

contested space, or, getting out of your head (and into the room)

Drama is about what happens between people (not about what happens inside them).

Actors are made to worry a lot about being “in their heads”. However, anyone who has worked closely with actors for any length of time, and has some understanding of what good acting is, knows that actors themselves aren’t very good judges, most of the time, of whether or not they are in their heads. That’s why the “outside eye”, whether it’s a director, a teacher, a coach, or a friend with a discerning eye, is so crucial for the actor’s work.

One thing actors can do to increase the odds of not being in their head is to have a **vision** for how the character wants the scene to unfold. A vision is something like an objective, only a having a vision means that the actor can actually picture what it would look like to get their objective. What would have to happen, in real time, for the objective to be met. What would be said, what would be done. And the what would be done part **includes** what would happen **spatially**: does it mean someone would give ground? Vacate the space entirely? offer a chair? Get down on bended knee before you? What would the accomplishing of said objective look like in the space in real time?

Knowing what that would look like, **having** said vision is one thing. It’s equally important that you **play to win**, which means actively wishing for that vision to become a reality, and then engaging with the scene partner(s) to make it so, in a take-no-prisoners kind of way. In other words, like you mean it.

Another important piece of this is what Uta Hagen calls **destination**. What she is talking about with destination is the way that certain movements become **necessary**: for me to get what I want, it becomes **necessary** that I go sit next to you on the couch. For me to get what I want, it becomes **necessary** that I go and look at the bookshelf, so as not to appear too needy, or too confrontational. Destination means the way in which physical positions in a space seem to call out to us, to demand that we move to occupy them. But it's also true that physical positions **outside** of a space can demand movement as well: as it becomes clear that you are not going to join me on my mission, I may start to feel a tremendous urge to go to my friend's place across town, who may be a more persuadable candidate. The first step of which is making my way out of your apartment and out onto the street, where I can get an uber. So if the scene is in your apartment, then the door to your apartment starts to **call to me**, it beckons, it extends a kind of tractor beam that pulls me toward it. This tractor beam may switch on, even at a low intensity, long before the point in the scene when I actually go through the door. At the first flicker of a suggestion of a hint that you might not be the one who is going to join in my crusade, I may start to feel that tractor beam, but at a very low intensity. Still, that keeps the door to the apartment within my "circle of concentration", as Stanislavsky called it, within the contours of my awareness. Then, as more signals emerge, as it starts to seem less and less likely that you are going to become Robin to my Batman, that destination of the door "heats up", the tractor beam becomes stronger, and harder to resist. It's only at the moment when you break out into a rousing *a capella* rendition of "It Ain't Me, Babe", that I surrender to the tractor beam and walk out the door— (and this is important:) on my way (hopefully!) to something better.

So here's the thing: if you have a vision, and/or a destination is exerting its power over you, and therefore that

destination is on your mind. then you are *not in your head.* You are *in the space*. Your awareness is on the space and what should happen in it, or is partly involved with something outside the space whose siren's song is calling you to it. But you are not thinking about what you look like, what emotion you should have, how you should say a line in order to have said emotion, etc. You are not *managing your self-presentation*, which is what being in your head really means. You are engaged, mentally and physically, with the other actors and with the space around you. And that physical engagement is important: to use Uta Hagen's word, that physical engagement results in the *animation* of the actor's body. The body becomes oriented and engaged with the circumstances and the unfolding scene, rather than being stiff or fidgety. The actor becomes a *contender* within the space of the scene. And that is always something to behold.

Actors perennially want getting out of their heads to be something that *just happens* if they *focus* and are determined and want it badly enough. That's not what it is, and that's a good thing, although it may take a while to get that. In the end, it's much better that you can identify things to focus on and then focus on them and have *that* be the way you get out of your head, rather than having it be a matter of just wanting it really badly and being determined and focusing. Because everyone else out there wants it really badly, and plenty of them have determination, and more than a few can focus on something. But they don't all have real techniques that can help them get the job done.

And that means that if you do what it takes to get those techniques, which is, admittedly, hard work, but nonetheless, if you do what it takes to get those techniques, you *can* distinguish yourself. And that's a very good thing indeed.