

actual affair. It's the actress's deep commitment to bringing out all these given circumstances that makes the performance alive over sixty years after it was filmed.

Stella Adler famously said, "It's not enough to have talent. You have to have a talent for your talent." One of the talents you need is to be able to break down a script and to identify all the facts that the writer gives you that help you understand your character, what each scene is about, and what the whole script is about. These given circumstances may make you emotional when you read them, and that's important, because that shows you that you're connecting to the material. But just as critical as your emotional response is being completely clear about the actual facts of the story. Because only by identifying and investing in these facts can you bring your truth—your interpretation—to your performance. Root your performance to the earth (the given circumstances), and you can begin to fly.

SUPEROBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE: WHAT DO YOU WANT?

After a scene has been done in my class, I always ask how each actor feels about their work on the scene they just completed. Then I often ask, what did you as the character want to accomplish in the scene? What did your character try to get from the other person? Affection, understanding, money, power, sex, information, forgiveness? In other words, what did you *want*? What did you identify as your character's *objective* in the scene as specified by the writer?

I use the word *objective* because I like it; it sings to me. Other synonyms you can use and that are used in the business of acting are my *want*, my *action*, my *desire*, my *goal*. Say it however you like, it's all about human needs. The objective is what your character wants in a certain scene in order to try to fulfill their needs.

Of course, your character's wants don't begin with that scene. As a character you walk into a play or a film from a prior life, and something has happened in that prior life—something deeply emotional—that has created for your character a wish or dream that is called the *superobjective*.

The objective of each individual scene is connected to your overall superobjective, your driving passion. The superobjective is the engine that propels you through the journey of the play or film; it is the dream that moves you through the story, for in plays and films as in life, without dreams we don't take action.

The Russian actor, teacher, and director Konstantin Stanislavski, who is thought of as the father of the so-called Method, said that the superobjective—the dream, which comes from a deep yearning within the character—is the spine of the actor's performance, and that the objectives in each individual scene are the ribs connected to that spine. One of the exciting things about reading a script is beginning to find what Stanislavski called "the system of wants." This system of wants for each character means that character's desires—objectives—in each scene. It is vital to every play or film you will act in, because without objectives, and without obstacles in the way of those objectives, you have nothing to act.

If I'm playing Richard Nixon and Nixon's dream is *to become the most revered president in the history of the world*, then each scene in the story of my life is a rib on the spine of that superobjective: my success at gaining visibility in the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) hearings; my becoming vice president under Dwight Eisenhower; my victory over Hubert Humphrey; my successful space program when the first astronauts land on the moon; my meeting with the Russian leader Brezhnev; my successful trip to China; my resounding victory over George McGovern for my second term; the Watergate scandal; the threat of impeachment. Each scene, even those that dramatize my downfall, is connected to the spine of being the most revered president in the history of the world, because that dream—the superobjective—is what drives me emotionally whether I am trying to rise or to survive a downward spiral. Each scene will have a particular, specific objective that I pursue in order to attempt to fulfill my dream, my superobjective.

When Nixon lost the California gubernatorial race, he famously said to the media, "You won't have Dick Nixon to kick around anymore." This was a man who was deeply wounded in his childhood, a man scarred by humiliation and repression. Nixon's way of coping with these unbearable feelings was to create the dream of becoming the most revered president in the history of the world. His defeats—the presidential election of 1960, in the California gubernatorial race of 1962—made him cling to this dream with even more intensity.

Every superobjective has a *justification*, an emotional reason for its

birth. Mr. Nixon's dream was birthed in childhood humiliation, and humiliation followed and drove him for much of his life. For years he seemed to be perpetually in a flop sweat due to the elusiveness of his desperate dream.

To make the connection between superobjective and emotional justification clearer, I'd like you to watch the 1950s movie *The Goddess*, written by Paddy Chayevsky and starring the great Kim Stanley. It is Chayevsky's imaginative telling of Marilyn Monroe's life. Early in the movie, Emily Ann Faulkner (Kim Stanley) allows young men in her high school to have sex with her because her mother screams, "I don't want her. I never wanted her," which makes Emily desperate for any kind of love. Emily's well of pain is deepened when she discovers that the one boy she believes likes her for herself, the one who made her feel that he cared, has been lying. As he begins to hungrily undress her and use her, she begins to softly cry, and says, "I'm going to Hollywood and become a movie star."

