Animal exercise

The animal exercise is our basic foundation for characterizing a role physically. Using this exercise we can talk, think, move, and feel more naturally and humanly with an inner content, rather than arriving at the character with only an external mask. With someone who becomes easily hysterical or emotional, I sometimes assign the animal exercise, which helps the actor avoid emotion or self-consciousness in order to get a sense of himself without emotional or mental associations.

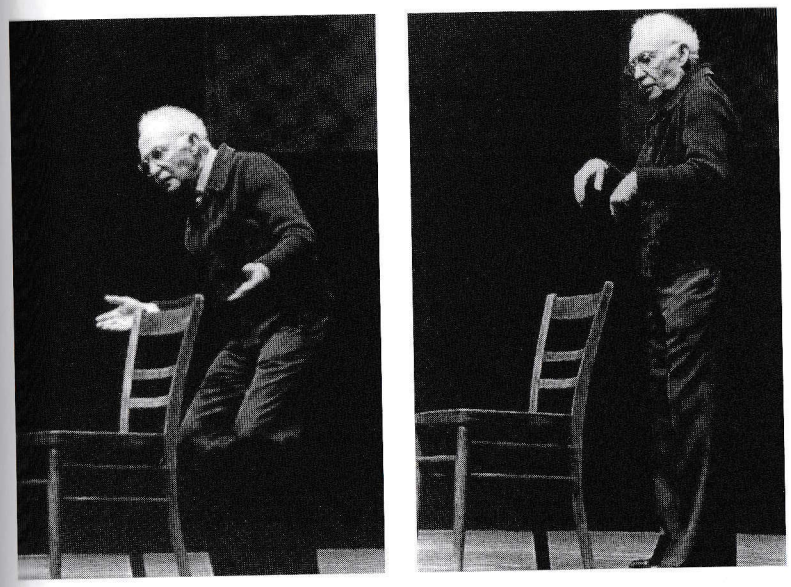
To create a character using the animal exercise, you must know the attitude you're seeking. You choose the characteristic, then pick an animal. If the character is ferocious or a predator, you might pick a bear or a gorilla. For a character who's suspicious or curious, you may want a cat. Then you study the animal. You go to the zoo. Get a *National Geographic*. Look in the neighborhood. With this exercise we copy the movements, manner and habits of the animal.

Don't begin initially by imitating the animal's normal position. Start by feeling each area of your body separately, standing up. Get a sense of the animal's limbs: How are the back and shoulders positioned? Make an effort to get a feeling of the animal's whole body. Then, let yourself go into the animal's position on the ground and begin to explore. We want the rhythm of the animal, the physical life. Where is its center of gravity?

Ask yourself, how is the animal different from me? For instance, an animal sits on its haunches differently than the human being, and its body moves as a unit. When it lies down, it decomposes. The animal's body is not tense and doesn't get involved with mental tension. Ask, what motivates it? The animal looks for food. What's its breathing like? An animal puts the tongue out for a specific reason. Move the tongue. It moves its tail. Do the eyes move independently? This is a discovery process.

You must do things the human body isn't accustomed to. Don't move the arms and legs by purely human energy. Make sure you know what to do with every part of the body. Where do you send the energy? Don't be afraid to fall, but fall with the animal weight, not the human weight. Now speak, trying to approximate the animal's sound.

Eventually, after working on the ground for many sessions, sometimes months, we stand the animal up as a human being and work on retaining the physical life and characteristics of the animal when creating a character. Pick details of the animal's behavior that will



Lee Strasberg demonstrating an exercise in Bochum, W. Germany, 1978

fit what you want, and take just the elements you need. As soon as you can do this, take a monologue and speak it as the animal, retaining physical elements of the animal's gestures. Don't make an effort to be dramatic. It's a test of the actor's ability to maintain the animal exercise standing up as well as on the ground. When you stand the animal up and form a character, it's not the animal any more. Speak in your own, real, human voice, using the characteristics of the animal for the appropriate characterization.

