

# ACTIONING

*and How to Do It*

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NICK HERN BOOKS  
London  
[www.nickhernbooks.co.uk](http://www.nickhernbooks.co.uk)

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## *Introduction*

The Actioning technique, sometimes called ‘Psychophysical Actioning’, is probably the most firmly established of all early rehearsal processes within the British theatre. Most drama schools and many directors see it as an essential part of rehearsal ‘table work’ and the bedrock of the actor’s work on the text.

Contrary to popular belief, Actioning is not a Stanislavskian technique, and is in fact little used outside of the UK. It was devised and developed by the Joint Stock Theatre Company in the late 1970s under the direction of Bill Gaskill and Max Stafford-Clark, largely in order to empower the actor to serve the play and the production by making clear and simple choices on each line of the text. It has since found its way into the arsenal of the majority of UK actors and directors.

Put simply, the Actioning technique requires you, the actor, in the early stages of rehearsing a play, to divide up your own lines into separate phrases or thoughts, to assign each thought an ‘action verb’ which expresses the underlying intention of the line, and then, having assembled this series of verbs, to attempt to speak and act each thought in the manner of the chosen verb.

The verbs themselves must be ‘transitive’ – in other words, something your character can *do* to another

character, such as ‘prod’, ‘ridicule’ or ‘encourage’, rather than non-transitive verbs such as ‘muse’, ‘cry’ or ‘hesitate’, which tend to pull your focus back onto yourself. This means that each thought, spoken with a particular action verb in mind, becomes an attempt to affect another character in the manner implied by that verb.

Actioning is radical because it always begins with the text itself, and with the creation of a ‘template’ of shifting character intentions that serves as a living analysis of the possible intentions of the playwright. The post-Stanislawskian technique of Active Analysis, by contrast, postpones engagement with the words of the text until the actor is physically and emotionally immersed in the imagined world of the play, and in the relationships and the journey of each scene. In Active Analysis actors initially *improvise* the dialogue of the play, exploring the relationships and the journey of each scene to the point where the actual text can be ‘drip-fed’ into the imaginary world thereby created.

There is much argument about which technique works better for actors, but for me the debate is largely irrelevant. In either case you are still faced with the problem of how you deal with that difficult moment when you have to start speaking words written by someone else, and possibly spoken by hundreds of actors before you, as if they had just spontaneously popped into your head within an entirely new and present situation!

My view is that the Actioning technique is a highly effective and efficient way of making the text your own from day one. By ‘Actioning’ the text, you can impose

your actor's will upon it, not in a random or perverse way, but by applying an analytical process which encapsulates each moment of a play into a single word that you yourself have selected.

For Gaskill and Stafford-Clark, Actioning was partly a response to the difficulty their actors seemed to have with 'motivation', especially in the case of political and polemical texts. In productions such as David Hare's *Fanshen* (Joint Stock Theatre Company, 1975), some actors were apparently unable to find the impulse to speak and act in a way that would clearly and simply reveal the human story and the social narrative. The director required the actors to serve the production by inhabiting and 'living' the form of the text; by contrast the actors seemed to want to explore individualised subtextual narratives which were emotionally and psychologically complex but which blurred the dialectical storyline and disrupted its rhythm.

The beauty of the Actioning technique is that, from the outset, it demands that you (often in collaboration with your director) interrogate the text in minute detail in order to find the right verbs to express your interpretation of each thought. The choice of a single verb, simple though it might seem, requires you to think about character, situation, scene objective and relationships at each point in the text, and to encapsulate them in one word. Having chosen your verbs, you then also have to 'play' them, through clear and tangible vocal shifts between one verb and the next. By bringing your vocal and physical resources to the task of delivering a line in the manner of the verb, you then start to own the text from a very early stage of rehearsal.

