The Job of the Actor

J. D. Salinger once said, "You were a reader before you were a writer." By the same token, all actors started out as audience members. What were the first things that struck us about the theatre? What are the things that draw us to the theatre again and again? What creates those moments that every audience member has had of sitting up in his chair because something has struck him in the gut? These moments are under no one person's control; their creation is shared in equally by audience, actor, director, and technician. Realizing this, the actor must understand that it is not rational to say, "It is my job to create these magical moments." Instead, he should realize that all he can do is bring himself to the theatre in optimum condition to participate in the play at hand. Identifying what things he can do to put himself in optimum condition and then doing them consistently so that they become habitual to him will give the actor the satisfaction of always knowing what to do, what his job truly is.

The actor will find, however, that while his job may
be clearly identifiable, it will not be easy. For example, to be in optimum condition to do a play, the actor must have a strong, clear, resonant voice. But developing this type of voice takes most people many years of training, of applying the will to working daily on effective vocal exercises. The actor knows he must develop a body that will do whatever is asked of it, but this again requires the discipline to exercise as well as the study of movement so that the body will become as strong, supple, and graceful as the physical constraints within which he was born (about which he can do nothing) will allow. The actor must look at himself honestly, which requires a great deal of bravery, and use his common sense to determine what his own shortcomings are. Then he must determine which of these shortcomings it is within his control to change. Given this, he must devote himself to doing everything he can to correct those things within his control; he must use his will to become to the fullest possible extent that person he would ideally like to be. Then when he comes to the theatre, he can have the satisfaction of saying to himself, "I know exactly what my job is. I have done everything in my power to be ready to go onstage." This will free him to be more completely involved with the play as it unfolds onstage, because he will not be worrying about what he could have done to be more prepared.

The best thing you can do for yourself as an actor is to clearly define and list those things that are your responsibilities and separate them from those things that are not. In other words, itemize what is within your control and what is not. If you apply this rather stoic philosophy of working on only those things within your control and not concerning yourself with those things that are not, then every moment you spend will be concretely contributing to your growth as an actor. Why not devote your time and energy to developing measurable skills such as your voice, your ability to analyze a script correctly, your ability to concentrate, and your body? On the other hand, how can it possibly help to concern yourself with the views others choose to take of you, the overall success or failure of the play, the ability (or lack thereof) of the director or other actors, which critics are sitting in the audience, your height, your feelings, and so forth? You cannot and never will be able to do anything about any of these things. Consequently, it makes sense to devote yourself only to those things which you have the capacity to change, and refrain from wasting your time, thought, and energy on these things you can never affect.

As an actor, you should never concern yourself with "talent." Talent, if it exists at all, is completely out of your control. Whatever talent might be, you either have it or you don't, so why waste energy worrying about it? The only talent you need to act is a talent for working—in other words, the ability to apply yourself in learning the skills that make up the craft of acting. To put it simply, anyone can act if he has the will to do so, and anyone who says he wants to but doesn't have the knack for it suffers from a lack of will, not a lack of talent.

Another major part of the actor's job is to find a way to live truthfully under the imaginary circumstances of the play. Thus the actor must be able to decide what is going on in the text in simple,actable terms. If the actor
gives himself something physically doable that he has a personal investment in for every scene, he will always have something more important to put his attention on than the success or failure of his own performance. Again, the actor must use his common sense to identify what is and is not within his control. Your feelings are not within your control, so it is not within the bounds of common sense to say "I must feel this certain way" for any particular moment of the scene. Instead, you must be able to say, "This is what I am doing in the scene, and I will do it irrespective of how it makes me feel."

You must understand that acting, like carpentry, is a craft with a definite set of skills and tools. By assiduously applying your will to the acquiring of those skills and tools, you will eventually make them habitual. Once your skills become habitual, you need no longer concentrate on your technique; the craft you have developed will work for you and allow you to operate freely within its bounds. For example, if you have worked long and hard on your voice, then you are free to put your attention on what is going on in the scene rather than on being heard.

If this sounds like an awful lot, it is. Acting requires common sense, bravery, and a lot of will: the common sense to translate whatever you are given into simple actable terms; the bravery, to throw yourself into the action of the play despite fear of failure, self-consciousness, and a thousand other obstacles; and the will to adhere to your ideals, even though it might not be the easiest thing to do.

In our world it is becoming harder and harder to communicate with each other simply and honestly, on a gut level. Yet we still go to the theatre to have a communion with the truth of our existence, and, ideally, we leave it knowing that that kind of communication is still possible. The theatre can put forward simple human values in hopes that the audience may leave inspired to try to live by such values. Seeing an individual doing his best against impossible odds and without regard to his fears allows the audience to identify that very capacity within themselves. That iron will is the will of the actor bringing not some "magnificent performance" to the stage, but his own simple human values and the actions to which they drive him. When truth and virtue are so rare in almost every area of our society the world needs theatre and the theatre needs actors who will bring the truth of the human soul to the stage. The theatre may now be the only place in society where people can go to hear the truth.
Physical Action

To act means to do, so you must always have something specific to do onstage or you will immediately stop acting. This is why physical action is so very important for the actor. Simply defined, an action is the physical pursuance of a specific goal. Physical action is the main building block of an actor’s technique because it is the one thing that you, the actor, can consistently do onstage. Choosing a good action is an invaluable skill that can only be developed by long, hard practice. In this chapter you will find the requirements of a good action; use them as a checklist when figuring out an action for any scene.

