

the visceral difference

In the much-read first chapter from Richard Boleslavsky's *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, Boleslavsky says that audiences watching an actor exercising her capacity for concentration correctly should "know and feel immediately" that what that audience is witnessing is more important than whatever concerns that audience members brought into the event with them. The importance of what the actor is undergoing must somehow be made evident by the actor's engagement in her craft. No small order.

The teachers I encountered at the Yale School of Drama asserted that what makes this effect possible, this immediate recognition on the part of the audience, independent of plot or story elements, is the *visceral* activation of the actor.

If you look up the word "visceral" in the dictionary, you will likely see something like this "pertaining to primitive or elemental emotion", and indeed, that is what the word means in contemporary usage. But the etymology tells the tale: the word originates with the Latin word *viscera*, which refers to the digestive tract, the intestines, or, more colloquially, the gut.

Visceral activation means that in some way, the actor's gut is involved in what he or she is doing. In our approach, this is achieved through working with the notion of objective in a particular way: objective has to be understood as visceral need. I have discussed this distinction at length on this blog, for example, [here](#). But I'd like to say a bit about what the visceral difference looks like and sounds like, that is, what are the signs that such activation has been achieved?

Actors do two things more than anything else: they talk and they listen. When a viscerally activated actor talks, they seem to be speaking from the gut, from the heart, from the core. Perhaps the most evident example of what this is like

in the current moment is the current occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Whatever you think of Donald Trump, he has a reputation for saying what is on his mind and in his heart in a tell-it-like-it-is way. There is an immediacy to the way he speaks, and this is part of what accounts for his appeal. When a viscerally activated actor speaks, he is making use of his abdominal core muscles, most importantly, the transverse abdominis, also known as the “skinny jeans” muscles, the muscles you need to tighten in order to squeeze into skinny jeans. These muscles are deep in the layers of musculature, and they help to stabilize the spine and also interact with the diaphragm. When these muscles are activated as part of the process of verbalizing, the actor appears to be speaking with the intention of impacting the partner: there is a palpable determination to be heard and understood. An audience understands this immediately. And it has nothing to do with projecting or being loud: these muscles can be used when speaking quietly, but the effect is the same: the actor who is activated in this way wants her words to *land* on her partner, and make something happen.

So much for the talking. The listening of a viscerally-activated actor is a bit more difficult to describe. In the process that I teach, we attempt to articulate a visceral need that the actor can embrace and pursue as a character in a given situation. This need is understood as living in the gut. This means that the actor needs to ground her attention in her gut, right behind the navel. It’s like the actor has an eye or an ear there, right behind the navel, and all of the listening needs to happen from there. This is “listening with the need”. Everything that the partner does is immediately evaluated as either meeting the actor’s visceral need, or refusing to meet it, and this evaluation affects the actor’s next utterance, in the next moment. This is challenging to do, because when an actor does this, she gives up the ability to monitor herself and how she is being perceived by her audience. She can’t watch herself with her awareness placed

in her belly, behind her navel. This requires courage, but it is so satisfying for audiences because an actor engaging in this seems utterly sincere and honest.

If you consider all of this in relationship to [mirror neurons](#) we can begin to see why a viscerally engaged actor is so rewarding for audiences to watch: when the actor is viscerally activated, then through the mirror neurons of the audience, they feel themselves touched or moved in a very deep place.

Achieving visceral activation, even one time, is quite challenging. Becoming an actor who habitually and instinctively works from the gut is more challenging by orders of magnitude, but is a very worthy goal, as such an actor can bring interest and life to virtually any script. An awesome power, to be sure. Like any awesome power, it comes with great responsibility.