The Dynamic Actor Workshop: Week Two

"Acting is not about being someone different. It's finding the similarity in what is apparently different, then finding myself in there."

- Meryl Streep

“Loss of self-consciousness does not involve loss of self, and certainly not a loss of consciousness, but rather, only a loss of consciousness of the self. What slips below the threshold of awareness is the concept of self . . . and being able to forget temporarily who we are seems to be very enjoyable. When not preoccupied with ourselves, we actually have a chance to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forwards

This feeling is not just a fancy of the imagination, but it is based on a concrete experience of close interaction with some Other, an interaction that produces a rare sense of unity with these usually foreign entities.”

-[Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow?language=en), on Flow

The guiding principles of The Dynamic Actor training:

* Technique should be practical and accessible.
* Technique should train you to find flow by taking your attention off of yourself and focusing it on the other.
* Technique should serve the collaborative, not just the actor.
* Choices don’t have to be new to be fresh: we must know how to improvise the same choices over and over again.
* There is no character, there is only you. Training should guide you toward your personal stake in every scene, while creating pathways to expand on any aspect of your unique you.

In week two, we fortify the first principles with a lodestar for our work:

 *The Driving Action*

 This is an approach to scene analysis that seeks the quickest path to investing your full playful self into a scene, finding flow as you make active choices and fight for your needs.

This is our foundation for analysis. In future weeks, we will balance this somewhat academic analysis style with active physical work. Balancing the outside-in and inside-out approaches is key to having a rounded approach that serves you in all situations.

A Driving Action

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi conducted research into what made people happy, and discovered that people were most happy when they were in a state that he called *Flow*.

Flow is a state of involvement in which a person is entirely immersed with a feeling of energized focus. We might refer to it as being “in the zone” or “in the moment.”

There are seven criteria that an individual must to meet to be in Flow. They are:

ONE: Completely involved in what they are doing

TWO: A sense of being outside of everyday reality

THREE: A clear idea of what needs to be done

FOUR: Knowledge that the Task is Achievable

FIVE: Absence of anxiety, beyond ego

SIX: Thoroughly present in the moment

SEVEN: Intrinsically motivated by the Activity

These criteria describe the optimum conditions to feel like you are “in the moment.” When these seven criteria are met, you are doing your best work. You are in Flow, the moment of mindful absorption, free from boredom and anxiety.

So how do you get there?

Think about a time when you played out a big scene in your head:

You knew you were about to have a big fight with your boss or big romantic scene with our girlfriend or big showdown with the customer service guy at Target because you don't have your receipt. Whatever the thing, you had something that was about to happen and your imagination made you start playing it out in your head. You play all the parts; you are super articulate and in control, the other guy is a more formidable opponent than you thought, but you don't give up. And you play the scene over and over, maybe on the way to where the real thing will take place, maybe in your living room as you wait for someone to come home, or maybe on the way home - replaying an argument that didn't go well, refining what you say until you get it right.

You can play these scenes over and over again, and they always feel fresh. And even when these imaginary scenes are related to difficult situations, they are somehow on their own enjoyable. Why? Because you are actively involved in a fight for something you want, and you are enjoying finding the ways to overcome the obstacles, and you are well aware of how much it will hurt if you fail. Read the seven criteria for flow above, and you will see that they are often met in these scenarios.

These imagined scenarios are something we all do, so they must be core to how we process and tell stories.

To bring these easily accessed flow into our work, we’ll start with a tool called the Driving Action.

Great acting requires invested connection to the other, the ability to let things happen in the moment, and a true, personal stake in your character’s struggle. You must have skin in the game.

First, we must learn to define our objective in terms of playable actions. An actor cannot play an objective; they must perform an action in pursuit of an objective. In a scene, an actor must define a *driving action* – *what you are doing to get what you want*. A driving action is not each choice you play during the scene – it can be guided by any number of changing tactics – but it is a tent pole under which the scene can happen. It is a guiding principle, so when you feel lost or searching you always come back to "what am I doing *to the other person* to get what I want *from the other person*?"

Begin by determining what the character is literally doing in the scene. This is what is given by the script that will not change regardless of the driving action. “A man is preparing to smoke a pipe” or “Two friends are discussing their plans” are good examples. Find the one specific thing that encompasses the whole scene, and phrase it in a single, precise sentence.

Once you know what the character is literally doing, you are ready to choose a driving action. A driving action must meet certain criteria:

First, it should *BE FUN TO DO*. “Fun”doesn’t mean it makes you laugh, but it should be something that is truly compelling to you (perhaps even something you would never do offstage). Use vital, active language, e.g. “talk a friend into spilling the beans” instead of “get someone to give me information.” Remember, there is no character: the driving action is what *you* want in the scene; it’s the unique way you solve the puzzle. Don’t try to figure out the right answer for the scene, but figure out the most compelling answer for you. It’s right when it’s fun to work for and heartbreaking to lose. *You* must *care* about it. The right driving action triggers a strong physical sensation.

It must *BE PHYSICALLY CAPABLE OF BEING DONE*. At any moment, you are able to begin doing it.

