

Actions and Reactions Applied to Activities

Even though this chapter focused on scripted dialogue scenes and interactions with others, all of the lessons provided here can be applied to any physical activity or actor business you may be using in your scene, play, or movie.

[Example] If your character has the stage business of cleaning up a room, how many different ways can he clean that room? It depends on how he feels about the task, the reason he is cleaning, and what he is trying to express while he does so. He could be cleaning the room to show his roommate that someone needs to clean this pigpen and to express his disappointment that it has not been done yet. Perhaps he would use a 3B Postural Attitude while he cleans, applying the Action Tactics *accept*, *tolerate*, *endure*, and *bear*. To demonstrate the weight of this burden, the actor might adopt a heavy sinking posture as he uses clumsy gestures to pick up and laboriously move furniture, clothing, and debris.

As the roommate fails to acknowledge or help, perhaps the Postural Attitude switches to 1B and he does the cleaning using the tactics *belittle*, *interrogate*, and *corner*. Then the actor's gestures might have greater muscular control, with more adept movements as he throws objects, tossing them on the floor or sometimes at the roommate.

You can also consider activities that may not be related to what the character says but that provide the character with another mode of expressing his feelings.

[Example] Let's look at a different situation, with the same setting and characters, where the character has exciting news and wants to tell his roommate. Throughout the activity of cleaning, the character is looking for the right opportunity to tell his roommate his news, using Action Tactics like *investigate*, *praise*, and *cajole*. The actor could approach the room-cleaning activity with the 3A Postural Attitude, applying gestures that are light and bouncy as he playfully tosses objects up into the top of the closet, dusts high surfaces, and even lifts things off the floor with agility, verticality, and ease. While doing this, he playfully interacts with his roommate and watches him for the opportunity to bring up the subject that carries the good news.

Solving Stiffness in An American Daughter

I am directing Wendy Wasserstein's An American Daughter, an intriguing play about women coping with political life in Washington D.C. The majority of the cast in the play are young college students, attempting to play characters that are intricate and politically savvy doctors, professors, journalists, and nationally respected authors. If the actors don't find ways to physicalize the urgent needs and desires of these very heady characters, this wordy play could fall into the depths of dull, talking-heads theatre.

I am working with the lead actress playing Lyssa, a newly appointed Surgeon General. The entire action of this very talk-centered play takes place in Lyssa's home in Georgetown. The opening scene mentions that Lyssa is cleaning up after her young boys while also dealing with the news of her appointment and how her friends, family, and the public at large are responding to that news. The actress playing Lyssa is a very talented, honest actor for someone so young; however, she struggles with physicalizing her thoughts and feelings. I notice that when she engages in an activity, greater levels of expressive posture, gestures, and variations of emotional life flow from her, like no other time in her acting.

I decide to give this actress many activities throughout the play and assign Action Tactics to the various beats of these activities. The stage business of cleaning, clearing, and organizing fits perfectly within the given circumstances of the play. It is justified by her frustration with all the people and news media equipment intruding her home environment. In the beginning of the play, her cleaning has more qualities of 3A, as she is filled with the excitement of the new appointment and the great potential for making an impact on the country's health care situation. As the play progresses and the media start to take over her life, manipulating her words and actions, the character of Lyssa feels she is losing control. The straightening and organizing become more intensive, fueled by her need to have control over something. She applies 1B qualities to her actions, and her acting exhibits the physical state of someone desperately trying to retain her dignity and hold onto the life she worked hard to build over the years.

The actors in this play would give me a wry smile occasionally during rehearsals, asking “What am I cleaning or organizing now?” The props crew had a challenge in keeping up with all the objects for these activities. In the end, the actors were grateful to have these priceless extensions of their tactics and feelings. As our audiences sat, almost feeling like they were peeking into the personal lives of these Washington D.C. elites in such a private, personalized setting, they were presented with intricately layered, truthful characters engaged in passionate and physically dedicated pursuits.

Applying an Action Approach

If you would like to use an Action Approach as the MVP for your acting, follow these steps:

1. Read and investigate the entire script for clues to your character’s actions, activities, and behaviors.
2. Determine Postural Attitudes for the layers of your character’s personality, considering one for each: (1) primary, (2) social mask, and (3) shadow self. Practice embodying these attitudes, putting them into action and gesture in order to build a physical characterization.
3. Break your scenes into beats and assign Action Tactics to each beat.
4. Consider facades and masks, reactions and discoveries, and the button when scoring and rehearsing the scenes. Use third choice theory and antithetical thinking in some areas to go beyond obvious choices.
5. Go over all the checklists for establishing beats and Action Tactics to check your final work.
6. Rehearse your scenes applying Postural Attitudes, Action Tactics, and activities.
7. Invite a Side Coach to watch and remind you of your Postural Attitudes and Action Tactics (see Manifestation Chapter for more information on side coaching).
8. Once the scene is memorized and rehearsed several times with the

Action approach, check to see that aspects of thought and emotion have also clearly manifested in your performance. If not, apply exercises and techniques from those chapters to help bring these elements into your acting work.