An action must

1. be physically capable of being done.
2. be fun to do.
3. be specific.
4. have its test in the other person.
5. not be an errand.
6. not presuppose any physical or emotional state.
7. not be manipulative.
8. have a “cap.”
9. be in line with the intentions of the playwright.

1. An action must be physically capable of being done. At any moment you should be able to begin doing it. For example, “pleading for help” is something you can begin to do immediately. Everyone knows how to do it. On the other hand, “pursuing the American dream” is not something you can pick up and do at a moment’s notice. To say something is physically capable of being done does not necessarily involve intense physical activity such as jumping up and down or assaulting someone. Pleading for help can be accomplished while sitting absolutely still in a chair. An action must be something that you, the actor, can actually accomplish onstage.

2. An action must be fun to do. As you will discover in scene analysis (see chapter 2), any number of actions can be correct for a particular scene. Common sense dictates that you figure out the one you as an actor will want to do, since you are the one who will have to do it every night of the week. By fun we don’t necessarily mean something that makes you laugh, but something that is truly compelling to you. This includes things you might never actually do offstage, but that appeal to your sense of play. If you’ve ever really wanted to tell someone off, for instance, here is your chance. Language is your main tool here. The more vital, active, and gutsy your language is, the more life you will bring to the stage because your action will be that much more exciting to you. How much more fun it is to “talk a friend into spilling the beans” than to “get someone to give me information.” There will occasionally be times when a seemingly mundane action is perfectly correct for a scene. The point is to find the action you want to do. What gets you going? What gets you hot? Only you know. The way you speak to yourself is the way you will act. If you are clear, specific, and strong with yourself, then, chances are that that is how you will be onstage.

3. An action must be specific. Stanislavsky said, “Generality is the enemy of all art,” and nothing could be truer. If your action is in general, then everything you do onstage will be in general. The specificity of an action such as “extracting a crucial answer” will bring you to life much more than the vagueness of “finding out something.” Furthermore, a specific action will provide you with a clear, specific path to follow when playing the scene.

4. The test of the action must be in the other person. An action is the physical pursuance of a specific goal, and that specific goal must have to do with the other person. In other words, by looking at your partner, you should be able to tell how close you are to completing your action. This will also make you less self-conscious and allow you to concentrate on something infinitely more interesting than how well you are performing—that person across from you. If your action is “forcing an enemy to do my bidding,” at any moment you should be able to tell how close he is to doing your bidding, and
only when he has done your bidding will you have completed the action.

5. An action cannot be an errand. An errand is an action that has no test in the other person. “Delivering a message” is not a good action because you do not have to look at your partner to see if you have accomplished it. Also, it can be accomplished in one line, leaving you with nothing to do for the rest of the scene. If you pick an action that keeps you working off the other person to achieve it, you will be brought to life throughout the scene. Too quickly and easily accomplished, an errand is boring both for you to perform and for the audience to watch. The action must be something it is possible to fail at; you cannot fail at an errand.

6. An action cannot presuppose any physical or emotional state, either in you or in your partner. You can’t artificially induce a physical or emotional state (e.g., hunger, anger, sorrow, drunkenness), because they are not within your control. Any action requiring you to put yourself into a certain state before or during a scene will force you to act a lie, the truth being that you are not actually in that state. If you try to work yourself up into a certain state for a scene, your attention will be entirely on the creation and maintenance of that state rather than on your action. As will be discussed later in detail, there is no such thing as a correct emotion for any scene. “Making a jerk know how mad I am” is a bad action because you cannot do it unless you are angry. A better action would be “putting a jerk in his place.”

The same holds true for your partner. “Calming down an excited friend” will not work because if the person in front of you is not excited, then you have nothing to play. “Building up a friend’s confidence” is a better choice because it does not presuppose your friend’s physical or emotional state; you can always build someone’s confidence higher than it already is.

7. An action cannot be manipulative. A manipulative action is one chosen to produce a desired effect on your partner. This type of action gives rise to the attitude that “I can do whatever I want to you, but nothing you do is going to affect me.” In other words, you make up your mind ahead of time how you are going to play the scene and allow nothing to sway you. An action such as “making someone cry” is manipulative. An action such as “forcing a friend to face facts” might very well make your partner cry, but the crying is more likely to be the honest response to your carrying out your action, rather than the result of your manipulation. A manipulative action can cause you to act in a predetermined way instead of dealing truthfully with what is happening in the other person (see chapter 3 on “The Truth of the Moment”).

