

## Scene Objectives

### Definitions

A scene objective is what a character wants and is trying to obtain from the other characters throughout a specific portion of text. Indeed, an objective is what initially brings a character on stage. Without a strong purpose to come into a scene, a character really has no dramatic reason to be there. A character can have more than one objective during a scene. A UNIT, however, is usually defined by a single objective. The quantity and duration of objectives can vary. If a character's objectives seem to be changing too frequently, it might indicate an uncertainty on the playwright's part. *What the characters want from each other in a scene – their objectives – gives the scene its structure.* Scene objectives are the most immediate of the objectives in the hierarchy, the most practical and accessible.

I mentioned taking a directing class in New York taught by the playwright Joseph Kramm. After we students had shown him our scenes, he would, as a matter of routine, ask the actors what their objectives were, clearly a question we tyro directors hadn't asked. The actors seemed able to reply with great precision as to what their characters wanted. He would then instruct them to play the scene again, this time making sure they fully engaged with those objectives. And, as I've said, on every occasion (or so it seems in retrospect), the situation being played became clearer and each scene acquired a dramatic vitality that it hadn't displayed the first time around. It became compellingly watchable, suspenseful – you wanted to know what would happen next (although, of course, you already *knew* that!). Experiencing this, I felt that I'd been granted the revelation of a serious theatrical truth: *actors cannot play scenes if they haven't endowed their characters with intentions (objectives).*

Think of it in this way: characters are unhappy or dissatisfied with their current situation and want to change it. They want to improve it, to rectify it in some way. *Pursuing an objective means trying to change the situation.* The situation can only be changed through the medium of another or other characters who (you believe) hold the key to that change. To change your situation, *you need to change the other characters. That is the event of the scene.* Your love is ignored – you want it acknowledged. You're owed money – you want it repaid. You're in a bad relationship – you want out. You have low self-esteem – you want reassurance. You feel guilty – you want forgiveness. More specifically: A ignores your love – *you want A to acknowledge your love.* B owes you money – *you want B to repay you the money.* You're in an unhappy relationship with C – *you want C to agree to end it.* You have low self-esteem – *you want D to make you feel better about yourself.* You feel guilty about something you did to E – *you want E to forgive you.* Essentially, you're unhappy and *you want to be happy*, you're unfulfilled and *want fulfilment*, you're dissatisfied and *want satisfaction.*

Think of it another way: pursuing an objective always means *trying to get something from someone else*. It's a two-way operation – you do something to other people in order to get something back from them. Young actors, when they first play objectives, tend to focus only on the first half of the transaction, bulldozing their way through a scene with lots of energy, but not allowing anything to come back at them from their partners, which of course renders the playing pointless. If I'm trying to have some sort of effect on you, i.e. *to get you to give me money, to get you to declare your love, to get you to forgive me*, I must stay open to your responses. How else can I know whether I'm getting what I want from you and whether I need to change my approach? If your response is not proving what I hoped for – if I'm *not* getting what I want – I can adjust the way I pursue my objective; *I can change my tactics*, i.e. my actions – more of which later. Good scenes have continuous adjustments and varying tactics. That's what keep them interesting. You already have such an example in the scene where Arkadina persuades Trigorin to stay with her.

#### **Objectives and Conflict**

You do things to other people *in order to get what you want from them*. At the same time, they'll be doing something to you *in order to get what they want from you*. The struggle to change the situation, and the conflict of clashing objectives are the dynamic of drama. Without struggle and conflict, there's no drama.\*

#### **Objectives and Plot**

Objectives ensure that the plot is kept clearly on track. Objectives drive the characters forward to pursue their stories. *Objectives create plot*.

#### **Objectives and Contact**

*The solution to the majority of problems for actors is almost always in the other actors, not in themselves*. Objectives create a need to engage with other characters. Objectives, fully committed, ensure that actors are always in truthful contact with their partners so that *something actually happens between them*. Objectives ensure that actor-characters' focus is on their partners and not on themselves. Asides or soliloquies create a need for actor-characters to make contact with audiences; their objectives are to get some response from the audience: sympathy, support, understanding, complicity . . .

\* Of course there are situations in which a non-human agent is causing the unhappiness, such as a snowstorm, an accident, an outbreak of war, an illness, but these are the devices of melodrama and are usually the framework for more interesting conflicts; they are also much more the material of film (*see: OBSTACLES*). Most Performance Art is devoid of drama. It has all the externals of theatre (lighting, staging, movement, sound, music – rich visuals and aural) but none of the internal life.

**Objectives as Scenic Fuel**

Objectives are strategies. They are the fuel that ignites characters into action. Objectives generate actions. You cannot literally play an objective. *Your objectives stimulate you to play actions.* (Actions are the only thing an actor can actually play.) Think of it like this: objectives are *propelling/moving/thrusting/urging/driving/shoving/hurling/kicking/pushing/pulling/drawing/shifting/leading/coaxing/luring/seducing/encouraging/guiding/prodding you into appropriate action.*

**Objectives are Holistic**

Objectives do not just emanate from the head. They are not solely the result of conscious decision. They often stem from the unconscious. Characters are not always aware of their objectives. That is why actors have to embody them so deeply that, like lines, they become a natural part of their performance and need no longer be thought about. They should be holistically all-consuming, imagined so fully that they create an inner state of need that permeates an actor's entire being.

**Objectives and Balance**

*Unfulfilled objectives are part of the condition in which characters exist.* Actor-characters should feel incomplete, unfinished, in a state of dissatisfaction which only the success of their objectives can rectify. As objectives rarely or only briefly succeed (there'd be no drama if they did), characters are always, in a sense, off-balance. *Being off-balance creates suspense; it is a creative state.* Balance, in contrast, creates harmony and eliminates drama.\*

**Objectives and Lateral Thinking**

I said objectives are strategies. In certain circumstances, characters feel that if ever they're going to get what they want, they'll need to manipulate the person from whom they want it, to handle that person with extreme caution. This can also happen at an unconscious level. Such manipulation involves the application of lateral thinking and an imagination of some wit to manoeuvre the other character (or characters) into the right frame of mind to concede to their wishes. This often means approaching the matter indirectly, circling around it, even appearing to retreat from the very thing that's wanted. As I've already indicated, the mistake inexperienced actors often make is to feel they're not playing their objectives unless they do so head-on, at full blast, with maximum energy and attack. Even accepting that they're playing truthfully and with intensity, a frontal attack, if overused, becomes an obvious and uninteresting choice. That way of playing only applies when the conflicts in a scene become unambiguously explicit and directly confrontational. Actors who apply an imaginative approach to their objectives create far more thrilling theatre. Technically, they are using interesting tactics (*see: ACTIONS*) in their attempt to succeed.

\* Eugenio Barba convincingly elaborates on this in *The Paper Canoe*.