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TACKLING TEXT [AND SUBTEXT]

A Step-by-Step Guide for Actors

Foreword by Daniel Radcliffe

Preface by Kenneth Branagh



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Contents

<i>Foreword by Daniel Radcliffe</i>	ix
<i>Preface by Kenneth Branagh</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BASICS

WHY READ THIS BOOK? <i>How This Book Can Help You</i>	3
WHERE DO I START? <i>The Basics</i>	9
ARE THERE ANY GOLDEN RULES? <i>The Three Connections</i>	31

PART TWO

TEXT

WHAT DO I SAY AND HOW DO I SAY IT? <i>Handling Modern Text</i>	35
AND HOW THE HELL DO I SAY THIS? <i>Handling Classical Text</i>	71

PART THREE

SUBTEXT

WHO AM I? <i>Building Your Character</i>	154
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WHERE AM I AND WHEN? <i>Establishing Time and Place</i>	175
WHAT DO I WANT? <i>Identifying Your Character's Objectives</i>	183
WHAT'S BEEN GOING ON BEFORE? <i>Fleshing Out the Back Story</i>	191
WHAT'S GOING ON NOW? <i>Exploring the Internal Dynamics of a Scene</i>	195

PART FOUR
HELPFUL EXTRAS

HOW DO I STOP SABOTAGING MYSELF? <i>Dealing with the Inner Critic</i>	237
HOW DO I SHARE THE WORK TRUTHFULLY? <i>Transferring from Rehearsal to Performance</i>	243
HOW DO I CONVINCe THEM? <i>Handling Auditions and Castings</i>	252
WHAT DO I DO WHEN . . . ? <i>Troubleshooting</i>	260
CONCLUSION	277

APPENDICES

AND WHAT ABOUT . . . ? <i>Extra Notes on Classical Text</i>	281
AND WHERE WILL I FIND THAT? <i>The Exercise Finder</i>	303
<i>Endnotes</i>	311
<i>Index</i>	313

Why Read This Book?

HOW THIS BOOK CAN HELP YOU

Why read this book? Firstly, because it is full of practical exercises to help you explore text, character and situation. These exercises have been developed through working with actors of all ages and experiences over many years.

Secondly, because you can use the exercises in this book outside the rehearsal room to support and deepen your work with a director. You can also use them when preparing for auditions and castings – whether for stage, television or film. They will enable you to become more self-sufficient and more certain of accessing your best work, whatever the situation and however great the pressure you're under.

Thirdly, this book also explores issues such as building confidence; dealing with criticism; handling auditions and castings; moving from rehearsal space to performance space; and offers simple yet effective tools for overcoming any problems that may arise in these areas.

Tangible Exploration

At the heart of this book is the idea of discovering by doing: getting on your feet and exploring text, character and situation physically. No specific physical skill is necessary for any of the exercises; however, you will find that by working in this way you will gain a great deal of physical confidence and freedom. You will also find that it is a much easier and more concrete way of working, which enables a far more detailed and subtle connection with both the text and subtext. The exercises allow you to have a much more direct relationship with whatever play, scene or speech you are working on and, as a result, to feel far more in charge of what you are doing and more able to solve issues for yourself.

Tackling Text

Layering

Another important aspect of this work is the idea of *layering*: in other words, focusing on one element of text, character or situation at a time, then letting go of that element and trusting that you will remember what you have learnt and will be able to put it together with everything else you have discovered. This allows you to go more deeply into each element; and the resulting mix, because it is achieved unconsciously, is richer and more exciting than any conscious mixing would be. It is also far easier to achieve and much more fun!

Noticing

Every exercise in this book is designed to raise your awareness, to enable you to notice what is there. This awareness has three benefits. Firstly, it allows you to be far more self-sufficient, because you don't need to wait for others to point things out to you. Secondly, it allows you to connect more deeply because you are making discoveries for yourself and so they have a much greater significance for you. Thirdly, it allows you to be far more specific and detailed, which in turn allows you to produce work that is more truthful and original both for you and the audience.

Essential Information

Two essential sets of rules allow you to navigate your way through any situation in life: *situational rules* and *personal rules*. *Situational rules* deal with what is acceptable in any given situation: it is not acceptable to walk down the street without any clothes on – unless you are in a nudist camp; or to drive on whichever side of the road you feel like; or to visit someone's home and help yourself to their possessions. Your *personal rules* deal with what you feel is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for yourself: whether it is alright, or not, to shout or cry in public, or even at all; how much personal information you share with people on first meeting; whether or not it's alright to be physically affectionate in public and so on.

Since you are expert at improvising your way through life based on these two sets of rules it makes sense that if you can identify the *personal rules* of any character, and the *rules of each situation* in which that character finds him/herself, you will have the essential information you need to navigate your way through any play. All the work in this book is designed to help you

How This Book Can Help You

identify these rules – especially where they are different from your own and from the rules of the situations you are used to. Throughout, you will be encouraged to ask the *essential question*, described below, as a way of shifting away from yourself and your own situations, whilst at the same time making use of all the experience you have as a human being.

