

## *The Neutral State*

The neutral state, or “neutral” as it more commonly is referred to, exists in many, if not most approaches to training the physical instrument of the actor. There are variations, but fundamentally each refers to *alignment* and *breath* as its core components. The body is aligned, top to bottom, through adjustments most importantly in the spine, but also involving the feet, knees, pelvis, ribs, chest, shoulders and neck. Breathing is regulated and deepened in comparison to daily life breaths, which are more like gasps. Actors often struggle with light-headedness when first applying Neutral position, due to the extra oxygen flowing into their bodies.

Neutralisation, as it applies to standing body position, has a few differences from one school of thought to another. The natural “S” curve of the spine is retained in most, but in some forms the pelvis is “tucked” to avoid one of the most common postural habits, over-arching of the lower back. The chest (sternum) is dropped to avoid arching of the upper back<sup>1</sup>. Shoulders are rolled and dropped into the shoulder girdle to eliminate what is now, through computer and cellphone use, the most prevalent habit of poor posture: shoulders rounding forward. Electronics use also tends to exacerbate anterior, or forward, head carriage, resulting in strained muscles supporting the neck.

So far this description of Neutral position might be called therapeutic; that is, a corrective antidote to the stresses placed upon the body in daily life. Many schools of acting leave it at that, without even properly explaining why the position is called “neutral” or what its psychological and technical applications might be. Going a little farther into how the concept of Neutral forms one of the two pillars of BoxWhatBox training can help in furthering understanding of such aspects.

Simply put, Neutral is the position an actor takes when they are ready to work. The body is fully oxygenated and supported in the most efficient manner. And it is plastic: in Standing Neutral the knees are slightly bent, ready to initiate movement in any direction, realistic or otherwise, without the unlocking that simultaneously delays movement and telegraphs the intention to move. In the “SATS” or “ready” position taught by Odin Teatret and Eugenio Barba, the body also leans forward, ever so slightly; enough, Barba notes, to place a single sheet of paper under the heels. This transfers the energy of the actor forward through the sternum, in the direction it must always go, even when playing a character who is physically or psychologically in retreat. The communication of psychic energy to other characters, and to the audience, follows its physical transmission. To borrow a term from Mikhail Chekhov, the actor must always be *radiating* in addition to *receiving*. Adopting a plastic or “soft” neutral position enables the actor to listen with her body, to receive energy, while at the same time taking the optimal physical position in which to transmit it.

So far, so clear. Actors begin to struggle with the idea of Neutral position when they are building character. Surely a character is not always in this erect position? The answer to this is that Neutral exists in many forms. Alignment exists even when an actor (or athlete) has committed to a difficult

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<sup>1</sup> In more colloquial terms these refer to conscious or unconscious jutting out of the buttocks or the breasts—often a posture of sexual appeal in traditional cultures. As such, these can make great character choices, especially in genres that make use of stereotype, such the commedia dell’ arte. The actor creates Neutral alignment in order to choose such positions rather than work from them as a default position.

physical position<sup>2</sup>. There is Neutral seated position, Neutral prone position, Neutral active position. And then there are moments when a character is committed to a position that cannot be supported neutrally. It's hoped this doesn't occur often, because the risk of damage to the actor becomes far greater. An enlightened director and a well-trained actor (and sometimes a fight director) can avoid this circumstance in almost every case.

David Bowie's greatest role was, arguably, not Ziggy Stardust. In 1980-81 he played the role of John Merrick<sup>3</sup> in the Broadway production of Bernard Pomerance's play *The Elephant Man*. The historical Merrick was lame, and suffered from huge deformities of his spine and cranium. Movement and speech became increasingly difficult as he aged until his death at age 27. Pomerance's play demands a performance from the actor that uses no prosthetics or special effects. Everything is created from the body of the actor. From Denver to New York, Bowie performed the play for six months. His success, stemming from his early training in physical movement, could not have been replicated night after night without the use of Neutral position as a supportive network for the actor's choices.

