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A screen actor prepares: Self-taping by reversing Stanislavsky's Method of Physical Actions

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ABSTRACT



The popularity of streaming services, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforced the understanding that screen acting skills should be prioritized, prompting a reimagining of Stanislavsky's practices to address the needs of the contemporary actor and acting graduate. Screen actors are expected to self-tape using digital technologies to showcase their acting skills independently. This indicates a growing demand for self-reflective abilities on what works or doesn't work in recorded performances. Aspiring to develop lifelong learning screen actors, this essay argues that Konstantin Stanislavsky's Method of Physical Actions can be reversed for generating findings from acclaimed screen performances to use in self-taping. The reverse Method of Physical Actions proposes that physical scores are artefacts that can be objectively broken down into psycho-physical gestures and character behaviours that can be appropriated for self-taping etudes, and analysed when reflecting on self-tapes, fostering an ongoing embodied understanding of how acting choices work on screen. The breakdown and examination of two scenes portraying Helen Mirren in *The Queen* (2006) and Viola Davis in *Fences* (2016) illustrate how the Method of Physical Actions can be rediscovered for do-it-yourself screen acting. This essay helps actors, students and actor trainers to understand how acclaimed actors create outstanding screen performances.

Keywords

Stanislavsky; actor training; screen acting; self-tape; Method of Physical Actions; reflective skills; lifelong learning; Helen Mirren; Viola Davis

Introduction: putting screen acting skills at the centre

Writing from the perspective of a Greek woman who has taught Stanislavsky-informed acting at UK universities and conservatoires for more than a decade – following twenty years of international acting and directing experience across stage and screen – this essay sits among efforts to appropriate Stanislavskian practice and terminology to accommodate contemporary actors. Even though it is a decade old that “screen acting has taken a dominant place in the working life of the professional actor at the beginning of the 21st century,”¹ Stanislavsky actor training primarily caters for the theatre, often at a paradoxical percentage of “80 to 90%”² when contrasted to screen. In the words of actor and actor trainer Graeme Hawley:

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For the majority of drama students coming out of drama schools today, the first job they do will be a television job, the second job they do will be a television job, and the third job they do will be a television job! They'll do one play a year for the first five years, if they're lucky.³

The popularity of streaming services, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforced the understanding that screen acting skills are crucial for sustaining an acting career, especially for actors from underprivileged economic backgrounds, who cannot survive on scarce and, often, low-paid theatre jobs. This prompts a reimagining of Stanislavsky's practices, including the Method of Physical Actions, for the employability of the contemporary actor and acting graduate.

In response to the growing needs of the actors and the industry, actor training programmes endeavour to create "new syllabuses to prepare actors for the specific challenges of television [and other screen] acting."⁴ Key books used in actor training, such as Patrick Tucker's,⁵ Mel Churcher's,⁶ and Bill Britten's,⁷ draw direct links between skills taught and skills that help actors get jobs, such as applying Stanislavsky techniques to screen acting (for example, character development, improvisation and script analysis); acting to the camera and microphone instead of an audience; preparing for castings and filming, and; working on location and with the crew. Testimonies from the field stress the importance of exposure to the filming process. Hawley said:

[T]he only way to be comfortable in front of a camera is to be in front of a camera . . . it's to do with experience . . . That's the great thing about soap opera as a training ground. You stand in front of a camera every day and then in two weeks, because of the turnaround, you can watch it and see what worked and what didn't.⁸

Hawley's testimony encapsulates why screen acting is particularly intimidating for acting graduates that usually have minimal experience. But it also suggests that watching back recorded performances and reflecting on them makes better actors.

Even before the popularity of self-taping as a casting process, actors were advised to record themselves and watch back "objectively," especially when "trying to solve something in particular,"⁹ and even use their smartphones for such purposes.¹⁰ Such prompts suggest reflecting on what works or doesn't work concerning screen acting and applying the new findings to a new screen acting artefact. Alongside reflecting on their own recorded performances, actors have been previously pointed towards "great performances,"¹¹ and "brave choices" of famous screen actors.¹² This implies that with a similar process to the one when they reflect on their own performance, they can learn from the choices manifested in other actors' performances.

