

I once met Sinead Cusack at a Christmas party. The previous year she'd been offered a job by Max Stafford-Clark. She'd heard about the way he works. (Max requires his actors to action each line of text and to annotate their scripts, sitting around a table for two to three weeks of rehearsal to achieve this.)

Sinead had told him, 'I'd love to work with you, but I know how you work and I have to say up-front I can't do it and I won't do it.'

Max replied, 'Try it for a week.'

'No.'

'I really want you to play this part. Give me four days.'

'No.'

'Three days.'

'Absolutely not.'

'Give me two days and if you're not happy, we'll do it your way.'

A big gesture from the immaculate Max. So finally, consigning the first two days of rehearsal to what she imagined would be a complete waste of her time, Sinead agreed to do the job.

She told me, 'I did it his way for two days, then three days, then a week. Two weeks later we were still at it.' She took a sip of mulled wine, tasting the memory, then in her gorgeous liquid brogue said, 'How did I ever act before that?'

I have worked with actors whose foreheads hit the table at the very mention of an action. I have worked with actors who energetically resist the idea that rational thought might be part of their creative process. But I have helped transform some young actors by converting them to a belief in Actioning. More instructively, I have worked with many actors (and I include in this all the best ones) for whom actions are a second language. Not a foreign language or an exotic one, but a technical articulation of the elusively human. A good actor talks about actions like a builder-decorator talks about the nature of nails or the colour of paint. Actions can lead an actor from confusion to clarity, from muddle to magnificence, from the clichéd to the complex.

This thesaurus of riches can help the actor develop that language. The final section is a genuine tool, using which the actor can analyse any one moment of his character's journey, define instinctively the basic polarities of feeling towards another character, then select the intensity of that feeling, and thus arrive at a choice selection of appropriate transitive verbs.

It sounds complex, but so is dancing the salsa, and that only takes an hour or so to get into the musculature. If you want to act, or act better, actions will take you a long way on the journey to excellence.

TERRY JOHNSON

Marry Espouse, Join, Wed
Maroon Desert, Isolate
Mash Crush, Mince, Squash
Massacre Annihilate, Butcher, Exterminate, Slaughter
Massage Caress, Curb, Manipulate, Mould, Relax, Rub, Stroke, Touch
Master Command, Control, Dominate, Govern, Overpower, Overcome, Repress, Rule, Subdue, Vanquish
Match Equal, Join, Parry
Mature Sophisticate
Maul Attack, Batter, Beat, Fondle, Gouge, Grope, Impair, Mangle, Manipulate, Savage, Wound
Measure Appraise, Assess, Calculate, Consider, Contemplate, Estimate, Evaluate, Gauge, Judge, Weigh
Mediate Adjudicate, Arbitrate, Umpire
Meet Confront, Encounter, Face, Greet, Receive, Welcome
Mellow Subdue
Melt Defrost, Disarm, Dissolve, Warm
Menace Affright, Alarm, Bully, Frighten, Intimidate, Scare, Terrorise, Threaten
Mend Amend, Better, Cure, Fix, Heal, Reassemble, Regenerate, Remedy, Repair, Restore, Treat
Mesmerise Beguile, Bewitch, Captivate, Charm, Compel, Enamour, Enchant, Engage, Enrapture, Enthral, Entrance, Fascinate, Fixate, Grip, Hypnotise, Magnetise, Spellbind, Transfix
Milk Deflate, Drain, Exhaust
Mimic Caricature, Copy, Emulate, Imitate, Impersonate, Parody, Parrot
Mince Mash, Pulverise
Mirror Ape, Copy, Echo, Imitate, Parrot, Reflect
Misapply Abuse, Appropriate, Misappropriate, Misemploy

Misappropriate Appropriate, Filch, Misapply, Pinch, Purloin, Steal
Misdirect Deflect, Misguide, Mislead
Misemploy Abuse, Misapply
Misguide Bluff, Deceive, Delude, Misdirect, Mislead
Mishandle Maltreat, Mistreat
Misjudge Underestimate
Mislead Beguile, Bluff, Deceive, Delude, Fool, Gull, Hoax, Hoodwink, Misdirect, Misguide, Pervert, Trick
Misshape Contort, Distort, Impair, Modify, Mutillate, Twist, Warp
Mistreat Abuse, Brutalise, Damage, Harm, Hurt, Injure, Maltreat, Mishandle, Misuse, Molest
Misuse Abuse, Appropriate, Exploit, Filch, Maltreat, Mistreat, Pervert, Use
Mob Assault, Charge, Overwhelm, Pursue
Mobilise Activate, Animate
Mock Deride, Insult, Jeer, Kid, Pan, Patronise, Ridicule, Satirise, Shame, Slight, Taunt, Tease
Moderate Control, Correct, Curb, Regulate, Temper, Weaken
Modify Affect, Alter, Amend, Contort, Impair, Improve, Misshape, Pervert, Reform, Twist, Warp, Weaken
Molest Abuse, Afflict, Assault, Debauch, Deflower, Harm, Maltreat, Manhandle, Mistreat, Persecute, Rape
Mollify Appease, Assuage, Calm, Comfort, Conciliate, Content, Disburden, Ease, Humour, Hush, Pacify, Placate, Propitiate, Quell, Quieten, Relax, Soothe, Sweeten, Temper
Mollycoddle Coddle, Cosset, Indulge, Pamper, Pet, Spoil
Monitor Check, Gauge
Monopolise Corner, Dominate, Engross, Hog

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