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# AN ACTOR PREPARES

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### UNITS AND OBJECTIVES

#### I

When we came into the theatre auditorium today, we were faced with a large placard, on which were these words: UNITS AND OBJECTIVES.

The Director congratulated us on arriving at a new and important stage in our work, explaining what he meant by units, telling us how a play and a part are divided into their elements. Everything he said was, as always, clear and interesting. However, before I write about that, I want to put down what happened after the lesson was over, because it helped me to appreciate more fully what he had said.

I was invited, for the first time, to dine at the house of Paul's uncle, the famous actor, Shustov. He asked what we were doing at school. Paul told him we had just reached the study of 'units and objectives'. Of course he and his children are familiar with our technical expressions.

'Children!' said he laughingly, as the maid set a large turkey in front of him, 'Imagine that this is not a turkey but a five-act play, *The Inspector General*. Can you do away with it in a mouthful? No; you cannot make a single mouthful either of a whole turkey or a five-act play. Therefore you must carve it, first, into large pieces, like this . . .' (cutting off the legs, wings, and soft parts of the roast and laying them on an empty plate).

'There you have the first big divisions. But you cannot swallow even such chunks. Therefore you must cut them into smaller pieces, like this . . .' and he disjointed the bird still further.

'Now pass your plate,' said Mr. Shustov to the eldest child. 'There's a big piece for you. That's the first scene.'

To which the boy, as he passed his plate, quoted the opening lines of *The Inspector General*, in a somewhat unsteady bass voice: 'Gentlemen, I have called you together, to give you a highly unpleasant piece of news.'

'Eugene,' said Mr. Shustov to his second son, 'here is the scene with the Postmaster. And now, Igor and Theodore, here is the scene between Bobchinski and Dobchinski. You two girls can do the piece between the Mayor's wife and daughter.'

'Swallow it,' he ordered, and they threw themselves on their food, shoving enormous chunks into their mouths, and nearly choking themselves to death. Whereupon Mr. Shustov warned them to cut their pieces finer and finer still, if necessary.

'What tough, dry meat,' he exclaimed suddenly to his wife.

'Give it taste,' said one of the children, 'by adding "an invention of the imagination".'

'Or,' said another, passing him the gravy, 'with a sauce made of magic *ifs*. Allow the author to present his "given circumstances".'

'And here,' added one of the daughters, giving him some horse radish, 'is something from the regisseur.'

'More spice, from the actor himself,' put in one of the boys, sprinkling pepper on the meat.

'Some mustard, from a left wing artist?' said the youngest girl.

Uncle Shustov cut up his meat in the sauce made of the children's offerings.

'This is good,' he said. 'Even this shoe leather almost seems to be meat. That's what you must do with the bits of your part, soak them more and more in the sauce of "given circumstances". The drier the part the more sauce you need.'

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I left the Shustovs' with my head full of ideas about units. As soon as my attention was drawn in this direction I began to look for ways of carrying out this new idea.

As I bade them good-night, I said to myself: one bit. Going downstairs I was puzzled: should I count each step a unit? The Shustovs live on the third floor,—sixty steps—sixty units. On that basis, every step along the sidewalk would have to count. I decided that the whole act of going downstairs was one bit, and walking home another.

How about opening the street-door; should that be one unit or several? I decided in favour of several. Therefore, I went downstairs—two units; I took hold of the door knob—three; I turned it—four; I opened the door—five; I crossed the threshold—six; I shut the door—seven; I relaxed the knob—eight; I went home—nine.

I jostled someone—no, that was an accident, not a unit. I stopped in front of a bookshop. What about that? Should the reading of each individual title count, or should the general survey be lumped under one heading? I made up my mind to call it one. Which made my total ten.

By the time I was home, undressed and reaching for the soap to wash my hands I was counting two hundred and seven. I washed my hands—two hundred and eight; I laid down the soap—two hundred and nine; I rinsed the bowl—two hundred and ten. Finally I got into bed and pulled up the covers—two hundred and sixteen.

