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Spicing Up Uta Hagen's Object Exercise: Notes from the Field

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This article will be a description and exploration teaching students about basic given circumstances, objectives, obstacles and tactics by using, adapting and reframing one of Uta Hagen's most utilized Object Exercises. I will discuss how I repurpose the original exercise that has been implemented in acting classrooms since *Respect for Acting* was first published over 50 years ago. First, I use the exercise where actors recreate 1-2 minutes of mundane 'real life' performed by an individual. But here, the original intent of the exercise is altered by students using pantomime rather than relying on physical props. Secondly, they expand upon it by having their classmates, who have been observing each other in the first phase, create new performances wherein they pretend to clandestinely steal something from one of their classmate's previously performed pieces. I will lay out both the pedagogy and the learning outcomes of both parts of this reframed exercise and give examples of some of the results. I will also discuss the history of how I first conceived of and experimented with this 'spicing up' of the Object Exercise while teaching over Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The inspiration for this article began from the Pedagogy Symposium workshop I led during the 2025 Mid-America Theatre Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, entitled "How I'm

Spicing Up Uta Hagen's Object Exercise." The workshop included a live demonstration of both parts of the performance aspects from class work. My colleague, Dan D., helped me by preparing and performing the original (Part One) Object Exercise and I performed the follow up (Part Two) or the 'thievery' portion. I also shared written handouts with workshop participants that I provide for my students along with a breakdown of the pedagogical values and learning outcomes for the separate phases and overall unit. I will conclude with a narrative description of the pedagogy workshop itself and share some of the discussion that ensued amongst the educators present that day.

First—The Classroom Exercises.

This two-part exercise is the majority part of a larger Object Exercise unit I teach in a first semester Freshman acting class at Marymount Manhattan College for BFA Acting and Musical Theatre students. There are usually 12 sections of this course every autumn of which I often teach one or two. We are given a lot of freedom in how we teach this course as long as we achieve certain learning outcomes as defined by the Theatre Arts Department. Many professors have their students read some or all of Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* and have them prepare and perform the first Object Exercise. Hagen describes this as, "Re-creating behavior which leads to the achievement of a simple objective."[1] As you will see in the lesson breakdown below, my assignment diverges from Hagen's in two major ways: most significantly, unlike Hagen, I insist that my students avoid using any hand props; whereas, Hagen very specifically demands that anyone doing this exercise *not* pantomime:

> Necessary personal objects which you know can't be supplied, like clothing or an iron or a particular dish, pot, glass or book, must be brought by the actor. As a matter of fact,

[1]Hagen, Uta, and Haskel Frankel. *Respect For Acting*. New York: Macmillan, 1973, 89.

> people who know me will recognize anyone studying with me as they approach the Studio, because they are usually lugging so many shopping bags full of props. Since place is crucial, let me remind you that when you examine every aspect of it at home to see what influence it plays on your life, already begin to make considerations for how it can be transferred and constructed elsewhere. Use real objects. These are not pantomime exercises. Avoid any task that will force you to pantomime an activity with an incomplete object (like opening or closing doors when there are no doors to work with). Take what's there and, if necessary, endow it physically and psychologically with what it should be.[2]

Unlike Hagen, I ask students to not only pantomime their use of any physical objects but to take the time to be as exact as possible with said invisible items. I even take a class period before this assignment to begin the practice. Students choose something mundane that they interact with regularly and happened to have brought with them to class that day, such as a piece of makeup, a journal, a clicky pen, something that zips or snaps shut, etc. They then practice using the item in a performance-like setting, put it aside and pantomime its use so they get a sense for the coming exercise. I also ask that they focus on a particular activity rather than just any random two minutes. I find that this helps them make more physically active choices for what they will show the class. I have had too many students in the past demonstrate how they lie in bed checking their phones or sit in a Starbucks working on their laptops.

My choice to focus on pantomime for this exercise happened over time but came about mostly due to frustration watching student actors poorly execute imaginary circumstances on a regular basis. It's simple to be lazy about something that is so easy to target in class, particularly

[2] Hagen and Frankel, 88.

in the first semester. If you are going to pretend to hold a phone, then you might as well give it weight and understand how to dial it. If you are pretending to drink something, then how heavy is the cup? What kind of liquid are you consuming? Did you swallow? If acting is meant to be a performance of truth, then attention to details should matter.

