Acting: How to Harness Your Creative Power ~ Enact Characters, Scenes, & Find Your Artistic Voice | The 2026 A. David Tobin Seminar in the Arts

Faculty: Theo Black, Senior Lecturer, Performing & Media Arts and Professional Actor

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Schedule: Monday - Friday, 9-12 and 1:30-3:30, except Wednesday afternoon.

Location: Black Box Theater, Schwartz Performing Arts Center, Collegetown

make sure you're perfectly still." She assured him again that she would never move on his laugh line. This went on for about a week and finally he stormed backstage, and started yelling, "Why are you against me? Why do you want me to fail? You're jealous of me getting the laugh!" And she said, "Alfred, if you want the laugh, stop asking for the *laugh* and start asking for the *tea*."

The lesson here is that in order to have a healthy relationship with the audience, you don't try to get the audience to love you, you don't try to get them to laugh or to cry, you just play the reality of the scene. Even someone as gifted and dedicated as Alfred Lunt fell into the understandable intoxication of encouraging the audience to love *him* and, without meaning to, he abandoned his character, his relationship, and the play. Every actor learns this between one time and a hundred times in an acting career: don't court the audience, play the play!

from Larry Moss, "Intent to Live"

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Destination, Business, and Gesture: Creating Physical Life for Your Character

When Helen Hunt came to work on her audition for *As Good as It Gets,* she told me that the director, James Brooks, wanted her for the role but was afraid that her intelligence was too much in the forefront of her personality. Brooks worried that the audience wouldn't accept her as a career waitress without other aspirations. He sent her away to do homework to prove him wrong.

What I suggested to Helen was a technique that was created by the teacher Michael Chekhov: to find the center of energy in the character's body. I asked Helen, what does your character do for a living? She told me she was a full-time waitress. I asked her where the center of her body's energy was as a waitress. Her answer was, "My feet." So I suggested that she pull all of her energy into her feet, as far away from her brain as she could get, and we agreed that she should try to walk as though her feet were the main energy of her survival. Almost instantly, the walk for Carol Connelly was born. Her feet turned out to the side

and although her walk was strong, it was almost a waddle. Needless to say, Helen got the part. In other words, once the choice was made, a physical character was born out of a technique that bypassed the brain and went directly to body impulse. As this example shows, sometimes something as simple as finding the character's physical life based on the character's job can be the key to finding physical behavior for the entire performance. This walk becomes the character's walk, and because you're doing it, it changes your point of view—the way you see and interact with the world when you act the part.

There was another dimension to Carol Connelly's walk: the actor's personal experience. While Helen was working on the part, a close relative was dying. She told me she felt she was charging down the hospital corridors like a general in the army, as if her energy could save her relative's life. She related that purposefulness to Carol's desire to save her son's life in the film.

Just as you are physically alive and expressive of who you are every moment of every day, as an actor you must make your character physically alive and expressive in their way.

I want to emphasize this because I find it's missing in many of the actors who come to study with me. You have to learn how to discover your character's physicality and deem it as vital to your craft. Some actors believe that if they experience something emotional themselves, then it will be communicated to the audience automatically and that alone will make the audience feel connected to them emotionally. *Wrong!*

Emotion unconnected to physical life doesn't reach the audience and doesn't teach them about the human being they're watching. Even if a character is deeply physically repressed, it's the physical repression—the absence of movement—that illuminates the interior of the character. In an extreme close-up, your inner imagery and thoughts can be enough to connect an audience to you emotionally, but once you're in a medium shot, or if you're on the stage, you better find physical life associated with that emotion to express it.

When I observe young actors who start in television dramas or films and have never been on a stage before in a demanding role, I am appalled and amazed by their helplessness, their inability to choose interesting physical behavior that engages the audience's imagination and emotions and helps to clarify the author's intent—the actor's job. They stand on a stage saying their lines as if they're waiting for a bus that never comes. It's as if they're expecting a director to give them a technique for physicalizing a character that they should have learned before they started working professionally.

The three primary ways of creating physical life for your character are *destination, business,* and *gesture*. Physical destination on a stage or soundstage is where you move your body to, how you move it (for example, Helen's walk as Carol Connelly), and why you move it. Moving your body around a stage helps the audience feel and understand what you say out loud (text) and what your character holds back (subtext). Business is any kind of activity that engages your body in something other than moving from one place to another. Sometimes you create physical business to be interesting and to fill in a space where the writing lacks excitement, but the business you create must always make sense with your character development and with the text. Business can also illuminate text and subtext, as does gesture. Gesture, as I mean it, is an unspoken, bold physical choice that may or may not be repeated throughout the play or film; gesture is psychological, and it helps the audience to understand something about the character's inner life.

To be creative and exciting with the tools of physical destination, business, and gesture, you must deeply understand the material you are acting and begin to see your body as an exquisite conduit directly connected to the audiences' guts. You want to heat up the minds and feelings of the audience, and nothing does that better than unique, idiosyncratic, specific human physicality.