We have established the context and form of Neutral position in its physical application. The body readies itself for creative work, maintains forms of alignment and regulated breath while working, and returns (after scenes, exercises or études) to Neutral to recuperate and prepare for the next piece of work when allowed. Implicit in this application is the neutralisation of personal postures. The elimination of daily life physical habits of the actor is a critical element of neutralisation. Without it the actor plays only herself, no matter how gifted her interpretation. All postures in performance belong to the character and are specifically chosen by the actor. Once chosen they are applied on the canvas of Neutral position, like different colours added to a portrait.

As with the notion of Plasticity (which exists in tandem, and often inextricably with, neutralisation), there are emotional aspects which must be considered. Stanislavski and Sulerzhitsky's *creative state* utilised *prana*, a state of mind created through yogic breathing, to achieve a kind of "tabula rasa", or clean slate, in which the cares and preoccupations of the actor's daily life could be left at the stage door, enabling the actor to focus on the present moment. Neutral thus embodies a mental purging, where the system is flushed (with oxygen) and the accumulated toxins of the ego are rendered temporarily static. An actor is not being asked to forget her daily responsibilities and passions, simply to place them aside while she works on the construction of a character—a person who may be like them in some ways, but who is definably a separate entity and must be built accordingly, able to stand on its own two (perhaps supinated) feet.

Actors, especially those trained in North American realism, are notoriously reluctant to let go of their own voice, and their own physical gestures and postures. They mistakenly believe that these are a guarantee of authenticity in performance, when in fact the reverse is true. In insisting on their own habits they limit the possibility of creating an authentic character, one who fits more naturally within the world of the play than the actor ever could. Any character may embody physical habits an actor possesses—but the actor must choose to use them, and apply them from a Neutral state. If they do

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<sup>2</sup> This is easier to understand if we use the word "balance", although this is not all-inclusive. There are, for instance, imbalanced positions an athlete or actor may take that are nevertheless aligned neutrally.

<sup>3</sup> The real-life individual on whom the character was based was Joseph Merrick, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Englishman who suffered from what are still unknown conditions which created lifelong deformities of the exo-skeleton. The name of the play comes from the original misdiagnosis of elephantiasis. John Merrick was, in actuality, Joseph's brother.

not the result is “personality acting”, the kind where an actor is always recognisable at the expense of the character.

We need to remember, always, as actors and artists, that characters are people. They exist. They have thoughts and feelings that extend far beyond what is written in a text (or they are not very dimensional characters). And the actor is the only representative they have, to represent their hopes and dreams, their triumphs and failures. It’s an awesome responsibility, creating life on stage. We should not take it lightly. Nor should we scar that life with our own physical or emotional biases.

Part of taking on Neutral as an over-all aesthetic philosophy is the awareness that an actor can never afford to judge her character. People in daily life may feel shame about specific actions they have committed, but over-all they attempt to justify their lives. Sanity is impossible without justification, however implausible or illogical<sup>4</sup>. The psychotic mid-20<sup>th</sup> century despot Adolf Hitler surely felt justified in his horrifying deeds. The mother who drowns her babies in a fit of post-partum depression feels justified in the moment of her desperation. Afterward, having recovered, she must find a justification to live.

Too often artists decide that some actions, and lives, cannot be justified, so they change them in perceptible and imperceptible ways. They knock off the distasteful edges, eliminate all the conflicts and contradictions and create a nice, clear moral template for the audience’s approval. This reverses the pattern of daily life: the lover we wound with a sudden caustic put-down has brought it on themselves, we instinctively feel, before all the civilisation kicks in: *oh, I shouldn’t have done that*. The actor murmurs *Do we want to set that kind of example to an audience?* This casual moralising, this judging of characters, rounding them off, is insidious and deadly to art.

A young actor once travelled from Toronto to Montréal to audition for a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* that I was directing. She clearly loved the play and had travelled 500 kilometres to audition. When I asked her to read for the role of Hero, the dutiful daughter of Don Pedro who forms a counterpoint to the wilful and independent Beatrice, she protested. “But Hero’s a wimp—she’s a pushover!” This actor, in her late 20<sup>th</sup> century understanding of feminism, admired the headstrong Beatrice and had nothing but contempt for Hero, who obeys her father even at the risk of her own unhappiness.

