



Creative Writing 30:

All the World's a Stage

by R. Michael Burns



It's a mighty good thing that I write alone. If anyone were to watch me working for any length of time, they'd probably walk away questioning my sanity. Why? Well, for a number of reasons, really, but foremost among them is my tendency to stop typing, stare into space, and start talking to myself.

Those of you who have spent any time crafting dialogue are probably nodding your heads knowingly.

Let's face it -- sometimes you just need to *hear* that conversation out loud, to listen to its ebb and flow, and get a sense of whether or not actual human beings would ever talk like that. I even sometimes find myself getting up and acting out snippets of verbal exchange, perhaps a few actions as well, to get a feel for it all before I commit it to the page. This no doubt is at least partly because I started acting on stage well before I started writing (I was in my first big production at Colorado College when I was five). Over the years, the skills I learned as an actor have proven invaluable in my work as a writer.

Whether you're a thespian or not, there are some theatrical techniques that could serve you well as a writer. Of particular use are the scene analysis techniques advocated by proponents of the Stanislavsky method.

Stanislavsky was a Russian actor who developed a naturalistic acting technique (method acting) that takes the emphasis off of feigned emotions and focuses on a character's goals and tactics. (These are my own terms, chosen for simplicity and clarity; elsewhere you're likely to find these approaches described using other vocabulary.)

The essence of the Stanislavsky method, as it concerns us as writers, is this: scenes should be understood based on the goals of the characters involved, and the tactics they use to achieve these goals.

At the heart of most memorable stories are characters engaged in some significant conflict. While the most visible conflict may (and usually will) be something *external*, resolving it should require the character(s) to make *internal* changes. In strong storytelling, characters possess some intrinsic quality which makes them uniquely suited to solving whatever problem makes up the story's central conflict -- or which render them uniquely vulnerable to their inevitable failure, as the case may be. (This is as true in an imaginative epic like the Harry Potter series as it is in a much more intimate, character-based drama like *The Great Gatsby*. In both cases, the main characters must struggle with their internal conflicts in order to have any hope of resolving the conflicts going on around them.)

### **Characters Need Specific Goals**

If you're like me, you usually have a rough sketch of your story in mind before you sit down to put it into words. Ask yourself, even before you start writing, just who your main character is and what his or her goal is. (Lesser characters, too, can have goals, which may coincide with the main character's goal, may be tangential, or may

clash with that goal.) The goal may not be apparent to the character at the start of the tale -- after all, goals often arise from circumstances which take shape as the story begins -- but it should be on the horizon where you, the author, can identify it.

What's important here is that the goal be *specific*.

"Live a good life" is a mighty vague goal, and one that doesn't seem to engage the character on a deeply personal level. Any number of people could set this goal. "Win the approval of my estranged father," is much more specific, and it is easier for the audience to see whether or not the protagonist succeeds. A character's goal doesn't need to be grandiose, only significant. It may not be earth-shattering, save-the-world stuff, but for the character involved it's obviously significant. And it is a clear, specific goal. (Indeed, even when it is grandiose, save-the-world stuff, the character needs something more personal to make the goal matter to him and to the audience -- so for example, Frodo must save the world from the evil of the Dark Lord Sauron specifically so that he can save his beloved Shire and his extended family and friends who live there. Frodo is fighting for the whole world, but he's also fighting for the people he loves. Saving the world is personal. By contrast, reuniting with the estranged father may not save the world -- may not have any real impact beyond the family -- but if the audience believes that this is hugely important to the character, and if they like that character, they will care whether or not he succeeds. In any event, personal goals are always easier for an audience to relate to than are massive, abstract goals.)

### **Goals Must Be Fallible**

This might seem a bit obvious, but a character's goal needs to be fallible. If it's guaranteed to succeed, there's no tension, and nothing to engage an audience. Let's imagine our estranged son (we'll call him Junior, for the sake of simplicity and, more importantly, laziness) attempts to win over his father (Dad) by showing off how successful he has become. But the old man takes this as Junior's way of overshadowing Dad's modest lifestyle, and the rift between them grows wider. What's more, Dad has been diagnosed with kidney failure, and there may not be much time left for Junior to work things out between them. Add to that a scheming sister (Sissy) who wants to make sure Junior doesn't get back into dad's good graces, and you have a number of entanglements that make Junior's success a lot less than a given. The stakes are high and the pitfalls numerous.