The superobjective is so emotionally powerful to your character that it will make you try to obliterate any obstacle in your path. Emily first tries to obliterate the obstacles to becoming a star. Then she tries to obliterate the deep depression that haunts her even after she attains stardom. The reason I'm using the word *obliterate*, which means to destroy, is that the superobjective is intensely passionate; it always comes from deep pain, deep joy, or deep fear. Emily's superobjective is not to become a movie star, it is to *have a feeling of being deeply cared about and loved*, which she never truly attains.

Where do you find the superobjective that drives your character? You find it in the script—the same place you find the objectives of each scene. It's the road that the writer provides for you. This superobjective, this dream, and these wants *drive* the story forward, and as an actor your job is to tell that particular story. If you misunderstand your character's driving needs, wants, objectives—all these words mean the same thing—the play or film will fail to truly reach the audience and live powerfully.

In Arthur Miller's brilliant tragedy *Death of a Salesman*, although there are many scenes in which Biff, the older son of Willy Loman, the salesman of the play's title, attacks his father, it is a great mistake to play Biff as attacking his father only with anger. A vital given circumstance of the play is that Willy is preparing his suicide so that his family can obtain his life insurance and he can feel he left the world with power and dignity. His death will leave the family with the only thing that has true significance in

his mind: money. Of course it's madness, but there is a kind of love in it. Willy wants Biff to be successful, which to Willy means money and power—the American dream—the very things that have eluded him. Because Willy realizes that Biff is lost and has no road toward success and prosperity, he criticizes him, he baits him, and he humiliates him. Biff retaliates in kind, but they do these things out of a distorted need for love.

Biff attacks with anger, yes, but he also begs, pleads, confesses his own failures, warns his father, creates ultimatums, hugs, pushes his father, demands him to face the truth about Willy's own failures and false dreams of attaining greatness, all out of a need for love, all because Biff wants *to save his family and find himself*. This is the superobjective that drives Biff through the play. Everything he does, he does because he needs his father's love, not because he hates him. The opposite of love is indifference, not hate. Biff may have moments of hatred toward Willy because he despises his actions and is enraged by his choices, but *Biff wants to save Willy so he can mend the family and himself*. If you are an angry son yourself, you may miss the intense need for love—don't!

Remember, you use yourself to act, but the character is not you; the character comes through you. Actors, don't get all huffy and close the book now, saying, "But my teacher says there's no character, there's only me adjusted." If you don't separate the character as written from your own life you will miss qualities that are imperative to capturing this person's personality. Yes, you use yourself deeply—*your* emotions, *your* imagination, *your* interpretation, *your* physical behavior, all subjects I will discuss later in the book—but I say again, the character stands on his own and your job is to bring him to life.

There are flashbacks in *Death of a Salesman* where Biff and his brother, Happy, idolize their father. When you are young and have that feeling toward a parent, and then the parent reveals his weakness and is abusive, you may forget that you once idolized him because your pain turns to depression and vindictiveness. The desire for love drives you for the rest of your life unless you resolve it. Notice that I'm talking here about Biff's need for love from Willy as opposed to his love for Willy, for I believe that between father and sons in the Loman family, no one has truly felt love, just the aching desire for it.

If a really powerful superobjective is never obtained, you never arrive at your destination. That keeps you in a state of wanting and aliveness until the curtain comes down or the screen flashes "The End." In the last moments of *Death of a Salesman*, Biff realizes that he has to discover a way

of living for himself that separates him from his father's inflated, empty dreams of power and glory. But by that time Willy is dead and the family is destroyed. So even though Biff starts to find himself, he has not, and never could have, saved his family and gotten his father's love. Willy didn't know how to love Biff. How could he when he didn't know how to value himself?