Actioning has often been criticised for being ‘inorganic’, and for not allowing the actor enough space to discover the meaning of the text through rehearsal and interaction. Actors have claimed to feel ‘straitjacketed’ and constricted by their action-verb choices, unable to speak as their impulse dictates in the moment. My view of this is that Actioning is no different from any of the other ‘set’ elements of the play and production. You cannot generally stray from the playwright’s text, or from the moves set by the director, since those elements are fixed. So it is with the action verbs, yet none of these fixed aspects necessarily leads to a fixed performance. Even within those boundaries, you, the actor, still have huge scope for being reactive, impulsive and present, and no two performances will ever be quite the same. Like the text, the blocking and all the other fixed elements of a performance, the action verbs are there to help and support you – to give you a structure and a direction so that you can be free to respond in the moment without fear of losing the thread of the narrative or the form of the play.

Having said that, it is important to remember that action verbs can also be changed, not randomly or inadvertently, but through moments of clarity and realisation, when you decide at some point in rehearsal that your initial choice is not working. My view is that you are more likely to arrive at such moments by making clear and definite choices to begin with.

It might also be argued that Actioning serves another vital purpose, crucial to the age we live in, which is to force actors to develop vocal and physical precision and to broaden their expressive range, in a world where so much of our communication is now electronic – and

where the notion of being physically, vocally and mentally 'present' is blurred by the reality that, for much of our lives, we are communicating simultaneously within two or three different contexts. For young actors in particular, the process of turning the body into a clear and efficient signifier, and of focusing the mind onto a single thought and intention in each moment of the action, works in opposition to the recent cultural shifts which encourage a much more dispersed energy and divided focus. This is not an entirely new endeavour – actors have always had to learn to speak and move with clarity – but there has never been a greater need for core training techniques which inspire and stimulate actors to expand and refine their physical and vocal capacity. Actioning is such a technique, and I believe it to be a fundamental tool for approaching text.

This book will attempt to go beyond traditional notions of using Actioning in rehearsal, by investigating the Actioning technique both as a tool for analysing and speaking text, and as a springboard into the actual staging of a scene. When I first used the technique, as an actor in the 1980s, I found it hard to see the connection between the action verbs chosen on the text and the work done on the rehearsal-room floor, and I saw other actors also struggling with this. Over many years of teaching the technique I have realised that action verbs also have a strong spatial/physical dimension which offers the actor possibilities for interacting with other characters and with the space. In the later chapters of this book I will be giving an account of these discoveries and showing how the actor can use Actioning as a physical as well as a verbal tool.

*Beginning  
Actioning*



The sample dialogue below is designed to illustrate on a simple level some of the key features you will later identify in more complex scripts.

### Sample Dialogue 1

(UNIT 1)

*A newsagent's shop. BECKY (aged eighteen) is standing behind the counter, checking off something on a list. JOHN enters the shop. BECKY looks up.*

JOHN. Hi. / Could I get some headache pills?

*BECKY looks behind her at the row of medications.*

BECKY. Which sort?

JOHN. Have you got any paracetamol?

BECKY. No, sorry, / just Nurofen and Anadin.

JOHN. Okay then, could I have some Nurofen?

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EVENT

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(UNIT 2)

BECKY. Are you over sixteen? / I'm not allowed to sell them otherwise.

JOHN. Of course I am.

BECKY. Do you have any ID?

JOHN. No, I didn't bring any. / Look, this is crazy, I'm twenty-two!

BECKY. You don't look it.

JOHN. Come on, take a look at me. / Do I really look fifteen?

BECKY. I could get into trouble.

JOHN. Trust me, I'm twenty-two!

BECKY (*doubtfully*). Okay.

*She hands him the Nurofen.*

The analysis of any scene, be it simple or complex, must always begin with the following questions:

1. What are the broad given circumstances? Include era, location, season, time of day, specific setting.
2. What are the specific given circumstances? Include characters and their backstories; previous relationships, if any; the basic contention (what the scene is about).
3. What do the characters *want*? We call these ‘wants’ objectives. Whose objective is the strongest? This person will be the scene driver.
4. What is stopping each character achieving their objective? This is the obstacle. Obstacles are usually created by the resistance of the other character.
5. What events happen in the scene, which change the situation? An event signifies the start of a new unit within the text.
6. What are the smaller ‘wants’ – sub-objectives – within each unit, which are leading towards the bigger want – main objective?
7. Are there any counter-objectives? A counter-objective is *something else* the character wants, or wants to avoid, which is in some measure opposed to the main objective, so that it becomes an internal obstacle.