In *Boys Don't Cry,* Hilary Swank as Teena Brandon has a gesture that sets up her entire performance. Teena looks at herself in the mirror in her jeans and cowboy boots and tips her hat as a young man would to a young lady, with gallantry and a wink. This private moment filled with joy confirms her own belief in her masculinity and makes us root for her. We wish her a happy life in the sexuality she is choosing to impersonate.

Truly embodying a character takes you beyond the mechanistic way that the terms *destination, business,* and *gesture* are sometimes used. During the time I worked with Hilary, she cut her hair blunt and short, lost a good deal of weight, worked out at the gym to build muscle, and chose to live as a boy for a month until she could pass in society as a young man. She stuffed her crotch—which in the world of cross-dressing, the world she was entering as Teena Brandon, is called packing—and walked as an older adolescent boy, using her shoulders with a kind of swagger. Hilary had been recently married and her husband, Chad Lowe, agreed to introduce her as his younger brother when they went out together.

She was shocked by what she discovered. Hilary looked so androgynous that no one could tell which sex she was, so people tended to avoid her and look at her disapprovingly. This was extremely painful to her and made her understand the isolation and loneliness that Teena Brandon had experienced her entire life. Hilary had always been seen as an attractive young woman with a beautiful body; she had great ease relating to other women and to men as a woman. Once that identity was masked, she began to believe the life of Teena Brandon. Living as a boy in this way took courage and commitment, but it was the only way Hilary could gain insight into Teena Brandon's courage and commitment and also into Teena's joy. Hilary also experienced the joy any actor feels when they have successfully transformed themselves. She was absolutely determined to succeed, and succeeding meant a 100 percent commitment to a physical choice that changed her entire view of the world. And, as Hilary said, "If I couldn't believe myself as Brandon, how in the hell would the audience believe me?"

One of the physical behaviors we discovered for Teena Brandon as her "male" self, Brandon, was how she sneaked looks at the men around her to see if they believed she was one of them. She kept checking out their reactions, and as they accepted her, Teena's confidence as Brandon grew. One of the most touching and creative aspects of Hilary's performance is Brandon's gentle, chivalrous courting of Lily Tisdale (Chloë Sevigny), the woman he falls in love with, and his courtesy to all the women he meets. There isn't a scene in *Boys Don't Cry* that Hilary and I didn't break down and explore with physical choices before the cameras ever started rolling.

With Michael Clarke Duncan in *The Green Mile,* one of the important choices Michael and I came up with for the introduction of the giant John Coffey was his frightened, childlike exploration of the eyes of the prison guards to see which one might strike him first. We added a gesture, too: he offered his huge hand to the guards as if to say, "I am no threat to you. Please don't hurt me." The gentleness of this gesture established in the audience's mind a tremendous tenderness and vulnerability that contrasted with Coffey's huge body and face. It was as if John Coffey was gently reaching out to the audience as well as the guards, saying, "Please don't hurt me."

Helen's, Hilary's, and Michael's performances have in common a strong sense of physical self that contributed to the audience's understanding of the inner emotional life of the characters and identified them

from the moment they hit the screen. My challenge is to get you excited by this part of your acting. Since I am dramatic and theatrical by nature, I use provocative and stern attacks, but that energy is passion generated by my watching life and watching great actors who learned from life the art of physical acting. So now you challenge me back and say, "All right, fine, but how do I learn?" First lesson: observe life. Second lesson: observe the best acting you can find.

Begin by spending an entire day being aware and keenly observant of your body, how it feels and how it moves. What do you do when you get up in the morning? What's the first thing you do? What's the second thing you do? How do you get dressed for the day? How do you walk out the door? Where do you go? How do you behave when you're "doing nothing"—just waiting in a line?

Every day I wait in line at my neighborhood coffee shop for my morning fix. Some mornings I'm very sad and mad because I've woken up from a dream that upsets me or I'm just in a lousy mood. I don't want to talk to or see anybody. I put on my dark glasses and my baseball cap, I grab my *New York Times,* and walk into Peet's Coffee. There are hoards of people there, also waiting for their fix, and I hate them, and I stand in line, and I want to be invisible. I don't want to be there, but I do want my coffee. So I enter the shop (lugubriously), get in line (resentfully), I shift my weight (impatiently), and move up (oh so slowly) toward nirvana, my coffee. Notice that my physical destination has an emotional point of view that is described with an adverb, saying not only where I move but emotionally how I move (lugubriously, resentfully, impatiently, oh so slowly). On those days, my business is shifting my weight, pulling away from people who get too close, burying myself in the *New York Times* theater section, and pulling my baseball cap down around my eyes. If a camera got a close-up of my eyes, it would capture my sadness and anger, but it wouldn't be as interesting as seeing how I try to hide those feelings through my physical behavior. Of course, on days when the sun is shining and the birds are singing in my heart and life goes well, I enter (jauntily), without my sunglasses, I wave and smile (exuberantly) at the people I know, and wait (patiently) to be served.

Besides observing yourself closely, be keenly observant of others. Keep a notebook with you at all times, and as you discover an interesting behavior that catches your eye, record it. Laurence Olivier, England's reigning acting king for over half a century, kept a file in his head of