Student actors have been traditionally advised to borrow acting choices from acclaimed actors, such as John Wayne who had "a habit of having a rising inflection at the end of a thought," described as "the John Wayne technique."¹³ Such inflection choices suggest a conscious individualized acting technique rather than just a habit of speech because, in Wayne's words, he aimed for "a longer shot of my [his] face."¹⁴ Such techniques that keep the attention of the viewer, which might be the editor or director in Wayne's case and a casting director or talent agent in the job-seeker's, can be adopted by the actor and explored during self-taping.

Self-taping is a term used in the mainstream acting industry to describe the self-recording of short monologues and scenes, which are sent to agents and casting directors to get jobs. The process of an actor independently producing, storing and disseminating

self-tapes online is taken for granted given the broad use of smartphones that allow individuals to create and edit homemade videos and upload them to platforms that make them accessible to industry professionals. Any screen acting syllabus should therefore include self-taping methods, especially because self-tapes manifest the student's acting skills directly to industry professionals that can hire them.

The first part of this essay discusses how my screen acting teaching between 2017 and 2022 prompted reversing the Method of Physical Actions for self-taping. To systematize reflection and learning from recorded performances, I offer a diagram that invites the Stanislavsky-trained practitioners to visualize the process. The second part of the essay positions the technique among efforts of practitioners-scholars that investigate screen acting. The third part of the essay breaks down two award-winning screen performances – extracts from Helen Mirren in *The Queen* (2006) and Viola Davis in *Fences* (2016) — to illustrate how the methodology can be applied to extrapolate acting choices that stand out, for later use in self-taping.

Reversing the Method of Physical Actions for screen acting

The Method of Physical Actions is a key Stanislavsky methodology used in contemporary actor training. It is often confused with Active Analysis, which has similarities but is also distinct in its application in the acting studio.¹⁵ I choose the Method of Physical Actions as I understand it from Stanislavsky's description below, and because it is generally understood as prioritizing “the actor's physical movement” rather than “the inner motivations of the actor.”¹⁶ Such priority is useful when analysing acting choices from performances because the actor's physical movement choices, and all visible behaviours, are clearly manifested and observed, whereas their inner motivations are assumed.

Stanislavsky described the Method of Physical Actions as:

a new approach to the role that involves reading the play today, and tomorrow rehearsing it on stage. . . Everyone can act this, guided by their own life experience. So, let them act. And so, we break the whole play, episode by episode, into physical actions. When this is done exactly, correctly, that it feels true and it inspires our belief in what is happening on stage, then we can say that the line of the life of the human body has been created. . .¹⁷

The key elements of the Method of Physical Actions can be understood from Stanislavsky's rehearsal room, where “[a]ctors analysed the events and investigated the psycho-physical behaviour of the characters on stage, in action.”¹⁸ By psycho-physical, Sonia Moore means that “[i]nstead of forcing an emotion before going on stage, the actor fulfils a simple, concrete, purposeful physical action which stirs the psychological side of the psycho-physical act, thus achieving psycho-physical involvement.”¹⁹ To achieve this, “before and after physical action, the student must use gestures of the body in order to project mental processes, such as thoughts, feelings, decisions, evaluations, attitudes.”²⁰ Even though the use of “physical action” and “gesture of the body” in the above quote might be limiting, as Joelle Ré Arp-Dunham discussed in more recent research,²¹ it helps with bringing the actor's choices concerning how they manifest physical actions to the forefront.