On the television series *Inside the Actors Studio*, Sydney Pollack talked about how he tries to sum up each film he directs in one sentence. In Pollack's film *Out of Africa*, the one sentence is the superobjective of Meryl Streep's character, Karen Blixen-Finecke (I'm going to phrase this in terms you would use if you were acting the role): *to tame Africa and to tame the man I love*. When you watch the film you'll notice that Pollack uses sweeping aerial views of the immense land that is Africa. No human being can ever own that land or change its essential nature, any more than Karen can tame the wild heart of the man she loves. At the end of the film, Karen says at the funeral of her lover, Denys Finch Hatton (Robert Redford), "He was never mine, he was never ours," and the camera cuts to the grave of Finch Hatton with lions guarding it. They are wild, he is still wild, even in death, and Africa pulsates as the film ends. Karen Blixen-Finecke's desire to own the land and the man drives her through the film, but she never achieves her dream.

What we *want*, what we *desire*, what we *must have*: each scene has at least two opposing objectives—one coming from your character, the other coming from another character. These create conflict and raise the scene to heightened reality. This is what Alfred Hitchcock called "life with all the boring bits cut out." These conflicting wants are among the obstacles to characters' obtaining their objectives, a subject we'll explore in the next chapter.

One of my goals in this book is to clarify technical tools; another is to excite your imagination and creative instincts by making the technical tools immediately useful. I use well-known, classic plays for many of my examples because they formed my love for the theater. If you haven't already read them, then you must—not only for personal growth, but also to get the most out of this book. My creative life was born from the depth and power of these plays; they are great, and they always will be great, for they speak about the difficulty of being human in extraordinary ways. That's why these plays are still being performed all over the world.

I like to talk about Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, because it is one of the few great modern masterpieces. *Streetcar* is about

the visit of Blanche DuBois, a fading Southern beauty with a genteel background and many secrets, to the home of her younger sister, Stella, and Stella's new working-class husband, Stanley, in a seedy section of the French Quarter in New Orleans. The fourth major character is Stanley's friend Mitch, who becomes a potential suitor to Blanche. Each character's superobjective moves them through the entire play.

Blanche DuBois—to *find a safe place*. In every scene that Blanche is in, she is trying, through gentility of manners, through humor, seduction, blame, and revealing past pain, to find a safe place;

Stanley Kowalski—to *stay king of my castle*. In order to stay king, Stanley dominates Stella (and any other woman) through his sexuality, his bullying, and his little-boy helplessness. He dominates his buddies through brute physical force. Everything Stanley does to bully, to entertain, to seduce, to create a ruckus, to destroy, and to beg—those active verbs that are his *active intentions* in each scene—is in the service of his superobjective;

Stella Kowalski—to *bring my sister and my husband together to form a new family*. In almost every scene, Stella tries to inspire affection, understanding, and patience in Stanley toward Blanche and in Blanche toward Stanley;

Mitch—to *end my loneliness*. Mitch is ultrapolite, gentle, accommodating, almost reverential toward Blanche because she appears to be fragile, like a woman he had loved who died. He sees Blanche as a potential life partner—which he desperately needs because his mother, with whom he lives, is dying.

In one searing moment, after Blanche reveals her complicity in the death of her homosexual husband years ago, Mitch says, "You need somebody and I need somebody too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche?" Then Williams writes the stage directions, "*She stares at him vacantly for a moment, then with a soft cry, cuddles in his embrace. She makes a sobbing effort to speak, but the words won't come. He kisses her forehead and her eyes and finally her lips. The polka tune fades out. Her breath is drawn and released, graceful sobs.*" And Blanche says: "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!" For Blanche, "the safe place" is God. But this is the only moment in *Streetcar* where two of the characters' superobjectives meet—and from then on they are torn apart.

As I've said, you identify your superobjective by finding it in the script. In scene after scene, Blanche says, in essence—and this is supported by her actions, as well as her behavior—"I'm tapped out, my youth is fading now, I don't have those options anymore, I can't turn the

trick anymore." That's why she must find a safe place; she has nowhere else to go; the streetcar has reached the end of the line. And Stanley declares—and demonstrates through his actions—"I'm the king in this house, and don't you ever forget it"—an instruction that Blanche ignores. And Stella tries to smooth the waters in scene after scene. She coddles and waits on Blanche; she begs Stanley, "Try to be kind to her, Stanley. Tell her how pretty she looks." Stella behaves toward Stanley as if he's a sexual narcotic she can't get enough of. "When he's away for one night," she tells Blanche, "I nearly go insane." She implores them to value each other because she can't bear the thought of hurting either one of them.