Essential Question

It was Stanislavsky who pointed out the power of an actor behaving *as if* they were a certain person in a certain situation. He argued, as an example, that if you asked someone to ‘be a tree’ he/she may well go ahead and attempt to do this, but his/her brain would be saying: ‘*But I’m not a tree.*’ On the other hand, if you asked someone to behave *as if* he/she were a tree, then his/her brain would have no problem with this. The *as if* makes all the difference.

The essential question linked to *as if* is ‘*What if . . . ?*’: ‘*What if these were my words? What if this were my rhythm? What if this was what was important to me? What if this was the situation I found myself in?*’ ‘*What if . . . ?*’ kick-starts your imagination and sends it searching for the crucial information needed to connect with any role – whether in terms of text or subtext.

Text and Subtext

Text is what is said. Subtext is what lies under and between what is said; it is expressed by body language, tone of voice and moments of silence. Text and subtext each inform the other and it is vital that both are equally explored. I always start with text work because it is the most tangible and because it is what the writer principally gives us – the subtext is implied by the text. By starting with the text you can be sure that you honour the voice of the author: that you tune in to his/her style. As John Gielgud said: ‘Style is knowing what play you’re in.’ Text is rather like the framework around which everything else is built and it is much easier to access the subtext once that frame is in place.

It is sometimes said that there is no subtext in Shakespeare and other classical text: that the action happens on the lines rather than between them. While it is true that much more of what characters are thinking and feeling is expressed in words in classical text, this does not mean that subtext disappears altogether; it is still there, underneath, informing the text and

Tackling Text

needs to be explored. Equally, it is sometimes said that text is less important in modern plays: that what happens in between and under the text is more important. Again, it is true that there is often a shift in balance so that more of what the characters are thinking and feeling may be expressed non-verbally; however, the text is still there and, with any good writer, it will have been well crafted – in terms of sound and rhythm as well as sense. It is not a question of any old words will do. So it is important to explore both text and subtext fully, whatever play you are working on.

Technique versus Instinct – Leonardo’s noses!

Technique and instinct often seem to sit very uneasily together for actors. For some, technique is the enemy: they fear that it will make them less spontaneous and truthful, more showy and set. For others, technique is their cornerstone, giving them shape and structure: they see relying on instinct alone as messy and even dangerous. However, when technique and instinct work together well, they give the actor the best of both worlds. It is a question of timing. When an actor is on stage performing, the audience need him or her to be moving through the play moment by moment, responding instinctively to what is happening around them. Only in this way can the audience truly be taken on a journey themselves. In order, however, for the actor to let go and trust his/her instinct on stage, technique does need to be applied in the preparation period. Now each actor’s technique may be very different – it may not even look like a technique from the outside – but it involves some kind of detailed exploration of the components – internal and external – that contribute to the whole: whether that be in terms of exploring text, character, situation or journey within the play, or preparing the body and voice.

A story about the artist Leonardo da Vinci may help to illustrate what I mean. Apparently, as part of his practice, he drew all the different noses, mouths and eyes he came across – he even numbered them! However, when he came to draw or paint a portrait he didn’t consciously think: ‘Ah, nose number 5, mouth number 3, eyes number 6.’ He responded in the moment to what he saw in front of him. However, the fact that he had spent time noticing and exploring individual parts meant that he had a vast store of detail that could support him as he worked instinctively on the whole.

How This Book Can Help You

In this way, technique, which could also be called exploratory preparation, becomes a *framework for freedom* within which your instinct can flourish securely. This is the core intention of this book: to give you a way of preparing that frees you in performance to be utterly present and respond instinctively to what is happening around you.

On the subject of frameworks, the next chapter sets out the basics, which can provide a firm foundation for all work on text and subtext, whilst this chapter ends with suggestions on the different ways in which this book can be used and hints as to the most enjoyable and effective way to work with the exercises.

A Note About Learning

Did you know that there are four stages of learning?³

1. Unconscious incompetence
2. Conscious incompetence
3. Conscious competence
4. Unconscious competence

Stage One is to a degree a blissful state of ignorance, although it may be frustrating in that we have a sense that things are not as we want them.

Stage Two can be very uncomfortable: now we know what we don't know and this is often the stage where people give up, especially if they are lacking in confidence. Yet it is a necessary part of the learning process and not a sign that we lack the ability to acquire whatever skill is involved.