By contrast, if a character's goal is simply to go to the store and buy a quart of milk, there's likely not much stopping her. (Of course, if the character lives in a war zone or her life is otherwise complicated, then the goal might run a high enough risk of failure to make for a compelling story.)

## **Tactics**

Once you've established the character's goal, the next thing to consider is the tactic or tactics the character will use to achieve that goal. In most cases, the tactics will change a number of times. After all, if the first tactic works, the goal is achieved almost immediately and the story is basically over.

This is where a writer can really get to the heart of a character. Two characters with the same goal might use vastly different tactics to achieve it. The reader will learn a lot about who the characters are by the tactics they're willing to use.

Consider a story about a missing child. A suspect has been arrested, but refuses to say where the child is. The story might feature a number of characters who all have the same goal: *to get vital information from the suspect*. But the characters would likely use very different tactics. One character might try persuasion, promises. Another might try threats, even actual violence. Another might plead, appeal to the suspect's humanity. And any one character might use any combination of these tactics.

What's vital is that the tactics fit the given circumstances -- the imprisoned suspect, the missing child, and whatever else might affect the scene -- and that the tactics reflect the character using them. The prison's priest, for example, might appeal to the suspect's humanity, his conscience, but probably wouldn't resort to physical threats. On the other hand, if the priest *did* threaten physical harm, it would tell us a lot about this character -- and something we probably didn't expect.

### **Through-lines, Beats, and Caps**

The character's main goal in a story is the *through-line*, the thing that ties the whole tale together. Within each scene, a character may have other goals, little things they must accomplish to achieve the main goal. And within each scene, the tactics a character uses to accomplish these goals may change a number of times. Each shift in tactics marks one *beat*, theatrically speaking. The beat changes when some new reality intrudes to force the character to shift tactics. This could be a big thing (the priest

threatens the suspect, the police officer rushes in to stop him), or it could be a small thing (the priest catches on to the fact that the guy wants to be beaten, hoping it will give him grounds for legal action, so the good father has to change his bellicose approach for tactics that don't play into the suspect's plans). Subtle or obvious, the new circumstance, whatever it is, inspires new tactics and shifts the beat.

Let's revisit Junior, Dad and Sissy. In this scene, Junior is trying to convince Sissy that he's not simply after Dad's money. Accomplishing this will resolve the scene and, hopefully, take Junior one step closer to patching things up with Dad.

"Ten years you wouldn't even talk to Dad," Sissy said, shaking her head. "Now suddenly you're itching to make amends. Right when he gets sick."

Junior bit his lip, let it go. "You really think I'm just in this to worm my way back into Dad's will? That's nonsense and you know it."

"Is it?" Her tone had a stony chill to it.

"Think about it. What's Dad worth? By the time funeral expenses are covered, outstanding debt, whatever goes to you and the kids, what's gonna be left for me? Anyway, I'm doing just fine, thanks. I don't need Dad's money."

"So you say," Sissy responded, turning to the sink full of dishes, her back to him now.

"When I heard about the. . . When I heard Dad was sick, it just, it put things in a new light, okay? Made me realize how stupid this thing

between us is, this feud, whatever you want to call it. I just don't want things to end this way between us."

Sissy sighed. She slipped a plate into the drying rack beside the sink and turned back to face him. "Okay," she said, not quite meeting his gaze. "I'll talk to Dad for you."

At first, Junior's tactic is to dismiss Sissy's accusation, but her stony reception compels a different approach. He then tries reason, but her physical response (turning her back on him) makes it clear that he's pushing her further away, not winning her over. Finally, he opts for an emotional appeal. All three tactics have the same goal, but each one shifts the beat of the scene ever-so-slightly, in response to small but significant changes in the reality of the scene.

At the end of the scene comes what's known as the *cap*, the moment at which it becomes clear whether or not Junior has achieved his goal. In this case, he has. Sissy has backed off of her accusations and agreed to help Junior out. Junior's goal, "convincing Sis to help me reconcile with dad," has been accomplished. Sissy's physical actions -- turning her back on Junior, then turning to face him but failing to look him in the eyes -- contribute almost as much as what she says to telling the audience how well Junior's tactics are working.