It's not enough just to identify the superobjective intellectually, you have to *justify* it, to find the emotional drive behind it. You need your own *specific interpretation* of the superobjective of your character so that every time you think of it, it makes you emotional and drives you into action. The words you use to describe your superobjective might be different from the words used by another actor. For one actress playing Blanche, the phrase "to find a safe place" might be emotionally compelling; for another actress, the phrase "to find protection" or "to find a beautiful corner for myself" might be the language that carbonates her. I believe that when you're playing a part, the justification for your superobjective should be so emotional, so passionate and alive to *you*, that when you think about it, it makes you weep, rage, or burst into joy and fall on your knees in gratitude. In performance, just reminding yourself of your justified superobjective may be all you need to keep you emotionally galvanized for the whole play.

One way to discover your emotional justification is to ask yourself, "What if I don't get my dream?" and imagine what would become of your life if you didn't. The given circumstances of *Streetcar* are that Blanche has lost everything that had meaning for her before she arrives at Stella and Stanley's. She's lost her husband, most of her family, the plantation called Belle Rêve (which, ironically, means beautiful dream), and her income—having been fired from her teaching job. She is left with the desperation of one wish: to find that safe place. You can see that the emotion of her justification is all-consuming. At the end of the play, Blanche cannot find a safe place in reality and she leaves reality behind altogether. As she is being led away to an asylum for the insane, she moves into the past of the genteel Old South, proclaiming the famous line, "Whoever you are—I've always depended on the kindness of strangers."

The emotional justification for the superobjective cannot be general;

it must be specific. If you are playing Richard Nixon, it's too general to say that you want to be the most revered president in the world in order to make up for former humiliation in your life. The passion behind the dream needs to be created by your imagination as a *specific*, unbearable humiliating moment or series of moments.

Nixon's life, because it's been well documented, is known to contain many such moments. One of these occurred at the HUAC hearings, when Nixon was prosecuting Alger Hiss for Communist activities. During an exchange between the two, Hiss snapped at Nixon, "I am familiar with the law. I attended Harvard Law School. I believe yours was Whittier." HUAC staff member Robert Stripling says that Nixon's face became "red, then blue, and red again. You could see the hackles on his back practically pushing his coat up." This moment is the kind of specific humiliation that you could use to justify your superobjective emotionally. But if it doesn't incite you, you would need to find another moment, or to create one, that made you turn red, blue, and red again.

Sometimes the emotional justification is in the given circumstances of the script, and sometimes it's only hinted at. Let's look at another Williams play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The play is about a marriage in the South, in which the husband, Brick, is ignoring his wife, Maggie, while he mourns the death of his best friend, Skipper, who may have been his lover. The script also tells you that there's a huge economic difference between Brick and Maggie: he grew up with money, a tortured prince, while Maggie, despite family social connections, is low-rent, low-class, and a social climber, haunted by her former poverty. Maggie's superobjective is *to have so much money that I never have the fear of being poor for the rest of my life*. Why does she feel this way?

Again, the script tells you that Maggie's family was poor. Maggie also declares to Brick: "You can be young without money but you can't be old without it. You've got to be old *with* money, because to be old without it is just too awful." But finding the specific emotional justification that propels Maggie's dream is up to you; you've got to know *exactly* what your "too awful" is. Perhaps Maggie remembers how her mother clutched her hand as she lay dying in a public institution, unable to get proper medical attention because they couldn't afford it. Maggie doesn't describe this in the play, but it's something that you as an actress might come up with from your *imagination* that fits the character of Maggie. To watch your mother die in agony in a public ward is an intense and painful justification to make sure you don't end up that way.