Since the two characters in this scene clearly do not know each other, and the nature of their encounter is largely transactional, the given circumstances of the scene are relatively straightforward, as are the character objectives. John (the scene driver) clearly has a

## ACTIONING

**Play Super-objective**  
I WANT TO GET MARRIED

**Character Objectives**

**ALGERNON**  
*whole play*

I WANT TO MARRY  
CECILY

(Obstacle: I can't get Jack to help me)

*this scene*

I WANT TO FIND OUT  
WHERE CECILY LIVES  
(Obstacle: Jack won't tell me)

*sub-objective  
for second half of scene*

I WANT ERNEST TO NEED  
MY HELP  
(Obstacle: He thinks he can manage alone)

Action-verb choices

**JACK**  
*whole play*

I WANT TO MARRY  
GWENDOLEN

(Obstacle: I have this awkward secret – I am not who I say I am)

*this scene*

I WANT TO FIND OUT  
WHETHER GWENDOLEN  
IS COMING TO VISIT  
(Obstacle: Algernon is asking too many questions)

*sub-objective  
for second half of scene*

I WANT ALGERNON TO  
UNDERSTAND/NOT  
OBSTRUCT ME  
(Obstacle: He's completely unromantic)

Action-verb choices

A quick look at these objectives and obstacles reveals that, despite being friends and enjoying witty aphoristic banter, Jack and Algernon are in fact each other's foil and obstacle. Their conflict arises from the fact

that Jack is participating in London's high society under an alias, and does not trust Algernon either to keep his secret or to stay away from Jack's ward, Cecily.

## Choosing Your Action Verbs

Armed with all this information, you should now be in a position to go back to the scene itself and start speculating about your character's intention on each line. What effect do they wish to have on the other character? How are they responding to what has just happened? And what single verb seems to sum up that intention? To make effective action-verb choices you will need to analyse each moment within this conflict, and track the characters' shifting thoughts as they seek to outmanoeuvre each other.

You now proceed to make your action-verb choices and to write them down. This may sound simple, and for some thoughts the action verbs will be fairly obvious. At other times a level of analysis and subtextual investigation may be required to make the right choices. This analysis is essential to Actioning, because the verbs you choose will ultimately affect not just how you speak the text, but how you think and move, and how your character perceives other characters.

One of problems you might experience when you start Actioning is not being able to think of the right verb, even if you are fairly sure what the nature of the action is. If you are a newcomer to this technique, it is probably a good idea to obtain a list or book of action verbs which you can consult as you go along. The most commonly consulted volume, and the one I would recommend, is *Actions: The Actors' Thesaurus* by Marina

TEXT	ACTION VERB	INNER MONOLOGUE (ALGERNON)
A: How are you, my dear Ernest?	I GREET	<i>He looks tense – I'll put him at his ease.</i>
A: What brings you up to town?	I QUESTION	<i>I mustn't put him on his guard.</i>
J: Oh, pleasure, pleasure!	I BRUSH OFF	<i>He's hiding something.</i>
J: What else should bring one anywhere?	I CONVINCED	<i>He's such a bad liar.</i>
J: Eating as usual, I see, Algy!	I MOCK	<i>He's always finding fault.</i>
A: I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock.	I OUTCLASS	<i>Ha! That told him!</i>
A: Where have you been since last Thursday?	I QUIZ	<i>I'll make him feel guilty for abandoning me.</i>
J: In the country.	I SHRUG OFF	<i>He's getting all evasive again.</i>
A: What on earth do you do there?	I DERIDE	<i>I'll just wind him up a bit.</i>
J: When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people.	I DISAPPOINT	<i>Oh dear, he's not going to rise to it.</i>
J: It is excessively boring.	I DISCOURAGE	<i>He really doesn't want to talk about it.</i>
A: And who are the people you amuse?	I PROBE	<i>I'll just keep pushing till he gives himself away.</i>
J: Oh, neighbours, neighbours	I BORE	<i>He's quite clearly bluffing.</i>
A: Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?	I PURSUE	<i>Let's see if he walks into my trap.</i>
J: Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.	I WARN	<i>He didn't even notice!</i>
A: How immensely you must amuse them!	I OUTWIT	<i>He's not going to let anything out.</i>
A: By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?	I NUDGE	<i>Let's see how he reacts.</i>
J: Eh? Shropshire?	I STALL	<i>I knew it!</i>
J: Yes, of course.	I REASSURE	<i>He is such a bad liar!</i>
J: Hallo!	I STARTLE	<i>Eh?</i>
J: Why all these cups?	I QUIZ	<i>He's trying to change the subject.</i>