In the ordinary course of the sequence of exercises, this exercise comes later, but we may also use it earlier when someone isn't responding to the other exercises or if there's difficulty making contact with the senses. For example, for people who have very strong physical conditioning in ballet and in dance, we find that at a certain point the breakthrough comes with the animal exercise. It has a strange effect on many people who have a very strong physical routine. It goes counter to their sense of beauty.

I had a student who got to a certain point in the work and she became blocked. She would literally give up. I tried different exercises but I couldn't break through. Then she did the animal exercise and somehow, by being external and not worried about her feelings or what she was thinking, she began to make contact with herself.

The same thing happened with a young boy of 18 who was also blocked up and nothing was coming through. He did the animal exercise and it was the best commitment he had. By breaking away from the physical pattern that unconsciously you're confined in, by having to do things that you're not used to doing – such as growling – this exercise invariably leads to a new awareness of oneself.

Because most actors don't use the character approach, the animal exercise is largely unused in American theater and film. When you see some of our people perform, their characterizations are based partially on this foundation, which is why they create a different kind of character that is very subtly, clearly, and precisely evoked.

Song and dance exercise

No matter what the actor thinks he's doing, he often does no more than what his habits dictate. The song and dance exercise (which is not actually performing either a song or dance) is a remarkable vehicle for breaking habits.

The idea of the song and dance exercise came to me while teaching a class at Carnegie Hall. Several students couldn't do this particular exercise, and I realized that I was dealing with singers and dancers who were tied to rhythms and movements. Clichés had been trained into their voices and bodies, and they were tied to the sequence of the song or dance. So strongly are these habits linked and set that they work unconsciously, without deliberate intent. I needed to think up an exercise that demonstrated how tied the student was to habit, and that helped break the habitual patterns. This simple exercise stimulated in the actor a complete experience that I never would have anticipated.

During the first part of the exercise – what I call the song – the actor stands straight and at ease before the audience. I discovered that this very stance of facing the audience is what every actor essentially experiences, no matter where he is on the stage. Even when he's backstage, essentially he's facing the audience without any protection. That pressure dictates, interferes, and disrupts what he wants to do, and unconsciously forces the actor to respond to the audience, rather than do what he had planned.

With some people, the mere fact of standing there in front of an audience makes them feel like they want to run away or bury themselves. Others have a problem making eye contact and look over my head at something. I always say, "Is somebody sitting there that's not paying?" The whole point of the exercise is that nothing necessarily has to happen. You don't do any acting to impress the audience. When nothing is happening, you're at ease.

By standing still, the actor gets rid of involuntary nervous behavior and thus begins to let impulses come through. The nature of impulses – which are biochemical recurrences – is to express themselves. We're working with the law of physics and of nature, which says as water seeks its own level, so do impulses. With impulses, what's in the way is habit. We must get the habits out of the way through relaxation and sound. One purpose of the song and dance exercise is to become aware of what's happening to you emotionally and physically, and to permit it to happen. If this exercise is done well, there's no problem in expression.

The ultimate purpose of the exercise is to help students shed their strong habits which inhibit expression. The song and dance exercise doesn't have to be done at a certain period during the training, and can be done at the beginning, middle, or the end. It's immaterial. It just goes side by side with the sensory work and has a particularly powerful kind of resonance which permits us to deal with the basic problem of expression. In fact, for the teacher, this exercise is a diagnostic tool for evaluating the actor's problems.

Song

Stand still and face the audience with the feet hip-distance apart. When the feet are too wide apart I call it "the Atlas stance," like Atlas who braced himself and carried the whole world on his shoulders. Settle into a position and don't move from the neck down. All areas of the body should be quiet. Be at ease and relax to show that you can control yourself. Do away with involuntary movements, or what I call involuntary nervous expression. We have some awareness of what we do with our voice and with our speech, but we have literally no awareness of what we do with our hands or our faces.

