

**The INCORPOREAL Actor**  
**( or Words, Words, Words...)**  
a Matthew Harrison essay

Words. As an actor, you have got to love them. And I don't mean your dialogue. I mean the kind of words that make you a masterful actor. Three kinds...

The first kind, I hope, is obvious and is, in essence, the craft of acting itself. The second kind will help sharpen your understanding of scenes and self. But the third kind may be new to you...and will help make you a master of your craft.

First: **verbs**

The heart of acting. To *act* is to *do*. The ultimate verb. Doing. Our job is to stand opposite other actors, or to face ourselves in soliloquy, and do something.

As actors, we become *verbologists*. The kind of verbs that we specialize in are "partner-related" verbs. Verbs specifically orchestrated to create change in the other. To *teach*. To *convince*. To *wrap you in a shroud of prejudice*. Things I can do to other people. And I do them from action to cut or from curtain to curtain.

Even when alone on stage, I do something to myself, myself being the partner: *convince* myself I can survive, *fight* my inclination to run, *celebrate with myself* my victory in love. Even when I'm on stage doing an activity (a physical doing of importance and urgency and difficulty) I'm still acting out a partner-related verb to myself. In *Apollo 13* Tom Hanks, as Jim Lovell, prepares the computer for the orbit re-entry...sure it's interesting...but what makes the scene masterful is his partner-related verb: to *calm* his own fears of failure and death.

These are directed outwards at the other. These verbs are not physical action verbs ("to run") nor are they reflective verbs (to ponder). They are outer-focused, partner-related, actions.

Be very careful not to slip into self-reflective verbs as many actors do...they make an actor self-absorbed, internalized, and lost on camera or on stage. These ones are tricky and trap actors inside by accident. Verbs like "to *decide*", which is self-related, not partner-related. I can't "*decide*" you. That makes no sense. But to *make a decision* is internalized and self-oriented and puts you in your head. However, to *search for the decision* in your husband's eyes...that's partner-related. Or to *drive myself forward regardless of consequence*...that's partner (in this case myself) related. And so those are exciting on stage and on camera.

Another thing to watch out for is the ever-present “make and get” school of verbology which inevitably reveals its ugly head in class. To *make* you understand. To *get* you to confess to murder. Well. It’s pretty easy to add “make” or “get” in front of your scene objective and call it a verb...but it gets you no closer to the heart of an action, nor helps you to ignite yourself inside a moment.

The job of the partner-related verb is to get you connected deeply with the material given (the scene) and with the other actors so as to bring the story alive. “Make” and “get” only put a wall up between you and the moment...and they don’t answer the question of how. “*Make you understand*” is an objective. The answer to “*how to make you understand*” will be a specific partner-related verb.

Hopefully, none of this is a revelation to you. In fact, there are lists on line of “verbs for actors” and I’ve had several students show me a book of “a hundred and one verbs for actors”. These lists are great and actors do need to widen their vocabulary...but...

The best verbs are the ones that artistically turn you on. The ones that make your heart beat. The ones that get your palms sweaty. Often, these are the ones you’ve made up and are personal to you:

- To *wow* you with my knowledge
- To *shroud* you with my bias
- To *gelatinize* you with my sexuality
- To *gift* you my love
- To *poison* you with my ideas
- To *chair you up* onto the pedestal
- To *sidewalk* you off the subject
- To *Paris In The Eighties* your dreams (that’s my own personal one...)

If it means something to you and rings bells for you inside, then use them.

Some actors use metaphoric-physical verbs. Instead of “to *teach* them the lesson”, they find a physical action as metaphor that fuels their understanding of the moment being played. Maybe “to *shroud* them with the lesson” or “to *smother* them with the lesson”. Or even “to *drown* them in a sea of glorious learning.”

If it’s appropriate to what the writer wrote and grinds you into the action, then go for it. Explore, play, and roll yourself around the verbs.

## Second: **Superlative Adjectives and Adverbs**

All scenes are heightened scenes in one way or another. Even if a scene isn't life or death, it is an extraordinary circumstance in some way, whether on the surface or sub textually, and has urgency and consequence and goes against expectation...that is what makes it a scene worth filming or setting on stage:

Your wedding day.  
Your father's funeral.  
Getting the big news.  
Finding out that your mother has breast cancer.  
Falling in love.  
Being betrayed.  
Reconnecting with your sister.  
Saying goodbye.  
Your first day on the job...

These are the scenes we watch. These are the scenes we act. In this way, scenes are *superlative*...of the highest order, quality, or degree. And so, scenes and the elements in them are described through superlatives. The above, re-written as superlative statements, for example:

The *most* amazing day.  
The *worst* moment of my life.  
The *best* news I've ever heard.  
The *last* thing I would have expected.  
The *only* person for me.  
The *hardest* pill to swallow.  
The *first* time we've really spoken.  
The *least* I've felt loved.  
The *easiest* job ever...

If you, the actor, think superlatively, you will recognize that all scenes have urgency and importance and consequence - and will never allow any scene to be casual, thrown away, or simplified.

Of course, the result in the scene may *appear* casual or thrown away depending on how much the character is capping her feelings or refusing her underlying truth or repressing her inner conflict (see my essay "The Contrapuntal Actor"). But even if it looks casual, the scene is still the *hardest* action she has ever taken to achieve the *most* important goal.