Stage Three requires all our attention: in other words, in order to achieve whatever it is we are focusing on we have to concentrate on that to the exclusion of everything else. This is often the point at which an actor will cry: '*I can't do this on stage!*' The answer to this is: '*Of course you can't.*' However, by taking the time offstage, in order to focus consciously on whatever behaviour or habit you want to establish, you will, in time, be able to do it unconsciously on stage – and you will have reached Stage Four: unconscious competence. So be prepared to spend time in Stages Two and Three, knowing that this is where the learning takes place.

Tackling Text

Using this Book

You can use this book in various ways depending on what you wish to achieve. You can work through it from beginning to end if you want an overview of the whole process before customising it to fit your own way of working. You can consult individual chapters to fill in gaps in your knowledge and experience. You can go straight to the troubleshooting section if there are specific issues that you want to address. The Index will also help you to find exercises and information on particular areas of work. However you choose to use this book, trust your instincts and I'm sure you will find what you need.

Some Helpful Hints

- *Do the exercises rather than just reading them through – this is the only way they will work! Knowledge is only rumour until it's in the muscle.*
- *Work with curiosity and a sense of humour; play and enjoy yourself. You'll learn more that way.*
- *If it's difficult, that's fine: it means you're learning something new, so celebrate. There's no point practising what you can do already!*
- *Let go of striving to achieve and certainly forget about perfection. Just do the work and the results will come by themselves.*
- *Pay attention and avoid mindless repetition.*
- *Focus only on one exercise at a time, trusting that what you learn will be remembered.*
- *Use your common sense, and trust that if you have explored the exercises thoroughly with commitment and openness you will learn what you need to learn.*

Tackling Text

Heightened Text

Often people will talk about heightened text. What do they mean by this? Are heightened text and poetry the same?

Heightened text is more *shaped* than everyday speech, so poetry, in that respect, is heightened. However, there are many ways of shaping a text. You could say that all plays have heightened text, to a lesser or greater degree, because the dialogue in all plays is shaped, even when it seems absolutely naturalistic. David Mamet's work is a wonderful example of this. The extract below is from the beginning of *Reunion*. Bernie is talking to his daughter, whom he hasn't seen for many years.

BERNIE: I would have recognised you anywhere.
It is you. Isn't it?
Carol. Is that you?
You haven't changed a bit.
I would have recognised you anywhere . . .
This is a very important moment.
But there's no reason why we should have it in the hall so
let me take your coat . . .
I feel like a racehorse. You ever go to the track?
Well, that's what I feel like.
If I was still drinking, I'd offer you a drink.
If I was still drinking, you probably wouldn't be here.
That's all right.²¹

This may have the appearance of everyday speech but Mamet uses punctuation, repetition and physical placing of the line on the page to create a specific rhythm. All the exercises in this chapter and the previous one ensure that you become aware of the specific ways each writer has shaped his/her text.

PATTERNS OF SOUND

Having looked at structure and rhythm and defined poetry and heightened text, let's move on to explore patterns of sound in classical text

Using sound effectively helps the listener to listen and understand. Shakespeare had a wonderful instinct for employing sound to underscore feeling and thought, so making his text more powerful for the actor to speak and the audience to hear.

Vowels and Consonants

We are going to start the work on sound by focusing on the vowels and consonants separately, as we did in the last chapter. Remember that vowels carry the emotion whereas consonants carry the sense. Achieving a good balance between the two is always important but doubly so with classical plays where so much is conveyed through sound. The following exercises will help you to find that balance. They will also allow you to hear the way the sounds work and how they create a pattern, or music, of their own.

Connecting with the Vowels

To experience how the vowels give rhythm and ‘music’

As I pointed out in the last chapter, vowels have different lengths – short, long and travelling. Travelling vowels are traditionally known as diphthongs because they are, in fact, made up of two vowels. I call them travelling vowels because you have to move from one vowel to the other to make them. Below is an example of short, long and travelling vowels in a Standard English accent. In each case I have given an example of the sound in a word so that if you are working in another accent you can check whether the vowel stays the same length.

I have marked out the speeches below using the same marks as in the last chapter: a forward slash [/] to denote short vowels, a long dash [–] to denote long vowels, and a circle [O] to denote diphthongs.

If you have not read the previous chapter on modern text please look at page 48 for further explanation about vowels and how to work with them in text before you try the exercise on the speeches.

Continue working on the speech you used in the earlier exercises.

- *Go through your chosen speech line by line saying only the vowels, remembering to commit fully to the different lengths.*
- *Add ‘h’ in front of each vowel to ensure that you are supporting the sound you are making with breath rather than the sound catching in your throat.*
- *It is useful to mark the rhythm with your hand – doing quick downward movements for the short vowels, long horizontal movements for the long vowels and big rounded movements for the diphthongs.*

Note: I have chosen not to use phonetic symbols to identify the vowels because not everyone knows these symbols. Therefore, I have used the spelling which is as near

Tackling Text

as possible to a particular sound. Also, in connected speech we do not fully say all the vowels. Where they are unstressed they can be reduced to a more neutral 'er' or 'i'.

