

Action Is as Theatre Does

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Every big-talking, pen-wielding theatre theorist since we slaughtered goats in Athens has announced the imperative use and divine power of action in performance. But if theatre is supposed to be so active and powerful, why am I napping and making grocery lists in my head during most of the plays I see? Why would I rather file my taxes than go see one more play filled with attractive, predictable pretty-boys delivering lines and indulging in tears?

Where's the action in today's American theatre? Because it ain't on the stage, baby. Instead, very talented people deliver well-executed, tidy performances – maybe with a skillful moment of crying or a little impassioned yelling. We watch moments that actors discovered and nailed to the stage floor weeks before we meet them as an audience. We see repetition, not action. We see showing, not doing. We see something dead and, if we're lucky, something pretty.

And I am so, so tired of it.

WHO PUT THE ACT IN ACTING?

Aristotle, was an argumentative man who, among other things, wrote the manual on modern poetry and drama, *Poetics*. He laid down some heavy rules about the pathos of tragic plot and the length of a good play. He also said that action does not exist for character, but characters exist to serve action – effectively placing the pursuit of a specific goal above any other single element in a play.

Konstantin Stanislavski, the big daddy of acting as we know it today, later defined action by what a character wants. Stanislavski was a Russian theatre director who founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 and then spent his life fighting the good fight against hokey happy/sad faces. He devised a system for teaching actors to relate to psychological truth and sensory experience: He related action to doing and demanded actors get in touch with their inner desires to drink vodka or knit sweaters.

Vsevolod Meyerhold was a star pupil of Stanislavski's – that is, until he left to develop his own theatre company and ideas about doing things. Meyerhold invented Biomechanics, a method of physical actor training, and argued that action was related to the body in space. Still connecting action to a character's desire, Meyerhold claimed to know action when he saw it. How? Through economy of movement and stability of purpose. If you're rocking back and forth and you don't know what to do with your hands, guess what? You left your action in the bathroom.

The family tree of American acting took root in 1931 when Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg founded the soon-to-be influential Group Theatre. Among the company's original 28 members was Sanford Meisner, who, after the Group Theatre dissolved in 1941, went on to become one of the most revered acting teachers of all time. For Meisner, the foundation of acting (and, consequently, action) was the reality of doing. That is to say, acting is not *looking* like you are shaving your brother's head. No, no. Acting is *actually* shaving your brother's head.

All of these people were very smart. And they are all indirectly to blame for how much theatre sucks these days. In their many nuanced definitions, each of them, and so many others, have effectively diluted action and rendered it almost meaningless.

WHAT'S YOUR ACTION?

In the world of theatre, play-making and performance, action has so many definitions that now the term gets thrown around like a hot rock in a one-armed game of catch. During a rehearsal, the word action can be used to describe almost anything. And is.

Every actor, director and vocal coach invokes action with the lyricism of troubadour and the specificity of an infomercial. Everyone knows exactly what it means. It means business. It means arc. It means purpose. It means the way your feet angle when you cross from stage left to stage right. It means the way you answer the phone. It means, what do you love? It means, what would you die for? It means, it should look like this. It means, "I can't find a better word for what I'm trying to describe so let's call it action and you'll think I know what I'm talking about."

Action is expansive in use and corrupted in meaning. Like boutique Buddhism.

So, I've been asking around, drifting through theatre circles and rehearsal settings, drinking Jameson and talking shop with actors and directors working in Seattle. The responses have been impassioned and vague:

"Action is the driving force behind a character's behavior," answered a local leading man before he walked into a rehearsal at Seattle Center.

"Action is at the center of the play; it is the big question the play's asking," a middle-aged, well-respected director told me after a reading of her new one-act play.

"Action is the character's overall purpose, her greatest desire," claimed a merlot-sipping ingénue the day after the Academy Awards.

"Action is the physical task that the character is invested in completing, like darning a pair of socks or loading a shotgun," declared a good friend of mine during a conversation about Dutch strippers and Teatro Zinzanni.

Um, great. Cool. Action sounds kind of important.