Although movement classes are included in most actor training, basic pantomime is often undertaught if not entirely ignored except in clown training, Commedia or other mask-based work. This is unfortunate. I am hardly an expert on the subject, but I have found that when given even a little bit of attention in the classroom and rehearsal, the specificity of an actor's physical work becomes evident. In the early years of this assignment, I also had enough students forget their necessary props on performance days. Ultimately, pantomime became both the challenge they needed and one less thing to check off a homework packing list. In the words of great physical acting teacher, Jacques LeCoq, I found the expression of my discovery:

> To mime is to literally embody and therefore understand better. A person who handles bricks all day long reaches a point where he no longer knows what he is handling. It has become an automatic part of his physical life. If he is asked to mime the object, he rediscovers the meaning of the object, its weight and volume. This has interesting consequences for our teaching method: miming is a way of rediscovering a thing with renewed freshness. [3]

Thus, below, you will find a description of the assignment the students receive each Fall as our way to spice up Uta Hagen's Object Exercise.

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[3] As quoted in Lecoq, Jacques, Jean-Gabriel Carasso, and Jean-Claude Lallias. *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre*. Translated by David Brandby. London: Methuen, 2000, 22.

Part One:

Personal Object Exercise

You will reenact 2 minutes of your daily life for the class.

You should choose 2 minutes that are mostly taken up by a specific activity. This can be an otherwise mundane activity like applying makeup, shaving or doing your hair. It can be a 'chore' like doing dishes or making a simple meal. The possibilities are endless. It should also be a solitary activity. You should ideally not speak during the performance. It is important that you be specific about when and where this is happening. Use the Uta Hagen Object Exercise questions as a basis for how to ground yourself. Be as specific as possible. You should be doing your activity in a specific place, at a specific time. How you feel and what is going on around you affects the way you do most mundane tasks and should affect the way you do this one.

You should first practice this activity using the physical item(s) that you would actually employ to complete the task. Then you should master performing the task without any of the actual items…. as a 'pantomime.' Make sure you endow the items with their true shape and weight. Remember when you place something on a table. How high is that table? Honor that height. You may use a chair if you need to sit in one **but no other furniture or props**. Everything else should be entirely pantomimed. Be painstakingly specific about your every movement. **Write yourself a script to remember the order of events.** Keep yourself honest about every small move you make.

You should also write out the various components of your two minutes following Uta Hagen's model from *Respect for Acting* to the extent that you can. Answer the following questions:

1. Who am I?
2. What time is it?
3. Where am I?
4. What surrounds me?
5. What are the given circumstances?
6. What is my relationship (to total events, other characters and to things)?
7. What do I want? (Objective)
8. What is in my way? (Obstacle)
9. What do I do to get what I want? (tactics/actions)[4]

My pro tip in all things: when in doubt, always be more specific, not less.

Plan to hand in the answers to these questions and the 'script' for your presentation.

The students are given a week to prepare and then present in front of the class, usually over the course of two class periods, receiving critical feedback. This is usually the first solo

[4] Hagen, 82 (my parentheses).

presentation made so I ask their classmates to take notes to try to identify what tasks they were performing and then comment on both 'what they saw' and 'what worked.' Fellow students get to be the 'good guys' and begin to create a positive and supportive ensemble. I then offer constructive feedback on how the students can be more specific in their work. Sometimes that means honing the specificity of the pantomime (often things that were established get forgotten or sizes are inconsistent) which usually means a need for more focused rehearsal. Alternatively, feedback might be more about honoring the given circumstances such as remembering the time of day the exercise is set, the kind of day it has been, how they slept, how they feel about what is happening next or anything else that often affects how we engage with the otherwise mundane tasks. This often results in the need for more specific answers to the nine questions embedded in the assignment. Students then rehearse for another week and bring the presentations back, generally much improved.

Now, the fun part.

It is at this point where I completely part ways with Uta Hagen and run roughshod with whatever may have been recognizable with the established Object Exercises. At this point, it makes sense to explain how this deviation was first birthed. The inspiration came out of a certain level of desperation.

<u>Second—The Inspiration.</u>

In the fall of 2020, like most of the country, Marymount Manhattan College was entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many of my colleagues, I was trying desperately to

figure out ways to connect with my students and teach acting over Zoom from my bedroom. About a third of my students were actually in dorms in New York City but the rest were spread out across the country and separated from each other. We were all exceedingly isolated and doing the best we could. As a professor who feeds on the energy of my students, it often felt like I was putting 200% of my energy into my computer and getting 50% back. So, here we were, doing Object Exercises in those little Zoom windows, each in our own very isolated spaces, and I had a little fantasy: What if we/they could imagine sneaking into each other's spaces without the occupant knowing it?

An idea was born.

