

INTRODUCTION

A performing musician, a singer or a dancer is extremely fortunate in that he is presented with specific exercises from the time he decides to pursue his chosen art form. He is forced into certain disciplines and consequently learns to develop them. He must use them daily, and they stay with him until the end of his career. He can practice them at home and put in as many hours a day as he chooses, to perfect his abilities.

As an actress, I have always envied these artists. I can participate in some of their disciplines. I can study dance, and practice my stretches and pliés alone. I can study voice and speech, and practice my exercises alone. I can study an instrument and enlarge my musical sense. I can read and study literature, history and plays, and know that I am enlarging my understanding of the theater. I can work on roles to a certain extent, and I can work on monologues. But in the area of human behavior, its discovery and enlargement, I usually have to wait for a part and rehearsals with my fellow actors. This always frustrated me as an actress, and so I began to devise exercises for myself to tackle a variety of technical

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problems that continued to bother me. Now I present these ten Object Exercises to you.

Let us take the problem of trying to find and re-create two ordinary minutes out of life when alone—two minutes when I say I wasn't doing anything (impossible!), when nothing happened. To say this is akin to saying that nothing happens in Chekhov, to which I have heard the retort, "Nothing does happen except that one world comes to an end and another begins."

What are the components of two consecutive minutes of my life—not in crisis, but in the pursuit of a simple need? What do I have to know if I want to re-create those two minutes of existence?

Who am I?	Character.
What time is it?	Century, year, season, day, minute.
Where am I?	Country, city, neighborhood, house, room, area of room.
What surrounds me?	Animate and inanimate objects.
What are the given circumstances?	Past, present, future, and the events.
What is my relationship?	Relation to total events, other characters, and to things.
What do I want?	Character, main and immediate objectives.
What's in my way?	Obstacles.
What do I do to get what I want?	The action: physical, verbal.

These are the questions we must ask ourselves, and explore and define in order to act. For the time being, I would like to free you from the interpretative problems of a given

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play and a character, and ask you to apply these questions to a simple exercise of finding and re-creating two minutes out of your own life when you were alone.

EXAMPLE: I am sitting at this typewriter writing this chapter.

Who am I?

I have a strong, still too narrow, sense of identity and self-image formed by my parents, my origins, education, sociological influences, loved ones and enemies—all the things a human being is conscious of.

What time is it?

10 A.M. on September 12, 1972. We're in the middle of presidential campaigns. Vietnam bombing raids are on the morning news. The air is very still. The light from outside has a slightly hazy glare. I am sitting in a sunsuit because it is quite warm.

Where am I?

My house in Montauk. I am working at the white Formica table in the dining area off the living room. The kitchen is to my left. Through the window to my right I can see the sundeck, and beyond it the grassy dunes topped by the shell of a World War II lookout tower, long abandoned. Behind me the sun is pouring through the living room.

What surrounds me?

The typewriter is new. House plants, which I recently watered, are in the corner. The white tabletop reflects

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brightly. In the kitchen a fly is buzzing over the newly washed breakfast dishes. My poisonous cigarettes are at my elbow, and the ashtray needs emptying. My poodles bark at a passing car. My notes lie piled up in disorder behind the typewriter.

What are the given circumstances?

My collaborator on this book is expected. We have been working all summer. I have been procrastinating since 7 A.M. by cooking, cleaning, arranging flowers, watering the grass, arranging unanswered mail and all my notes on "The Object Exercises." My book is years in the making. A deadline is coming up.

What is my relationship?

To the book: it represents the expression of my work both as a teacher and as an actress.

To Haskell: he is my collaborator, and also my house guest during the writing of this book.

What do I want?

To be of service, to be a participant in society as well as to be needed by those I love. To be a part of art and nature. To live up to responsibilities. (Main Objective)—To finish this chapter.

(Immediate Objective)—To have a few pages to show him when he arrives at noon.

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What's in my way?

Time: he's coming in two hours. Weather: its gorgeous outside. The garden: the vegetables need to be weeded. I would enjoy a frothy, cold drink. I'm unclear about the organization of the chapter. The onion-skin paper crinkles in the typewriter. My poor typing skill, and many typos.