Bad: *I am pursuing the American Dream*

Good: *I am pleading for help*

It’s something that you, the actor, can actually accomplish onstage. And it follows that it *SHOULD HAVE A PHYSICAL CAP*.You should be able to know if you’ve succeeded, and you should have a clear physical image of what that looks like.

Good: *I am getting a friend’s forgiveness (physical cap: she gives me a hug)*

Bad: *I am maintaining someone’s interest*

Your action must *HAVE ITS TEST IN THE OTHER PERSON*.Our goal is to keep our energies focused on the “other.” Your driving action must be about the other person. By looking at your partner, you should be able to tell how close you are to completing your action. Everything you do is in response to the behavior of the other, and your focus of them is what lets you live in the moment, working to encourage or discourage behaviors in order to get closer to your goal.

You must *BE SPECIFIC*.If you action is general, everything you do onstage will be general. A specific action will give you a clear path to follow when playing the scene.

Bad: *I am finding out something*

Good: *I am extracting a crucial answer*

“Generality is the enemy of all art.” - Constantin Stanislavski

It should *NOT PRESUPPOSE ANY PHYSICAL OR EMOTIONAL STATE, and it should NOT BE MANIPULATIVE.*

Bad: *I am making a jerk know how mad I am* (presupposes your emotional state)

Good: *I am putting a jerk in his place*

Bad: *I am calming down an excited friend* (presupposes your partner’s state)

Good: *I am building up a friend’s confidence*

Bad: *I am making someone cry* (manipulative; attempts to produce an effect on your partner)

Good: *I am forcing a friend to face facts*

A driving action is quite different from what the character is literally doing, and lets the actor set aside self-consciousness, focus on the other, react in the moment, and engage their sense of play. Almost always, a scene will have a single driving action. If it seems that your objective changes in the scene, it is likely that you need to more carefully define your driving action.

A driving action is not a super objective. It is what you are doing to get what you want *from the other person in the scene you are playing.* Your character’s goal in life may be to make the world a better place, but that is not their objective or driving action.

As an example, if we look at the famous scene in *A Streetcar Named Desire* where Stanley shouts “Stella!”, we can say that he is literally *asking for Stella to come home to him*. But his essential action could be one of many:

1. I am begging a loved one’s forgiveness
2. I am clearing up a terrible misunderstanding.
3. I am retrieving what is rightfully mine.
4. I am imploring a loved one to give me another chance.
5. I am showing an inferior who’s boss.
6. I am making amends for bad behavior.

Each of these actions could serve the needs of the scene, but offer a variety of possibilities of how the scene is played. Each action could be carried out with a variety of tactics.

Note that actions are phrased in the first person and in a universal form. “*I* am begging a *loved one’s* forgiveness,” not “*my wife’s* forgiveness.” The actress playing Stella is not the actor playing Stanley’s wife, so stating the driving action as such would remove the need that is universal to the character and the actor. The driving action is not what your character wants; it is what you want while playing your role

A DRIVING ACTION: HOMEWORK

In the space below, write the driving action for your character in the scene. Notice it is only two lines; the driving action is one sentence, simple and repeatable. Experiment with different driving actions, but be sure they are all clear and concise enough to fit into one sentence:

I am

Now test it:

Is it fun to do? Can you imagine doing it in your life, if a different context? When you think about it, does it make you want to get up and start playing? Will it hurt if you don’t get what you’re working for? Remember, unless you can answer “yes” to these questions, you haven’t found the right driving action yet. “But it’s what the script says,” is not an excuse, and it’s not true. There’s something exciting for you to play, so work until you find it.

Is it physically capable of being done, and does it have a cap? If someone told you to perform this action, could you immediately begin doing it, and would you know when you had accomplished it? Can you say exactly what would your partner would physically do if you accomplish your goal?

Does it have its test in the other person? Throughout the scene, can you look at your partner, acknowledge what they are doing, decide if you want to encourage or discourage that behavior (do you seem closer to or further away for getting what you want), and then play an action that gets you closer to what you are working for? The driving action must take the focus off of you and puts it on the other.

Is it specific? Don’t mention character names or relationships, but the driving action should give a clear path with multiple available tactics. Tactics are simple verbs that could fit between “I” and “you”, e.g. GUILT, CALM, SETTLE, PUSH, HUG, CONFRONT (I confront you, I calm you).

Does it not presuppose a physical or emotional state, and is it not manipulative? Carefully look at your driving action and be sure it is open to all possibilities and can be played in the moment as it grows and changes.

Suggested reading: [*Action! Acting Lessons for CG Animators*](http://www.amazon.com/Action-Acting-Lessons-CG-Animators/dp/0470227435)by John and Kristen Kundert-Gibbs

While intended for animators, this book offers a nice digest of many different acting techniques, traditional and otherwise. It’s a broad survey, often a touch academic, but filled with good, condensed information about Laban, Chekhov, Alba Emoting, and other techniques. I don’t endorse them all, but most are at least interesting, and knowledge is power. It also comes with some good photos and a DVD that shows the ideas of Laban, etc. quite well. It’s expensive to buy new, but can be found used for under $5 or is worth looking for at your library. You can borrow my copy if you’d like.