The Dynamic Actor Workshop: Week Three

“. . . the world is hungry and not concerned with culture . . . . What is important . . . is to extract, from what is called culture, ideas whose compelling force is identical with that of hunger. I mean that if it is important for us to eat first of all, it is even more important for us not to waste in the sole concern for eating our simple power of being hungry.”

- Antonin Artaud, The Theater and Its Double

“. . . in the big/small debate, we are actually talking about whether an actor is ‘connected’ or ‘disconnected.’ If the actor is working from their center or core, the work will be perceived as truthful and everything will be free and feel effortless. Without engaging [the abdominal-diaphragmatic area], the actor becomes disconnected from the need that is driving the role and disconnected from the emotional, vocal and energy ‘center.’”

-Mel Churcher, *A Screen Acting Workshop*

Everything we do ends up in some way pointing back to that basic principle of telling the truth by working from you core. Our physical work lets our bodies lead our mind, and our script analysis finds our most essential need in a scene so that we tap into our “simple power of being hungry.”

This week we will concentrate on that core. First, purely physically, before we even have words, and then through identifying truly compelling driving actions. Once you’ve awakened your center and are working from a real need that forces you to focus on your task, you can vary your approach to the scene while maintaining a compelling investment in whatever is happening.

Refining Driving Actions:

Some problems that commonly arise when first creating driving actions:

1. Weak or inactive verbs:

“I want to get him to hear me,” “I’m waiting for something to happen”

Don’t choose verbs that are passive or weak – this is what is driving you through the scene – make it strong: “I’m forcing a friend to face facts,” “I’m begging a stranger to take a chance.”

1. “I’m trying to . . . “:

“I’m trying to make a friend repent.” Nope - take out the “trying to.” I’m making a friend repent. The trying is implicit, but stating it waters down your action.

1. You have too many choices:

It may seem like you really want to work for two or three things; how do you choose? First, see if you can pick an action that encompasses both ideas. “I am getting him to face the truth but also need him to help me out” might both be covered by “I am exposing a threat to a friend.” If that doesn’t seem to be possible, it could be that you are identifying both a need and an obstacle to getting that need. “I’m begging a friend for help, but I’m also trying to keep a secret.” Protecting the secret is important to the scene, because it stands in your way (you could get the help if you could only tell him why!), but it is not a part of the driving action – what you are doing to get what you want. You are doing something because you want something while something stands in your way; only the first two things matter in the driving action.

1. It’s too narrow or obligated to the story

Remember, the driving action is how you find *your personal stake* in the scene. It’s your entry to playful engagement. So it is not confined by the world of the scene – the answer is never, “I don’t like it, but it’s what the scene requires.” The scene requires that you care about it; find a driving action that makes you care. And remember that you must be able to lift that driving action up and put it into another, imagined scenario easily. “I am asking my husband to have a baby with me” is to specific to the world of the play. “I am convincing a loved one to take a risk” could apply to the scene, but could also be played out in any number or improvised circumstances.

The Crossings:

Your connection to your scene partner is paramount, and working from your core means grounding that psychic connection in the physical

And ways to have fun: play the opposite choices for the entire scene.

* Discovering the opposite choice means clarifying the original choice (if you don’t know the opposite, you don’t really know the scene). This is especially true when working with driving actions. The clearer the action, the easier it is to find the opposite.
* Exploring polarities exposes interesting choices or brings out nuances that avoid two dimensional performances.
* It also reinforces the idea that there is no one “right” way to do the scene. It’s a puzzle with endless solutions
* Try not just the opposite, but varying choices along the spectrum. This keeps you exploring and not locked into to one way of doing the scene.

When exploring driving actions, you can test some generic statements to start to hone in on what most sparks your interest. The final action will be specific to you and change with every scene, but these offer a starting point if you are stuck:

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| TASK GRID: DRIVING ACTIONS |
| I am begging a loved one’s forgiveness. | I am pleading for help. | I am extracting a crucial answer.  | I am putting a jerk in his place. |
| I am building up a friend’s confidence. | I am forcing a friend to face facts. | I am clearing up a terrible misunderstanding. | I am retrieving what is rightfully mine. |
| I am imploring a loved one to give me another chance. | I am showing an inferior who’s boss. | I am making amends for bad behavior. | I am enlisting a friend’s aid. |
| I am getting a friend to stand on their own two feet. | I am exposing a threat to a friend. | I am inspiring a loved one take a big chance. | I am putting a loved one on the right track. |
| I am reassuring people in my care that I’m capable of leading them. | I am making a subordinate confirm a terrible suspicion. | I am seducing an old friend. | I am comforting a friend. |
| I am forcing a family member to see the damage they’ve done. | I am tricking an enemy into showing their cards. | I am breaking ties with a hurtful lover. | I am convincing someone I’ve wronged that I have changed. |
| I am imploring a friend to join my team. | I am getting what I deserve from a superior. | I am asking a loved one to back off. | I am convincing a friend to bend the rules. |
| I am coaxing a friend into letting down their hair. | I am knocking a peer off their high horse. | I am pleading with a friend to drop the charade. | I am smacking a friend into reality. |

Homework: Creating a physical score.

Once you have a driving action you believe in, look at each beat of the scene: what is happening, what tactic might you be using to carry out that driving action? It should vary from beat to beat. Now, for each beat’s tactic or main idea, find a gesture that embodies that idea. Make it broad and expressive – not something you would use in the scene, but a large, abstracted statement in gesture. See if you can weave the beat gestures into one fluid score that describes the scene. A gesture for each beat, and some transition between gestures. There should be five or six gestures, maximum.

Suggested reading: [*A Screen Acting Workshop*](http://www.amazon.com/Screen-Acting-Workshop-Mel-Churcher/dp/1848420552)by Mel Churcher

Mel’s book is straightforward and practical and marvelously good at explaining how technique supports and hones creative impulse. It’s especially good because it includes a DVD showing her principles in action. Immediately seeing what she’s discussing played out on film is like auditing a class and makes this a book worth owning.

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