over the years, I've come to believe that, for certain situations, there is far greater efficacy in using the body to get in touch with inner experience. Any movement we make, the smallest gesture, evokes some feeling, autonomically connected with it. Often, by committing yourself totally to a physical action, you will make a more direct and natural contact with your need, thoughts and feelings than by trying to think or 'feel' your way into them. There are various techniques (many devised by Michael Chekhov) that help actors to embody their super-objectives

* There is a discouraging contemporary inability or unwillingness to identify with anything that isn't 'just like us', a total collective failure of imagination that, more and more, forces characters from period plays into modern dress, for fear that the audience won't otherwise recognise them as human beings. A way of trying to attract disaffected youth into the theatre is to give them more of what they already experience. This strikes me as patronising and reductive.

and their emotional life. I describe some of these approaches in both the CHARACTER and WORLD OF THE PLAY strands of the REHEARSAL process.

Our bodies' cross-culturally shared expression of certain prime emotions is proof of the holistic interconnection between our physical and emotional lives. Particular physical patterns become unconsciously connected with particular feelings. If we recreate those physical patterns, they reactivate those feelings. In this way, we can either engage or limit particular feelings and attitudes. For example, if you collapse your chest, you'll be unable to express aggression or self-assertion; if you stick it out (a predominantly male assumption of cool to keep uninvited intimacy at bay), you'll find it difficult to make contact with anyone or, interestingly, to take in what is being said to you (it creates a sort of tension in the ears). Examining such examples, we are practising reverse engineering, working backwards from our physical state to discover the feelings – and therefore motives – that produced it. Originally, of course, the inner life initiated the external behaviour. People who want to keep a low profile, will instinctively take up as little space as possible ('I'm not really here'). Feeling socially inadequate or insecure, depressed or worried, they aren't likely to display much physical assertion. Collapsing the chest is one way of achieving this. They are not consciously doing this; the body instinctively knows to put itself into this state. Similarly, someone who tries to avoid unwanted familiarity will, by pushing out the chest, signal to others to keep their distance. This is a pseudo-aggressive stance, not actually threatening but pretending to be: by pushing the chest forward, the head automatically gets pulled back, indicating an unwillingness to engage. The chest is saying 'Keep away', the head, 'I don't want to get involved with you'. (Quite different from the menace of a jutting forehead.)

Every gesture contains within it some previously learnt experience. Our emotions are not abstractions floating about in the ether, they are actually in our bodies. Many repressed feelings are locked in our muscles. Once, in rehearsal, during a Feldenkrais movement class,* two actresses who were lying on their backs with legs bent and knees up like the rest of the company, burst into tears after carrying out the instruction to open and release their thighs. What had those thigh muscles been holding that was being released along with their thighs? Skilled Alexander teachers can relate the frequent occasions on which the apparently simple placing of a hand on a particular muscle of the person they're teaching can cause extraordinarily vivid releases – of tears, laughter, trembling, sighs, euphoria.

I did an adaptation of James Elroy's novel, *The Black Dahlia*, an especially violent thriller which demanded huge reserves of stamina and energy from the actors. To this end, the company did daily circuit training, increasing the number of circuits

* Moshe Feldenkrais was a Russian-born Israeli who developed a system of movement based on the development of detailed self-awareness of how one habitually uses one's body, taking nothing for granted, e.g. where do you place your feet when you sit in a chair, forward or under you, how wide apart and so forth . . . and what difference does that make for you . . . ?

and the duration of each station every few days. At the end of these sessions, the actors' eyes were vibrantly alive, their skins clear and they themselves unusually present – the energy and power vibrating from them was tangible. Sometimes, at this point, instead of letting them rush off to have a pee, drink water and wipe away the sweat, I would send them straight back into a scene. They were so released, so free, that their emotional life was totally available. Strong feelings poured naturally from them without a trace of strain or tension. Acting suddenly seemed so easy! Everyone got very excited about the possibility of doing circuits as a pre-show warm-up once we started touring. Unfortunately, this idea faded: the practicalities of pre-show preparation got in the way and the actors lost the habit – and the addiction! I had to observe rather sadly that their performances, however excellent, never quite matched the electricity and release of those rehearsal sessions. It also suggests that great performances require the most extraordinary combination of high energy and total release (not a hint of reserve, caution or inhibition) that is beyond the reality of most performance conditions. But the point I'm making here is the extraordinarily thrilling impact the actors' physical life had on their emotional life.

