

A baseball batter rehearses his stance, grip, swing, and breathing; he studies the opposing pitchers; at the plate, he takes note of the wind and the position of the fielders. As he begins to swing at a pitch, however, he ceases to think about all this and focuses his total awareness on the ball. This single objective channels all his energy into his action, the swing. Having this single objective allows the batter to synthesize all his other concerns and all his rehearsed and intuitive skills into a single complete action of mind and body.

For you as an actor, the “ball” is your character’s objective, what he or she is trying to accomplish at any given moment. Your focus on this single objective at the moment of action will provide you with the same kind of integration achieved by the baseball batter. It will energize your action and give it power, intensity, and control.

## Defining Productive Objectives

When you begin working on a scene, one of your earliest steps is to discover your character’s needs and each of the objectives the character pursues to try to satisfy those needs, step-by-step through the scene. You define these objectives in a way which makes them personally important to you, giving you the kind of focus on your dramatic task that the batter has on the ball, thereby producing public solitude. When an objective does both these things—compels your attention and energizes you in a personal way—it is what Stanislavsky called a *productive objective*. Experience has proven that objectives become more productive when they are directed toward a *single, immediate, and personally important* goal. Let’s examine each.

First, an objective needs to be *singular* because you wish to focus your energy on one thing rather than diffuse it by trying to do two things at once. Imagine a batter trying to hit two balls simultaneously.

Second, the most useful objective is in the *immediate present*, something that can happen right now. The scene must move forward, and your energy

must help propel it; never define your character's objective in a way that moves your awareness into yourself or into the past. While the character's needs may be rooted in the past, their action is always directed toward an objective in the immediate present or future.

Finally, an objective must be *personally important* to you, the actor, so that it will engage as much of your own feeling, belief, thought, and unconscious behavior as possible. We can remember these three requirements as the acronym **SIP**: Singular, Immediate, and Personal.

A productive objective will also connect you to the other characters in the scene. The most productive way to define an objective is as *a change you want to bring about in the other character*. One acting teacher even taught his students to think of this as a change in the other character's eyes. If, as Willy Loman, your immediate objective is to get Howard's attention away from the recorder, you can think of wanting "to get him to look at me with interest." This encourages you to play into your partner's eyes with your own, and nothing intrigues the camera more than the eyes. (Even when your scene partner is off camera, they will be present to provide your "eye-line," and it will be possible for you to play to their eyes.)

Defining objectives will be easier after you have studied scene structure in the following chapter, but for now you can try to identify your character's objectives according to the principles we have discussed here.

### **Exercise 10.1: Productive Objectives**

Examine your scene. Define your character's objectives as SIP. Try defining each as a change in your partner's eyes. Record and study the results.

## **Defining Playable Actions**

In the Willy Loman scene, we described a productive objective: Willy enters and sees that the boss is busy; his single, immediate, and important objective is to get Howard's attention. Like any good writer, Miller has envisioned Willy's inner world and has provided an external action that springs naturally from this objective: Willy is going *to flatter* Howard. Although the action is provided by the writer, it is essential that you, the actor, "work backward" to discover it *for yourself*. You cannot simply accept the writer's result, you must recreate the whole process of thought and feeling which produces that result.

This is what Stanislavsky called *justifying* the external action by finding the inner need that drives it. Only in this way can you make the character's experience your own, and it is this experience that turns you into the character. When you find a way of understanding your character's action in a way that springs naturally from their objective, you have found what actors call a *playable* action.

As you start out, it may help you to form a simple verbal description of each of your actions and objectives, step-by-step through a scene, in order to learn the best way of approaching the material. Eventually, this process will become largely intuitive, but for now, here are a few simple rules that will guide you in describing playable actions. First, use a *simple verb phrase* in a *transitive* form, that is, a verb that involves a *doing* directed toward someone else, such as “to flatter.” Avoid forms of the verb “to be,” since these are intransitive verbs; they have no external object and their energy turns back upon itself, certainly not a good condition for an actor whose energies must continually flow outward into the scene. You are never interested, for example, in “being angry” or “being a victim;” these are not playable actions.

Next, you select a verb that carries a sense of the *particular strategy* employed by the character to achieve the objective. When you choose a course of action in life, you naturally select the one that seems to offer the greatest chance for success in the given circumstances. You ask yourself, “Given what I want, what is the best way to get it in this situation, from this person? What might work?”

Here’s how you might describe your action if you were playing Willy in the sample scene from *Death of a Salesman*. You have just entered; you desperately need to get a spot in town; you see Howard playing with the recorder. At this moment, you, as Willy, want to get Howard’s attention (to get him to look at you), but you want to do it in a way that will make him feel positively towards you. As a salesman, you instinctively appeal to something the “client” is interested in, so you flatter him by praising the recorder and the stupid recording he has made of his family.