But Hero is a creature of her time (as indeed, Beatrice turns out to be). There were few options in Renaissance society for a single woman who has been disowned by her family, and the concept of an independent life has frankly never occurred to her, because it’s so impractical as to be a childish fantasy. She does not chafe at her father’s rule. Like most of us, she accepts the order of things as she understands it. But she is far from being a doll or a meek, weak-willed servant of the patriarchy. The play clearly demonstrates that Hero is wise for one so young, loyal, good-hearted, open to love. There is so much to like about Hero that I was taken aback by the actor’s vehemence in refusing to read for her. That effectively ended her audition. She could not read for Beatrice, because Beatrice should never be played as a feminist heroine or a moral beacon for an audience. No character should be played as an instructive, positive or negative, for the masses. How patronising, how lacking in dimension or the understanding of the complexities of human character. How boring.

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<sup>4</sup> Another way to phrase this might be to say that each of us requires a *raison d’être*.

The actor who plays Hitler on stage senses the trap in playing a “monster” and works to avoid it, by constantly looking for the ways in which Hitler justified his actions: as one entrusted with a noble duty, or, perhaps, the ways in which he believed he was a good person (and may actually have been). The question, and it must be a question, is left to the audience as to how to respond. Only an actor who clears their own emotional and mental baggage to one side, to be utilised when needed (rather like a tool shed) can create a real, breathing person, an individual who speaks in her own voice, possesses good qualities as well as flaws, works with her own thought process and creates her own justifications. The actor journeys to this Land of the Character in her work in the studio, exploring, deducing, eliminating, learning, and returns to her own Self Country when the work is done. This is the application of Neutral in emotional and mental terms<sup>5</sup>.

In building character, Neutral and Plasticity join in application to enable the actor to see the character’s point of view, even when at extreme variance from her own. In BoxWhatBox the application of Neutral goes even further. Neutral, like plasticity, is a way of life. To explain how, it’s necessary to introduce the terms *commit* and *recover*.

Actors approach life face-first. Or heart-first. We tend to be passionate rather than dispassionate (though the opposite can be true). We are obliged to possess vast reserves of empathy in order to understand the cares and actions of characters, so we feel what others are feeling, often as strongly. These are all positive qualities for the actor. But they can become negative. Feeling sorry for a character is a form of judging, for instance. Nevertheless, actors must feel, and judge, and then they must find correction, a place of objective utilisation where feelings and judgments can be weighed and found useful for the character or not. Directors are helpful in this process; but actors must learn to apply Neutral principles themselves.

An actor *commits* to a choice—a feeling, an action—and then Recovers. That is, the character continues down her slope, beat by beat, action by action. The actor, however, does not. Her journey is marked by getting on and off the train. At breaks in the work or in her work off stage she steps back from the action or feeling and assesses its impact and utility. If an actor fails to commit, she will not create authentic character traits. If an actor commits but does not Recover, she is simply a feelings machine, operating on instinct or (more likely) unintended learned patterns of response. The feelings actor links feeling to authenticity. She is wrong. Without proper application of the feeling—choice, level, execution—as a result of post-feeling analysis, she isn’t operating within the parameters of the play or the character she inhabits. The risk of making choices that are predictable, stereotypical and banal is very high<sup>6</sup>.

Having said that Neutral, like Plasticity, is a way of life, it’s necessary to elaborate. Goethe wanted his actors to be actors all day, every day. Stanislavski had no wish to subject the actor to Goethe’s

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<sup>5</sup> Stanislavski’s work with Motivating Forces (“Intention”), Pieces and Problems and Given Circumstances addresses the nature of character justification in very practical ways. I’m not suggesting that this aspect of neutralisation is new. But it must constantly be re-stated. The increasing tendency in western society to valorise opinion over critical analysis and to condemn individuals without regard for context creates a dangerous landscape for actors.