But now what? My head was full of thoughts. Was each a unit? If you had to go through a five-act tragedy, like *Othello*, on this basis, you would roll up a score of several thousand units. You would get all tangled up, so there must be some way of limiting them. But how?

Today I spoke to the Director about this. His answer was: 'A certain pilot was asked how he could ever remember, over a long stretch, all the minute details of a coast with its turns, shallows and reefs. He replied: "I am not concerned with them; *I stick to the channel.*"

'So an actor must proceed, not by a multitude of details, but by those important units which, like signals, mark his channel and keep him in the right creative line. If you had to stage your departure from the Shustovs' you would have to say to yourself: first of all, what am I doing? Your answer—*going home*—gives you the key to your main objective.

'Along the way, however, there were stops. You stood still at one point and did something else. Therefore *looking in the shop window* is an independent unit. Then as you proceeded you returned to your first unit.

'Finally you reached your room and undressed. This was another bit. When you *lay down* and *began to think* you began still another unit.

'We have cut your total of units from over two hundred down to four. These mark your *channel*.

'Together they create one large objective—*going home*.

'Suppose you are staging the first bit. You are going home, you just walk and walk and do nothing else. Or the second bit, standing in front of the shop window; you just stand and stand. For the third you wash yourself, and for the fourth you lie and lie. If you do that your acting will be boring, monotonous. Your director will insist on a more detailed development of each bit. This will oblige you to break each unit up into finer details and reproduce them clearly and minutely.

'If these finer divisions are still too monotonous you will have to break them up still further until your walk down the

street reflects the details typical of such an act: meeting friends, a greeting, observation of what is going on around you, jostling passers-by and so on.'

The Director then discussed the things Paul's uncle had talked about. We exchanged knowing smiles as we remembered the turkey.

'The largest pieces you reduce to medium size, then to small, and then to fine, only to reverse the process eventually and re-assemble the whole.

'Always remember', he warned, 'that the division is temporary. The part and the play must not remain in fragments. A broken statue, or a slashed canvas, is not a work of art, no matter how beautiful its parts may be. It is only in the preparation of a role that we use small units. During its actual creation they fuse into large units. The larger and fewer the divisions, the less you have to deal with, the easier it is for you to handle the whole role.

'Actors conquer these larger divisions easily if they are thoroughly filled out. Strung along through a play, they take the place of buoys to mark the channel. This channel points the true course of creativeness and makes it possible to avoid the shallows and reefs.

'Unfortunately many actors dispense with this channel. They are incapable of dissecting a play and analysing it. Therefore they find themselves forced to handle a multitude of superficial, unrelated details, so many that they become confused and lose *all sense of the larger whole*.

'Do not take such actors for your model. *Do not break up a play more than is necessary, do not use details to guide you. Create a channel outlined by large divisions, which have been thoroughly worked out and filled down to the last detail.*

'The technique of division is comparatively simple. You ask yourself: "*What is the core of the play—the thing without which it*

cannot exist?" Then you go over the main points without entering into detail. Let us say that we are studying Gogol's *Inspector General*. What is essential to it?

'The Inspector General,' said Vanya.

'Or rather the episode with Khlestakov,' corrected Paul.

'Agreed,' said the Director, 'but that is not sufficient. There must be an appropriate background for this tragi-comical occurrence pictured by Gogol. This is furnished by scoundrels of the type of the Mayor, the superintendents of various public institutions, the pair of gossips, etc. Therefore we are obliged to conclude that the play could not exist without both Khlestakov and the naïve inhabitants of the town.

'What else is necessary to the play?' he continued.

'*Stupid romanticism* and the *provincial flirts*, like the Mayor's wife who precipitated the engagement of her daughter and upset the whole town,' suggested someone.