So, let's say I'm Hamlet. And I'm trying to convince my best friend, Horatio, to help me murder my step-dad. I mean, my uncle. I mean, the guy who killed my dad and married my mom. I mean, the circumstances are a little complicated – and I need to figure out how to be believable and engaging. Showing my mean look, delivering my well-yelled lines and demonstrating how sad and confused I have become are going to hold an audience's interest for about 85 seconds. After that, I better have something juicy to *do* in the next two hours, or the audience is going to congratulate Ophelia for drowning herself in the lake.

WE KNOW IT WHEN WE SEE IT

If you've seen any theatre at all, I promise you've been subjected to some version of violent incompetence. Maybe you couldn't articulate why you thought the play was boring, but you didn't

care about the characters and eventually stopped listening to them. The actors probably weren't listening either. Chances are they were waiting to talk, practicing their white-toothed grin or thinking about their upcoming death scene.

Yet there is nothing more compelling than real human experience onstage. Nothing. It is breathtaking, simple, delicious and woefully honest. We know it when we see it.

And we see it rarely. The moment in the second act when the hero blanks on his next line and the entire cast is immediately, drastically present with a razor-sharp focus on what's going to happen next. Or when the leading lady pops her zipper and has to figure out how to keep her dress from falling off while she pleads for her life. *That* is doing. *That* is human beings struggling, without a foregone conclusion of what's going to happen next or how it will be orchestrated. That is action.

As theatre artists we have no responsibility but to violently pursue and create that kind of living, breathing truth for an audience. Everything else is noise and decoration. Action is our job and we need to deliver on it, if we want audiences to continue to pay inflated prices for uncomfortable seats and concession coffee.

TO DO, FEEL OR UNDERSTAND

The most useful and most difficult definition of action I know I learned from Jon Jory, founder of two major regional theatres and professor of drama at the University of Washington. Jory insists action is what you want the *other* person to do, feel or understand. It is wanting your mom to finally thank you for the diamond tiara you sent her on her birthday. It is wanting your boyfriend to buckle and admit that he's been borrowing your favorite socks. It is wanting your boss to wipe that shit-eating grin off his face and feel a little guilty for spilling orange juice on your favorite Grisham novel.

This definition creates a hostile environment for ego and self-obsession on stage. An actor totally focused on her scene partner *cannot* subject us to a parade of emotional baggage or a mundane celebration of faces and postures. This is a huge shocker, especially for any of you poor chumps who've ever dated an actor, but we tend to be utterly self-obsessed with the way we look, the way we sound, the way we dress, the way other people see us and the way we see ourselves.

This is the stuff that shitty acting is made of. An actor focused on self will never have the impulse or the balls to get dirty, ugly or disliked on stage. She will never attempt to actually *do* anything because she will never risk failure. This actor is doomed to be beautiful and boring. But by focusing on our scene partner and what we want *them* to do, we are relieved of actor self-involvement and its painfully mediocre consequences.

PLEASE DO

Theatre is not film. It is not wrapped up in a shiny box and dispersed the world over. It is strictly confined by time and space. It is unreliable. If I want to see expansive scenery and beautiful acting executed the same way every single time, I will rent *Brokeback Mountain* and clear an afternoon. If I want to see an event occur in real time and in a way that is strictly, utterly unrepeatable, I will seek out some good theatre and cross my fingers. I will wish to see something happen for the first and only time.

Action on stage allows an actor to embrace the volatility that defines live performance. It demands us to be present and sincere. It insists on happening right now. And now. And now. And at 8:34 on

a Thursday night while I am plotting to slaughter my step-dad in front of a room full of strangers. Action makes the plot new – shiny and terrifying for you, the audience, and me, the actor. Action does not let us know for sure what will happen next. And it leaves me no choice but to move forward and find out.

My action is to get you to do, feel and understand. Do continue to go to the theatre, even if you don't get lucky all the time. Feel the explosive and revolutionary possibility that exists when, in this age of iPod ear buds and faceless chat rooms, a group of people gathers in a big, dark room to witness and participate in an event. Understand that, for all its flaws and yawns, theatre is essential to our culture. It is a barometer, a mirror, a three-dimensional playground for our imagination and a celebration of what is unapologetically human.

For all of our technology, speed and information, we will never find a way to replicate the true action of live performance. It is sweaty, dangerous, unpredictable and over as soon as it is born. Watching a person risk violent failure right in front of you – because she needs something so badly she can feel it in her skin and under her nails – *that* is worth 90 minutes and the price of admission.