Building Character Personality and the Social Mask

Selecting Emotional Colors is an excellent basis for building a character's personality and source of behavior. When we first attempt to describe a person, in order to share the sense of who that person is, we might initially offer a, "This is what he looks like" descriptor. But then we often launch into emotional descriptions of their states of being: "He's...goofy, a serious type, intense, a little scattered at times, a riot, very friendly, a loose cannon, or sweet." When approaching the study of a character, it is a good practice to create a list of emotion words that describe how your character behaves and what you believe are the building blocks of the character's personality.

It is also important to recognize that we tend to have a public persona, much like wearing a mask. We might adopt this social facade when around people we don't know very well. This social mask can project how we want to be perceived by others or can serve as a protective shield against those we don't yet trust. As you prepare a role, think about possible social masks and how they may differ depending on who your character is with, and where and when they may prefer to adopt a facade.

When the mask is dropped, even for brief moments, it reveals greater truths about what we are really thinking. These moments can be prolonged periods of time when we are amongst those that we know better or trust, or they can be quick flashes of gut reactions when we are caught off guard, and respond honestly. What are some possible candid reactions for your character, and what might those moments reveal?

When constructing a character's personality and the behavior associated with these choices, Emotion Tactics and Colors are essential building blocks for character development.

Exercise for Emotional Layers in Character

After examining your character's story throughout the script, see if you can identify the following:

1. A primary basic emotion (Anger, Tenderness, Fear, Sensuality, Sadness, or Happiness) that is a dominant through-line for your character's

behavior during the entire story. This would reflect your character's core, revealed when with trusted acquaintances and when not feeling threatened by others.

2. A secondary basic emotion that is your character's social mask. This is what your character prefers to exhibit in public, to those unfamiliar, and is the preferred persona for formal settings.

3. A third basic emotion that might be your character's shadow self. This is the rare emotion that rises up quickly, unannounced and uncontrollable, perhaps when your character feels threatened, tired, or insecure.

After identifying these three basic emotions and understanding how and when they would be used, you can (1) use them for an overall embodiment guide for your character and (2) use them now as a guide for selecting Emotion Tactics when scoring your scene.

In order to apply these emotion layers to character embodiment, go to the Actions chapter section on Postural Attitudes. You can practice embodying each basic emotion chosen in this exercise and find a blend of the three Postural Attitudes for your character's overall expressive behavior.

The following exercise will guide you through the process of selecting Emotion Tactics and scoring a scene. When assigning Emotion Tactics to a scene, choose ones that are grouped in the categories of the basic emotions you identified for your character's primary, facade, and shadow states. This keeps your tactic choices in line with the script research and personality preparations you made for your character.

Exercise
Applying Emotion Tactics to Open Scenes

Open scenes are created for actors to exercise their acting choices. They do not have identified characters and are written in such a way that the scenes can happen anywhere, anytime, with any combination of situations, given circumstances, and objectives. For purposes of exercising your ability to connect Emotion Tactics to text, say each of the lines in the open scene that follows with the different emotions listed for each line. With the four columns of Emotion

Tactics provided, you have four different possible readings of the open scene.

The Basic Exercise:

With a scene partner read the scene out loud, applying the Emotion Tactics from column #1. Then read the scene again with tactics in #2, #3, and #4. Notice how the intensity of the scene changes as you move across the columns of Emotion Tactics. Does one set of tactics seem to raise the scene's intensity more than any other?

To explore this exercise in greater depth, follow these instructions:

1. Stand and face your partner.

2. Each of you secretly select a column of Emotion Tactics. In order to find the tactic quickly and easily, fold the page so your Emotion Tactic column rests just to the right of the dialogue.

3. Apply this basic rule to the scene: When your partner is delivering a line to you, maintain eye contact with your scene partner and react instinctively.

4. Progress through the scene slowly, allowing a pause after each line delivery to listen and react to what was said and how it was said to you. REACT instinctively. Then, look down at your score for your Emotion Tactic and the next line.