I tasked the students with finding a way to act like they were not in their own rooms but instead in the space of one of their classmates and pretend to steal or clandestinely use something that that person had engaged with during their Object Exercise. I thought this would be a particular challenge since visually they would obviously be in their own spaces. What I didn't account for was how much fun they would have with this assignment or for how playful and adventurous they would become in subsequent performances. What was most amusing was the number of them that found hilarious ways to 'enter' the 'forbidden spaces.' One found a way to drop 'Mission Impossible-style' from above into the screen view. Many of them would pop up from below as if they had crawled into the room, and it was remarkable how easy it was to identify whose room they were in based on the pantomiming of engagement with a particular invisible object 'used' by someone else previously. Making the original assignment a pantomime, I had unintentionally set up the perfect opportunity for a second person to establish the same space via that same imaginary actualization while honoring spatial parameters. It was also hilarious watching people be sneaky and pretend to do something so taboo without the high

stakes. It was unexpectedly delightful that at a time when we were so far apart, we got to pretend for a little while that we weren't. It was a wonderful day in class.

The following Fall when we were back in person, I decided to try what I was now calling the Personal Object Engagement Exercise and see if the magic would still happen. Would it be as much fun? Would it still make us giggle and feel like an unexpected reward for the previous weeks' work?

It absolutely did.

Now that I had established its pedagogical viability, I could start to look at the learning outcomes which were not difficult to parse. I have been teaching this exercise for five years with continued great success and positive feedback.

Part Two:

Personal Object Engagement Exercise

For our next class please plan to act out stealing a specific object from one of your classmates' Personal Object Exercises.

You will need to pretend to sneak into their previously defined space. Find a way to establish that it is their space and then proceed to take something that they either used, utilized or put on. This is meant to be sneaky. You are infiltrating a space that is not yours and taking something that does not belong to you. You need to get in and out without being seen and without getting caught. Be stealthy and try to make it clear what you are taking and where you are taking it from.

Hopefully the class will be able to identify whose exercise you infiltrated and stole from.

Have fun. Be as specific as possible. Don't work with your classmates. That way we can all be surprised by what you chose.

Third—The Learning.

As a teacher of all levels of acting classes, I always pose the question to my students "What did you learn?" at their conclusions. This question usually gets a bevy of different answers depending on the group. More often than not, with the Object Exercises, I hear that they are surprised by how much rehearsal they actually ended up needing in order to give a truly polished and believable performance of these seemingly simple 'scenes.' Here they recreated activities they engage in daily, seemingly by rote. In addition, they often mention some or all of what I have listed below, if not always with this phrasing:

The Learning Outcomes for the Part One of the Personal Object Exercise are as follows:

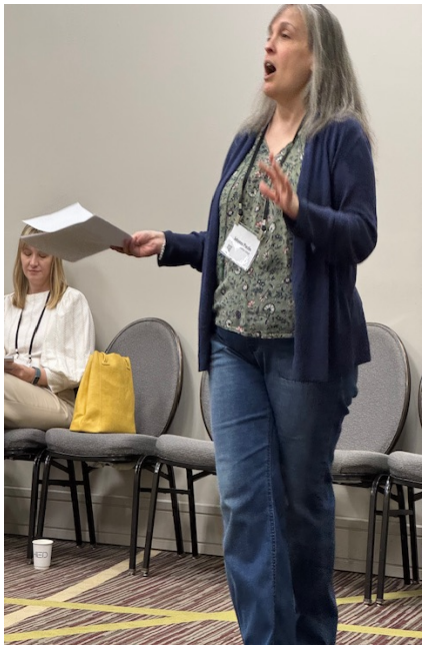
1. Exploration of self-defined given circumstances both physical and emotional
2. Clear introduction to and understanding of objectives
3. Use of imagination in seeing and exploring invisible three-dimensional space
4. Attention to details in both physicality (the pantomime) and minutia (the order and completion of tasks) demanding rehearsal and repetition calling upon such a practice.
5. Getting over nerves of a first performance in front of peers

As you will see below, the outcomes for Part Two build on the first and take a step further by increasing the complexity of what is being asked of the student. The beauty of the exercise is that the students don't realize that their learning is more complex. If anything, they think their job is easier, which I suppose, at least on the surface, it is. They see it as much more fun and sillier, demanding a little less rehearsal. It's a bit like getting to have a decadent dessert after a nutritious meal. They just don't realize that I snuck some metaphorical chia seeds and avocado into their rich chocolate dessert.

The Learning Outcomes for the Part Two of the Personal Object Engagement Exercise are as follows:

1. Exploration of given circumstances as defined by someone else (both the chosen location and the nature of the assignment)
2. Discovery of a clear objective (steal something) AND obstacle (don't get caught)
3. Use of TACTICS
4. Exploration of three-dimensional imaginary space with predefined parameters
5. Heightened storytelling through physicality

This exercise also inspires a post-exercise discussion about why we find watching Part Two so entertaining, how it is unexpectedly funny, and how so often we, as humans, find humor in tension and often amusingly fraught situations. We also often talk about how this step is inevitably much more fun to prepare, watch and engage in than the original Object Exercise. I like to point out that the enjoyment we experience with the second part cannot possibly happen without the work and time invested in the first.



Fourth—The Showing.