VIOLA:

/ O / / — / O — / O
hi high hi huh hoo hi high hah-h'er' hay
If I did love you in my master's flame,
/ / / / / / / / / O
hi huh h'er' huh-hi huh h'er' he-hi high
With such a suff'ring, such a deadly life,
/ — / O / O / O O /
hi hor hi-high-h'er' high h'oo' high hoh heh
In your denial I would find no sense;
O / / / / / / /
high h'oo' h'o' huh-h'er'-ha hi
I would not understand it.

OLIVIA:

O / / —
high h'o' h'oo' hoo
Why, what would you?

VIOLA:

O — / / / / / / — O
hay hee h'er' hi-hoh ha-hi ha hor hay
Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
/ O / / — O / / / O
ha high h'er'-h'o' hor hoh hi-hi h'er' how
And cry upon your soul within the house;
O O / / / / / / / / /
high hoy-h'er' ha-ho h'o' huh-heh-hi huh
Write loyal cantons of contemnèd love,
/ / / O — / / / / / / O
ha hi heh how hee-h'er' hi huh heh h'er' high
And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
/ — — O / / / — / / / /
ha-ho hor hay h'er' h'er' hi-her-huh-huh hi
Hallo your name to the reverberate hills,
/ O / / / / / / / / / O
h'er' hay h'er' ha-h'er'-hi ho-hi h'er' h'er' hair
And make the babbling gossip of the air

Handling Classical Text

O O O / / / O — / / /
high how hoh-hi-hi-h'er' hoh hoo h'oo' h'o' heh
Cry out 'Olivia! O you should not rest
/ — / / / / / O / —
hi-hee h'er' heh-h'er'-h'er' huh hair h'er' her
Between the elements of air and earth
/ — / / — —
huh hoo h'oo' hi-hee hee
But you should pity me!

OLIVIA:

— O — /
hoo high hoo huh
You might do much.

*

CLAUDIO:

O / / O / O — O / O
high huh h'er' high h'er' hoh hee hoh h'o' hair
Ay, but to die, and go we know not where,
/ O / O / / / / / / /
h'er' high hi hoh h'er'-huh-h'er' h'er' h'er' h'o'
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
/ / / / — O / / / / /
his heh-hi-h'er' hor hoh-h'er' h'er' hi-huh
This sensible warm motion to become
/ — / / / / / O / / / /
h'er' hee-heh h'o' h'er' h'er' hi-high-hi hi-hi
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
/ O / O / — / — / / O
h'er' hay hi high-h'er'-hee h'oo' hor h'er' hi-high
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
/ / / — / / / / / O
hi hi-hi hee-h'er' h'o' hi-hi-heh high
In thrilling region of thick-ribbèd ice,
/ — / / / / / — / / /
h'er' hee hi-hi-huh hi h'er' hoo-huh hi
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds
/ O / / / O / / O / O
h'er' hoh hi heh-h'er' high-h'er'-h'er' how h'er'-how
And blown with restless violence round about

Tackling Text

/ / / — — / — — / —
h'er' heh-h'er' her hor h'er' hee her ha her
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst

/ O / — / / / — / —
h'er' hoh h'er' hor-h'er' h'er' hi-her-h'er' hor
Of those that lawless and incertain thought

/ / / O / / — / / /
hi-ha-hi how-hi hi hoo ho-hi-h'er'
Imagine howling, 'tis too horrible.

/ O / / / O O / — / O
h'er' hear-hi-h'er' h'er' hoh hoh-heh her-hi high
The weariest and most loathed worldly life

/ O O / / / / / / / / /
h'er' hay hay heh-h'oo'-hee h'er' hi-hi-h'er'-h'er'
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment

/ O / O / / / / / O
ha hay h'o' hay-h'er' hi h'er' ha-h'er'-high
Can lay on nature is a paradise

/ / — O / /
h'er' h'o' hee hear h'er' heh
To what we fear of death.

Do you notice how committing to each vowel, to its specific sound and length, creates a *music* in the text? Do you get a sense of how the character might be feeling from this music? It may be at this point that you are focusing so hard on doing the exercise that you can't pick up on the music or emotion. This is often the case at first. As you practise the exercise, it will become more and more comfortable. For now, choose for yourself whether you want to have another go at the vowel exercise or return to the whole speech.

- *Speak the text normally, letting the vowels take care of themselves.*
- *Use the earlier unmarked versions on page 101.*

How was that? Did you notice that you were naturally using the vowel lengths more, that they were more distinct?

This exercise is an excellent way of becoming aware of the specific music of each text. The point being, as I hope you have begun to discover, that the music of a piece may be harsh and abrupt just as often as it may be beautiful or lyrical. It reflects the feelings of the characters and can change as those feelings change: it is not a single overlaid melody.