Now...if you, the actor, think superlatively in your research of your personal life and the world around you, insight will be gained into your own and other's psychology which will feed, inform, and infuse your understanding of scenes.

Ask yourself personal questions using superlative adjectives/adverbs, such as:

- Who do you love the *most*?
- Who do you hate the *most*?
- What do you want *most* out of life?
- What's the *best* part of who you are?
- What's the *worst* part of who you are?
- What's the *one* principle or value that you believe in most?

Ask yourself hypothetical questions that you answer from your imagination, such as:

- What would be the *best* news you could get?
- What would be the *worst* news you could get?
- What's the *meanest* thing someone could say to you?
- What's the *kindest* thing someone could say to you?
- Why would you say goodbye to the person you love *most* for the *last* time?

Ask yourself questions from your experience, such as:

- What's the *hardest* thing you've ever had to do?
- What's the *nastiest* thing you've ever done to someone?
- What's the *wildest* thing you've ever done?
- Where's the *most* beautiful place you've ever been?
- What's the *proudest* moment of your life?

Invent new questions and fill out a long and detailed superlative list for yourself (the list was referred to in my classes long ago as the "*Ist List*" ...one hundred questions of the best, worst, fastest, brightest, hardest, wildest...etc. )

By examining your superlative life, you'll understand the superlative life of the character. By detailing and knowing your truth, experience and imagination, you will be able to do two things:

- identify the superlative circumstances of the scene
- and imagine the character's truth.

Which brings me to:

### Third: **Incorporeal Nouns**

Acting is the simplest art form. You learn lines and say them like you mean them by choosing an appropriate partner-related verb for the superlative circumstances and doing it. Simple.

Playing classical piano, dancing Jazz dance, painting, sculpting...those are hard art forms. Trust me. Playing a multi-voiced Bach fugue on the piano is excruciatingly hard to learn and worse to execute. The art form is brutal. But the *instrument* is a joke...a bunch of strings inside a box of wood.

But if the craft of acting is simple. It is the instrument that is infinitely more complex and fascinating...because it's *you*. In this way, the craft of acting is *doing*...but the art form of acting is *being*.

To really understand the psychology of the character, you must first learn your own psychology. And to really understand the *ideas* behind the circumstances, you must first understand what these ideas mean to you.

Take any story, any scene, or even any moment within a scene, and look at it's subject: *Wealth. Love. Betrayal*. The how and why change happens to that subject is it's theme: *love dies when two people stop fighting for it. Or wealth comes when we stop looking for it.*

The characters you play will have deep, profound, personal relationships with these subjects and themes. And so do you. Your job as the artist is to know your personal specific relationship to these subjects, themes and ideas so that you have a deep, personal, and specific relationship to life...the rich and full life you will create on stage and screen.

These subjects, *wealth, love, betrayal*, are INCORPOREAL nouns (meaning non-tangible - unable to be touched). You must know what they mean to you specifically, what images they conjure up for you, what they mean in your experience and your imagination, and you must have this specific and deep comprehension at your ready. When a director asks you to make the scene about having a *secret* - you'd better be able to nod your head and say: "I get it."

Careful to avoid *feelings*. Yes, feelings are incorporeal nouns - but they are not *subject* so much as *result* and will send an actor down the slippery slope of trying to find the "emotional answer" to the scene. Find the incorporeal nouns that represent ideas, subjects, and topics...and dig into those.

Here's a list of just a few incorporeal nouns. Choose one a day. Study it. Reflect on it....

What images come to mind? What memories? Talk out loud or write a few pages about it from your past or from your imagination...maybe even draw, or sing, or act out a scenario. Find articles from newspapers or photos from magazines. Paste and record it all in your "Actor's Logbook".

Do whatever it takes to find your specific trigger (what I call your "hook"). Do anything creative so that when you're done you can say: "I get it" ...

sacrifice	respect	philosophy	integrity
responsibility	youth	loyalty	jealousy
satisfaction	ritual	anxiety	communication
parenthood	chivalry	dignity	admiration
betrayal	revenge	dreams	hope
life/death	love/hate	confidence	success
racism	forever	time	beauty
privacy	loneliness	sacrifice	purity
accomplishment	goal	determination	spirit
dreams	hope	obsession	temptation
endurance	diligence	dedication	tradition
travel	strength	durability	perseverance
willpower	honesty	challenge	passion
indestructibility	courage	mistake	truth
respect	honor	power	beauty
communion	unity	innocence	trust
responsibility	prudence	patience	peace
loyalty	kindness	justice	impartiality
humor	humility	gratitude	honesty
determination	defiance	curiosity	caution
deception	violence	greed	vanity
arrogance	confidence	determination	integrity
cynicism	caution	shyness	curiosity
indecisiveness	optimism	pessimism	religion
stubbornness	fate	retribution	punishment
resurrection	immortality	divinity	supernatural power
conflict	God	transformation	refuge
home	warmth	stability/instability	isolation
alienation	future	past	present
childhood	magic	education	pain
wisdom	differences	identity	wonder
renewal	success	mystery	transience

Find new subjects. Study them. Dig into them. Dig into life. By exploring and researching these and more **incorporeal nouns** you will understand the depth of your **superlative circumstances**...and will be better more profoundly armed to hit your scene partner with appropriate **partner-related verbs**...

...and then you are a master of both the craft and the art of acting.

Matthew Harrison

[www.actorsfoundry.com](http://www.actorsfoundry.com)