

DOCUMENT B:

ACTIVE ANALYSIS WORKSHOP

The workshop consists of three sessions of two hours each. All sessions are divided in two parts:

Part I Preparatory work/exercises

Part II Scene work

Part I becomes shorter as the workshop progresses to allow more time for scene work.

Session 1

Part I Preparatory work/exercises

Walking exercise

- Walk around the space, filling in any empty spaces. Use diagonals. Walk towards a specific point, giving it meaning in the process.
- Give yourself an invented name. While walking establish eye contact with another participant, approach them, and introduce yourself using the invented name. Give attention to the beginning, middle, and end of the action. Don't rush but go through the logical parts of the introduction.
- Actors are divided in As and Bs. A introduces themselves. B is open to this introduction. You are ok with it. Why? How do you show this? (Figure 1)¹



Figure 1.

- A introduces themselves. B is closed to this introduction. You are not ok with it. Why? How do you show this? (Figure 2)
- Exchange roles.



Figure 2.

Take action somewhere else

- I was first exposed to this exercise in a class with Alessio Bergamo of the Accademia di Belle Arti di Frosinone.
- A participant goes out, sits on a chair, and carries out a simple action from daily life. E.g. playing the violin. They repeat the action. (Figure 3)
- The leader calls 'stop'. Another participant goes out and sits in front of the first participant. They strike the same pose. The first participant leaves when they are satisfied that the position has been copied correctly.
- The leader calls 'continue', and the second participant 'takes the action somewhere else', i.e. develops the action by transforming it into something different, like reading a book.
- The exercise continues until all participants have a turn. Multiple turns are also possible.
- When sitting down it is important for participants to engage with each other, and to acknowledge each other's presence and role in the exercise, even if just by establishing eye contact.



Figure 3.

An invested relationship with a person

- The original exercise can be found in Merlin (2023: 88-89). Participants imagine a person in front of them with whom they have an invested relationship (parent, lover, sibling, close friend, etc.). They incline forwards to connect with that person; backwards to stay away from them.
- Two more images are added. In the first participants imagine they are a wooden figure being placed in different positions by the imaginary person. In the second they work with the image of clay to mould the imaginary person in various positions. Words and short phrases are added.
- In my elaboration of Merlin's exercise, participants work in pairs with a real partner. They connect with each other through eye contact, and give a reason or justification to why they are inclining forward (i.e. reaching out towards the other) (Figure 4) or backwards (i.e. retracting from them). (Figure 5)



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

Cross the line: A | B

- The original exercise can be found in Arp-Dunham (2023: 93). Participants are again divided in pairs and they try to make each other cross an imaginary line. How do I accomplish this task? What tactics do I use? See [Video 1](#).
- Participants are encouraged to raise the stakes, i.e. to make the circumstances compelling for the other person.
- In my version of the exercise the following simple script was added – see [Video 2](#):

A: Come here.

B: Emm...no, I'm ok.

A: Please.

B: Ok.

Part II Scene work

In this part of the workshop participants go through the basic steps of Active Analysis as articulated in Merlin (2023).

Step 1: Read the scene

The following scene was used. The scene is my own composition and readers are very welcome to use and adapt it as they deem best. This is an open scene, meaning that participants get very little information on the characters' bios, their genders, age, occupations, given circumstances, context, etc. These are all details for the participants to add. The text is also very simple, though the context could be as complex as the participants wish to make it.

A: Hello.

B: Hello.

A: You ok?

B: What do you think?

A: Come on!

B: Come on?

A: Yes. Get a grip on yourself.

B: You will never understand.

A: Ok.

B: Ok.

Step 2: Discuss the scene

The following questions are used to stimulate discussion. Answers are written on the board.

- (i) Who are they?
- (ii) Where are they?
- (iii) When are they there?
- (iv) What does A want from B? What is stopping them from achieving it?
- (v) What does B want from A? What is stopping them from achieving it?
- Answers to questions iv and v are usually in conflict to each other, which adds dramatic interest to the scene.
- The suggested length of the answers is one or two sentences rather than a couple of words. This ensures meaningful answers even at this early stage of the process.
- As a workshop leader, keep your feedback to a minimum, so that participants move swiftly to the next step.

Step 3: Improvise the scene silently

Merlin (2023: 92) emphasises that the key thing to keep in mind is that participants are improvising the 'wants'. The improvisation will thus necessarily be a short one. See [Video 3](#) and [Video 4](#).

Step 4: Discuss the silent improvisation

- Prompt: What did the other character want from you?
- It is also important that the improvisations are understood, that they are clear and coherent. What is happening in the scene?
- Participants are asked to explain their choices, their actions, and solutions, especially when the improvisations were unclear.

The first session ends here.

Session 2

Part I Preparatory work/exercises

Less preparatory work is carried out in this session to allow more time for scene work. Two exercises are suggested, one more exploratory and performed individually, the other more game-like and carried out in pairs.

Setting the scene

- This exercise is based on Merlin (2023: 84-88). In it participants reflect on the questions 'who', 'where', 'when', 'why', and 'for what reason'. They answer from their own point of view of young actors attending an acting class. (Figure 6)



Figure 6.

- The emphasis is on their 'Here, Now, Today', which I repeat many times when posing the questions. The exercise helps participants to connect with themselves.

Dolphin training

- This is an exercise sourced from Halba (2023: 51), who was herself first exposed to it during a workshop with Keith Johnstone.
- Participants are divided in pairs. They take the roles of 'trainer' and 'dolphin'. The trainer directs the dolphin to take a physical position they have in mind by simply saying the word 'ding', making this more emphatic when the dolphin gets closer to the image they have in mind. Instead of a dolphin participants worked with the more familiar image of a puppy.