<sup>6</sup> This is, in some respects, a variant of the age-old Reason vs Passion argument that has raged in theatre since Plato and which met its most brilliant proponent in Friedrich Schiller and his concept of the *Super-Sensuous*. Schiller, and Brecht after him, argued that passion is essential, and must be evoked by the actor; but that then dispassion—reason—must be applied to the experience. Without the application of reason after passion what we have is bread and circuses; what Boal identified in his essay on Aristotle as the principle failing of catharsis-structured western drama. Such drama is disenfranchising rather than empowering, both for actors and audiences.

excesses of “noble behaviour” but he felt as passionately that actors are citizens who must be part of the community around them. The actor does not simply feel. She *learns*. She surrounds her feelings with information, experiences, intellect in the form of analysis. She is a part of an organic entity and yet is required to transcend it. The actor can never get completely lost in a role to the point where she loses the ability to control its execution. Nor can she get lost in a political movement or a belief in a way of life or a religious faith. In all of these she commits by choice, to feel and act in response to the stimuli provided by the world around her. Then she must step away. She must *recover* her *Neutral Position*. Without the recovery she is a disabled citizen, the kind who is routinely maltreated and manipulated by forces greater than individuals. She could understand them, if she would only try. She could use them for the common good, if she stepped back to assess the many ways in which people respond against their own best interests, rather than simply indulging her ego in an orgy of outrage.

The actor’s job is not simply to feel. Nor is it to make an audience feel, though both these skills are useful. Her job is to create a real person, whose presence and actions helps to bring the audience to a greater understanding of life and its infinite richness. Only by employing a Neutral State in her own life on a daily basis can an actor acquire the skills to bring the objective to the subjective in her work developing a character. To use Neutral is not to disengage, but exactly the opposite. It doesn’t mean not taking a side, but rather taking a side and then reflecting on why you have done so. It’s not easy. It’s not meant to be easy.

Physically, emotionally, and intellectually, an actor should try to apply the principle of Neutral to her daily life—the way she sits, stands, walks (physical); catching herself in lazy ways of thinking (emotional); catching others in manipulations (intellectual). She will fail, regularly. But she must try.

Additional Material

### **Preparation For The Neutral State**

Such imbalances can be connected to a wider understanding of the concept of the Neutral State. A few basic, even crude examples suffice. The great actress Julie Andrews once mentioned, of working with the equally celebrated (and much older) British actor Rex Harrison that he was “an explosively flatulent gentleman<sup>7</sup>”. Imagine trying to work on a scene with the stench of noxious gas all around you, intensified by the distraction of the *sound*, then doubled by the fact that the character you are trying to fall in love with is in front of you, passing that wind? The challenge to work from a Neutral State becomes much more difficult. Wind, of course, is easily controllable through attention to nutrition and the timing of food intake. That’s *preparation*.

Many actors have also been notorious for their lack of hygiene—perhaps they wear a favourite piece of clothing repeatedly (their “acting clothes”), or forget, in the midst of a so-called “Method approach”, to shower. Hair greasy, body stinking, they show up for a love scene and close in on their horrified partner. How colossally selfish, how artistically unjust, to impose such a non-neutral state on a colleague!

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<sup>7</sup> J. Andrews: *Home: A Memoir*. New York:Hyperion, 2008. [Page reference to be found](#)

I worked on two shows in Romania at a big state theatre with an actor of great charm and charisma. He spoke English, German and Romanian fluently, but whenever he opened his mouth all one could focus on was that his teeth were black. Of course this also meant that his breath was foul. Talented he definitely was, but how can an artist walk into a collaborative environment in a state that clearly makes a negative impact on their co-workers, even if not on themselves?

Actors tend to forget that Neutral is not simply about their own preparation. To prepare to create as an actor is different than a painter who wakes up and works by herself in a studio without seeing another soul. Actors create worlds together, by affecting and influencing each other, not as discrete blocks or units placed together like lego by a director.

Listen: there are two ways for an artist to live. One is to endure a myriad of daily distractions and corrosive experiences and to overcome them as often as one can through sheer acts of will in order to achieve a Neutral State. The danger of this approach to life is that we so easily settle for it, and think of chaos and distraction as normal. The other is to gradually eliminate or cage the most dangerously unbalancing elements in one's life so that achieving a Neutral State is not an attritional exercise in exhaustion of body and soul.

