The Dynamic Actor Workshop: Week One

“The skill of acting is like the skill of sport, which is a physical event. . . . its difficulty consists . . . in being much simpler than it seems. The study of acting consists in the main of getting out of one’s own way, and in learning to deal with uncertainty and being comfortable being uncomfortable.”

-David Mamet, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*

“There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. ... No artist is pleased. [There is] no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others.”

-Martha Graham, as quoted in *The Life and Work of Martha Graham* by [Agnes de Mille](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnes_de_Mille)

And so it begins. The goal for the next eight weeks is simple: to build a tool kit that you can practice to increase your confidence, presence, sense of play, and ability to tap your best instincts. You will learn to invest your unique self in your art, and, in so doing, learn how to stretch beyond and expand that self.

As Mamet says, the difficulty of acting is often its simplicity. Once a camera is pointed at you, your best bet is usually to do nothing and let things be.

But that’s the endgame, and you can’t try to skip ahead. At best, you will only be good when the stars align and you have the right script in the right environment. At worst, your attempt to be simple will just end up being boring.

So first, we are going to step far away from in front of the camera and really explore who we are and what we can do as actors. We’ll let our bodies lead us and hone our ability to latch onto big ideas. And when we’ve done all that, and only then, we’ll step back in front of the camera and be simple again. But that simplicity will be the tip of a very big iceberg: the small, visible part of something forcefully huge.

So, yeah, it’s gonna get weird. You will be asked to take risks and to trust the journey. There will be times you wonder where it’s all headed. But give yourself to the process for this eight weeks, commit fully to each exercise, and you will emerge on a path toward a career that is not just successful, but sustainable and infinitely rewarding.

Week One Concepts Explored:

Read it out loud – the first time and every time.

* Treat the scene as actions, not words on a page
* Know that you can’t get it “right”
* Without any other knowledge, you know that the role starts with you, and all other choices are variations and additions to that unique you.
* Always read the script before you read any character breakdown – attack the scene from your own perspective first.

Highlight the stimulus:

* If you need to highlight the script to help track on the page, don’t highlight your own lines. Instead, highlight the stimulus – the thing that causes you to say the line. This keeps you focus on what matters – listening to and responding to the other – while accomplishing your practical goal. Don’t overthink it; just make a quick decision and highlight it. Avoid getting invested in the paper and ink of the scene.

Run it before you know it – three times through, then turn the script over.

* Once you’ve careful read the scene two or three times out loud, set down the script and run the whole scene
* Do not allow yourself to stop. Run the whole scene, whatever happens (even if you immediately forget everything and the scene is entirely improvised). If something throws you off and you need to recover, recover within the scene. Take what is happening and make it work.
* Test what is sticking to you brain most immediately
* Go back and see what you missed altogether. That may point you to the hardest part, which you must solve and connect to in order to unlock the whole scene.
* You’ll be emphasizing that the scene is what happens between action and cut, not a repetition of a fixed template.

Physical technique, basic introduction – finding your center and varying it.

* Establish presence and openness to outside stimulus though centered breathing and kinesthetic awareness.
* Your center of gravity is your power center; it guides your entire point of view. Simply varying that center can alter your whole presence and perspective on a scene.

Homework: Run your scene. *Always* out loud. Discipline yourself. With a partner, when you can. If you can’t work with a partner, read the other actor’s lines aloud. Vary your approach to the scene, allowing yourself to make new discoveries and “wrong” choices.

Suggested reading: [*True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*,](https://www.amazon.com/True-False-Heresy-Common-Sense-ebook/dp/B005HE8ENY?ie=UTF8&keywords=true%20and%20false%20heresy%20and%20common%20sense%20for%20the%20actor&qid=1462766107&ref_=sr_1_1&s=books&sr=1-1) by David Mamet

Mamet’s book lives up to its title, giving common sense advice for studying acting while dismantling the nonsense techniques that infect many acting classes. A must read for every actor. Read critically – it’s a cautionary and often cynical book. “I agree with almost nothing Mr. Mamet says in this book and encourage you to devour every word.” – Alec Baldwin