- The exercise is a fun way for participants to connect with one another in preparation for the paired improvisations that they will carry out next.

Part II Scene work

Some revision work from the previous session was carried out. Participants revised the wants and were asked if they were still happy with them. Silent improvisations were also revisited.

Step 5: Re-read the scene and identify the main event

- Whilst Merlin (2023: 93-94) and Arp-Dunham (2023: 97-98) were important sources to understand this particular step in the Active Analysis process, the account described below is my own interpretation of the practice.
- The following question helps participants to identify the main event(s) in a scene: when does ‘something’ happen? This ‘something’ could be many things: a stage direction; a character’s entrance or exit; a clear and very tangible action like a slap; and, my favourite, a change in energy. Participants typically come up with different answers, but generally the two moments in the open scene when something happens are: (i) before A says ‘Come on!’ and (ii) when A says ‘ok’.
- Each pair chooses one moment to improvise on. A scene which accomplishes the event is improvised. For example, what happens that makes A say ‘Come on!’? Or what happens that brings about the final resolution? See [Video 5](#) and [Video 6](#).
- When performing the workshop (see Chapter 2 of the *Performing Academia* book), three different versions of the event were identified. These were treated as three different options which the participants were to choose from in the ‘hear, today, now’ of a particular run. In other words, they improvised their choice of the event.
- The following is helpful advice when improvising: (i) slow down, so that your actions can develop logically; don’t rush through your actions (ii) choose simple solutions and actions because they are more honest (iii) side-coach as necessary.
- Repeat the process with the other event.

The second session was brought to an end here.

Session 3

In this session participants do little preparatory work to give more time to scene work. Another open scene, this time written by Joelle Ré Arp-Dunham (2023: 105-08), was used. Titled *Grandma's Attic*, this open scene is longer, with more character exposition and clearer facts. Plenty, however, is still left open to the actors' interpretation.

Part I Preparatory work/exercises

Reach towards the ceiling

- This is an exercise by Sharon Marie Carnicke, reproduced in Arp-Dunham (2023: 93). Participants first reach towards the ceiling; subsequently they add deeper levels to this simple activity, turning it into an action:
 - reach up to try and grab a balloon that is slightly out of reach;
 - reach up to try and grab a balloon that is slightly out of reach and which you need to calm a crying baby;
 - and finally, reach up to try and grab a balloon that is slightly out of reach, which you need to calm a crying baby, and all the time while balancing precariously on a wobbly chair.

Ball throwing exercises

- This is another exercise reproduced in Carnicke (2010: 108). Participants throw each other a ball. They explore the dynamics of their relationship and how they are connecting with their partner through the simple action of throwing and catching a ball.
- What do they speak about? How do the dynamics between the voices, the throwing, and the pairing converge together?

A conversation on the bench

- This is a simple action-counteraction exercise. Participants improvise on the following scenario: two people are on a bench in the park; one wants to strike a conversation, the other does not. See [Video 7](#).
- Terms like action, counteraction, and tactics can be introduced or reminded of with this exercise.
- Tactics are shared, written down, and discussed: how did you try to start the conversation? How did you block this attempt?
- Writing on a whiteboard helps participants to be precise with their answers. Any points raised are also easy to recall when written down.

Part II Scene work

- The same steps are applied to the longer script:
Step 1: Read the Scene
Step 2: Discuss the scene
Step 3: Improvise the scene silently
Step 4: Discuss the silent improvisation
Step 5: Re-read the scene, and identify the main events

- Three events were identified (Arp-Dunham identifies two):
 - (i) An unscripted first event, where something happens that makes one of the characters want to leave;
 - (ii) Finding the wand;
 - (iii) Towards the end, when Alex says ‘I miss you’, the energy between the two characters changes because they want to reach a compromise.
- An event signals the start of what in acting terminology is referred to as a ‘bit’ or ‘beat’, though I prefer to use the word ‘micro-scene’. This is no random choice, as ‘micro-scene’ is how I refer to a contained unit of acting, a micro-scene within the larger macro presentation of a scene, act, or performance.
- The following structure was identified:
 Event 1: Micro-Scene 1 – Conflict. See [Video 8](#).
 Event 2: Micro-Scene 2 – Game/Fun with the wand. See [Video 9](#).
 Event 3: Micro-Scene 3 – Compromise. See [Video 10](#).

Step 6: Improvise

In the run of the workshop described in the book each group took one event and the corresponding micro-scene. They improvised on the event, first without words and then by adding what they felt was one, key line from the text. Feedback and comments were shared, after which the workshop was brought to an end.

More time could be allocated to this step, perhaps by shortening the preparatory phase, so as to bring together the three micro-scenes and, therefore, the scene as a whole.

References

- Arp-Dunham, J. R. (2023) ‘Active Analysis for Beginning Acting Students: A Class Blueprint’, *Stanislavski Studies*, 11 (2): 87-108.
- Carnicke, S. (2010) ‘The Knebel Technique: Active Analysis in Practice’, in *Actor Training 2nd edition*, edited by A. Hodge. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 99-116.
- Halba, H. (2023) ‘Stanislavsky and the Pedagogy of Play’, in *Stanislavsky and Pedagogy*, edited by S. Aquilina. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 36-55.
- Merlin, B. (2023) ‘Hear, Now, Today: Active Analysis for the working actor: A “special guest workshop” delivered at The S Word, Prague, 12 November 2022’, *Stanislavski Studies* 11 (1): 81-97.

© Stefan Aquilina

Notes

¹ Photos and videos here are by Dr Margaret Jean Westby. Published by her kind permission.