The Dynamic Actor Workshop: Week Six

“Only the man who is not hungry says the coconut has a hard shell.”

- African Proverb

“If it be now, tis not to come, if it be not to come, it will be now, if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all”

- Hamlet, Act V, Scene 2

“. . . Time is like wax dripping from a candle flame. In the moment, it is molten and falling, with the capability to transform into any shape. Then, the moment passes, and the wax hits the tabletop and solidifies into the shape it will always be. It becomes the past, a solid, single record of what happened, still holding in its wild curves and contours the potential of every shape it could have held.

. . .then you remember! I remember! That we are, even now, in anther bit of molten wax! We are in a moment that is still falling, still volatile. And we will never be anywhere else. We still always be in that most dangerous, most exciting, most possible time of all: The Now, where we never can know the shape the next moment will take.”

- Cecil, *Welcome to Night Vale*

How to you train to be in the now? If the whole idea is to respond in the moment as though you weren’t prepared for it, then how are you supposed to rehearse? Mark Westbrook rightly says that acting is Ping Pong, not chess. During play, you cannot pause and carefully plan each move. It’s action and reaction, and you cannot plan for that. But you can prepare yourself to be in a state of Readiness. You can hone your ability to be tuned into and responsive to your partner, your ability to let every choice grow from and urgent need to accomplish your task. So training doesn’t always feel the same as acting, just as practicing Ping Pong may be very different from actual competitive play. This week we play a bit with that idea as we continue our scene work.

Concepts explored:

Words don’t *mean,* they *do*. The words are the page are not the scene, not a restriction on what you should be doing. Your first obligation (unless you are told otherwise) is, of course, to the text, and it is your primary source of information about the scene. But your job is not to communicate the words meaning. You must make the words *do* something, make them affect your partner, and make them tools for accomplishing your task. The open scene improvisations are a simple way of highlighting this core idea. This is what TACTICS do – they make words do more than they mean.

ADRA:

A tennis player hits balls sent to her by a machine for hours as she trains, repeating the same shots over and over. A piano player drills scales and etudes to develop limber fingers and embed and understanding of musical structure deep in his brain so that he may improvise with friends at a jazz club. So it follows that the actor must be able to look at acting moments differently during training that they would during performing. That’s what ADRA can do: break down a microsecond and put it under a microscope. Stopping yourself to examine how a reaction/action sequence works builds the muscles that put you in that critical state of focused readiness when it does come time to play a scene for a camera or an audience.

So the scene stops, and you:

* **A**cknowledge: Read your partner’s behavior and simply state what they are doing.
* **D**ecide: Do you want to encourage or discourage their behavior? (Are you getting closer to or further away from achieving your task?)
* **R**emind: Restate your driving action – your task.
* **A**ction: What will be your tactic (to encourage or discourage)?

And the scene starts again. At multiple moments, we bring out this microscope.

A tactic can typically fit nicely between “I” and “you.” “I mock you.” “I assure you.” There are whole books dedicated to listing tactics for actors. If you’re working on an exercise like ADRA, it might be helpful to have a grid like this to reference:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| CHALLENGE | CONDEMN | BERATE |
| WARN | BEG | GOAD |
| MOCK | DISMISS | LECTURE |
| ASSURE | HOLD | ATTACK |
| TOUCH | AVOID | DEFLECT |
| EVADE | NUZZLE | ELEVATE |
| CASTIGATE | COAX | STROKE |
| CALM | POKE | BULLY |

This is not a suggestion that you would be consciously picking tactics in the moment while playing a scene. This is a rehearsal exercise, training your disposition to always be ready to react and adapt and move ever forward toward getting what you want, staying in the fight, staying in flow.