

**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

**Week One:** July 5 – 11, 2026

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

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

# Acting

## Physical Choices Make Characters Memorable

by BRUCE LECURE

Dustin Hoffman and Kevin Costner are both very talented and famous actors. They are both stars. They both command millions of dollars for each film in which they appear. I respect the talent of both of these actors but find their work quite uneven.

How are their talents uneven? I consider Dustin Hoffman to be a superstar, in a higher acting "league" than Kevin Costner. Why? Versatility! Consider the roles that both of them play. Dustin Hoffman's roles have included a 121-year old man in *Little Big Man*, a mousy convict in *Papillon*, an aging door-to-door salesman in *Death of a Salesman*, a successful female soap opera star in *Tootsie*, an autistic adult in *Rainman* and a fairy-tale pirate in *Hook* (the list goes on and on). Kevin Costner's roles have included a CIA officer in *No Way Out*, a novice farmer in *Field of Dreams*, a civil war officer in *Dances With Wolves*, the title character in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and an escaped convict in *A Perfect World*.

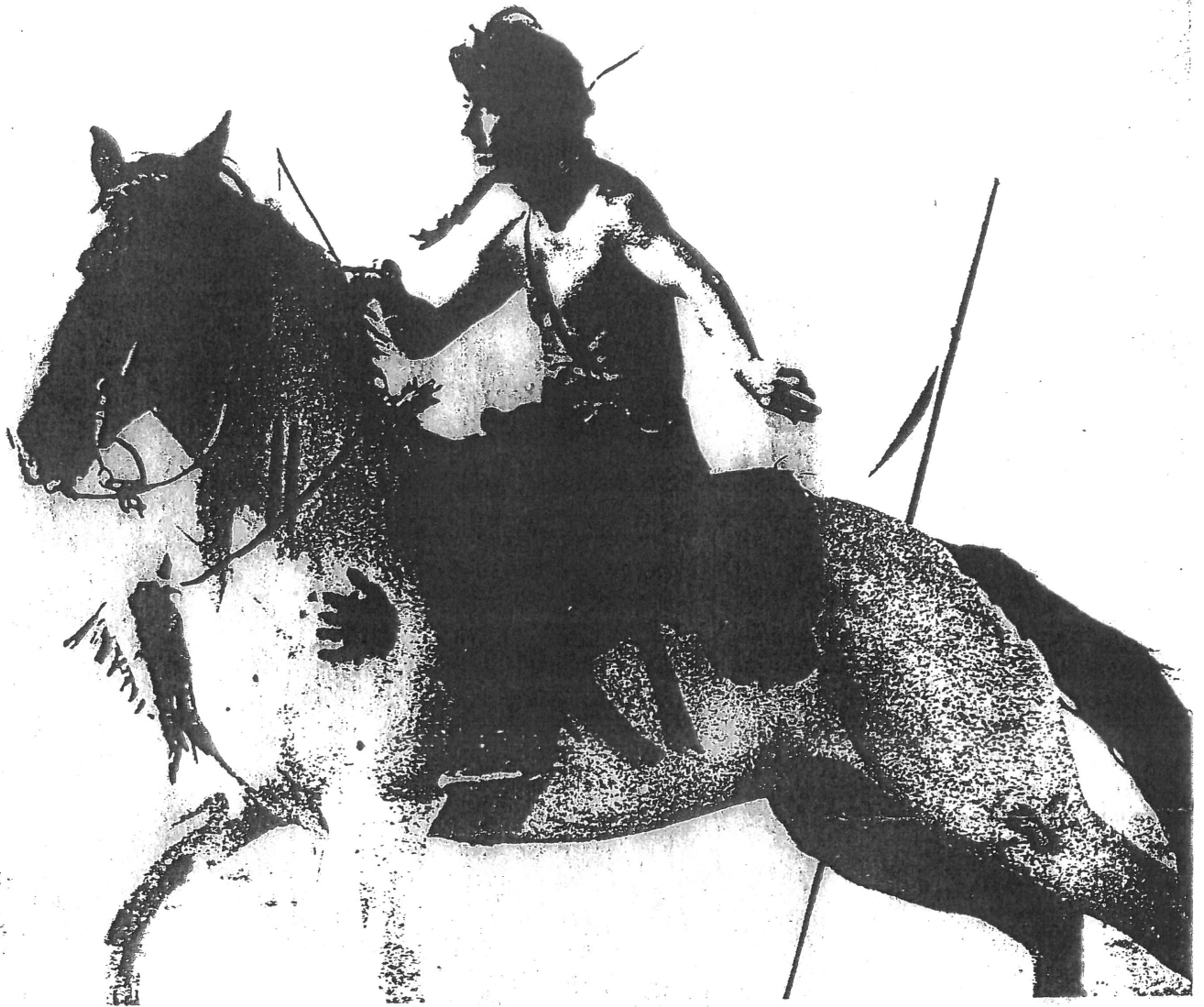
If you examine the variety of roles and character types that Hoffman has played over the years, in comparison to the roles Costner has played, you see a startling difference. Hoffman transforms himself into a completely different and unique human being — different stance, different posture, different walk, different physical quirks and different voice. Costner's characters, on the other hand, are different and unique only through the words they say, the costumes they wear and the situations in which they find themselves.

