1

Physical Action

To act means to do, so you must always have something specific to *do* onstage or you will immediately stop acting. This is why physical action is so very important for the actor. Simply defined, an *action* is the physical pursuance of a specific goal. Physical action is the main building block of an actor's technique because it is the one thing that you, the actor, can consistently *do* onstage. Choosing a good action is an invaluable skill that can only be developed by long, hard practice. In this chapter you will find the requirements of a good action; use them as a checklist when figuring out an action for any scene.

An action must

1. be physically capable of being done.
2. be fun to do.
3. be specific.
4. have its test in the other person.
5. not be an errand.
6. not presuppose any physical or emotional state.

7. not be manipulative.
8. have a "cap."
9. be in line with the intentions of the playwright.

1. An action must be *physically capable of being done.* At any moment you should be able to begin doing it. For example, "pleading for help" is something you can begin to do immediately. Everyone knows how to do it. On the other hand, "pursuing the American dream" is not something you can pick up and *do* at a moment's notice. To say something is physically capable of being done does not necessarily involve intense physical activity such as jumping up and down or assaulting someone. Pleading for help can be accomplished while sitting absolutely still in a chair. *An action must be something that you, the actor, can actually accomplish onstage.*

2. An action must be *fun to do*. As you will discover in scene analysis (see chapter 2), any number of actions can be correct for a particular scene. Common sense dictates that you figure out the one you as an actor will *want* to do, since you are the one who will have to do it every night of the week. By fun we don't necessarily mean something that makes you laugh, but something that is truly compelling to you. This includes things you might never actually do offstage, but that appeal to your *sense of play*. If you've ever really wanted to tell someone off, for instance, here is your chance. Language is your main tool here. The more vital, active, and gutsy your language is, the more life you will bring to the stage because your action will be

that much more exciting to you. How much more fun it is to "talk a friend into spilling the beans" than to "get someone to give me information." There will occasionally be times when a seemingly mundane action is perfectly correct for a scene. The point is to find the action you *want* to do. What gets you going? What gets you hot? Only you know. The way you speak to yourself is the way you will act. If you are clear, specific, and strong with yourself, then, chances are that that is how you will be onstage.

3. An action must be *specific*. Stanislavsky said, "Generality is the enemy of all art," and nothing could be truer. If your action is in general, then everything you do onstage will be in general. The specificity of an action such as "extracting a crucial answer" will bring you to life much more than the vagueness of "finding out something." Furthermore, a specific action will provide you with a clear, specific path to follow when playing the scene.

4. *The test of the action must be in the other person.* An action is the physical pursuance of a specific goal, and that specific goal must have to do with the other person. In other words, by looking at your partner, you should be able to tell how close you are to completing your action. This will also make you less self-conscious and allow you to concentrate on something infinitely more interesting than how well you are performing—that person across from you. If your action is "forcing an enemy to do my bidding," at any moment you should be able to tell how close he is to doing your bidding, and

only when he has done your bidding will you have completed the action.

5. An action *cannot be an errand.* An errand is an action that has no test in the other person. "Delivering a message" is not a good action because you do not have to look at your partner to see if you have accomplished it. Also, it can be accomplished in one line, leaving you with nothing to do for the rest of the scene. If you pick an action that keeps you working off the other person to achieve it, you will be brought to life throughout the scene. Too quickly and easily accomplished, an errand is boring both for you to perform and for the audience to watch. The action must be something it is possible to fail at; you cannot fail at an errand.

6. An action *cannot presuppose any physical or emotional state,* either in you or in your partner. You can't artificially induce a physical or emotional state (e.g., hunger, anger, sorrow, drunkenness), because they are not within your control. Any action requiring you to put yourself into a certain state before or during a scene will force you to act a lie, the truth being that you are not actually in that state. If you try to work yourself up into a certain state for a scene, your attention will be entirely on the creation and maintenance of that state rather than on your action. As will be discussed later in detail, there is no such thing as a correct emotion for any scene. "Making a jerk know how mad I am" is a bad action because you cannot do it unless you are angry. A better action would be "putting a jerk in his place."

The same holds true for your partner. "Calming down an excited friend" will not work because if the person in front of you is not excited, then you have nothing to play. "Building up a friend's confidence" is a better choice because it does not presuppose your friend's physical or emotional state; you can always build someone's confidence higher than it already is.

7. An action *cannot be manipulative.* A manipulative action is one chosen to produce a desired effect on your partner. This type of action gives rise to the attitude that "I can do whatever I want to you, but nothing you do is going to affect me." In other words, you make up your mind ahead of time how you are going to play the scene and allow nothing to sway you. An action such as "making someone cry" is manipulative. An action such as "forcing a friend to face facts" might very well make your partner cry, but the crying is more likely to be the honest response to your carrying out your action, rather than the result of your manipulation. A manipulative action can cause you to act in a predetermined way instead of dealing truthfully with what is happening in the other person (see chapter 3 on "The Truth of the Moment").

8. The action *must have a "cap."* The cap is that specific thing you are looking for that will mean that you have succeeded at your action. You must be able to tell whether or not you have finished doing your action by looking at the other person. For example, "to get a friend's forgiveness" is an action with a cap. You *know* when your partner has forgiven you by his behavior toward you. On the other hand, an action such as

"maintaining someone's interest" does not have a cap. Depending on the scene, you may never actually achieve your action, but you must always have a specific *end* to work toward onstage.

9. The action must be *in line with the intentions of the playwright*. This is extremely important, and can be better understood in conjunction with scene analysis. Once you have determined exactly what the playwright's intentions are, the actions you choose must be true to those intentions. For example, in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, in the scene where Willy returns home after his harrowing trip, if the actress playing Linda chooses an action such as "putting someone in his place" for the scene, it is clearly out of whack with the intentions of the playwright. Something more in line with the scene would be "assuring a loved one of my support."

Within each action is an infinite number of *tools*, or ways to go about executing that action. For instance, if your action is "to get a straight answer," at various points in the scene you might demand, cajole, reason with, intimidate, or threaten the other person to get the answer. After you have analyzed a scene try listing some of the tools you can use to go about getting what you want. The right tool is, as you will learn later on, mainly dictated by what the other person in the scene is doing.

2

Analyzing a Scene

Now that you know what a good action entails, you must learn to choose the best action for a scene. The following simple formula, if employed consistently, will always lead to a performable action in line with the intentions of the playwright. Ask yourself these three questions:

1. What is the character literally doing?
2. What is the essential action of what the character is doing in this scene?
3. What is that action like to me? *It's as if . . .*

1. What is the character literally doing? The key to answering this question is to be as literal as possible; do not interpret or embellish what is happening on the printed page. A character may say and do many things in a scene, some of them seemingly contradictory. Your task is to find out the one specific thing he is doing that encompasses *every line*. Phrase what the character is