

Breaking Down the Material

The first thing you need to do if you're going to act in something is to find out what needs to be worked on so you can do justice to the part and make every possible appeal to your artistic sensibilities. Great performances aren't an accident. You may be talented and you may be cute, but a real actor is called upon to assay material written by some of the finest minds humanity has ever produced and, I'm sorry, that's probably going to take a little work.

You're like an architect who's been given a set of constraints: the particular type of building to create (your role), the exact dimensions of the lot (this production), and the demands of a perfectionist client (the director). While intuition must be respected and flexibility encouraged, before you start buying lumber and hammering nails, it's nice to have some idea of what the hell you're doing.

The Emotional Bridge. Having said this, depending on the part, some issues may be more important to consciously examine than others. There may be roles that don't require a great deal of deliberate analysis because, by way of your own natural make up, you'll supply the necessary details. If you're a socially shy, Italian-American boxer from Brooklyn, you won't have to do a lot of planned character work to play a character like Rocky. The most innate situation for you is going to be playing someone exactly like yourself right now in a contemporary, naturalistic setting.

If the values and basic behaviors of the character are the same as yours, and you feel an affinity for the piece, then just about all the analysis you'll need to do can be gotten by using the Emotional Bridge (using your own emotional sensitivities to "bridge" you to the part). You simply ask yourself: *If I were in this situation, how would I feel about it, and what would I do?* This is the most basic use of what's called the "Magic If."

But come on now, don't be lazy. Be an actor. Maybe you can pull it off doing the part straight from yourself, but seriously assess what's in front of you before you decide to go that way. There's a much greater chance that the Emotional Bridge by itself won't be enough and you're going to have to pursue a deeper examination of the character and the piece. Also, a case can be made that the only way to deliver a truly great acting performance is as a result of willful, aesthetic choices. Stella Adler said: "The talent is in the choices." What makes a performance transcendent is that there's been an approach decided upon that then, in the actual presentation, adapts itself to the moment. A plan brought to life. Or, as "greatness" is defined by Fast Eddie Felson (in Robert Rossen's *The Hustler*): "If a guy knows what he's doing and he can make it come off."

THE PIECE AS A WHOLE

Did I say you're like an architect? Forget that. You're a detective. There may be explicit information in the text about things like what's happened or what your character wants, but often it won't be openly disclosed and you'll have to sift through clues and make inferences. Whether your character, or even the playwright who created them, consciously knows the exact details underlying this story, it'll be up to you to establish a working theory for the specifics.

Before getting started on an explanation of how to break down the material as a whole piece, let it be said that, if you're going to be performing in a play that's been done before, you can probably get a leg up by researching reviews and other sources that will tell you what experts have had to say about the plot, style, theme and character dynamics of the piece you're going to undertake. This is, of course, no substitute for doing your own investigative work, but if the information is out there, why not take advantage of it?

How does it strike you? You should be especially sensitive to your first impression when exposed to the material, and read the entire piece with an open heart. Suppress the desire to go right to your part so you can count how many lines you have and imagine how wonderful you'll be when momma comes to see it. Easy, Tiger. Right now you need to

get a sense for the piece as a whole. How it hangs together as a work of art. This means you might also have to leave aside, as much as possible, preconceived ideas about who's involved in the production, how it might have been done before, or how it would have been better if it had been written in a different way. Let it play upon you new, just as it is; there'll be time enough for that other stuff.

It should be read repeatedly.

What happens? You want to get a handle on the plot so that you could tell somebody the basic story. It should be felt as an experience that is lived through with a vivid and specific life.

What is the style of the piece? Try and imagine what the overall tone and spirit of this presentation might be. Style is the form that's been used to transmit this particular artistic vision, and it's intimately connected with the genre. There should be consistency to the natural law and the phenomenon within this fictional world: the atmosphere, the design and decor, the motifs, should all be harmonious.

Every time you take on a part you're like a musician entering a new band who needs to get a feel for the type of the music they'll be playing. Often you see an actor whom you've previously liked totally tank in a part because they don't play the qualities of this different kind of style.

Maybe you have a favorite style you prefer and it suits you and, hell, maybe you'll get on a successful television show and make a handsome living never having to deviate from it. That's fine. But every role you take on has to be performed in the particular style required. It's your job.

To ascertain the style of the piece, it's probably best to visualize how this kind of thing has been done in the past. Ask yourself: *What does this remind me of?* Unless it's from a completely different culture, you've almost certainly been exposed to something similar to this. Authors will tend to write in a favorite style, so maybe it's possible to compare it to their other works.

You can look at this issue of style from the point of view of genre. Certain types of subject matter have particular styles associated with them and will tend to similar points of view and common qualities among the characters. A gritty crime story will feature characters with

raw emotional lives, whereas, in the sunnier world of Light Comedy, no one is savagely enraged or catastrophically grief stricken; those qualities will be limited for the most part to irritation and sentimentality.