'The postmaster's curiosity and Ossip's sanity,' other students threw in. 'The bribery, the letter, the arrival of the real Inspector.'

'You have divided the play into its main organic episodes—its largest units. Now draw from each of these units its essential content and you will have the inner outline of the whole play. Each large unit is in turn divided into the medium and small parts which, together, compose it. In shaping these divisions it is often necessary to combine several small units.

'You now have a general notion of how to divide a play into its component units, and how to mark out a channel to guide you through it,' said Tortsov in conclusion.

## 3

'The division of a play into units, to study its structure, has one purpose,' explained the Director today. 'There is another, far more important, inner reason. At the heart of every unit lies a *creative objective*.

'Each objective is an organic part of the unit or, conversely, it creates the unit which surrounds it.

'It is just as impossible to inject extraneous objectives into a play as it is to put in units which are not related to it, because the objectives must form a logical and coherent stream. Given this direct, organic bond, all that has been said about *units* applies equally to *objectives*.'

'Does that mean', I asked, 'that they are also divided up into major and minor steps?'

'Yes, indeed,' said he.

'What about the channel?' I asked.

'The objective will be the light that shows the right way,' explained the Director.

'The mistake most actors make is that they think about the result instead of about the action that must prepare it. By avoiding action and aiming straight at the result you get a forced product which can lead to nothing but ham acting.

'Try to avoid straining after the result. Act with truth, fullness and integrity of purpose. You can develop this type of action by choosing lively objectives. Set yourself some such problem now and execute it,' he suggested.

While Maria and I were thinking it over Paul came to us with the following proposal:

Suppose we are both in love with Maria and have proposed to her. What would we do?

First we laid out a general scheme and then divided it into various units and objectives, each of which, in turn, gave rise to action. When our activity died down, we threw in fresh suppositions, and had new problems to solve. Under the influence of this constant pressure we were so wrapped up in what we were doing that we did not notice when the curtain was raised and the bare stage appeared.

The Director suggested that we continue our work out there, which we did, and when we had finished he said:

'Do you recall one of our first lessons when I asked you to go out on to the bare stage and act? You did not know what to do but floundered around helplessly with external forms and passions? But today, in spite of the bare stage, you felt quite free and moved around easily. What helped you do this?'

'Inner, active objectives,' both Paul and I said.

'Yes,' he agreed, 'because they direct an actor along the right path and restrain him from false acting. It is the objective that gives him faith in his right to come on to the stage and stay there.'

'Unfortunately, today's experiment was not altogether convincing. The objectives some of you set were chosen for their own sakes and not because of their inner spring of action. That results in tricks and showing off. Others took purely external objectives related to exhibitionism. As for Grisha, his purpose was, as usual, to let his technique shine. That is just being spectacular, it cannot result in any real stimulus to action. Leo's objective was good enough but was too exclusively intellectual and literary.'

'We find innumerable objectives on the stage and not all of them are either necessary or good; in fact, many are harmful. An actor must learn to recognize quality, to avoid the useless, and to choose essentially right objectives.'

'How can we know them?' I asked.

'I should define right objectives as follows,' said he:

'(1) They must be on our side of the footlights. They must be directed toward the other actors, and not toward the spectators.'

'(2) They should be personal yet analogous to those of the character you are portraying.'

'(3) They must be creative and artistic because their function should be to fulfil the main purpose of our art: to create the life of a human soul and render it in artistic form.'

'(4) They should be real, live, and human, not dead, conventional, or theatrical.'

'(5) They should be truthful so that you yourself, the actors playing with you, and your audience can believe in them.'

'(6) They should have the quality of attracting and moving you.'

'(7) They must be clear cut and typical of the role you are playing. They must tolerate no vagueness. They must be distinctly woven into the fabric of your part.'

'(8) They should have value and content, to correspond to the inner body of your part. They must not be shallow, or skim along the surface.'

'(9) They should be active, to push your role ahead and not let it stagnate.'

