Theatre/Practice: *The Online Journal of the Practice/Production Symposium of the Mid America Theatre Conference*

Volume 15, 2026

Understanding Objectives and Tactics Through Play

by Matt Durland

Anything Goes -- Literally

In pivotal moments of our lives, certain words shape our needs and wants. For a newborn, it is 'mommy or 'daddy.' For a high school junior, it is college applications. And for the actor, it is that famous three-syllable word—objective. Objectives work best when they stand in polarity to another character's needs and wants. I first encountered this polarity in high school biology. My teacher's 'objective' was to impress upon me that "the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell." My objective was to ignore her. See?

Polarity.

Like many young actors starring in their 11th-grade production of *Anything Goes*, I thought I knew way more about acting than I did. My objective was to get Reno Sweeney to love me, and I was going to win a Tony for it. I figured I could throw whatever felt right onstage and it would magically land, regardless of whether it made sense for the musical.

Now, as a Graduate Assistant teaching Acting I and II for Non-Majors—after completing four

levels of acting in undergrad and currently reexamining my own process in the MFA program at Michigan State University—it is clear: I had *no* idea what an objective really was back in 11th grade. I was truly saying, “anything goes.”

The moment it hit me like a ton of bricks was the moment I was forced to accept that *playing a mood* is not an objective. There I was, standing in my undergraduate acting class, performing a scene and just... yelling. My professor asked, “What's your objective?” I overconfidently replied, “I want them to understand me.”

Christie M., my acting professor—equal parts sass and wisdom, straight from New Jersey—smiled and said, “Of course you want them to understand you. That's why you're talking. That's why we *all* talk. Stop playing the mood.” She would spend the next three years reminding me: an objective is what we want in the scene and a tactic is how we go after it. It is often connected to a verb, a key tool to clarify our pursuit. A strong transitive verb helps fuel the action, moving us closer to achieving the objective. I was confusing an *emotional state* with a *tactic*, letting it blanket the entire scene. It was not until I realized that verbs are the fun, spicy ingredients that truly drive acting that I began making real progress.

Here is the thing: your non-major students will do the exact same thing. They will yell. They will cry. They will be sad. And they will look at you like they just gave a Tony-worthy performance. Your job, and this essay's job, is to give you some tools to lovingly redirect them. The good news is that it can be genuinely fun.

Why Play? A (Brief, I Promise) Theoretical Pit Stop

Before we delve into the games, let's pause to ponder: why do we play? Why is a game the ideal medium for imparting technical knowledge like objectives and tactics? Viola Spolin, a pioneering figure in American acting pedagogy, centered her entire approach around games and spontaneous play. Her fundamental belief was that learning occurs through hands-on experience, not through passive lectures. When actors engage in play, their analytical minds take a backseat, allowing their instincts to guide them. This is precisely the state we desire for our students when they're attempting to internalize a tactic. If they're preoccupied with the tactic, they're not *fully immersed in* the act of playing it.

This concept aligns with a broader shift in acting pedagogy. Scholars like Lisa Peck and Evi Stamatiou, in *Critical Acting Pedagogy: Intersectional Approaches*, encourage us to question the nature of the acting studio. Instead of discarding foundational techniques, they prompt us to examine who these techniques serve and who they may inadvertently exclude. bell hooks, in her seminal work, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, asserts that engaged pedagogy places the whole self of the student at the heart of learning. Play embodies this principle. A game lowers the stakes, fosters risk-taking, and, most importantly, doesn't necessitate a shared cultural vocabulary for participation.

This last point holds significant importance when teaching non-majors. Your classroom likely comprises students from diverse backgrounds, languages, and experiences with performance. While the games presented in this essay were designed to be accessible, they may not inherently ensure equity. We'll explore this further in the coming sections.

The Open-Ended Objective

How do we help actors fight for more compelling objectives?

In the Fall 2024, I had a student working on a monologue from *Death of a Salesman*. Let's call this student 'Biff' (for humor and anonymity). Biff came in well-prepared, lines memorized, clearly having read the play. I could feel their excitement to tackle the famous "Now hear this, Willy, this is me." But as soon as Biff spoke the word "now," they launched to level 10—full passion and energy—but the objective needed refining.

I asked, "What objective are you playing?"

