

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

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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

The "W"s: *Given Circumstances*

“It’s not the lines. It’s the *life*” – Stella Adler

Renowned acting instructor Sanford Meisner claimed that the aim of acting is to “live truthfully in imaginary circumstances.” Konstantin Stanislavski calls this inroad the “magic If.” How would I act, what would I do, *if* I were, say, the son of the king of Denmark, and had just found out my father was murdered by my uncle who now wears the crown and is marrying my mom?

To inhabit the skin & psyche of Hamlet, I first need to go over the playscript with a fine-tooth comb & then make his circumstances personal so I can live within them as my own. To walk in another person’s shoes, you don’t necessarily need differently size feet – but you do need your character’s costume to suit you like actual clothes. What separates me from Hamlet are our given circumstances. My job as an actor is to find the ways in which we are similar and embrace those, and deduce the ways in which we differ and then find how to best stretch myself.

This creative work begins by engaging in **script analysis** to unearth the clues given to us by the playwright about who we will become onstage:

1. Unearthing the Given Circumstances:

Script analysis is a form of detective work, in which practitioners search the text for information - its given circumstances. Given circumstances are those irrefutable facts set out in the play (or “given”) by the playwright - in five different categories, known as “**the Ws:**”

1. **where**, 2. **when**, 3. **who**, 4. **What**, and 5. **hoW?**

Occasionally these facts are obvious, but at other times, they only appear in the form of allusions or clues. In searching the text for this information, practitioners conduct what one calls “internal research.”

As actors read and re-read the text, they pay close attention to the spoken words (lines) and stage directions, to assemble the data provided by the playwright in relation to these four categories. Typically, these data are tabulated scene-by-scene, to make their application in performance immediate and palpable).

1. **Where?**

“*Where you are is who you are.*” – Stella Adler

Where is the play set? Where does each scene you are in take place? What objects are present within that space? (This list of objects should also include anything that appears on the “fourth wall” between the stage and the auditorium). Particularize/personalize: what is my relationship (i.e., personal history, familiarity, and degree of comfort) with the place and the objects in it? What does the space look like? What colors, textures, shapes stimulate my senses? How does the place feel? What physical sensations does the location itself evoke?

How does the place & its objects affect my other senses? (ambient sounds, smells, taste?).

What are the “ways in” and “ways out” of each location: entrances/exits? Where do the various paths in and out lead? What do those off-stage locations mean to me?

EXAMPLE: As Hamlet, I start the play recently returned back home (from college at Wittenberg University in Germany), in the house I grew up in, yet now headed not by my father – but my uncle.

2. **When?**

At what point in time does the action of each scene occur: year, month, day of week, and time of day? Season? What is the climate like at the time of the particular scene? What *previous events* (the not-too-distant and the immediate past) carry me into each scene? How does that condition the manner in which I enter the action and engage with others? How does it influence my expectations upon entering? What psychological & emotional baggage do I bring to bear?

EXAMPLE: Hamlet. It’s mere minutes after my uncle’s wedding... to my mother. Dad’s been dead less than a month. Dead winter. Outside it’s bitter cold (like an Ithacan winter – can still feel it in my fingertips from when I was last outside, holding a cigarette before the wedding ceremony).

3. Who?

What do I say about my own *character/identity*? What do others say about me? What is my age? What is my occupation? What is my current socio-economic status? What is my connection to established religious systems of belief? What ethical beliefs guide my decisions? Political values/views? What is my personal history and backstory? (Arguably, ‘backstory’ is the dimension that requires the greatest amount of “gap-filling” and personalization, thereby becoming central to an actor’s interpretative work). What is my personal ‘baggage’ that I carry through life (& why)? What emotional & psychological givens affect me at the start of this scene?

What are my *relationships* (factually and emotionally) with the other characters (including those mentioned but who never actually appear)?

EXAMPLE: Hamlet. Dad, in his portrait on the wall, looks regal and noble. My uncle, standing there spouting political platitudes, looks like an overgrown and unkempt rat. My mother looks like a phony two-bit soap opera actress, with crocodile tears and smeared gaudy lipstick.

4. What?

Every play is organized around a “dramatic problem” that characters struggle to solve by taking actions (the “through-line”), often in conflict with one another. The moment when that struggle is clearly resolved one way or another is known as the climax. This sequential drive for a solution by the characters is the action of a play, and constitutes the “what” of the given circumstances.

Thus, the actor must answer the following questions in order to articulate the dramatic action:

1. What do I *want* in the play/scene(s)?
2. What stands in my *way*?
3. And what do I *do* in order to get what I want?

Finding, naming, and honing playable objectives, obstacles & actions is the backbone of the dramatic process, and the engagement of given circumstances is the ability to play within them fully, transforming in the act of embodied storytelling to “live truthfully under imaginary circumstances...”

5. hoW?

The most open to creative interpretation of all the questions, but rooted in the elements which comprise the play-world the author has enshrined upon the page... Dig deeply to discover the context, style, norms and 'rules' that govern the play-world, and how it can clearly & compellingly be brought to life!

Filling in the Gaps:

After examining the totality of circumstances given by the playwright, one invariably discerns missing information. Having determined those holes, actors then personalize the given circumstances by filling in the gaps in a manner consistent with and supportive of the text, and reflective of the artist's personal experience and individual point of view. "What is the nature of Hamlet/Ophelia's relations?" "What does Gertrude know about her husband's murder?" "How old is Hamlet during the play's first 4 acts?" This process of personalization dwells in the *interpretive* dimension of theatre production. The combination of the givens and these personalized choices constitutes a production's overall circumstances. *How* we interpret the playwright's given circumstances is the creative contribution we as artists make to the theatre and its present audience.

It's what compels people to tell & hear these same great tales, again and again – as if for the first time...