At the Mid-America Theatre Conference in Atlanta, GA in March of 2025, I presented a 30-minute workshop in the Pedagogy Symposium wherein I demonstrated my Personal Object Engagement Exercise for a group of 16 participants including a respondent and a facilitator. As part of my presentation, I provided hard copies of the two assignments along with the specific learning outcomes for each. After giving a brief description of the class and unit where these exercises are usually taught my colleague, Dan D. performed a prepared Personal Object Exercise. For his presentation, Dan did a very clearly performed pantomime of entering a space and (rather intricately but quite clearly) preparing coffee in a French press. He did everything up until but not including pressing down the plunger. He entered the space, emptied the grounds into a compost bin, thoroughly cleaned the various parts of the press, boiled water, put fresh grounds into the press, got a mug out of a cabinet, set it on the counter, poured boiling water into the press, put the top on and finally left it to steep. The whole thing took approximately two minutes. When Dan finished his performance, I asked the group (as I would my students) what they saw and what they thought he had done. They immediately identified almost every step of his performance including some shared amusement in the recognition that he had not cleaned the press before needing to use it again.

Once we had established that in a typical class there would have been 10-12 of these exercises, I performed the Object Engagement Exercise as follows: I walked the same entrance

path that Dan had but clearly walking carefully so as to make little to no noise on floor boards while also checking around me to make sure that I was not being seen as I entered 'the space.'I then spotted the fully brewed French press and carefully pushed the plunger all the way down so as to finish the preparation process that Dan had left undone. I then poured the coffee into the mug that Dan had previously set out on the counter, carefully lifted the mug, smelled the sweet ambrosia and started to leave with it. On second thought, I turned back, grabbed the plunged French press with my other hand and stealthily walked out of the space stealing both items. Dan thoughtfully took video of my portion of this performance. I was so rapt watching his part that I neglected to film it.

Really great conversation was had in response to the presentation, particularly around the choice to diverge from the original Hagen by engaging in pantomime and how that change made the creation of the second exercise possible. We also discussed how the pantomime works to add a physical movement aspect that asks the actor to be aware of their body in space and in relation to personal given circumstances, objective and storytelling. This turns out to be an important fundamental building block in early actor training that is sometimes taken for granted. The participants also noted how the original exercise is such a solitary activity and the follow up exercise is one in which the students get to engage with each other and audiences in unexpected ways. It also hones their ability to not only be good actors but also active observers. Their quality feedback is part of the overall experience. Identification of what is happening onstage is part of the fun and challenge and allows for a feeling of accomplishment for both performer and observer. There is also a delightful feeling of being 'in on the joke' once the people begin to identify whose original objects are being burgled. The second exercise allows both for

heightened performance and for the audience to pay attention in a different way than they might have for the initial presentation. Further discussion also raised the possibility that these exercises could end up having a dramaturgical element and an exploration of what Sanford Meisner referred to as the 'reality of doing.'[5] Sometimes Meisner's technique can be a little boring in early training as my students so often lament.

As a student and now a professor of Theatre who focuses on performance, I have utilized many different 'classical' acting training texts, including but not limited to Larry Moss's *Intent to Live*, *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* by Melissa Bruder et al., Declan Donellan's *The Actor and the Target* and Jon Jory's *Tips*. The text I find myself returning to most often is Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting*. Every semester in recent memory, I have assigned (with apologies to Uta) my take on the first of her Ten Object Exercises. It continues to be a great launching pad for actors to focus on the specificity of a simple task and the very basic definitions of given circumstances, objectives and obstacles. Hagen's First Object Exercise is not only about the two minutes of activity that the student actor chooses to rehearse and perform but about answering those nine questions in specific written detail which will ultimately enrich their performances and ideally become a lifelong practice for scene work and full-length theatrical endeavors. By having them pantomime and to hyperfocus on the physicality of their space and their engagement with imagined props, they have engaged in a very specific and intense kind of rehearsal. Tasking them with a genuine attention to detail will ultimately allow for the follow up Personal Object Engagement Exercise which takes advantage of that world building. This approach has also had the unexpected positive outcome of honing their skills as observers and audience members. They

[5]Meisner, Sanford and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner On Acting*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987, 16.

need to first identify which of their classmates' exercises and then, once the performances of Part Two are in full swing, they get to both enjoy the performances and try to determine exactly whose original exercise is being burgled.

Finally, and interestingly, the first part of the Object Exercise takes 2-3 weeks (or 5-6 classes) with everyone performing twice, while the second part takes only one week with all performances taking place in a single class. As a bonus, in recent semesters, the students have challenged both the Teaching Assistant and I to perform Part Two as a finale. In anticipation of this, I've taken to preparing such a performance. As the students remind me every semester, "it really is a lot of fun and who wouldn't want to get in on that?"

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