

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

ACTIONS/TACTICS

Theo Black

“An act hath three branches – it is to act, to do, to perform”
– Gravedigger, *Hamlet*

“It’s not brain surgery. It’s pretending. The one thing I never want is for people to catch me pretending.”
- Morgan Freeman

To act is to do. That’s our job. The more specifically & committedly we do our job, the better the act of theatre created. Stanislavsky’s “System” is a method for physical acting. It doesn’t matter how much of an inner mental or emotional journey we go on as artists, unless it is manifested in the flesh. To that end, we must deduce, select, and hypo-test possible actions in rehearsal and then commit to the best ones in performance.

Finding and Naming Actions

Contrary to popular belief, actors should never focus on the emotional quality of their own speaking or performing.* Instead, focus on the evocation or provocation of emotions in the other characters onstage with whom you interact. Ask what your lines imply that you want the *other* character to feel/do. Then ask what you are doing to elicit that response. Always state your answer (i.e., the action) in the form of a simple transitive verb.

* You may initially see emotional qualities in your own lines. For example: a passage or line may seem sarcastic. This is a valid place to start, but the actor must quickly translate that response into active terms. What does sarcasm imply that you are doing to the other character? You could “mock” or “belittle.”

Actions: what we **do** to pursue our objectives.

- Actions are stated as *verbs*.
- Actions specify what we do to another character *in order to elicit a specific desired response*.

Examples: I terrorize him to tears. I praise her into newfound confidence. I plead for their forgiveness.

- Actions are derived from reasons embedded *in the text*.
- Actions, when done with conviction & commitment (within a framework of personally-connected Given Circumstances), *facilitate* resultant moods & emotions.

Objective/Tactic Example (Hamlet): To make my mother (Gertrude) pay for her sins, [prime/ensnare/enslave/mock/prod/taunt/squeeze/press/mislead/seduce/repel/annihilate] her into submission.

Preparing for Action

- In selecting an arsenal of potential actions to utilize for each Objective, brainstorm the myriad ways you might make the desired in-road to achieve your desired response from the other person – and then test them out in rehearsal.
- Avoid playing an emotional state or mood/manner of being – this way “*schmacting*” lies. (If your action is to “reject” Ophelia, **don’t** indicate/demonstrate/show us that you are rejecting her. Just do it.**)
- ** While always keeping your scene partner and self SAFE. Because acting is an ensemble endeavor – while playing different roles, we are absolutely still on the same team – any physical contact or even extreme emotionally-triggering behavior, should be discussed and agreed upon with your scene partner and myself (or the director) before trying it out in rehearsal.
- The aim is always to provoke/evoke an emotional and active response from your partner. Ask yourself what your lines (and theirs) *imply* that you desire the other character to feel/do/say.
- Seek contrast in tactics. Induce/Impede are two sides of the same coin.
- Make friends with a *thesaurus* – find your general term (“fill with doubt”) and look up all the associated variations; then narrow it down to the tool you need in order to elicit that specific desired response from your partner, by finding the transitive verb which most inspires your imagination & physical activation.

A partial***list/starting-place to get you going on the selection of actions is below; and falls into two ultimately arbitrary categories for initial ease of use: those actions which generally operate by saying “do what I want and you’ll be happier” & “do what I want or you will be miserable”:

CARROTs:

AMUSE ANIMATE AROUSE ASSURE ATTRACT AWAKEN BEDAZZLE BEG BESEECH CAJOLE CALM CAPTIVATE CHARM COAX CODDLE COMFORT CONSOLE DELIGHT DRIVE EDIFY ELATE EMPOWER ENCHANT ENCOURAGE ENFOLD ENERGIZE ENGAGE ENLIST ENLIVEN ENTERTAIN ENTHRALL ENTHUSE ENTICE ENTREAT FASCINATE FEED FLATTER FORTIFY GALVANIZE GOLRIFY GRATIFY HUMOR HYPNOTIZE IGNITE IMPASSION IMPLORE IMPRESS INFLATE INSPIRE MELT MESMERIZE MOLLIFY MOVE NOURISH PACIFY PRAISE REASSURE RELAX SATISFY SELL SOOTHE STROKE TANTALIZE TEMPT WARM WHEEDLE WOO WORSHIP

STICKs:

ABUSE ACCOST AGGRAVATE ANNOY BADGER BAIT BELITTLE BEWILDER BOTHER BLAME CASTRATE CHALLENGE CHASTISE CHIDE COERCE COMMAND CONFUSE CORRUPT CRUCIFY DARE DEBASE DECEIVE DEFLATE DEFY DEGRADE DERIDE DISGUST DOMINATE DUMBFOUND EMBARRASS ENFEEBLE ENRAGE ENSLAVE ENTANGLE EXCLUDE EXASPERATE FLABBERGAST FREEZE FRIGHTEN GRILL HORRIFY HUMILIATE IGNITE IGNORE INCITE INJURE INTERROGATE INTIMIDATE IRRITATE JAB JOLT LURE MISLEAD MOCK MOLD MORTIFY NAG NASUEATE OBLITERATE OFFEND OPPRESS OSTRACIZE OVERRUN OVERWHELM PATRONIZE PERPLEX PERTURB POUND PROD PROVOKE REBUKE REJECT REPROACH RIDICULE SCARE SCATTER SCOLD SHAME SHACKLE SHOCK SNUB SUBVERT SUFFOCATE SUPPRESS TAME TAUNT TERRIFY TERRORIZE THREATEN TORMENT TRICK TYRANNIZE WARP WOUND

*** For a comprehensive resource listing playable actions, procure a copy of *Actions: The Actors' Thesaurus* by Marina Caldarone and Maggie Lloyd-Williams.

Avoid un-actable choices:

General verbs – actions that are generally true and therefore non-specific

Ex: convince, persuade, overcome, defeat

Intellectual verbs – too cerebral to put a shoulder behind and push through

Ex: discover, decipher, reconnoiter, reciprocate

Behavioral verbs – state of being that lacks strength of playable choices

Ex: wait, eat, sleep, laugh, cry

Existential verbs – vast activities which operate without our volition

Ex: to be, exist, become, think, die

Trigger verbs – so brief in execution that they cannot be played sustainably

Ex: slap, kick, shoot, kiss, touch

Selected actions provide your performance with purpose. They enable you to act affectively, rather than be subject to self-conscious focus re: your own performance/delivery. It simply requires the willpower to do your job: act upon your scene partner in the actual attempt to elicit a specific response.

Remember: the goal is to activate you on-stage, so that your action seeks your partner's reaction. Actions are the tools through which you can specifically & fully commit to playing your objective,¹ in the moment, every time as if for the first time – you may (hopefully) have practiced your serve, your forehand, countless times – but in the scene, you must now actively employ them to win...

¹ You can also reverse-engineer from discerning actions to determine your objective; if I'm doing *x*, that means I want *y*.