Obviously, you have a strong subtext here. You seem to be doing one thing, but you are actually trying to do something else, something that is, for the moment, hidden. You are also hiding your true feelings under a veneer of interest and cordiality. Though you are aware of this as an actor, as Willy you play the immediate objective (to get him to look at you) through the immediate action (flattery) while simply holding your true feelings in your hidden consciousness. As an actor, you avoid the temptation to “show” the audience what you are really feeling (which would be *indicating*) and simply trust your immediate action to carry all the hidden pain and impatience that lurks beneath it. (More about subtext in the following chapter.)

From these principles we see that the most complete description of what Willy is doing at this moment is *to flatter Howard by praising the recorder* (action) in order *to get him to look at me with interest* (objective). As useful as this verbal description may be at first, the ability to describe something (coming from the analytical left side of the brain) is no guarantee of the ability to play it (coming from the intuitive right side of the brain) and the two sometimes get in each other’s way. You will soon discard such verbal descriptions in favor of an intuitive experience of the scene, moment by moment, having

transferred your acting process completely into the creation of your character's consciousness.

### *Exercise 10.2: Playable Actions*

Review your scene, and define each of your character's actions using a transitive verb phrase. Shoot the scene with this awareness, and study the results.

## Spontaneity

What you do in front of the camera must be spontaneous, "for the first time," no matter how many times you have done it before. To achieve this spontaneity, you must keep your awareness on your objective rather than on the mechanics of your external action, just as the batter thinks only about the ball and not about his swing. Otherwise you will just be "going through the motions," repeating the external aspects of your performance without re-experiencing the internal needs that drive the externals.

Spontaneity does not mean that your performance is erratic or changeable: in order to maintain continuity between master and coverage, and from take to take, your action must have the same basic structure each time you perform it. During your preparation you have refined your understanding of the inner process of your character's thought until it becomes dependable and consistent; you live through that inner process in each take and allow yourself to "rediscover" the behavior which results. Just as the baseball batter has rehearsed his swing until he can do it without thinking, he then focuses all his attention on the particular ball coming at him. You will be free to pay full attention to the scene as it happens every time you do it. As Stanislavsky said,

... a spontaneous action is one that, through frequent repetition in rehearsal and performance, has become automatic and therefore free."<sup>1</sup>

By re-experiencing the objective every time you perform the action, you will keep your performance spontaneous, even though it is also consistent and dependable. Review the tapes you have made of your scene so far; is your performance fresh and alive each time? You will have to repeat a scene many times when shooting a film.

<sup>1</sup>Stanislavsky, *An Actor's Handbook*, p. 138.

## The Inner Monologue

We are now able to understand the entire flow of action from need to objective. In the opening of the scene from *Death of a Salesman*, Willy's inner thoughts might sound like this:

1. STIMULUS: What's that thing Howard's fooling with?
2. ATTITUDE: Why doesn't he stop that foolishness and listen to me?
3. ALTERNATIVES: I should demand the respect I'm entitled to.
4. CHOICE: But that might make him mad. I'd better get my foot in the door first, butter him up a bit.
5. ACTION: "What's that, Howard?"
6. OBJECTIVE: To get him to look at me with friendly eyes.

You can see that Willy's needs, values, way of thinking, way of relating to the world—in short, his entire psychology—is involved and expressed in each step of this mental process. Recreating your character's thought process in this way is the most important single step you can take toward transformation. One way to check the thoroughness and specificity of your psychological preparation is to verbalize your character's stream of consciousness as in the example above. This technique is called the *inner monologue*.

### Exercise 10.3: The Inner Monologue

A. Work through your scene with your partner, speaking silently to yourself the inner stream of thought that connects the external things you do and say. Go slowly and allow yourself to experience each step in the flow from stimulus to choice to objective.

B. Select a portion of your scene in which your inner process of thought is especially rich. Shoot a close-up of yourself during this portion of the scene. See what the inner monologue has provided.

C. Finally, shoot a close master of your scene; don't try to keep the inner monologue going, just allow what you have learned from it to "be there." Study the result.

## Summary

As you work on a scene, you discover your character's needs and the objectives he or she pursues to try to satisfy those needs. You define these objectives in a way that compels your attention and energizes you in a personal way, making them *productive objectives*. Remember the requirements of productive objectives as the acronym **SIP**: **S**ingular, **I**mmEDIATE, and **P**ersonal. The best objective is *a change you want to bring about in the other character*.

These productive objectives lead to *playable actions*. To describe a playable action use a *simple verb phrase* in a *transitive form*, such as “to flatter.” Avoid forms of the verb “to be,” since these are intransitive verbs. As you start out, it may help to form such simple verbal descriptions of your actions and objectives, but eventually this process will become intuitive.

What you do in front of the camera must be spontaneous, “for the first time.” You must keep your awareness on your objective rather than on the mechanics of your external action, just as the batter thinks only about the ball and not about his swing. By re-experiencing the objective every time you perform the action, you will keep your performance spontaneous, even though it is also consistent and dependable.