In this sample dialogue, we can construct a table of action verbs and suggested physical moves/gestures on each thought, as follows:

TEXT	ACTION VERB	PHYSICAL POSSIBILITY
F: Morning!	I TEASE	Comes in but does not hug or touch Sam. Surveys him and the room.
S: Hi.	I FREEZE	Backs away.
F: This place is a tip.	I CHASTISE	Circles the mess.
F: You should clear it up.	I GALVANISE	Stops and looks directly at Sam.
S: Why don't <i>you</i> ?	I SILENCE	Turns away and resumes searching.
F: It's not my flat.	I REMIND	Steps back away from the mess.
F: Looking for something?	I QUESTION	Comes round to get a better view.
S: Nothing important.	I BLOCK	Stops looking, sits down.
F: If it wasn't so messy you wouldn't lose things.	I CRITICISE	Sits down next to him.
S: Yeah thanks for that.	I REBUKE	Turns away from her.
F: What you lost?	I PROBE	Kneels in front of him.
S: Nothing.	I EVADE	Stands up, moves away.
F: Must be something.	I CONFRONT	Stands, confronts him.
S: Just some money.	I PLACATE	Puts hands on her shoulders and starts looking for the money again.
F: Money?	I PRESS	Takes a step towards him.
F: How much money?	I INTERROGATE	Moves round into his eyeline.
S: Just some money, okay?	I DISMISS	Waves her question away, turns away.
F: What money?	I SHAKE	Approaches him. Touches him.
S: It's a loan.	I SATISFY	Turns to her, opens his body.
F: A loan?	I QUERY	Pulls back.
F: Who from?	I QUIZ	Keeps her distance. Folds arms.
S: Rosie.	I SUBMIT TO	Holds up hands, backs off slightly.

The first action verb is I TEASE. I chose this verb because I assumed that Fran would most likely have some kind of response to the fact that Sam has clearly been drunk the night before and is rather dishevelled. This verb (in context) suggests that Fran does not approach Sam directly but teases from a distance, having seen that both he and the flat are not at their best. The text does not tell us that she approaches Sam or kisses him, so we can safely assume that she doesn't. The physical action suggested here is one of surveying the mess from a distance.

Sam's first action, I FREEZE, also implies distance – Sam's objective is to find the lost money, which means that Fran's arrival at this point is highly unwelcome, especially as he knows she is inquisitive and bossy. Under normal circumstances he might have been more polite, but in this context he is hung-over and anxious, and absolutely doesn't want her there.

I CHASTISE might seem to indicate a direct approach, but since Fran is talking about the mess in the room one can assume that she will want to stay in visual contact with the mess while chastising Sam, which again implies distance, but also possibly implies motion, as she takes in each aspect of the room, circling and avoiding the mess around the sofa rather than sitting down. I GALVANISE, on the other hand, is a much more motivational verb, which probably means that Fran stops and looks directly at him. At this stage she probably doesn't go towards him, because she wants him to look at the mess rather than at her.

Sam's next action, I SILENCE, may seem very dominant, but the stage direction '*He resumes searching*'