Two Levels of Emotion

From this, we can see that there is the theatrical possibility of recreating feelings by working backwards, as it were, from our bodies. This might seem totally to contradict my earlier premise that emotion is a result of thwarted or successful objectives that can only be achieved through spontaneous, unplanned playing of actions. *However, there are two quite different levels of emotional experience.* We must distinguish between *short-term* and *long-term* feelings.

From our individual natures and nurture, we each have tendencies to favour particular states of mood or feeling; we have some dominant emotional basis from which we function. Someone obsessive and anally retentive, for example, will spend a large percentage of their life in a state of *angst*, worried, uneasy, fussing over apparent trivialities. Someone who sees themselves as a victim will much of their time live in a state of distrust, suspicion, both hostile and defensive, oversensitive to anything that could be interpreted as a sneer or a smear. These are *long-term* states, deeply absorbed within the person's psyche. Let us assume that actors playing characters with such tendencies personally inhabit quite different emotional worlds from their creations. If they proceed to play 'from themselves', rather than adapting their inner life to that of their characters, the resulting moment-to-moment choices will always be skewed, always slightly 'off'. In the long term, through their careers, such actors will seem to be playing, again and again, the same part from the same emotional base (always playing 'themselves'), whatever the role. But if they can change the tendency of their inner emotional states to what they understand is more appropriate for the characters they're creating, they will be more likely to suit the demands of the play (rather than

making the play suit them). One way of achieving this change is by working from your experience of other people, from your study of the outward manifestations of their inward states. By close observation and then accurate assumption of the physical life that organically releases such feelings, actors can provide themselves with an emotional basis with which they engage in the actions of the play. Acquiring a pattern of physical behaviour will help to put the actor into a suitable area of feelings, and with them, thoughts, values and attitudes, that is the character's long-term habitation. There are many techniques for doing this that I describe as part of the rehearsal process (see: CHARACTER; WORLD OF THE PLAY).^{*} *With time, actors absorb this physicality as naturally as their lines; it becomes an organic function of their performance. They 'live' in character.*

But there are emotions aroused by specific circumstances from moment to moment, encounter to encounter, that are very much the outcome of objectives and actions, and that cannot be prepared for by physical behaviour. These circumstantial or situational moments play spontaneously off the ground bass of the prevailing emotional tendencies of the character. I've quoted at some length the Act 3 scene from *The Seagull* in which Arkadina refuses to release her lover, Trigorin. If you can imagine Arkadina, not as the self-absorbed, energetic, demanding woman she is, but as someone wise and thoughtful, the scene would be played from a very different emotional basis and the moment-to-moment playing of the scene would consequently be totally dissimilar. *Even though, in both cases, the actions and the emotions created by the situation would be more or less the same, their expression would be completely different.* The way someone wise and thoughtful deals with their jealousy is quite unlike that of someone impulsive and selfish. This reiterates *exactly* one reason why emotional recall or pre-planned emotion – dredged up from the actor's personal experience and injected into a scene – is useless. The emotional ground bass of the actor is not the same as that of the character, therefore the experience and expression of the same emotion will be totally different.

We can see how the two levels of emotional experience interact: the spontaneous, immediate emotional states which arise because of the moment-to-moment circumstances are informed by the broader, more general emotional tendencies of character.

Categories of Feeling

Probably this is a good place to make a small semantic point. We are always in some state of feeling. Emotions and moods are two opposing ends of a continuum in the general category of feelings. Emotions are usually passions (rage, joy, despair) or very strong feelings (anxiety, resentment); moods are more sustained

^{*} This approach also applies to states of feeling that characters might be prone to fall into under certain influences, such as music, or the change of seasons; these tend to be moods rather than big emotions – sadness, restlessness, Weltschmerz, nostalgia, contentment and so on.

states towards the lighter end of the emotional scale (contentment, restlessness, nostalgia, sadness). And then we use the word feeling for more low-level experiences: we feel tired, amused, perplexed . . . Of course, these cannot be absolute categories. Different states blur into each other. I can slide from a mood of pleasant weariness to a state of profound tiredness and from that to wanting to weep from exhaustion. There is no precise moment when we can claim someone moved from intense irritation to anger and from anger to rage any more than we can say exactly on which day someone became bald. *We are constantly in process, in flow, not in a sequence of strung-together results.*

Characters' Feeling v. Audiences' Feelings

Some actors play the emotion that the audience are likely to feel. They are responding *to* the scene, rather than participating *in* it – a very different matter. The audience should be moved differently from the characters. Actors who make such choices tend to play sentimentally. They are also doing the audience's job for them.

