OBJECTIVES AND ACTION VERBS

All objectives must answer the question, "What do I, as my character, want?" Because all objectives demand action if they are to be fulfilled, objectives are best expressed through action verbs. Objectives formulated with "I am" usually require an adjective or noun to end the sentence and lead you into the trap of playing qualities and feigning emotion. "I am angry," or "I am sad," or "I am President," would lead you to play a generalized emotional state. You must avoid intransitive verbs that express a state of being. Seek instead verbs that imply a clear sustainable action that you can work toward in a scene or improvisation.

The best objectives are immediate and compelling. Some verbs are more powerful springboards to action than are others. Part of an actor's job is learning to express objectives in the strongest terms with the most dynamic verbs. Implicit in the statement of objective is a sense of urgency that enhances theatrical excitement. Verbs such as imprison, crush, bolster, dare, coddle, defy, block, seduce, intimidate, shatter, explode, soothe, and console are examples of active verbs that provoke a strong image and suggest physical action. Just saying these verbs makes you feel something in your body. You can see how verbs such as think, imagine, feel, and determine are more passive, reflect an internal state, and are harder to play. Good action verbs can propel you into a scene and enliven your action choices.

Let's take a simple situation. You are in the bedroom and see and smell smoke coming from the living room. You can say that your objective is to leave the house. Or you may strengthen the statement by saying your objective is to get out of the house. You can increase the power of your objective even further if you say it is to flee the fire. Note how each verb increased the energy required of your actions on stage. Each objective could have begun with "I want" and was expressed in terms of a verb and object. It is not enough to say your objective is to flee. To flee is not specific enough and would lead to generalized action on stage. To flee the fire implies a series of circumstances and actions that determine your behavior.

When you are on stage with other actors, the strongest statements of objectives use verbs that have other characters as their direct object. I want to seduce Juliet or I want to mock Emily are statements designed to act on other characters and cause a change in the relationship. Such objectives will alter the given circumstances and force a response in other characters, moving the drama forward.

Let's apply this principle to Hamlet's objective in the scene in which the players enact the murder of his father. To choose to watch Claudius' reaction would use too passive a verb and not compel an action from Claudius. The objective stated actively with an object of the verb—to push Claudius to reveal his guilt—animates Hamlet's behavior while provoking a response in Claudius.

In summary, objectives should answer the question, "What do I want?" and should express your primary need or desire in a scene. Inherent in the formulation of the objective is the suggestion that action will fulfill your purpose. The objective

must be of importance to your character and must try to affect a change in other characters and the given circumstances.

■ Exercise 8.1 ■ Objectives with Action Verbs ■

For each of the following situations, write statements of objectives that answer the question, "What do I want to do," using strong action verbs and a specific object of the verb:

- 1. You have received a letter from the registrar, saying you are being expelled from college for bad grades. You need an "A" in one class to stay in school.
- 2. Your boy- or girlfriend, with whom your are madly in love, has said he or she does not want to see you any more. You do not accept this decision.
- 3. You see a good friend standing in a sixth-floor window about to jump to his or her death.
- 4. You are a passenger in a car with a drunk driver.

Were you able to create strong statements of objectives? Do your objectives inspire action?

Indicating Emotion versus Playing an Objective

Your primary concern when you are on stage is the pursuit of your objective, not the creation of emotion. To act sad, happy, upset, angry, in love, or any other such emotion is misplaced focus. We call this "playing a quality," and it inevitably leads to behavioral clichés. Actors who try to demonstrate an emotion instead of playing their objectives are said to be **indicating**. Indicating means you are showing a feeling without experiencing it. It leads to the pumping up of emotion for external display without any inner justification.

If you have ever been in a situation in which you did not experience what you thought were appropriate feelings and tried to feign an emotional response, you have actually experienced what it feels like to indicate. Some of you may have tried to cry in order to elicit pity or compassion. You know the feelings aren't there, but you try to force some semblance of them externally through facial mugging, voice, and gesture in order to achieve an effect; this is indicating. This artificial straining for emotion appears on stage as overacting.

If you are working hard to produce emotion, you are wasting energy that could be put to better use in action. It is also the dead giveaway that you are not viscerally experiencing your character's needs. Working for effects or results short-circuits the actor's process. To avoid falling into this trap, remember that you must never think in terms of adjectives and nouns, but instead, define every moment of your stage life in terms of playing an objective formulated with an action verb.