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WALKING AND TALKING

ON OCCASION, I'm certain you have found yourself sitting comfortably in a scene, relaxing into the cushions of the sofa, puffing on a cigarette. You were occupied and involved with another character in the play, and unaware of your body in any sense except that you believed you were there. Then you rose and stood for a while as the conversation continued.

Suddenly, the very act of standing became awkward. You became aware of your hands as unnecessary appendages. Your legs and feet tensed up, you lost a sense of character and place, and you became an exposed actor on stage, not a human being in a room. Then, you protected yourself, attempting to regain composure by assuming a stance—a stage pose. This protective pose was probably borrowed from your earliest and most inept stage experience.

There are many reasons for this kind of physical discomfort and inaccurate adjustment, but the most probable one is that you were gratuitously executing stage *business*, unjustified blocking, following the command, "He rises." You had no relevant justification for the rise or for whatever arrested you in a standing position and this consequently caused you

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to lose character and orientation to the place. If the rise from the sofa had been connected with the need of the given circumstances (let us say that you rise to get a drink for your friend, to make him feel more at home and welcome, and that on your way to the bar a piece of astounding news has arrested you in a standing position while your attention is riveted to the subject, and that only when the attention waned did you continue to the bar), the standing would be an involving and simple task releasing the body from the sense of being hung up.

Arthur Hopkins, the producer and director, once said, "The reason for walking is destination." Let me add that the movement you create must come from carefully selected action which allows for the organic development of the character and the primary action of the scene.

Even a trap set for us over and over again by the playwright or the director—"He wanders restlessly"—does not have to lead to the usual cliché of mechanical, tense, and general stage wandering. Each movement of true wandering has destination, is focused on a relevant object that we deal with in order to further the character and the story. Suppose that you are alone at home and waiting for a telephone call or a visit from a friend bringing news of a job. You may be impelled to walk to the window to see if he's in sight, and then you may cross to the telephone and consider calling him. You may reject the idea and take it out on the phone by giving it a little push. You cross to the liquor cabinet and actually pick up a glass which you then quickly replace because you have (your character has) a drinking problem. The expected friend is always criticizing your untidiness so you cross to the armchair to rub a grease spot on the upholstery. You cross to a wall mirror and check your hairdo. Meanwhile, your mind races from one inner object to the other—those objects directly connected with your friend, the

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possibilities of the job, what might stand in its way, etc. In life, your wanderings may seem to lead you to irrelevant objects. On stage, where every second counts, the objects should be selected and dealt with to reveal something new about the character or the circumstances, or both. The *seemingly* illogical objects you have contacted in a strange order must be substantiated by the logic of the play.

You are helped in physical reality by the very clothes you choose to wear. Your psychological state of being, your sense of self, as well as the physical manifestation of it, is strongly influenced by what you wear, even in a simple walk down the street to the corner drugstore to buy a tube of toothpaste. You must make your clothing particular in likes, dislikes, appearance—and with sensory awareness. First assume you are dressed in tight blue jeans, a long Sloppy Joe sweater, and worn sneakers. Now, assume the same destination and identical circumstances of weather, time of day, preceding and upcoming events, only you are wearing a new, classic suit, elegant shoes, fancy kid gloves, and a bright silk scarf around your neck. Then try changing only one thing in the latter example—you think your slightly soiled slip is showing. See how these elements change your entire psychological state of being, and consequently the physical manifestations of a simple walk down the street. (I might take something as small and unimportant as “my slip is showing” for the center of the physical life of a whole character.)

Clothing so influences my character, is so crucial to me, that I would find it as impossible to come to a rehearsal for Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* dressed in slacks and sneakers as it would be for me to work on *Saint Joan* in a frilly chiffon dress and high-heeled shoes. I could barely get the words out of my mouth sitting around a rehearsal table at a reading.

Of course, the total animation of the body is brought

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about by a correct incorporation of surrounding circumstances, weather, time, character needs, relationship to the things and people that surround me, plus main needs and immediate needs. And so is the animation of the words of the character. They are the messenger of my wishes.

The action of the words, how I will send them, for what purpose and to whom, under what circumstances, hinges solely on what I want or need at the moment. This is what must make the words inevitable for my character.

Delivering the words mechanically with set, intellectualized intonations, projecting them beyond the object they are trying to reach and into the audience in the old-fashioned manner, or mumbling without verbal intention or action in the “modern” manner—all come from a misunderstanding of true verbal action. The errors can arise even before rehearsals have begun. The misinformed, diligent actor, if he has time, will sometimes memorize the words and mechanize the inflections before he comes to the first reading of the play. This can be fatal to his final performance. During rehearsals he can hunt for and find intentions for his character, he can attempt to genuinely receive from his partners and his surroundings, and still he will fall back into the identical pattern of the mechanical and rigid “line readings” he had begun with. He can no more change it than he could change arbitrary and unjustified stage blocking which had been arrived at and set for quick convenience. We must learn what our character wants, from whom and under what circumstances, if we are to be propelled into genuine verbal action.

Physical actions are the necessary balance for verbal actions. When the actor is truly alive on stage there is an endless variety of interaction between verbal and physical behavior. Ideally, the audience should be unable to differentiate whether he walks when he is talking or talks when he is walking!