Now look again at this scene, and you may notice that perhaps Sissy, too, has a goal here, and tactics of her own. Perhaps her goal is "to discover Junior's real motives." By challenging and denying him, she tests him, and at the end of the scene, she too has achieved her goal. The cap is now firmly on the scene.

## **Another Sort of Tension**

Another way to achieve tension in a scene is to give multiple characters the same goal, even a collective goal, but to have them disagree about the best tactic for achieving this goal.

In my hopefully-to-be-published-one-of-these-days novel *Windwalkers*, a number of people trapped in a church during a freak blizzard are struggling to survive a supernatural onslaught. Their goal, "to survive the night," is a common one, but much of the tension comes from disputes among them as to how best to accomplish this fundamental goal. Some want to hide, some want to run, some want to fight. Each character develops the lesser goal of convincing the others of agreeing to his or her plan. So even here, where the goal is one the characters share, tension arises from goals and tactics.

## **Story and Structure**

One nice thing about using these theatrical techniques in writing is that having them in mind helps keep a piece focused on the characters, and keeps them active. Story is all about characters in conflict, and by employing these techniques you can't possibly neglect those two vital aspects. This isn't to say that writers ought to avoid passages of backstory or description -- both of those things flesh out a tale and help to create the given circumstances which shape the characters, their goals, and their tactics. But ultimately the characters themselves must step up and own the tales we tell.

Another benefit of using this technique is that it helps structure a story. Not sure when to end a scene? Look for the cap. When the cap is on, the scene is over. Anything much beyond that moment will probably drag, because the tension has been relieved.

### **Emotional Truths and "As Ifs" . . .**

Method acting is about honesty, specifically about the emotional reality of a scene rising not from some necessity to emote, but from the situational reality of the characters' goals and tactics. In each of the scenes described above, the emotional undercurrents come from the goals and the *stakes* of the scene, and manifest themselves in the tactics. For Junior and Sissy in the scene above, what's at *stake* is their family. So Sissy's turning her back on Junior is both a tactic and a believable emotional response to the gravity of the scene.

Actors use an "as if" statement to help them relate to a character's emotional state in an honest way, and writers can employ the same technique. Often the tales we tell come from genuine personal experience, and therefore the emotional connection is immediate. But at least as often, we find ourselves putting characters in situations we've never been in ourselves. That's where the "as if" comes in so handy. Returning to my snowbound characters in *Windwalkers*: I've never been in besieged by monstrous supernatural beasts, but I have been in a few situations where I was pretty concerned about my own safety. So I look at my main character, Nick Bookman, and ask myself what his situation is like to me. It's *as if* I were rock climbing and found myself in a place where I wasn't sure I could go up or down, and where a single false step would probably result in serious injury or a nasty death. That's a situation I can relate to, and it

seems to fit Nick's circumstances well. Trapped, with only a glimmer of hope, and the certainty that the wrong action will be catastrophic. This helps me find Nick's emotional center and also drives home the *stakes* of his reality for me. Now when I write how he acts, I can believe more confidently that his actions are honestly manifesting both his goals and his emotional state. The emotion isn't arbitrary or imposed for effect; it arises naturally out of the situation.

### **Parting Advice**

Having put all this on the table before you, I now humbly suggest you forget it. Or rather, put it in the back of your mind. It's my belief that good writing develops organically. Work too hard to fit your stories into a mold or pattern -- even a good one -- and you're apt to produce stuff that's rigid and artificial.

My advice -- which I sometimes even manage to take myself -- is to write that first draft naked and dirty, letting the characters and events fall out as they may. Then, when you do the rewrite, look at it with these considerations in mind. Odds are the goals and tactics are mostly there. Your task on the second draft is to clarify them, heighten the tension, and edit each scene to its essential beats. In this sense, you can think of writing as sculpting. In the first draft, you carve the rough shape from the hard stone. In the second, you chip away the excess and add the details that make the figure the Adonis-like beauty you always had in mind. You're apt to have problems if you try to impose the finished form on the first draft. Let your story take shape, then use these techniques to perfect it.

And never be too shy to get up and act things out. Sure the kids and neighbors may think you're a bit nuts, but they've probably already reached that conclusion. And if you're a writer, they're probably not far wrong.

Write on, my friends.