Think about each of the above Costner films. Each of his characters walked, stood, gestured and talked practically the same — the way that

Bruce Lecure is the movement specialist at the University of Miami's B.F.A. Conservatory Training Program in Coral Gables, Florida. He also is a professional actor and director.



Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is one of the many vastly different characters that Dustin Hoffman has played over the years. Hoffman uses physical choices to transform himself into a completely different human being for each role.



Dustin Hoffman, shown here in *Little Big Man*, creates a different stance, different posture, different physical quirks and different voice for each character he portrays.

Costner himself walks, stands, gestures and talks. To Costner's credit, Hollywood wants him to "sell" the image and personality of Kevin Costner rather than stretch himself to play characters beyond his image and personality. In other words, Hollywood has cast Costner into his own "type." Why? The reason is the amount of money Costner can make them if he plays the same type. For Hollywood investors it is a safer bet.

Hoffman also makes Hollywood investors a ton of money but he has not allowed Hollywood to cast him into a "type." He chooses to play many different ages, genders, and psychologically based characters. Dustin Hoffman is truly a versatile actor!

One of the key ways that these two stars prepare differently for their roles is in the use of physical choices. Hoffman makes very specific physi-

## Examples of Actors Who Created Characters with Clear Physical Centers

Christopher Reeve in <i>Superman</i>	Positive (+) Chest
Jodie Foster in <i>Nell</i>	Negative (-)/Positive (+) Chest
Kevin Kline in <i>French Kiss</i>	Positive (+) Eyes
Dennis Quaid in <i>Breaking Away</i>	Positive (+) Legs
Michael Keaton in <i>Beetlejuice</i>	Positive (+) Hands/Arms
Randy Quaid in <i>Of Mice and Men</i>	Negative (-) Head/Forehead
Dustin Hoffman in <i>Rainman</i>	Positive (+) Head/Forehead
Dustin Hoffman in <i>Papillon</i>	Negative (-) Eyes

to the construction or lack of construction in that area.

Please note that a physical center need not be obvious or overdone to be effective. A subtle change of the body can be just as effective as an extreme choice. In addition, remember that a "positive" or "negative" physical center refers to musculature involvement — not a judgment as to whether the particular part of the body is "good" or "bad."

Each part of the body relates to different emotional and psychological traits. In order to match the body of the character to the emotional life of the character as called for in the script, you must first understand the different qualities that each section or part of the body can exude. These qualities will differ by whether the section or part of the body is filled with tension (negative [-] physical center) or is released and open (positive [+] physical center).

Take some time now to look at the chart to the right. In it, I explain the possible emotional qualities corresponding to characters with either positive or negative physical centers.

Now, explore different positive and negative physical centers for yourself. Walk around with a positive (+) chest (open and released). How do you feel? How has the rest of your body changed due to this specific physical center? How are you breathing differently, feeling differently, thinking differently? What kind of character might this be? What might he or she do for a living? How old is this character? How does this character feel about life? Now immediately switch to a negative (-) chest (closed and tension-filled). How does this feel completely different? What kind of character might this be?