'Let me warn you against a dangerous form of objective, purely motor, which is prevalent in the theatre and leads to mechanical performance.'

'We admit three types of objectives: the external or physical, the inner or psychological, and the rudimentary psychological type.'

Vanya expressed dismay at these big words and the Director explained his meaning by an example.

'Suppose you come into the room,' he began, 'and greet me, nod your head, shake my hand. That is an ordinary *mechanical* objective. It has nothing to do with psychology.'

'Is that wrong?' broke in Vanya.

The Director hastened to disabuse him.

'Of course you may say how do you do, but you may not love, suffer, hate or carry out any living, human objective in a purely mechanical way, without experiencing any feeling.'

'A different case', he continued, 'is holding out your hand and trying to express sentiments of love, respect, gratitude through your grasp and the look in your eye. That is how we

execute an *ordinary objective* and yet there is a psychological element in it, so we, in our jargon, define it as a rudimentary type.

'Now here is a third way. Yesterday you and I had a quarrel. I insulted you publicly. Today, when we meet, I want to go up to you and offer my hand, indicating by this gesture that I wish to apologize, admit that I was wrong and beg you to forget the incident. To stretch out my hand to my enemy of yesterday is not a simple problem. I will have to think it over carefully, go through and overcome many emotions before I can do it. That is what we call a *psychological objective*.

'Another important point about an objective is that besides being believable, it should have attraction for the actor, make him wish to carry it out. This magnetism is a challenge to his creative will.

'Objectives which contain these necessary qualities we call creative. It is difficult to cull them out. Rehearsals are taken up, in the main, with the task of finding the right objectives, getting control of them and living with them.'

The Director turned to Nicholas. 'What is your objective in that favourite scene of yours from *Brand*?' he asked.

'To save humanity,' Nicholas replied.

'A large purpose!' exclaimed the Director half laughingly. 'It is impossible to grasp it all at once. Don't you think you had better take some simple physical objective?'

'But is a physical objective—interesting?' asked Nicholas with a shy smile.

'Interesting to whom?' said the Director.

'To the public.'

'Forget about the public. Think about yourself,' he advised. 'If you are interested, the public will follow you.'

'But I am not interested in it either,' pleaded Nicholas. 'I should prefer something psychological.'

'You will have time enough for that. It is too early to become

involved in psychology. For the time being, limit yourself to what is simple and physical. In every physical objective there is some psychology and vice versa. You cannot separate them. For instance: the psychology of a man about to commit suicide is extremely complicated. It is difficult for him to make up his mind to go over to the table, take the key from his pocket, open the drawer, take out the revolver, load it and put a bullet through his head. Those are all physical acts, yet how much psychology they contain! Perhaps it would be even truer to say that they are all complicated psychological acts, yet how much of the physical there is in them!

'Now take an example of the simplest sort of bodily action: you go up to another person and slap him. Yet, if you are to do this with sincerity, think of the intricate psychological sensations you must bring to fruition before you act! Take advantage of the fact that the division between them is vague. Do not try to draw too fine a line between physical and spiritual nature. Go by your instincts, always leaning a little toward the physical.

'Let us agree that, for the present, we will limit ourselves to physical objectives. They are easier, more readily available and more possible of execution. In doing this you reduce the risk of falling into false acting.'

## 4

The important question today was: how to draw an objective from a unit of work. The method is simple. It consists of finding the most appropriate name for the unit, one which characterizes its inner essence.

'Why all these christenings?' asked Grisha, ironically.

The Director replied: 'Have you any conception of what a really good name for a unit represents? It stands for its essential quality. To obtain it you must subject the unit to a process of crystallization. For that crystal you find a name.'

'The right name, which crystallizes the essence of a unit, discovers its fundamental objective.

'To demonstrate this to you in a practical way,' said he, 'let us take the first two units of the scene with the baby's clothes, from *Brand*.

