

THIS DISCUSSION OF THE ACTOR'S PREPARATION ACCOMPANIES AND AUGMENTS CHAPTER 21: REHEARSALS.

Actors and their director should thoroughly study the text before coming together. This creates checks and balances so that when actions, motivations, and meanings come under scrutiny, they will draw usefully partisan perceptions from everyone. Each actor sees the world of the text more from the perspective of his or her own character. Thus, the viewpoints of the different actors often spark new ideas. Not all may be compatible, so the director leads the process of coordinating and reconciling them. You will need to be evenhanded, holistic, and speaking for the best interests of the project and its general audience.

Following are the responsibilities that cast members bear at the outset of rehearsal. For inexperienced players, you may want to photocopy this section and hold a supportive discussion before they go to work. This section is addressed directly to cast members.

THE ACTOR PREPARES

Your director is your audience and also the arbiter of all that affects you. Seek feedback from your director alone, and turn a deaf ear to anything being said by crew, onlookers, or other actors.

GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES

Know at every point in every scene what circumstances and pressures are determining your character's physical and mental state. Your "givens" are the who, what, when, and where of your character. They include physical and psychological traits, social circumstances, special relationships, and your character's values and moral stance.

BACKSTORY AND BIOGRAPHY

Make up a life story for your character that supports the backstory details implied in the script. Everything your character says or does has roots in his or her past, whether near or distant, so you must develop one that is appropriate where none is specified. Your director will sometimes question you during rehearsal about your character's background, always probing when something is not yet coming across clearly.

JUSTIFICATION

Know the specific pressures that motivate your character's every action and line. This extends the process you used to build your character's biography, and helps govern his or her choices and decisions. The script usually contains the relevant clues, but sometimes what motivates your character's actions must be decided between you and your director.

OBJECTIVES

What is my character trying to get, do, or accomplish? He or she is always acting on other characters to get something (a smile, a cup of coffee, a sympathetic reaction, a rejection, a sign of guilt, a glimpse of doubt). As in life, your character is usually aware of immediate, short-term objectives, but long-term ones that emanate from deeply buried needs are likely to be unconscious.

The short-term ones must fit into the long-term ones. Define your character's every goal as:

- An active verb ("I will convince"—*not*, "I will be convincing")
- Someone or something acted upon ("the judge")
- A desired outcome ("to let me off so I can go to my brother in the hospital")

Naturally, your character will often fail to achieve his or her objectives, and this leads to the next objective ("I will plead with my lawyer to intercede so I can reach my brother before his operation").

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DEFINING ACTIONS

Giving your actions a descriptive tag helps invest each with identity and meaning. Even common actions like opening a closet door need clear taglines. “He eases the door open,” for instance, shows caution and perhaps apprehension. Substitute other active verbs—such as “jerks,” “rips,” “shoves,” “barges,” “slides,” “elbows,” “flings,” “dashes,” “heaves,” or “hurls”—and you open up a range of relationships between person and door. Tag descriptions help you locate playable action and remain consistent from take to take. They also particularize the action and reveal the user’s interior life to great effect. Authentic physical and mental actions worked out in advance also tend to liberate genuine feeling as you need it.

HOW DO OTHER CHARACTERS SEE ME? AND HOW DO I SEE MYSELF?

Each character in a drama illuminates our understanding of the others, so:

- How does each of the other characters see you?
- How do you see each of them?
- What do you have in common? What are your most important differences?
- What defenses does your character need in relation to how others see him or her?
- How does he or she rationalize this?

WHAT ARE OTHER CHARACTERS TRYING TO DO TO ME OR GET FROM ME?

During performance, listen acutely to other characters for nuances in their will and intentions, so your character stays fresh and alive. A scene shot in multiple takes and angles can remain vivid because you and your partners are working from the actual, not just from something memorized.

BEATS

As an actor sustaining a single consciousness, you must know where your character’s beats are (that is, where his or her consciousness peaks and changes). Play these strongly and be an advocate for your character.

ADAPTATION

As you pursue or defend your character’s objectives, you will read either victory or defeat into each turn of events. As obstacles shape up, you make strategic adaptations. Spotting where and how to make these adaptations helps you build a dense and changing texture for your character’s consciousness. Because your fellow actors nuance their actions differently each time, you must play to these. Maintaining this work keeps you effortlessly in focus throughout many takes.

KEEP MY CHARACTER’S INTERIOR VOICE AND MIND’S EYE GOING

Summon up mental images from your character’s past, remember and imagine in character, silently articulate your character’s inner thoughts, and see his or her mental images. This makes you continuously interesting to an audience.

KNOW MY CHARACTER’S FUNCTION

Know what each scene and the whole film are meant to accomplish, and what your character contributes to each. Don’t work to inflate or change it. Throughout rehearsal, as you come to know your character more profoundly, you will keep gaining new insights into your character’s *super-objective*. This will happen with all the cast, and will deepen your understanding of the film and its potential.

KNOW THE THEMATIC PURPOSE OF THE WHOLE WORK

Each characterization has its dramatic function and must play its part—no more and no less—in the thrust

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and super-objective of the whole work. In this, you must cooperate, not compete, with the other actors.