Emotion Inside Rehearsal but Outside the Text

Acting is an emotional business. A good actor is constantly vulnerable. In the pressure of rehearsal, a lot of feelings, with little or nothing to do with the content of the work, but *because* of the work, can come to the fore. At times, the rehearsal room has to be a safe place where an actor can release pent-up emotion. It can be healthy as long as it doesn't become a self-indulgence. A sensitive director should make space for such occurrences, neither indulgent – which only encourages more of the same – nor going into a state of denial – which leaves matters unresolved for everyone. In Canada, I once worked with an actor who seized every opportunity to become hysterical and had continuously to be calmed down by the rest of the company. It was all exciting stuff, but did nothing for her performance. God knows what she thought acting is for! Acting is certainly not a branch of therapy unless you're deliberately participating in forms of psycho-drama.

Mask v. Face

There has been a continuous debate down the centuries as to whether an actor should experience emotions or simulate them, whether to present the Face or a Mask. The degree of simulation ranges from a totally externalised sequence of expressions (what we might call posturing and face-making) to our contemporary, more subtle emulation. Denis Diderot's eighteenth-century *The Paradox of Acting* is all for Mask; William Archer's late nineteenth-century refutation, *Masks or Faces?*, is all for Face. Shaw's comparison of Duse and Bernhardt that I've already referred to, exemplifies the debate. He goes into great detail about their comparative performances and ends with a description of Duse blushing:

She began to blush; and in another moment she was conscious of it, and the blush was slowly spreading and deepening until, after a few vain efforts to avert her face . . . she hid her face in her hands. After that feat of acting I did not need to be told why Duse does not paint an inch thick, I could detect no trick in it: it seemed to me a perfectly genuine effect of the dramatic imagination . . . I must confess to an intense personal curiosity as to whether it always comes spontaneously.

He comes down clearly on the side of the Face. And so, you may have gathered, do I!

Given Circumstances

A scene does not only comprise its structure of objectives and actions and the dialogue employed in their execution. There is also the context within which those actions and objectives are played out. This context is created by given circumstances.

Given circumstances are any facts, events and conditions that influence the situation taking place. They can range from the environmental (time of day, weather, season, location . . .) to the cultural (period, ethnicity, social structure, social conduct, politics, religion, fashion, entertainment . . .) and through to the personal and historical (what has happened in the past, what might be about to happen, daily routines, relationships, careers, celebrations, arrivals and departures . . .). In *The Cherry Orchard*, they range from the Emancipation of the Serfs to the sweets in Gaev's pocket. Writers choose the time and place of their plays for good reasons. Why does *The Cherry Orchard* begin in the small hours of a cold May morning? Why does the last act of *The Three Sisters* take place out of doors in October? Why does *A Doll's House* take place at Christmas? These conditions are established to influence the characters in some pertinent way (for us to discover) or to throw more light on them.

The plays of Ibsen and Chekhov, particularly, are dense with given circumstances, those of Shakespeare, surprisingly light. In Ibsen there are usually two actions unrolling simultaneously – what has happened in the past and what's unravelling in the present. What's happened in the past is a given circumstance for what is happening in the present. In *A Doll's House*, for example, Nora's forgery of her father's signature to raise money for her husband's health impinges on her behaviour in the present. When Krogstad threatens to tell her husband the truth, that threat becomes an all-engulfing given circumstance for Nora. That the play takes place at Christmas isn't only an irony for the audience, it's another given circumstance that must affect the characters' actions: the conjunction of a time of

festivity and the threat of exposure puts Nora under pressure that manifests itself, for example, in the hysteria of her tarantella rehearsal.

All given circumstances will affect *how* the actors play their objectives and actions. (For the way in which given circumstances are actually absorbed by the actors into the body of their performances, see POINTS OF CONCENTRATION in REHEARSAL TEXT WORK.)

Note that given circumstances are *factual* and have nothing to do with value judgements (nice, nasty, clever, stupid . . .) or adjectival, emotional descriptions (suspicious, romantic, shy, daring . . .). Such opinions are subjective and generalised.

Feelings as Given Circumstances

The emotions evoked in one scene become part of the given circumstances that affect how an actor plays the following scene. There's an immensely satisfying short sequence in the second act of *The Three Sisters* when Vershinin is called away because of some problem with his wife. Masha's frustration at losing his company is turned into anger against Anfisa when the old nurse starts fussing about Vershinin not drinking his tea before he left. Anfisa, in turn, takes out her grievance against Masha's anger by shouting at Andrey through the closed door of his room. A flow of feelings accompanies the actor-characters on their journey through the play, the feelings aroused at one moment affecting how the actions will be played in the next.