'Agnes, the wife of Pastor Brand, has lost her only son. In her grief she is going over his clothing, toys, and other precious relics. Each object is bathed in tears. Her heart is bursting with memories. The tragedy was brought about by the fact that they live in a damp, unhealthy locality. When their child fell ill, the mother implored the husband to leave the parish. But Brand, a fanatic, would not sacrifice his duty as pastor for the salvation of his family. This decision took the life of their son.

'The gist of the second unit is: Brand comes in. He, too, is suffering, on account of Agnes. Yet his conception of duty forces him to be severe, and to persuade his wife to give the sacred relics of her little son to a poor gypsy woman, on the ground that they hinder her from giving herself entirely to the Lord, and from carrying out the basic principle of their lives, service to one's neighbour.

'Now sum up these two bits. Find the name for each that corresponds to its essential quality.'

'We see a loving mother, talking to a child's belongings as though to the child himself. The death of a beloved person is the fundamental motive of the unit,' I said decisively.

'Try to get away from the mother's grief and to make a coherent survey of the major and minor parts of this scene,' said the Director. 'That is the way to get at its inner meaning. When your feelings and consciousness have mastered it, search for a word which will embrace the innermost meaning of the whole unit. This word will spell your objective.'

'I can't see that there is any difficulty about that,' said Grisha.

'Surely the name of the first objective is—a mother's love, and that of the second—the fanatic's duty.'

'In the first place,' corrected the Director, 'you are trying to name the unit and not the objective. Those are two quite different things. Secondly, you should not try to express the meaning of your objectives in terms of a noun. That can be used for a unit but the objective must always be a verb.'

We expressed surprise, and the Director said:

'I shall help you find the answer. But first execute the objectives, just described by the nouns—(1) A Mother's Love, and (2) The Fanatic's Duty.'

Vanya and Sonya undertook this. He put on an angry expression, making his eyes start from their sockets, and stiffening his backbone rigidly. He walked across the floor with great firmness, stamping his heels. He spoke in a harsh voice, he bristled, hoping to make an impression of power, decision, as the expression of duty. Sonya made a great effort in the opposite direction, to express tenderness and love 'in general'.

'Don't you find', asked the Director after watching them, 'that the nouns you used as names for your objectives tend to make you play the picture of a strong man and the image of a passion—a mother's love?'

'You show what power and love are but you are not yourselves power and love. This is because a noun calls forth an intellectual concept of a state of mind, a form, a phenomenon, but can only define what is presented by an image, without indicating motion or action. Every objective must carry in itself the germ of action.'

Grisha started to argue that nouns can be illustrated, described, portrayed, which is action.

'Yes,' admitted the Director, 'that is action, but it is not true, full integrated action. What you describe is theatrical and representational, and as such is not art in our sense.'

Then he went on to explain:

'If, instead of a *noun* we use a *verb*, let us see what happens. Just add "I wish" or "I wish to do—so and so".'

'Take the word "power" as an example. Put "I wish" in front of it and you have "I wish power". But that is too general. If you introduce something more definitely active, state a question so that it requires an answer, it will push you to some fruitful activity to carry out that purpose. Consequently you say: "wish to do so and so, to obtain power." Or you can put it this way: "What must I wish to do to obtain power?" When you answer that you will know what action you must take.'

'I wish to be powerful,' suggested Vanya.

'The verb "to be" is static. It does not contain the active germ necessary to an objective.'

'I wish to obtain power,' ventured Sonya.

'That is closer to action,' said the Director. 'Unfortunately it is too general and cannot be executed at once. Try sitting on this chair and wishing for power, *in general*. You must have something more concrete, real, nearer, more possible to do. As you see, not any verb will do, not any word can give an impetus to full action.'

'I wish to obtain power in order to bring happiness to all humanity,' suggested someone.

'That is a lovely phrase,' remarked the Director. 'But it is hard to believe in the possibility of its realization.'