"I want them to hear me."

Biff had already moved past the usual "I want Willy to love me," a great first step. But many students, when they need something from their imaginary scene partner, turn to yelling or emotional outbursts. It is vulnerable to dig deeper and find what is truly driving the character.

I guided Biff by asking:

- Why does he need to hear you *right now*?
- What happens if he does hear you *right now*?
- What happens if he doesn't hear you *right now*?

You may notice that I emphasize "now," adding urgency connects actor and character in the present moment. As we explored these questions, Biff began speaking more earnestly with a sharper point of view. But when answering "what happens if he doesn't hear you right now?" Biff struggled to find an ending. He sighed, almost in defeat, and said, "I need to wake Willy up." And there it was. That one sentence opened a world of possibilities. Now *that* was an objective with life!

We deepened the conversation, helping Biff shift his language to align with this new need: *to wake Willy up*. Allowing students to begin with their own phrasing, then speak freely as the character, often reveals what they are truly fighting for.

Here is some guidance I offer when working on monologues with students:

- The objective should be active. Anything rooted in memory or the past doesn't move your character's needs forward.
- Create urgency. What happens if the objective is achieved? What if it is not?
- Freely speak the monologue without the text -- just as yourself. Reflect on what words or moments activate a sensation in you. This can lead to a stronger, more truthful objective.
- If your objective doesn't leave you feeling a sense of relief by the final line, revisit it. Playing to *investigate* is the most exciting work we do as actors.

The beauty of acting is that we define our own objectives in any scene. The playwright may hint at them, but we have the freedom to craft them. And, even more exciting, to choose how we pursue them. Which brings us to another key word: tactic.

Tactics and Actions and Verbs -- Oh My! (It's All the Same)

The great thing about tactics? They must change. Every time your objective is not met, you must adjust. That shift changes your perspective and suddenly, so does your point of view.

Returning to our friend Biff. Now that he discovered his objective—*to wake Willy up*—he needed better tactics. Previously, he was using yelling as his primary tactic, which was not allowing for spontaneity or truly affecting his scene partner.

I asked, “How are you getting what you want?”

“Yelling.”

Yelling is fine, but it is not exciting. It is like seasoning meatloaf with just salt and pepper. So I asked Biff, “What are synonyms for what you're doing?”

After some struggle, I prompted him to reflect on his earlier free speech. What physical action was he trying to do internally to Willy?

“It's like I'm a news station alerting Willy to wake up.”

There it was! I asked him to repeat the sentence and identify the verb. He landed on *alert*—a word that beautifully complemented his objective. The wonderful thing about tactics is that they open doors rather than box actors in. Playing a mood, such as anger, limits choices and spontaneity. Tactics can and *should* change because our scene partners will always make it difficult for us to reach our objectives.

This is something worth reinforcing with your non-major students specifically. They are not training to be actors. They are training to be better communicators, collaborators, and humans. The skill of reading a situation and adjusting your approach—finding a new tactic when the old one is not working—is one of the most transferable things they will take out of your classroom. Point that out to them. It tends to make them care a lot more.

Understanding Tactics Through Play

In my first MFA acting course, our fearless leader, Rob R., blended technique with pedagogical tools. One of our early activities was designing simple, accessible games to help actors

internalize these concepts. What follows is what came out of that work: two games I have now used with real students, with real results.

Games: “All Aboard!” and “Who Will Buy?”

Materials: Paper, markers, scarves

Time: 25 minutes

List: 25 common actions/verbs

Purpose: Young actors often default to playing moods instead of pursuing objectives through tactics. These games help actors recognize, understand, and implement active tactics, expanding their vocabulary and building deeper awareness of playable actions.

Game #1: All Aboard!

Setup: For large classes, divide into two groups -- one participates while the other observes and cheers, then switch roles.

Instructions:

- Choose a Train Conductor who writes a tactic/verb on paper.
- Form the train (8-10 students in a line). Encourage playfulness -- train sounds create a low-stakes, fun atmosphere.
- One student becomes the Passenger, facing the train.

Gameplay:

- The Train Conductor reveals the tactic to the train body.

- The Leader of the Train uses that tactic (verbally and physically) to persuade the Passenger to “get on board!”
- The Passenger tries to identify the tactic.
- Once guessed, roles rotate.