Examples of Given Circumstances

THE FIRST ACT OF 'THE CHERRY ORCHARD'

Here are some of the main given circumstances that apply to *all* the characters in the first act of *The Cherry Orchard*:

1. It is about 3 a.m. on a morning in May.
2. It is cold outside, but warm indoors.
3. The cherry orchard is in bloom.
4. The action takes place in the nursery.
5. Ranyevskaya is returning home, penniless, to her estate after five years in France.
6. She left home after the death of her husband and then the death by drowning of her little son, Grisha, both of which occurred during the period in which she was having an affair.

7. She has been living with her lover, who has pursued her, first to Monaco where she had to nurse him through an illness, then to Paris where he took all her money and abandoned her.
8. She left her daughter, Anya, who was then twelve, on the estate for those five years, during which she hasn't seen her.
9. Anya with her governess, Charlotta, has travelled to Paris to bring her destitute mother home.
10. The three of them, plus Yasha, a former peasant from the estate who went to Paris with Ranyevskaya and is now her valet, have been travelling back by train for three sleepless days.
11. Lopakhin has come from Kharkov to welcome her home.
12. Lopakhin, now a wealthy businessman, is the son of serfs who once worked on this estate.
13. Semyonov-Pishchik, a neighbouring landowner, who is always trying to borrow money, has also come to greet her.
14. Trofimov, a student who had been Grisha's tutor at the time of his death, has reappeared on the estate.
15. Varya is Ranyevskaya's 'adopted' daughter and runs the household.
16. Gaev is Ranyevskaya's older brother who lives on the estate.
17. Yepikhodov is the estate clerk.
18. Dunyasha, who is about the same age as Anya, is a maid.
19. Everyone from the estate has been up all night awaiting their return and gone to meet their train at the local station (except Dunyasha, Yepikhodov, Lopakhin, who fell asleep, and Trofimov, whom Varya has deliberately excluded from the welcoming party).
20. During Ranyevskaya's five-year absence, some retainers have left the estate or died.
21. The estate is heavily in debt and will be auctioned off in August if the debts are not paid.
22. The cherry orchard was once productive and profitable!

There are many other *given circumstances* that apply to characters individually, for example: Ranyevskaya bathed Lopakhin's wounds in the nursery when, as a boy, he had been beaten by his drunken father.

THE FIRST ACT OF 'THE SEAGULL'

These are the main given circumstances that apply to *all* the characters:

1. The action takes place on the edge of a lake on Arkadina's estate.
2. It is a summer evening.
3. The weather is very close (a storm is likely).
4. The moon is rising.
5. A stage has been erected on the edge of the lake, with a view of the lake and moon when the curtain rises.
6. Konstantin is presenting a play he has written and that Nina will perform.
7. The estate is not productive, and absorbs more money than it earns.
8. Konstantin's mother, Arkadina, is a famous actress, making her annual summer visit to the estate from Moscow.
9. Her lover, a famous novelist, Trigorin, is visiting the estate for the first time.
10. Nina is the daughter of neighbours who try to keep her away from the 'Bohemia' of Arkadina's estate.
11. The estates surrounding the lake were once the scene of parties and a vibrant social life.
12. Masha is the daughter of Polina and Shamraev, who is the estate manager.
13. Dorn, a bachelor, is the 'local' doctor, who has known the family since he was a young man.
14. Sorin is Arkadina's brother and Konstantin's uncle.
15. He is a retired mid-ranking bureaucrat (state councillor in a legal department).
16. He is in poor health.
17. Konstantin has no money and wears worn-out clothes.

Some individual *given circumstances* that not all the characters might know:

1. Medvedenko is a poorly-paid schoolmaster with responsibility for his mother, two sisters and a little brother.
2. He is in love with Masha.
3. He walks four miles each way to see Masha.
4. Masha is in love with Konstantin.
5. Dorn and Polina have had an affair.
6. Nina wants to be an actress.
7. Konstantin wants to be a writer.
8. He is in love with Nina.

RECAPITULATION

Actor-characters are motivated by *objectives*. To try to achieve those *objectives*, they have to play *actions*. Playing *actions* means having an effect on the other actor-characters. Success or failure in playing those *actions* will automatically cause them to experience *emotions*: 'good' feelings if they succeed, 'bad' feelings if they fail. Throughout a scene, they will experience a continuous flow of emotions accompanying and affecting the playing of their *actions*. In the pursuit of their *objectives*, they will have to overcome *obstacles*: resistance, opposition, dilemmas. *Obstacles* create *conflict*. How actor-characters carry out their *actions* will be influenced by *given circumstances* – the conditions and contexts in which they find themselves. *Objectives, actions, obstacles and given circumstances are the vital elements of acting.*