Don't sway. Don't look down; if you do, you'll bury yourself. If you're staring up or at the back wall, it means you'd like to eliminate the audience. Be aware of tension. What happens to you when you stand there? Make contact with what you're feeling and experiencing. Do you feel weak? Do you want to run away, hit, yell, or scream? Are you excited? Is it a pleasant sensation? Would you like to embrace us? If you want to cry, do you know why? Is it fear or frustration? You must know what you're feeling. When you're afraid that what you're doing is wrong, it's already wrong. Don't settle for "I don't know" as your answer.

Now choose a song that isn't complex. Get ready for the projection of tone by breathing even and easily. When the actor speaks without vibration, the tone is often dead. The vocal chords must vibrate. When you speak quietly in the theater but with vibration, you'll be heard because vibration and sound waves travel. Send the breath through the lungs, make the sound from the lungs instead of the throat, which is one of the most trained areas in the human being. If the vocal habits are strong, the physical habits of behavior and expression are even stronger.

Make eye contact with someone in the audience and loudly sing out each syllable of your song separately, giving each syllable an equal emphasis. Include the melody so that it doesn't come out in a monotone. For instance, using the song "Happy Birthday," you would begin with an elongated first syllable (haap ...) then continue with an elongated second syllable (... peee) and continue that for each syllable of the whole song. The length of each syllable should be the same as the long Ahhhh sound we make during the other exercises. Be conscious of taking the breath in and out so that it will begin to function as a foundation for tone, rather than using only the mouth and the verbal muscles. If sound is just through the mouth, it doesn't bring the whole body with it. Make a full sound from the lungs, which means that we literally breathe in, hold it, and send that breathe out into an even explosive sound. Stop and take a few breaths between each syllable, and don't rush from one to the next. Commit yourself to a good vibration, not to the words. Don't taper off or fade out at the end of a word. Be careful not to choke on the sound. If the sound is compulsive and continues on too long, it can be habitual. That means the actor doesn't know when to stop. If the sound is not committed, there can also be a problem in expression. If you laugh, keep the sounds going through the laughter. If you experience the sensation of pins and needles, it means something is being released, but not fully. Take additional breaths or you'll get dizzy.

The point of the exercise is that when you pick a song and then separate each syllable in the song, it shows that you have control over it, and that the habitual rhythm isn't the determining factor. Many people can't do it, and not because it's difficult. It's easy to do. But the pattern and the habit is so strongly set that they can't stop at "hap" and "peee" and "birth" and "day" and so on. They say, "hap-py" having to finish the word. Likewise, as soon as they say, "birth," they follow immediately with "day." They can't help it. They can't stop themselves.

If something starts to happen and feelings arise during the exercise, usually the actor will try to contain it, thinking, "What the hell is this happening for? I'm supposed to just do this and here I feel like crying, or I feel like hitting someone, or I feel like embracing someone." Relax and make contact with those feelings. And never say, "I don't know what's happening." If the actor thinks this, there is only one legitimate response: "What's the matter with me that I don't know what's happening?" You can't let yourself off the hook. You must name the feeling. In this case, I won't tell a student what I think the emotional impulse is. I insist he tells me what he thinks he's feeling.

Dance

Now we add movement to the song, what I call the dance part. Establish a rhythm with your body and keep repeating it (jazz, shimmy, skip, jumping high, any repetitive movement). At the same time, unlike the elongated sound of the song exercise, make a short explosive staccato sound for each syllable of the words from the song you have chosen. "Hap! Peee! Birth! Day!" Stay with the same movement until the teacher gives you the command to change to another repetitive movement. Don't think about how you're moving. Make the sounds and the movement at the same time and let the whole body go.

Movement with sound exercise

Make a movement with the body that expresses a feeling, and don't worry about what it is or how it looks. What sound best fits that movement? Add it. When you have an impulse, ask, is it fear, anger, embarrassment, or the desire to embrace someone? As discussed before, be aware of where you're looking. Looking down is burying yourself; looking up, you're hoping for God's help. They're involuntary nervous expressions.

Voice exercises

It's usually assumed that because we emphasize the internal nature and the emotional experience of the actor, that we therefore pay little or no attention to the technical problems of voice and speech. We certainly do. We, however, don't confuse that with acting. A person can have a very good singing voice and be a very poor singer