All of us endure, or even embrace, actions in our lives that unbalance us, and one person's toxin may be another's controllable release. An artist assesses what impact the choices she makes in her private life are having on her creative existence. It's a crucial awareness for an artist to have. With it, she will create more, and create more consistently. Without it, she will find her muse fickle, unreliable, or absent: and with that, she too becomes an unreliable artistic partner, less attractive to employers and less confident about her ability to create.

Establishing a life that does not negatively impact your art requires a certain ruthlessness. Society never tells young artists that their art comes first. There is family, friends, or the job that pays the rent. Obligations. It's easy to tell a young actor who is single to prioritise their art by establishing a life that enables them to consistently come into the rehearsal studio in a Neutral State. But then we marry, we have children, someone is ill, your aging parents need assistance...the list of moral obligations is endless (and often feels that way). They should not be ignored. They are valid.

But an artist decides how far she can go in her pursuit of excellence. Perhaps she can only go a certain distance. Fine. Optimise that. She finds a way to give herself development time as an artist each day. It's too easy to say "That's great for kids, but I have *responsibilities*." Artist, unless you want a certain, non-stop slide into mediocrity, you will occasionally put someone's nose out of joint (maybe even your own nose) by insisting on a space for yourself where your creative development takes pride of place.

This may seem problematic, perhaps even controversial. The point is not that the actor should be a narcissistic baby who consistently ignores the needs of others; quite the opposite. A true artist knows her obligations, feels empathy to the needs of others, makes accommodations and amends as often and as well as she can. But her art is her priority. That's an elite level of commitment. If art is a secondary priority, you can't be an elite artist (and even with total commitment, there are many other factors required that combine to create an elite level artist). You may have elite skills, and be able to coast on them a while, but you're no longer developing, you're eroding, and part of you is simply hoping no one notices the erosion.

There's nothing wrong with not being an elite level artist. Lots of actors work as hard as they think they can, but not truly as hard as they can; they work as hard as is *convenient for their comfort*. That's a hard truth to admit. The overwhelming proportion of working actors in the West are not elite-level artists. Lots of good art still gets made. Few artists will read this book and wish to apply its precepts in their entirety. That's fine too. There is no single finish-line, no ultimate goal, in developing as an artist. There is only constant development and/or maintenance, and as part of that, the determination to achieve a Neutral State on command by creating a life and a body that is responsive to your artistic needs.

## The Concept of Rewarding Activity

Let's begin simply.

Actors work with their bodies, voices, and spirits in expressing humanity. In daily life there are innumerable ways of maintaining and developing each of these for artistic purposes. Here we focus on the body, but with the understanding that there is no true separation of these elements: one affects the other. For the actor this represents a kind of freedom. If she doesn't feel like concentrating specifically on her spiritual life, she can sing or play an instrument or read aloud to work on her voice, or go to a gym and train specifically on parts of her body that are crucial in acting. Perhaps she'll go to a yoga class, where mind and body are more recognisably fused. All "rewarding activities", possess a measure of spirituality, physicality, or psyche. By "rewarding activities" we mean those the actor explicitly undertakes as an act of artistic development or as having a clear artistic component<sup>8</sup>.

A few examples:

- Body: Going to the gym and working specifically and with precision on targeted areas of the body is a Rewarding Activity. Going to the gym and idly spinning on a stationary bike while gazing at a television is not.
- Voice: Booking a studio and practising musical scales and songs is a Rewarding Activity. Singing in the shower is not (though it may be rewarding in other ways).
- Soul: Having a lovely dinner with close friends is a tonic for the soul, no doubt, but it's not a rewarding activity in artistic terms unless the actor applies her super-sensuous faculty to the experience after the fact. That is, she reflects on the event and the actions within it and absorbs them, *prints* them, with the focused intent of applying them to her artistic work.

But, so many actors think to themselves, *that's an impossible amount of work. And I deserve a break after all that focused artist stuff, right?* It's true that breaks are important. What we're talking of here is the application of a mindset that becomes a habit, requiring little mental effort, such as standing in a neutral position while waiting for a bus.

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to infer that all rewarding activities have some connection to artistic development. Personal interaction