I trained in the Method of Physical Actions at drama school, and later as a professional actor with Nikolay Karpov, Tamilla Kulieva and Stathis Livathinos from the Russian

Institute of Theatre Arts (GITIS). I have used the Method of Physical Actions to construct a performance score in etudes. An etude is an improvisation enacting the given circumstances and units of a play, sometimes for the purposes of performance but also as a rehearsal process “purely for the actors to understand something for themselves.”²² The etudes have supported me to discover on my feet what I would do in a scene if I were the character, and often triggered me to imagine actions and manifest gestures and behaviours that weren’t clearly implied in the text, but highlighted the play in complementary and individualized ways. Later training in Sanford Meisner’s and Lee Strasberg’s methods did not contradict my use of the Method of Physical Actions but enriched it. Among approaches, the Method of Physical Actions was my first acting process, practice and vocabulary, and any consequent actor training that I received was scaffolded on it. As an actor trainer, the Method of Physical Actions is the basic technique that I teach for text-based acting, inviting students to improvise scenes and monologues, first in silence and then in their own words gradually adopting the text, looking for appropriate and meaningful physical scores for characters that move the actors.

There has been less exploration of how the Method of Physical Actions works for screen actor training, compared to stage. The idea that reversing it can support screen actors came from my desire to give nuanced feedback to acting students and advise them on how to improve their self-taping. In 2017, as the newly appointed course leader of the new BA (Hons) Acting at the University of Chichester, I was tasked to squeeze Stanislavskian training for stage acting into forty hours spread out throughout the first year of study, and screen acting in twenty hours during the first semester of the second year, at the end of which the students were expected to be able to submit self-tapes of industry standards. I considered what would be the basic acting learning that an undergraduate acting student needed. So, the first years were trained in stage acting for forty hours, involving improvisation-led monologue and scene study that drew primarily on the Method of Physical Actions, but also Uta Hagen’s Object Exercises, and an Actioning workshop. In the second year, they trained on screen acting training, combining camera exercises with a focus on frame, eyeline, and voice projection, with mock castings that invited the use of recently taught Method and Meisner tools. At the end of the screen acting class, the students received guidance on how to self-tape using their smartphone, laptop or other available recording devices, and were invited to create a self-tape of a monologue of their choice.

At the end of my class, the students submitted the self-tape as an assessment, for which they received feedback that prompted them to keep developing their self-taping skills and suggested how to keep improving through self-taping. The standalone university feedback had two components: to justify the classification of the artefact against set assessment criteria and to identify areas for development with advice for improvement. To exploit such a mechanism to prompt the student’s lifelong learning, the feedback highlighted possible, or desirable, manifestations of taught techniques, as applied during self-taping. Examples of validating feedback included phrases such as “there is evidence of complex and nuanced inner monologue,” and “you used appropriate eyelines, moved within the frame and projected to your collar, as appropriate in film acting.” Advice for improvement read

along the lines of “to create a compelling emotional arc, commit to the Method of Physical Actions,” or “to improve your spontaneity, commit to Meisner’s repetition exercise.”

Most of the self-tapes showcased acting to professional standards, as inarguably corroborated by invitations to castings for prestigious roles such as Diana in the series *The Crown* and everyone in the class getting a talent agent before graduation. But the expectation for identifying areas for development resonated with a key frustration around industry casting processes, which is who stands out among professional actors. I would feedback with “take greater risks with your performance;” “You are very natural in front of the camera but need to work on standing out;” “Watch screen works and try to deconstruct exceptional performances: is it the movement, the eyeline, the transition or the inner monologue that make them exceptional?,” and; “You can aim for even more outstanding performances. Watch screen drama considering ‘What makes a great performance stand out.’ What kinds of movement, facial gestures and self-reflective moments outside of the scene partner’s eyeline engage the viewer’s interest?” Without making specific suggestions about how each student could produce an outstanding performance, I encouraged each student to develop their acting skills through committed analysis of acting artefacts as a way of informing their future performances.