What do I do to get what I want?

I type. I make typos. I race ahead. I light a cigarette after emptying the ashtray. I battle with content. I battle with order. I take a breather outdoors, and sniff the clematis. I yell at the poodles. I write ten sentences with clarity. I deserve a drink.

These areas are the essentials to examine in order to define what makes this moment in my life evolve. Every one of them and many more influence and make this moment inevitable. The examples I have made in each area are minimal to finding my behavior for the moment. Some of the things are primary and deal with the conscious execution of the task, and some are secondary.

In turning this examination of a few minutes of your life alone into a practical exercise, I ask you not only to test all aspects mentioned above but to pinpoint all of the physical and psychological sensations inherent in them, and then to make a layout of the action for the two minutes you have examined. Then see if you can re-create them as if for the first time.

I have given an example of something I was doing now at this moment of writing. I could take a remembered event

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from last year, or season or week. I might select the same objective (to finish a chapter) and put it at a different time (March 11, two years before in Greenwich Village on a raw, sleety day, with knocking radiators in an untidy apartment. The garbage men are on strike. I might have a head cold, be wearing an old bathrobe and terry-cloth scuffs. A marred leather-top desk, my twenty-year-old Remington typewriter, hot tea at my elbow, some Vicks cough drops and Kleenex, the telephone ringing incessantly, unwanted company coming for dinner at night, etc.—and I will discover different behavior and actions.

Object exercises should not be improvisations, although a degree of the rehearsal process will obviously involve them. But the final work should be exactly like that on a scene or a play, and you should be able to repeat a precisely defined concept broken down into actable elements (comparable to the score of a musician), as if it were happening for the first time. The only difference between the exercise and a scene is that you will be using yourself instead of a character, and your life experience instead of a play. The addition of the play requires that you find yourself in a character, using the auditory and visual concept of the playwright, director and designer.

You will work on these exercises by yourself under circumstances when you find yourself alone. This will also help you to develop discipline, which most actors are so sadly lacking—the discipline to work and to explore all by yourself. (No partner to tell you, “Let’s get down to work.”) Step 2 will be the testing of your exercise in communication with your teacher and peers. The final work, when you apply the problems of any exercise to a play, will, of course, include the powerful recognition not only of the writer but of the other actors.

When you first work on the exercises you will probably

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balk for all of the reasons I mentioned in dealing with “Identity.” You will think you are boring, and you would rather look for eccentric circumstances or “interesting” events. Remember the cat!

Don’t become bad playwrights. What should compel you into actions are definite needs, not show-off inventions. Don’t look for melodrama or eccentric tales, no eviction notices, suicide notes or tragic love affairs. An actor once brought in an exercise in which he prayed to God in a cathedral, ran behind the curtain, fired several shots, staggered back on stage, and died in front of the Madonna. Don’t look for a B-movie story, but a discovery of your behavior under simple circumstances when fulfilling a precise need. To convince a group of your colleagues that you are alive with forward-moving action for two minutes—that this never happened before in spite of the preciseness and detail of your selections—is what you should aim for. If you can convincingly create two minutes on stage in which you exist as if you were alone at home, you will have succeeded.

The very fact that you have no playwright’s interpretation to hide behind (“But the character would feel, he would do, or wouldn’t do . . .”) forces you to examine all sources and behavior with no excuses. You also are establishing habits of self-exploration which later can be put to use for character. Furthermore, you will establish the habit of working in many of the areas you must use in a scene. The exercise will help you to test selection and pertinence.

After having rehearsed and devised the exercises, the problem of presentation—how and where—will be an individual one. If you are a professional actor, you will undoubtedly have a studio or workshop available, with sufficient space, equipped with basic furniture and props (a bench or

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sofa, a bed, a bureau or desk, a cabinet that can do for a refrigerator, tables—one of which can substitute for a stove or sink—chairs, a blanket, some cushions or pillows, books, bottles, magazines, ashtrays, etc.). If you are lucky, there will be a movable flat or two with workable doors, and perhaps even a window. You will present your scenes to a teacher or your peers for criticism and possible reworking.