A character in a Light Comedy who discovers their spouse is cheating on them relates to this event probably more the way you would if you were to find out that they'd ruined your credit. The feelings should be real, but they're going to be lightened in their intensity for the style. Light Comedies don't feature acts of real depravity: pirates are fun pirates. As these values start to increase in their gravity and realism, the style gets darker, until it passes through Naturalism and into the portrayal of a ridiculously grim world, referred to as a Black Comedy. In Black Comedy you may have to adjust your character's responses in the other direction, and be over-the-top awful, as in *There Will Be Blood* where Daniel Plainview pledges to cut a business rival's throat because he innocently asks him about his son.

The style will very much affect the way actors conduct themselves vocally and physically. If it's a naturalistic drama, or what's been called a "kitchen sink" drama, you can mumble and, if you itch, scratch away; but if it's a glossy High Drama, I don't care how much that costume pinches or that wig is bugging you — no touchy, Desdemona.

Style Value Ranges

You can evaluate the tone of a piece in relation to where it falls on a scale of values.

- ▶ Realistic *vs.* Bizarre (Broad)
- ▶ Gloomy *vs.* Sparkling
- ▶ Chaotic *vs.* Orderly
- ▶ Brash *vs.* Tranquil
- ▶ Dangerous *vs.* Leisurely
- ▶ Raw *vs.* Poised
- ▶ Grim *vs.* Silly
- ▶ Stark Patina *vs.* Glossy Patina

Some Style Labels

- ▶ Absurd: odd people in completely unrealistic, painful situations.
(*Waiting for Godot*, *Eraserhead*)

Breaking Down the Material

- ▶ Action: the heroic and the eccentric in a flamboyant, tough world.
(*Die Hard*, *Goldfinger*)
- ▶ Black Comedy: desperate people in a grim, eccentric world.
(*Fargo*, *Dr. Strangelove*)
- ▶ Camp: a skewed period setting with dark, adult, but safe, silliness.
(*Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Blazing Saddles*)
- ▶ Fantasy: a romantic, elegant world of heroes and monsters.
(*Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*)
- ▶ Farce: goofy and scheming people in fanciful situations.
(*There's Something About Mary*, *Some Like It Hot*)
- ▶ High Drama/Comedy: formal, elevated lives of suppressed passion.
(*Atonement*, *Shakespeare in Love*)
- ▶ Historical: an orderly stage where definitive, romantic actions unfold.
(*Patton*, *Glory*)
- ▶ Horror: an orderly, naturalistic world with ghastly phenomena.
(*The Exorcist*, *The Ring*)
- ▶ Light Comedy: silly, good-hearted folk in an unthreatening world.
(*Little Miss Sunshine*, *Notting Hill*)
- ▶ Mystery: innocence and meanness in a glossy, shadowy world.
(*Casablanca*, *Chinatown*)
- ▶ Naturalistic Drama/Comedy: realistic, human stories.
(*Kramer vs. Kramer*, *The Goodbye Girl*)
- ▶ Surreal: a bleak, beautiful world on a precipitous slant.
(*Blue Velvet*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*)
- ▶ Thriller: a sleek jungle of ruthless survival.
(*Seven*, *The Bourne Identity*)
- ▶ Zany Comedy: fun outrageousness in a free-form universe.
(*Airplane*, *Austin Powers*)

All these styles can overlap and blend, as when Horror mixes with Black Comedy so that the subject is both genuinely frightening and funny (as with *The Shining* or *Psycho*), or as Zany Comedy blends the melodrama of Light Comedy and is able to generate sentimental feeling (*Liar, Liar* or *Mrs. Doubtfire*).

- ▶▶ **Note:** Talking about style is like describing cuisine. It's clumsy. And, just as saying a meal is "Northern Italian" is a long way from

conveying the actual experience of the dish, calling something a “Mystery” doesn’t give more than a vague sense for how it’s going to be experienced. But don’t let anybody kid you, everything has a style. It may be an inconsistent mess that no one can get comfortable with because the tones keep changing; or there’s an intense effort made to make it look like reality, with ad-libbed dialog and inexperienced, unvetted actors and all, but everything that’s created has its style.

In determining the style of a piece, as with all elements of *Breaking Down the Material*, using precedent isn’t meant to be a substitute for your personal vision. The artist’s creative invention should be working at all times and it may be worthwhile to revisit a work with a stylistic approach very different from what is the convention — it just shouldn’t be done arbitrarily.

What is the setting? The environment in which the piece takes place must be examined for its Culture and Location, and all of this will have to be taken into account and later brought to life in your performance.

The Culture is where and when it takes place:

- ▶ The History
- ▶ Current Events
- ▶ System of Government
- ▶ Values of the Society
 - Formal Religion
- ▶ Fashion
- ▶ Technology
- ▶ Economics (Standard of Living)
 - Jobs

Values and economics may be interrelated in so far as there are class levels and different moral standards for people of different social standings. It’s a scandal if the son of the mayor is seen intoxicated in public, but not so much when he’s a boy from a family of ordinary construction workers. That construction worker’s son, however, will probably receive more condemnation when he crashes his car than the rich kid who’s more likely to receive sympathy because of “the disease” of his addiction.