5. Deliver the next line applying your tactic, which might be considerably different than your instinctive reaction. Continue through the entire scene in this way, discovering instinctive reactions and practicing conscious emotional actions applied to text.

Keep in mind that this is an exercise that provides plenty of practice with large emotional swings from line to line. It would be highly unusual to have a scene where there is a different Emotion Tactic for every single line.

OPEN SCENE

Dialogue	Emotion Tactics			
	#1	#2	#3	#4
A: Hi.	Lustful	Depressed	Alarmed	Bitter
B: Hello.	Annoyed	Considerate	Aroused	Festive
A: Great outfit.	Dazzled	Sarcastic	Bashful	Baffled
B: Thanks.	Coy	Aloof	Fascinated	Confused
A: Where did you get it?	Envious	Cool	Gracious	Insistent
B: It's my own.	Playful	Doubtful	Coquettish	Adamant
A: Your own?	Shocked	Amused	Disbelieving	Playful
B: Yes. Mine.	Curious	Despondent	Peevish	Obsessive
A: Wow!	Downcast	Haughty	Delighted	Raging
B: Thanks.	Cheerless	Detesting	Apprehensive	Distraught
A: I mean it.	Nervous	Sly	Benevolent	Vexed
B: Well – again, thanks.	Embarrassed	Aggravated	Lighthearted	Cowardly

Dialogue	Emotion Tactics			
	#1	#2	#3	#4
A: So? I was wondering…	Affectionate	Buoyant	Excited	Insistent
B: Wondering?	Apprehensive	Irritated	Fervent	Distrusting
A: If you could…	Doting	Amused	Aggressive	Flirtatious
B: Really?	Uneasy	Impatient	Invigorated	Thankful
A: Do you mind?	Appreciative	Astounded	Fervent	Gracious
B: No.	Mortified	Disgusted	Lascivious	Charmed
A: No? …. Or No?	Bewildered	Wicked	Anxious	Lonely
B: No.	Rigid	Delirious	Breathless	Fond
A: All right then.	Forlorn	Ferocious	Entranced	Affectionate
B: Ok.	Disdainful	Hateful	Confident	Enraptured

After reading the four variations of the open scene, discuss what was different with each reading when you changed the Emotion Tactic for each line.

1. What did you discover when you gave yourself time to instinctively react before selecting an Emotion Tactic? Can you see how at a faster pace this could translate into a scene filled with flashes of honest, emotional reactions and then consciously applied Emotion Tactics?

2. Without even planning a scenario or given circumstances, did a character relationship seem to appear simply by applying these Emotion Tactics?

Revisit the open scene, applying one column of tactics. Practice the scene very slowly at first, finding candid reactions, and then applying Emotion Tactics. During additional runs of the scene, gradually speed up the interaction process, allowing the reaction time to shorten and faster delivery of the returning line and Emotion Tactic. Eventually, run the scene, in "real time" and see how the reactions, or Emotional Colors, become minute flashes, and the Emotion Tactics merge into instinctive application with text. With this practice, you will start to see how this technique can reveal a dynamic scene with layers of feelings, reactions, and interactions. Emotional variations can provide relationship subtext, evidence of character motivation, and greater depth of a story unfolding through dialogue. The combinations are infinite, and so then is your acting range!

Stories Emerge from Emotional Scores

I hand the Applying Emotion Tactics to Text exercise to my Acting II class, and break them into teams of two. One actor plays character A, and one plays B. Each actor is to select a column of Emotion Tactics and apply them to the open scene. They are instructed to keep playing the scene over and over again, following these basic instructions:

Take your time; be sure to watch the delivery of the actor across from you; notice how you want to react impulsively. REACT. This will be the emotionally colored, honest reaction to what you are receiving from your scene partner. Then look down on the paper, pick up your Emotion Tactic and line, and play the line with the Emotion Tactic in response. This will help you see how your character could also choose a controlled, conscious Emotion Tactic, or cover up the previous honest reaction. Progress through the scene in this manner, and take your time.

The story and the chapter continues....