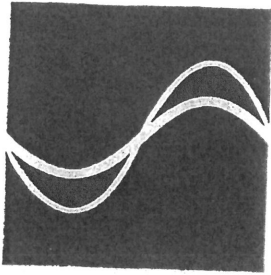
While it is possible for a character to have more than one physical center, there should be one physical center leading at any given time. It is also possible for physical centers to change as a character develops emotionally. A good example of this is in Jodie Foster's recent film *Nell*. Foster's character of a young, naive hermit begins with a physical center of a negative (-) chest. Then, as she becomes socialized and begins to trust other humans, this physical center changes to a positive (+) chest. Her character has now become more open and emotionally receptive, thus the physical change.

Our bodies and the physical choices that we have made as human beings have been shaped for as long as we have been alive by many factors: our role models growing up (parents, guardians, etc.); our life experiences; the effects of our environment, and the careers we have chosen. Our

mind have been developed by the same factors.

Creating a character means exploring the past experiences as well as the present emotions of the character in the scene and making the proper physical and emotional choices to bring this character to life in a unique

Character's Physical Center	Possible Emotional Qualities
Positive (+) Chest	Strength, Courage, Caring, Giving, Full of Pride
Negative (-) Chest	Cowardice, Weak, Hiding, Loner, Frightened, Low Self-Image, False or Exaggerated Pride
Positive (+) Stomach	Lover of Food, Wanted Pregnancy, Taker of Space, Happy with Size of Body
Negative (-) Stomach	Food as a Weakness, Negative Pregnancy, Unhappy with Body Weight
Positive (+) Groin	Sexual Prowess, Phallic Pride, Exaggerated or Fake Macho Image
Negative (-) Groin	Asexuality, Impotency, No Sexual Self-Image
Positive (+) Legs	Agility, Strength in Movement, Power in Movement
Negative (-) Legs	Insecurity, Uncoordinated
Positive (+) Hands/Arms	Cockiness, a "Toucher" or "Feeler"
Negative (-) Hands/Arms	Insecurity, Closed-Off Emotionally, Impatient
Positive (+) Head or Forehead	Large Mental Capacity, a "Thinker"
Negative (-) Head or Forehead	Small Mental Capacity, a "Slow" or "Dumb" Person
Positive (+) Eyes	A Visually-Based Person, Extremely Open Person Hiding Nothing (perhaps naïve)
Negative (-) Eyes	Visually/Emotionally Closed Off, Visually Impaired, Very Concentrated
Positive (+) Nose	Smelling-Based Person - Lover of Smells
Negative (-) Nose	Overinflated Ego, Negative View of Life
Positive (+) Mouth	Orally-Based Person - Lover of Tastes
Negative (-) Mouth	Nervous, Stingy, Withholding of Emotion, Cannot Speak
Positive (+) Ears	Aurally-Based Person - Lover of Sounds
Negative (-) Ears	Self-Centered or Selective Hearing, Deafness



**ACOUSTICAL DESIGN  
COLLABORATIVE, LTD.**

CONSULTING, DESIGN &  
MEASUREMENT SERVICES  
FOR THEATRES

ROOM ACOUSTICS  
SPEECH INTELLIGIBILITY  
SOUND ISOLATION  
HVAC NOISE CONTROL  
AUDIO SYSTEMS

5119-A LEESBURG PIKE  
SUITE 161  
FALLS CHURCH, VA 22041

TEL 703.533.0717  
FAX 703.533.0739

and exciting way. The mind and the body of a character must always be in sync and working together.

Next time you are working on a character for an acting scene, a play or a film, analyze the life of the character and then make corresponding physical choices for this character using the choice of a physical center as a core exploration of the character's body. Each of us sits, stands, walks, gestures and moves differently than

any other human being. Why should the characters we create as actors be physically identical?

Let's take our lead from one of the best in our business. You know, Dustin Hoffman didn't just wave a magic wand to develop his memorable character in *Papillon*. He made exciting emotional and physical choices. Don't forget to do the same next time you are working on your craft! ■



Ewan Middlebrooks plays the controlling Emcee in Cabaret with a physical center of a resolute +) head during a production at the University of Miami. The openness and lack of tension in the face make the Emcee a very innocent but evil manipulator. You never know what he might do next.