If you don't understand that Maggie's superobjective is economic security, you might think her dream is for her husband, Brick, to love her—which would be a mistake, because if she wants to be loved by him, why would she irritate him and enrage him, which she does quite purposely? If, however, you understand that Maggie wants economic security, and you've found the personal justification for that need, then you understand that she'd want to put a fire under Brick in whatever way she can. Maggie needs Brick to make amends with his dying father so that they will get a share of the inheritance. Of course Maggie feels, and rightfully so, that they're more apt to get the money if she can get pregnant and give Brick's father a male heir. This is particularly important because Brick's brother and sister-in-law, May, "that monster of fertility," are way ahead of them in the baby-producing department. She irritates and enrages Brick because she wants to get through his armor and make him *feel something* before he gets too drunk, so that perhaps he will impregnate her and go downstairs and celebrate his father's birthday—and *get the money*. Whether he loves her or not is beside the point to Maggie; it would be nice, but it's not what drives her. She may truly love Brick, and I believe it's better for the play if she does, but it's not love that drives her; it's terror. How do I know? I found it in the play! I found it by reading the script and observing what Maggie does scene by scene.

How badly does Maggie want her superobjective? She wants it *at any cost*. I know this because Maggie brings up to Brick the most dangerous and vulnerable injury in his psyche, his possible sexual relationship with his best friend, Skipper. "I just can't keep my hands off a sore," she says. Brick, a former athlete who has broken his ankle and is now on crutches, later says, "Don't you know that I could kill you with this crutch?" And Maggie answers, "Good Lord, man, do you think I'd care if you did?" It's an all-or-nothing game for Maggie. Because Brick is ignoring her, and because he's turning into a drunk, and time is running out for the family's money machine—Brick's father, Big Daddy, who's dying of cancer—she's desperate. She doesn't want to die, but she can't go on the way she's living. Maggie tells Brick that if she thought he would "never, never, never" make love to her again, she would go downstairs into the kitchen and get "the longest and sharpest knife I could find and stick it straight into my heart. I swear I would." That's how much Maggie wants what she wants. Maggie is written with great humor, and that delicious sense of humor must be played, but don't let that blind you to her primary goal in life—*money*.

The superobjective, the dream, tells you how you feel about everything in the play or film, including the other characters, and in every scene it drives you to actions that you believe will help you to get what you want.

Sometimes a character has a *conscious* and an *unconscious* superobjective. Take, for example, Eddie Carbone, the leading character in Arthur Miller's play *A View from the Bridge*, which is about an Italian-American family in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn. Eddie's unconscious superobjective—and remember, *unconscious* means exactly that: as a character you are not aware of it—is that he wants to have a sexual relationship with his niece, Catherine, whom he and his wife, Beatrice, raised after Beatrice's sister died. Although Eddie is not conscious of this, as an actor playing the character you must be aware of it, or you will not have the TNT to play the part. Watching this young girl flower into womanhood excites Eddie's desire, but this is so unbearable for him to face that he channels this sexual energy into becoming overprotective and suspicious of any man who would court her. He believes her suitors want only one thing—exactly what he wants but can't admit to himself. Eddie becomes obsessively controlling and tries to destroy an innocent young man who falls in love with Catherine and wants to marry her. So Eddie's conscious superobjective is *to keep my niece with me forever to protect her from the dirty hands that will soil her purity*.

How does Eddie justify this? He tells himself that he and Beatrice vowed to her sister that they would care for Catherine and never let anything bad happen to her. At the same time he's impotent with his wife, who is pushing him to have sex. When Beatrice brings up their lack of sexual intimacy, he explodes, saying, in effect, "Don't tell me what to do because I'm the head of this family and the man is law and I have to protect all of you and how dare you question my virility! I am the head of this family!" He tries to justify his unconscious desire with his conscious superobjective. The play ends in tragedy because he can't.

Whenever you get confused about what you're doing in a part—whether you're working on it at home, auditioning, rehearsing, or in performance—say to yourself, "Wait a minute, what's driving me? Oh, right! My dream, my superobjective. Now what is happening in this scene, or with this relationship that I'm involved in, and how is it connected to my superobjective?" You have to keep asking and answering these questions for yourself to keep your performance on track and alive. If you stay clear about your superobjective and objectives, and are emo-

tionally connected to them through your justification as you relate to the other characters, you will always feel the emotional carbonation that gives you a reason to be in the story.