Game #2: Who Will Buy?

Materials: Scarves

Setup:

- 10-15 students form a circle; one stands in the center (Buyer).
- Each seller holds a scarf or object.
- Create a playful "marketplace" atmosphere.

Gameplay:

- Each seller selects a tactic and objective to sell their scarf.
- Sellers use verbal and physical tactics to persuade the Buyer.
- The Buyer identifies the tactic: “You want me to buy this scarf by ____.”

These simple games help actors practice *playing* and *reading* tactics. I used them in my Acting 101 for Non-Majors with great success. The students enjoyed the playfulness and, more importantly, began drawing on a wider range of tactics beyond their usual defaults.

What makes these games worth your time, and worth including in your non-majors' curriculum specifically, is what they do that traditional scene work often does not. They separate the concept from the emotional pressure of performing. Nobody is 'acting' in All Aboard. They are playing a game. And in that low-stakes space, the concept clicks.

I Love a Circular Ending

During my first year as an MFA student, I was proud to present this work at M.A.T.C. Even more meaningful was doing so alongside my mentor, best friend, and now colleague, Christie M., my sassy, wise undergrad acting professor. There was real closure (and a touch of fear!) in presenting my pedagogical games with her in the room. And yet, there we were, as colleagues, watching her lead a train in All Aboard.

The feedback was unanimous: the games were fun, accessible, and clarified a topic that can often feel muddy for young actors.

What About Non-Native English Speakers and Tactics?

While leading this game at M.A.T.C., I was fortunate to have a colleague whose native language is not English. They encountered real challenges interpreting and responding to some of the English verbs. That moment stopped me in my tracks—in the best way.

Here is the honest truth: a game built around English verb vocabulary is going to create barriers for students who are working in their second or third language. It can also create barriers for students whose cultural backgrounds do not have the same relationship to the kinds of

performative persuasion these games rely on. As Taylor and Sobel remind us in *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Teaching Like Our Students' Lives Matter*, culturally responsive teaching is "a contextual and situational process for both teachers and students," [1]meaning the same activity will land differently depending on who is in the room.

This does not mean ditch the games. It means do some groundwork first.

Prelude to All Aboard! and Who Will Buy?

Materials: List of actions/verbs, small paper, pens/pencils

Activity:

- Share a list of actions/verbs.
- Let students select about 20 that excite them.
- Write one verb per slip of paper, fold them, and mix them up.
- As a group, read one action at a time. Everyone explores the action physically and vocally, helping those who may be unfamiliar with certain words or nuances.

This shared exploration lets the whole group build a common vocabulary before the game begins. It is not just a fix for language barriers; it is genuinely more fun and more rigorous for everyone. Students who *do* know the words are often surprised by how much they learn about a verb when they have to embody it rather than just recognize it.

Do this prelude early in the semester and keep building the action vocabulary over time. Think of

[1] Susan S. Taylor and Deborah Sobel, *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Teaching Like Our Students' Lives Matter* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2011).

it as a running list you return to. The more robust that shared vocabulary gets, the richer the games become.

And if you want to go deeper on how to make your acting classroom more equitable, not just accessible but genuinely inclusive, I strongly recommend Lisa Peck and Evi Stamatiou's *Critical Acting Pedagogy: Intersectional Approaches*, as well as bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. These texts will challenge you and make you a better teacher. *That* is the whole point.

Final Reminders

Whether your students are tackling Shakespeare or the wackiest jukebox musical, or, more likely, a scene from a contemporary play they found at 11pm the night before class:

- Your objective should be active.
- If you finish the scene without a sense of release, is your objective the right one?
- Tactics are actions, not moods.
- If your tactic isn't bringing you closer to your objective, is it the right tactic?
- Keep playing.

And one more, just for you as the teacher: trust the games. Trust the mess. Trust the play.

Bibliography

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

Peck, Lisa. *Act as a Feminist: Towards a Critical Acting Pedagogy*. London: Routledge, 2021.

Peck, Lisa and Evi Stamatiou. *Critical Acting Pedagogy: Intersectional Approaches*. London: Routledge, 2024.

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963.

Taylor, Sheryl and Donna Sobel. *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Teaching Like Our Students' Lives Matter*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2011.