8. The action must have a “cap.” The cap is that specific thing you are looking for that will mean that you have succeeded at your action. You must be able to tell whether or not you have finished doing your action by looking at the other person. For example, “to get a friend’s forgiveness” is an action with a cap. You know when your partner has forgiven you by his behavior toward you. On the other hand, an action such as
“maintaining someone’s interest” does not have a cape. Depending on the scene, you may never actually achieve your action, but you must always have a specific end to work toward onstage.

9. The action must be in line with the intentions of the playwright. This is extremely important, and can be better understood in conjunction with scene analysis. Once you have determined exactly what the playwright’s intentions are, the actions you choose must be true to those intentions. For example, in Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman, in the scene where Willy returns home after his harrowing trip, if the actress playing Linda chooses an action such as “putting someone in his place” for the scene, it is clearly out of whack with the intentions of the playwright. Something more in line with the scene would be “assuring a loved one of my support.”

Within each action is an infinite number of tools, or ways to go about executing that action. For instance, if your action is “to get a straight answer,” at various points in the scene you might demand, cajole, reason with, intimidate, or threaten the other person to get the answer. After you have analyzed a scene try listing some of the tools you can use to go about getting what you want. The right tool is, as you will learn later on, mainly dictated by what the other person in the scene is doing.

## Analyzing a Scene

Now that you know what a good action entails, you must learn to choose the best action for a scene. The following simple formula, if employed consistently, will always lead to a performable action in line with the intentions of the playwright. Ask yourself these three questions:

1. What is the character literally doing?

2. What is the essential action of what the character is doing in this scene?

3. What is that action like to me? It’s as if . . .

1. What is the character literally doing? The key to answering this question is to be as literal as possible; do not interpret or embellish what is happening on the printed page. A character may say and do many things in a scene, some of them seemingly contradictory. Your task is to find out the one specific thing he is doing that encompasses every line. Phrase what the character is
his technique, will face at some point in his career. Chapter 11 offers detailed advice on how to approach these pitfalls both philosophically and in terms of the text analysis formula.

A technique is useless unless it can be called upon in the most difficult and stressful situations.

This method of physical action is a practical one; if it is applied assiduously, it will help you through the most demanding performance and rehearsal circumstances.

The Emotional Trap

The single most confusing and upsetting aspect of the actor's work is the so-called emotional life. It is unfortunate that many actors find the emotional aspect of acting so frustrating, because creating emotion is not their concern. There is one simple guideline to follow concerning emotional life onstage: it is beyond your control, so don't worry about it. Ever.

One of the great bonuses of this system of physical action is that every action will give rise to an emotional condition; you won't have to work for it. Once you accept that there is no such thing as a correct emotion for a given scene, you will have divested yourself of the burden of becoming emotional. When you've learned to place your attention on other person, your inchoate feelings about the scene will manifest themselves in a way specific to the moment at hand.

If you work for an emotional result, you will pollute most of what you have learned so far for several reasons. First, if you push yourself into an emotional state you will create an attitude that you will then find your-
self compelled to maintain throughout the scene. Thus the truth of the moment will be completely lost because your attention will fall on yourself, and your impulses will go out the proverbial window.

Second, you can’t execute a physical action while trying to maintain an emotional state. The specificity you’ve worked so hard for in coming up with a good analysis will no longer operate; you will be acting in general, because your action will be lost in the emotional morass you have created for yourself. Two indications that this is happening are: you lapse into line readings; you find yourself constantly monitoring how well you are doing. Remember, you do not have to feel like performing your action. If you learn to act in spite of what you are feeling, you will bring yourself to life in the scene and develop a strong will in the process.

The third danger is both subtle and ironic. Every once in a blue moon, concentration on the emotions will somehow bring you in line with the needs of the scene. What you must remember is that a technique based on emotion is utterly undependable; because you cannot control what you feel, your emotions can desert you at any time. On the other hand, a technique based on physical action calls upon the will and can be used at any time and in any situation, regardless of how you are feeling.

Contrary to popular belief, you need never gear up emotionally for a scene. The idea of emotional preparation is one you need not bother with. As discussed in chapter 5, there are many excellent ways to prepare for a scene that do not require you to whip yourself into a generalized emotional frenzy.

When working onstage, don’t take upon yourself the onus of becoming a more “feeling” person. Pushing for emotional results is invariably an attempt to make the scene more “dramatic” or “interesting.” Nothing is more interesting or dramatic than an actor working off the truth of the moment, so don’t take responsibility for the scene by charging it up emotionally.

Once you’ve learned to commit fully to a physical action, your only task concerning emotions will be to learn to work through them, to let them exist as they will, for they are beyond your control and will come to you quite unbidden. Your emotions are the natural and inescapable by-product of your commitment to your action. Eventually you will learn to work through the torrents of emotion raging through you onstage. Again, your one and only job is to follow through on your action.