Sometimes a character has a double-pronged superobjective. This was true of Carol Connelly in *As Good as It Gets*. At the start of the film, Carol, single mother of a son with life-threatening asthma, has the dream *to save my son's life at any cost*. When Melvin tells her that he'll take care of her and her son so that she'll no longer have to worry about paying for the treatment her son needs, Carol's life moves into a new stage. What Helen and I found in analyzing the script was that in some ways up to that point Carol was still an adolescent; she never grew up to be a fulfilled woman in relationships with men because she didn't have the time. So this is a comparatively rare instance when the character does get their superobjective and, because they do, a new superobjective is born, which, in Carol's case, is *to find a romantic life and create a new family*.

Remember that the objectives of your character in each scene are ribs on the spine of the superobjective. Start observing your own life and see that this is true not just of plays and films but of all of us.

As a young actor in New York, I wanted desperately to star in a Broadway musical; I thought there was nothing more exciting, thrilling, or challenging than singing, dancing, and acting in front of a live audience. When I was growing up in L.A., my parents would bring home the programs from musicals they had seen in New York, and they would talk about Broadway in excited and glamorous terms. In my child's mind I thought if I became one of those people on the stage that my parents had talked about as important, then I, too, would be considered important and lovable. So you could say that my superobjective was *to gain my parents' love through becoming a Broadway musical star*.

My obstacle: I was nineteen years old, I had no money, no technique, and I knew no one in the theater. This was during the 1960s, when New York was elegant, down and dirty, chic, and discotheque mad. I applied for a job as the second dishwasher at a discotheque called Steve Paul's The Scene. So I was trying to get my parents' love and attention by becoming a Broadway star, but in order to achieve my dream, I had to get money to study my craft. If there was a scene about my job interview in this play entitled *I Will Be Loved and Adored by My Family If I Am a Broadway Star*, the scene would be about how my character sweet-talked, joked, and pleaded with the boss of this disco to let me be a dishwasher in a greasy, smelly, overheated, hysterical kitchen in order to make money to take

classes to achieve my dream. My objective in this particular scene, then, is to *get the job as a dishwasher so I can study and become a Broadway star.*

You can begin to see in a very practical, very human way that every day of your life you have a system of wants, desires, objectives from the moment you get up in the morning till the time you go to sleep at night. Understanding this about yourself will make it much easier for you to break down a script and identify the wants of characters in different scenes. I'll end with an exercise I assign to my students: My System of Wants.

My System of Wants Exercise

Go through a day in your life and write down every single thing you *want*—and I mean the subtle things like, “I want to get the sleep out of my eyes,” “I want a cup of a particular kind of coffee,” “I want to call a particular friend for a particular reason,” “I want to mend an argument with my sister and therefore I will make the call I do not want to make because I will have to hide my anger and try to get her to understand my point of view.”

Throughout the day, also be aware of how your body feels: when you are hungry, when you are tired, when you are sad, joyful, lustful. Then observe what you do about it. Sometimes we want things and we know that they are bad for us so we do something else instead. It doesn't mean that we didn't want the thing that was bad for us, but that for some very specific reason we choose to do what is better for us. The system of wants may start with, “I *want* to eat that pint of Häagen-Dazs,” but it will switch to “I will eat an apple instead so I can fit into my clothes.”

I want, I want, I want—objective, objective, objective—all day long, every day, every second. That's why superobjectives and objectives are so fundamental to your work as an actor; they, along with given circumstances, are the bedrock of life—and of every part you will ever play.

3

OBSTACLE AND INTENTION: HOW WILL YOU GET IT?

Drama is created by wants—objectives—but it can't really be drama unless there's an *obstacle* standing in the way of achieving the want. In every play or film, there's someone who can't or won't give you what you want, or you're in a place where you can't get it, or there's something else you have to overcome to get it. Having obstacles is basic to dramatic structure. It's also basic to life.

I said that as a young man my superobjective was to *gain my parents' love through becoming a Broadway star.* Then I listed my obstacles: I was nineteen years old, I had no money, no technique, and I knew no one in the theater. One of my objectives on my way to becoming a success was that I wanted to get a job so I could support myself and take classes. That objective brought me to apply for the dishwashing job in the discotheque. In order to get the job—my objective—I had to face new obstacles: I had to compete with other guys wanting the job and to impress the owner, Steve Paul. To overcome these obstacles, I did specific *active* things. I ingratiated myself, I joked, and I pleaded with him to work in his greasy