If you are an aspiring actor, you should find a qualified teacher who will provide you with the same physical setup, and if you are a teacher interested in testing these exercises you should provide all of the above for the students.

Necessary personal objects which you know can't be supplied, like clothing or an iron or a particular dish, pot, glass or book, must be brought by the actor. As a matter of fact, people who know me will recognize anyone studying with me as they approach the Studio, because they are usually lugging so many shopping bags full of props.

Since place is crucial, let me remind you that when you examine every aspect of it at home to see what influence it plays on your life, already begin to make considerations for how it can be transferred and constructed elsewhere. Use real objects. These are not pantomime exercises. Avoid any task that will force you to pantomime an activity with an incomplete object (like opening or closing doors when there are no doors to work with). Take what's there and, if necessary, endow it physically and psychologically with what it should be.

The exercises are not mute. If you find that you grunt, use expletives, or verbalize when alone, fine. It will help you with later exercises.

A minimum of one hour of rehearsal for each two-minute exercise is recommended—and by rehearsal I mean doing it, not just thinking about it.

Testing the communication of your selected existence

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with your "audience" is, of course, the proof of the pudding in the value these exercises will have for you.

THE TEN OBJECT EXERCISES

1. *The Basic Object Exercise* Re-creating behavior which leads to the achievement of a simple objective
2. *Three Entrances* Preparation and its influence on the entrance
3. *Immediacy* Dealing with the problems of anticipation while searching for something lost or mislaid
4. *The Fourth Wall* The guarantee of privacy while using, not ignoring, the visual area of the audience
5. *Endowment* Dealing with objects which cannot have total reality because they might otherwise totally control you; heightened reality
6. *Talking to Yourself* The problem of the monologue
7. *Outdoors*
 - a) Relationship to space and nature
 - b) Finding forward-moving occupation without the help of furniture and props
8. *Conditioning Forces* Learning to put together three or more sensory influences—heat, cold, physical pains, hurry, dark, quiet, etc.

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(The last two exercises employ a character from a play)

9. *History*

Identifying with and finding realities of historic time and place (the character taken out of crisis in the play)

10. *Character Action*

Objects as they affect two different characters in terms of behavior

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THE BASIC OBJECT EXERCISE

THE BASIC object exercise places no emphasis on any particular technical problem. It simply should test your ability to re-create two minutes of your life and bring it to presentation as if for the first time.

Incorporate all the questions on page 82 except perhaps the first, since I assume you *know* who you are—or think you know. First, give yourself an event or a simple task and establish your circumstances—past, present and future.

For example, you are coming home exhausted and want to make yourself comfortable. I have suggested your “home” for the place of your exercise so that you will explore all of the things in your surroundings that continuously influence you when you are alone, which, until now, you have probably taken for granted. And don’t ignore the influence of the city and neighborhood of your living quarters.

If you are uncomfortable you must ask yourself, What is uncomfortable—and why? Suppose your feet hurt. Why? You walked the “rounds” of producers’ and agents’ offices on a hot, sticky day in July. You were wearing thin-soled sandals which rubbed at the back of your heels. You were rejected by

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agents in a variety of ways—coolly and courteously told, “Nothing today”; rudely and humiliatingly told, “You’re too fat for the part”; offhandedly informed, “Try us again next week.” The producers were away on vacation.

You have just climbed three long flights of stairs and had trouble locating your key, and you come into your apartment to flop, only to find a disorderly apartment. Now you pursue your objective to try to get comfortable. You drop your portfolio with its photos and credits on the table. Painfully, you remove your sandals and leave them near the door. You go to the window to open it further for more air. Soot from the windowsill blows in and dirties your hands. You hobble to the sink to wash your hands, etc., etc. You end up sitting at the kitchen table soaking your feet in a bowl of warm water while you cry softly into your vodka-and-tonic, feeling sorry for yourself. You are comfortable!

