

Should I Stay or Should I Go?, or, acting an inner conflict

One of the central insights of Stanislavsky is that by focusing on the goal(s) of the character in a particular situation, an actor can go a long way towards entering the role and embodying the character's experience. The term of art for such a goal is an *objective*. In the approach I teach at AWAS, we think in two types of objectives: we can call these two types of objectives *needs* and *plans*. Basically, a character has a need, and from that need, forms a plan about how to get that need met. In my approach, the game is to keep the need primary, and not allow it to be eclipsed by the plan, which is usually easier to spot and simpler to pursue.

Pursuing the plan always has to be seen as a means of getting the need met.

One good thing about this approach is that it allows a character (and actor) to adapt to circumstances which change as the script proceeds to change her plan, but to still have a single need which she pursues. It's perhaps hard to explain why having a single need is valuable, but suffice to say it has tremendous organizing power, ultimately simplifying what an actor needs to focus on in her performance. With this setup, we get to have our cake and eat it too: the ability to change plans affords us flexibility, and the single need grants our work *continuity* and ultimately *integrity*.

The question arises, though: what about a situation where a character is conflicted or ambivalent? He wants to have his cake and eat it too, but unhappily for him, in his case, there is no way to have both. How should the actor approach this?

The danger here is that the actor becomes focused on his conflicting *feelings*. In the approach I teach, the only thing

approaching a feeling that the actor should focus on is his *need*. He can *have* feelings, such as sadness or joy or regret or anger, but he always directs his attention to his need and his plan, and the feelings come and go as they come and go. They are never the appropriate object of his attention.

But in a situation where a character is ambivalent, the temptation can become very strong for an actor to focus on her conflicting feelings. This would be a mistake, and would enmire the actor in a morass of self-consciousness (as focusing on her emotional experience always will). What is the way out of this impasse?

The answer is to take the so-called inner conflict and translate it into an outer one. If someone is conflicted, he is conflicted, ultimately, about *what to do*. Should I open door number one, or do number two? Should I stay here with you and make the best of it, or go home and lick my wounds over how you have rejected and betrayed me? There is usually some way of seeing an emotional conflict in spatial terms, such as what I have described.

But to give this solution legs, as it were, we need another couple of concepts. One is Uta Hagen's concept of *destination*. "The reason for movement is destination!" is her refrain in the chapter of *A Challenge for the Actor* entitled "Animation". What she means by this, on first encounter, seems to be the familiar admonition that when an actor moves in a scene, the movement needs to be coupled with an intention to go *somewhere in particular*, it can't be an arbitrary movement utterly devoid of purpose. An important insight that helps actors overcome the tendency to wander around the space aimlessly, often as a way of alleviating the discomfort of encounter with the partner or of being watched.

But this is only the beginning of the usefulness of Hagen's concept of *destination*. We can talk about destinations "heating up": as the prospect of physically moving towards a

destination becomes more appealing, we say that the destination “heats up”. The actor should start to imagine it as exerting a well-nigh magnetic influence on her physical being, drawing her to the destination in question like the tractor beam from Star Wars.

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Now, back to the actor attempting to act a character’s ambivalence or inner conflict. One side of this conflict is typically: there is something I want from my partner. The other side of this conflict is: nah, this is never going to work with this person (the partner), time to cut my losses and go somewhere else to get my need met. During the scene, as the prospect of going elsewhere begins to look like a better choice, the destination in question “heats up.” The destination in question is often outside the space in which the scene is taking place; in other words, deciding to go towards that destination often involves exiting. Even as that destination heats up, though, the prospect of getting the need met from the current partner remains, so the actor/character finds himself “caught”: he is being pulled, tractor-beam like, toward the destination that is elsewhere, but at the same time, there is still some hope of getting his need met from his partner. So typically, he continues to press the partner to do what would be necessary to meet his need, but as the external destination seems more and more like the better prospect, the “tractor beam” grows stronger and stronger. In this situation, the actor is using Stanislavsky’s notion of the *circle of attention*, described in the “Concentration of Attention” chapter of *An Actor Prepares*. The actor’s *primary focus* will typically be the partner, but the actor has to keep the destination (usually outside the space of the scene) in his awareness, in his *circle of awareness*. Keeping the destination in the actor’s circle of awareness will start to produce subtle physical changes in the body of the actor: the body will instinctively begin to prepare to move: he will shift

his weight, and perhaps eventually, start to orient his feet towards going towards the external destination. These changes should not be consciously and deliberately enacted by the actor; rather, they come about instinctively or unconsciously as the negotiation with the partner unfolds and the prospect of going towards the offstage exit becomes more and more appealing.

Ultimately, the character will decide to stay or go, depending on how the exchange with the partner goes, and, ultimately, what the script dictates. But what has been accomplished here is the reframing of an "inner conflict" as an outer one, thus getting the actor's attention off of herself and her emotional life, and *onto* the appropriate objects of her concern in the physical world.

See what I did there?