

## *Approaches to Acting*

### *Loop, Action, Intention and Focus Points*

When you take a string and tie one end to the other, you are creating a physical link. Both ends are equivalent to each other. Similarly, when you communicate with another interlocutor, you create a link, by sending forth energy directed at that person, in the form of words, gestures or postures (or the absence of these). That energy returns along the link that has been established (often through eye contact, but not always.) You anticipate a response, and, if the energy has been received by the person you direct it to, you get one. This is called a *loop* in acting.

A loop always comes back to its beginning, to itself. In acting, a loop begins when a character sends something out—a statement, a gesture, a reaction. This is an *action*; it involves the character *acting*. To act is to do; and there's only one reason why any of us *do* anything. It's to get what we want.

An action can also involve *inaction*; a lack of response can be as powerful a statement as an action, because it's a response that carries *intent*. “I intend to ignore you (and to show you I'm ignoring you)”. Intent is the purpose for which you act in this example. Anything you do on a stage (or in life) that carries intention can thus be described as an action, even if you never move an inch.

These *actions* are directed at the object of a character's intentions onstage; most often one or more people in the scene. There is an impact; the energy hits home and is received by that person. Their reaction or response is in turn directed back at the initial generator, the first person. A chain is built; one action causes another reaction. This is a loop. Loops are a fundamental aspect of acting, most especially psychologically realistic acting. Without them you have actors who exist outside of their scenes.

Reactions are often not proportionate, or “equal and opposite”. As in kinesis; humans are not machines, so their response to situations and the intentions is not measured simply by the force of the intention itself. Characters, like people, have sense memories that are triggered by the smallest things. We react as much to what we've already experienced in similar situations as we do to what is before us. Our response is often a kind of anticipation, based on those prior experiences. This is why responses to other people's simple statements often seem wildly disproportionate. It feels proportionate to the character doing the responding, however; that is, it feels like the right thing to do at the time. For all of us, a present moment reaction involves equal parts past and future, which cannot be separated from the present.

The main object of your intention in a scene is your *primary loop partner*. This is the focus of the activities you undertake to get what you want. The character always believes their primary loop partner can give them what they desire. Conflicts arise, of course; the loop partner may not be aware of, or capable of fulfilling, the first character's objectives. Some characters act tactically in a way that works against achieving their intentions, for instance by responding to moment stimuli at the expense of long-term objectives. (How many times have we yelled out of frustration at someone we wish to love us?)

## *Approaches to Acting*

A *secondary loop* involves another relationship a character has in a scene. It can be with a person who is present, a person who is not present, with a present place, a past place, or, occasionally, with past or present objects. There can be more than two loops in a scene; in *Three Sisters*, the sisters alternate focusing on each other with a focus on each of their guests. In such scenes one can argue that if a character's intention doesn't change, then they may be treating *the group* as a single loop; in terms of Concentration spheres (what Stanislavski calls "Attention") this is a *public* focus. But if there are individual reactions the character gives and receives, we're talking about multiple focus points and loops.

Secondary loops involve two types of story-telling; past moment and present moment. Many plays feature characters who are *forced* to tell a story to achieve their intention. They explain something about themselves to a primary loop partner in order to get what they want. In a past tense story, the character explains what they experienced. They *re-create the scene*: a character who tells a story about the first time they saw a person die re-creates the experience for themselves as well as the listener. To do that, the character must *go there*; we must see what they see. When they go there, the spectator is tipped off by the fact that their *focus point* changes. They look somewhere else. If that second focus is a person, this can be called a secondary loop. I extend the term to the relationship a character has with *place*; remembering a childhood sanctuary, for instance, will create a relationship with that space. A loop creates an effect or forces a response in the character.

In a *present tense story*, a space, a memory or a story is merely used for reference, as illustration, by a character. There is no need to create a second loop. There is still a shifting of focus points, though. All references have a "there", but the character simply *checks* it, referring to it as a point of clarification. This is a lesser relationship where there is little or no loop.

Deciding which approach to take with secondary loop in a text can be difficult. The actor must look at the story, or reference, and judge how *invested* the character is. Do they go there, live there momentarily? Are they reluctantly pulled back into the present? Or are they merely illustrating? Remember, even in illustrating a point, we go somewhere, shift our focus. But the investment is less; we choose to go there, then choose to come back to our primary loop. In good writing, the character may choose to go to their secondary loop, but they are *forced* to come back. If they don't come back to the primary loop partner, they risk losing the object of their intention in the scene.

Characters must have a relationship with every object in their world. If the object, place or person is not directly affecting them, there is no loop. The moment it creates a response, there is a loop.

What happens if your loop partner isn't part of the world of the play? Many plays involve characters who break out of their world and speak to the audience. How can this be called a loop?

Treating the audience as a single unit is the beginning step. Much like the sisters in *Three Sisters*, or any character addressing a room full of people in a play, treat the group as one focus point. The audience becomes a single person, a stranger who is there to hear you, to comprehend you, to help your character define herself and retain her identity (and thus survive). The character has broken out of their world for a reason: they are *forced* to look

## *Approaches to Acting*

outside their world because they are not getting what they want, in that moment, from within it. When they return to their world, they are *forced* to do so, because if they lose contact with their world, they themselves are lost. This is clearly a loop.

What constitutes the primary or secondary loop in a scene? Often the hierarchy is misleading. A character can switch from one loop to another in a scene with equal force and intention. The distinction of primary and secondary is based more on which loop the character spends the bulk of their time investing in. In terms of focus placement in a scene or audition situation, the primary loop is often, but *not exclusively*, set forward, and the secondary loop to one side. There is no reason why a confident actor can't reverse this. A character on a couch, talking to the sleeping husband beside her, will find that he is her primary loop partner. So we see her a great deal from a profile point of view. There's nothing wrong with this; it creates, quite appropriately in a scene like this, a sense of listening in clandestinely. When she breaks away in exasperation or desperation to look at the television that dominates their lives, she looks at us with a blank, resigned or resentful stare. We are allowed to look at her privately.

Thus the idea of where a character's main *focus point* is directed is governed more by the actor's creativity and instinct than by any hoary rule of the stage. If you've got the guts, your primary loop and focus point can be all the way upstage, turning your back to the audience. It can be done. (You'd better be a virtuoso, or have a really attractive back.)

A final note about those challenging pieces which require an actor to break the wall and speak "outside their world". Talking to the audience isn't out of the context of the play, if that's the way the playwright wrote it. An actor doesn't have to fake anything. All she has to do is identify an intended target, based on a specific intention, and an urgent motivation. Following the playwright's script and speaking to the audience as a character—or, as in Brecht, out of character—still requires an actor to create a loop is. In a loop, action is created organically, by receiving energy and responding to it. This governs every action a character performs on stage.