OR

TIME: 7:10 on a beautiful spring morning in 1973.

PLACE: In your bed on Perry Street in New York City.

SURROUNDINGS: Your alarm clock is on the antique night table at the right of the bed. The window is wide open; the white Orlon curtains are blowing, and the early light is shimmering. The streets are still except for isolated foot-steps and barking—someone is walking a dog. Your chiffon robe is across the room on a stiff, white chair. One slipper is next to the bed, the other was kicked under it, etc.

GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES: *Past*—You had a heavy date last night and went to a great new French movie. You had a little too much to drink and showed off. You slept heavily and got the bed clothes tangled. You slept ten minutes past the alarm.

Present—You are considering how to stay in bed a little longer. You see a man in an apartment across the street

The Basic Object Exercise

watching you in bed. You wonder how to get to your robe and slippers.

Future—You have a reading for a part in a play today. You have another meeting with last night’s date later on.

RELATIONSHIP: To your date—possibly serious for the future; tender, humorous. To the young director of the new play you’re going to read for—he thinks you’re terrific and right for the part, but isn’t sure he can persuade the producer. You’ve worked for the director in stock and “handle” him easily. To the peeping Tom—he’s done this before, and you’ll give him his money’s worth. You love your new robe, earned from a commercial. The slippers are tacky and should be thrown away. Your date’s cigarette butts have a musty, stale smell in the ashtray on your bureau.

MAIN OBJECTIVE: To prepare for the reading.

IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES: To get your robe and slippers on. To get a cup of coffee and some juice. To get the script ready with pencil and pad in order to study the scene you will prepare. To lay out a proper wardrobe for the audition and to make yourself elegant.

OBSTACLES: Time—you have only until ten o’clock before the reading. Physical—you’re slightly headachy from the extra drink. Weather— it seems too balmy and beautiful to work. The script is badly Xeroxed and difficult to decipher. The peeping Tom won’t leave his window, etc.

ACTIONS: You leap out of bed and flaunt your behind in your thin nightie at the peeping Tom, before yanking the curtains together and putting on your gorgeous robe. You turn the clock to the wall so that your lateness won’t rattle you. You empty your friend’s ashtray in the attempt to get him off your mind. You look for an aspirin for your headache, etc., etc.

These examples should stimulate ideas for an approach to your own basic object exercise. The order of examination of the various categories is not as important as the

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fact that you eventually cover them all. You may begin with a relationship to someone and build an objective around that, which you then clothe in circumstances, or you may begin with an objective. Let me repeat that no matter how much you improvise in the course of your rehearsals, the final work entails the decisiveness of the actions which have evolved from your particularizations of all the elements I have described in such detail. I sometimes call this your final score. The final shape you give the whole, the determination of the objectives, whether they succeed or fail as they lead you on to the next one should become inevitable. And your craft will be tested by your ability to present the final shape with the spontaneity of the first time.

How much of your behavior has been subconscious and reflex will become clear to you as you put it under the microscope in this fashion. You should also discover that your actions are dependent on your wishes and the objects which surround you.

All technical variations of the ensuing exercises incorporate the elements you have examined in this one. Don't omit any of them.

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THREE ENTRANCES

HAVEN'T you stood nervously in the wings waiting to make an entrance, fighting for concentration to gain faith in your character, in your circumstances, in your very state of being, while stagehands scurried around, whispering near the light board, and other actors chatted distractingly? If you were *on* stage when the curtain went up, although some of the distractions were similar, at least you were surrounded by furniture and objects which allowed you some kind of illusion. You didn't stand frozen while waiting for the curtain, but probably connected yourself with some small doing which came from the events that would lead you forward into your activities as the curtain rose.

How to overcome the ice-cold shower-shock of the first contact with the audience as "He enters" from backstage onto the stage has been a problem for even some of the great stars I've worked with. Actors protect themselves from this shock usually in one of two ways, both incorrect. In the extreme, they either sneak on and into the stage area, floating inconspicuously without decisive action until some object engages them so that it must really be dealt with, or they