'I wish to obtain power to enjoy life, to be gay, to be distinguished, to indulge my desires, to satisfy my ambition,' Grisha said.

'That is more realistic and easier to carry out but to do it you must take a series of preparatory steps. You cannot reach such an ultimate goal at once. You will approach it gradually. Go over those steps and enumerate them.'

'I wish to appear successful and wise in business, to create con-

fidence. I wish to earn the affection of the public, to be accounted powerful. I wish to distinguish myself, to rise in rank, to cause myself to be noticed.'

The Director went back to the scene from *Brand* and had each of us do a similar exercise. He suggested:

'Suppose all the men put themselves in the position of Brand. They will appreciate more readily the psychology of a crusader for an idea. Let the women take the part of Agnes. The delicacy of feminine and maternal love is closer to them.'

'One, two, three! Let the tournament between the men and the women begin!'

'I wish to obtain power over Agnes in order to persuade her to make a sacrifice, to save her, to direct her in the right path.' These words were hardly out of my mouth before the women came forward with:

'I wish to remember my dead child.'

'I wish to be near him, to communicate with him.'

'I wish to care for, to caress, to tend him.'

'I wish to bring him back! I wish to follow him! I wish to feel him near me! I wish to see him with his toys! I wish to call him back from the grave! I wish to bring back the past! I wish to forget the present, to drown my sorrow.'

Louder than anyone I heard Maria cry: 'I wish to be so close to him that we can never be separated!'

'In that case,' the men broke in, 'we shall fight! I wish to make Agnes love me! I wish to draw her to me! I wish to make her feel that I understand her suffering! I wish to paint for her the great joy that will come from a duty performed. I wish her to understand man's larger destiny.'

'Then,' came from the women, 'I wish to move my husband through my grief! I wish him to see my tears.'

And Maria cried: 'I wish to take hold of my child more firmly than ever and never let him go!'



The men retorted: 'I wish to instil in her a sense of responsibility towards humanity! I wish to threaten her with punishment and separation! I wish to express despair at the impossibility of our understanding each other!'

All during this exchange the *verbs* provoked thoughts and feelings which were, in turn, inner challenges to action.

'Every one of the objectives you have chosen is, in a way, true, and calls for some degree of action,' said the Director. 'Those of you who are of a lively temperament might find little to appeal to your emotions in "I wish to remember my dead child". You would prefer "I wish to take hold of him and never let go". Of what? Of the things, memories, thoughts of the dead child. Others would be unmoved by that. So it is important that an objective have the power to attract and to excite the actor.'

'It seems to me that you have given the answer to your own question why it is necessary to use a *verb* instead of a noun in choosing an objective.'

'That is all for the present about *units and objectives*. You will learn more about psychological technique later, when you have a play and parts which we can actually divide into units and objectives.'

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### FAITH AND A SENSE OF TRUTH

#### I

'FAITH AND A SENSE OF TRUTH' was inscribed on a large placard on the wall at school today.

Before our work began we were up on the stage, engaged in one of our periodic searches for Maria's lost purse. Suddenly we heard the voice of the Director who, without our knowing it, had been watching us from the orchestra.

'What an excellent frame, for anything you want to present, is provided by the stage and the footlights,' said he. 'You were entirely sincere in what you were doing. There was a sense of truthfulness about it all, and a feeling of believing in all physical objectives which you set yourselves. They were well defined and clear, and your attention was sharply concentrated. All these necessary elements were operating properly and harmoniously to create—can we say art? No! That was not art. It was actuality. Therefore repeat what you have just been doing.'

We put the purse back where it had been and we began to hunt it. Only this time we did not have to search because the object had already been found once. As a result we accomplished nothing.

'No. I saw neither objectives, activity nor truth, in what you did,' was Tortsov's criticism. 'And why? If what you were doing the first time was actual fact, why were you not able to repeat it? One might suppose that to do that much you would not need to be an actor, but just an ordinary human being.'