

METHOD ACTING PROCEDURES – ANIMAL EXERCISES

You are a relatively young actor, medium build, a basically happy going person who has an overwhelming desire to play the role of a man in his late sixties who has been beaten down by the challenges and responsibilities of life. Can you do it?

"Of course I can", you say, "I'm an actor. I'll put on some makeup to make me look older, and act beaten down. " And you do the part. The critics give you passable reviews, remarking what a wonderful makeup job it was, and how you acted so beaten down for such a young actor. And your friends tell you how good you were.

But inside, you know something was missing. You know that the makeup and "acting" so beaten down didn't really transform you into the "real" man in his sixties, who was "really" beaten down.

So you go to the library and do some research to see what you can find out about the Pulitzer prize winning play, and the actor who brought the role you longed for to life. "Aha, here it is! Lee J. Cobb played Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's "Death Of A Salesman"." And as you investigate, you discover that Cobb was also a young man when he played the part, and stunned the world with his riveting characterization of the old, beaten down salesman. " How did he do it?", you wonder.

Your research finally leads you to Cobb's "secret". He created Willy Loman with an "Animal Exercise". "Huh? What the heck does that mean?" you wonder. And your research leads you into "method" acting, and you become fascinated. So fascinated that you decide to quit acting for two years to study this approach to the actor's art.

You learn about relaxation, sense memory, concentration, the "magic if", substitution and other concepts you hadn't known of. Then it comes time for you to do an "Animal Exercise". The instructor tells you to study an animal. Any animal. It could be your pet bird. Or you could go to the zoo and study the elephant, like Lee J. Cobb did, so that he could create the "weight of the world on his shoulders".

And you are further instructed to be very specific in your observation of the animal. What is the animal's posture? How does he move? When does he move? Why does he move? Can you imagine what he might be thinking? Begin physically imitating his movements. Be as specific as possible. If it's a gorilla you are studying, and the gorilla places its hand somewhere on its body in such a way that you might not place your hand on your body, especially in public, then you must overcome your inhibitions, and imitate the animal, even if you are in the public zoo.

If the animal is inactive for a period of time, you become inactive, as if you were "mirroring" the animal. You study patiently.

Look into the animal's eyes? Does it seem intelligent? Tame? Wild? Dangerous? Try to transfer the animal's thoughts to your own thoughts. What are you, "the elephant" thinking as you move from the spot at which you have been standing for quite some time to a tree fifty feet away to pick a few leaves to eat? Why did you move now, and not five minutes ago?

Study the animal for as long and as often as you can before you bring your work back to the workshop next week.

And so you do as you are instructed. You have chosen the elephant, because you want to see if you can understand what Lee J. Cobb experienced when he created that role you hungered for.

And you do it in the workshop. And your friends in the workshop tell you afterward, "I didn't recognize you. You had a very different look in your eyes, and your entire posture was totally changed. " Now you feel very encouraged. But you have one question that remains unanswered. You ask the instructor, "What do I do next? I can't play this part on my hands and knees."

The instructor tells you the next step is to make the animal "human". In this case, the elephant, now has legs and arms. Keep the physical and psychological aspects of the animal, and transform them to the human counterpart in yourself.

The following week, after working on the exercise again several hours a day, with this "adjustment", you bring the exercise back to the workshop. And again your friends there are impressed and amazed by your transformation. You feel ecstatic with the results of your efforts.

And suddenly, you have to play Willy Loman again.