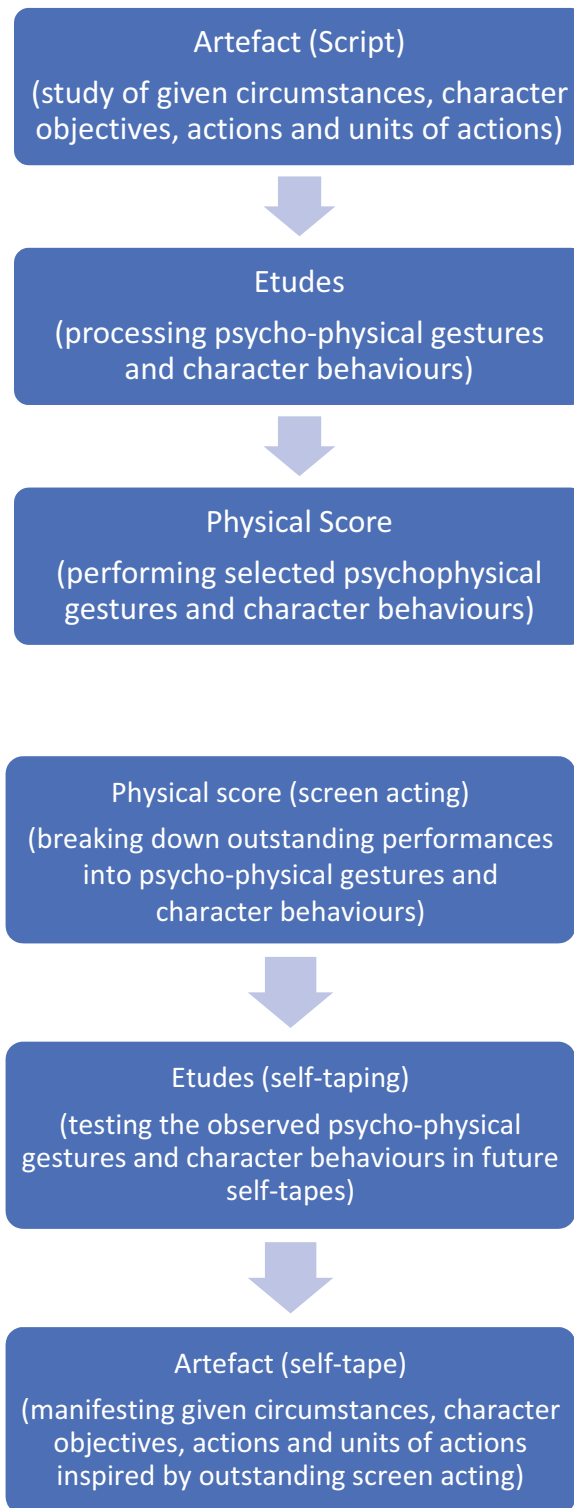
My feedback echoed Mark Evans’s observation in his investigation of how the emphasis of Lecoq’ training on gesture and use of space resonated with successful screen acting choices.²³ Evans wrote:

Although film acting is more commonly associated with psychological realism than physical expression, there are few successful film actors who do not have a strong physical presence on screen and an ability to express meaning powerfully through gesture and movement.²⁴

Even though Evans’s observation derived from his Lecoq training and focus, it resonated with my feedback concerning Stanislavsky in prioritizing the physical score as a signifier of outstanding screen acting. This helps with identifying a gap concerning how actors are trained to analyse acting, across training traditions and independently to any scripts or techniques used, aiming for the improvement of their acting skills. Actor training can proliferate from a conscious use of an observation-based vocabulary, that supports actors to recognize the components of a physical score, such as movement, facial gestures and self-reflective moments, on screen and the mechanism of putting them together to signify character behaviours.

I argue that the reverse Method of Physical Actions can work as an observation-based method for the lifelong development of screen acting skills. A typical version of the Method of Physical Actions implies that the actor first studies an artefact, which is a play or screenplay, and identifies the given circumstances, character objectives, action and units; then improvises character behaviours that resonate with the script and themselves in the testing ground of etudes, and; eventually solidifies acting choices and bodily gestures in a physical score that is manifested in a different artefact than the script, which might be a stage or screen performance.

If a typical Method of Physical Actions process is illustrated like this:



Then the reverse Method of Physical Actions becomes:

Therefore, a reverse Method of Physical Actions starts with the actor breaking down an outstanding screen acting performance into identifiable memorable acting choices and psycho-physical gestures that are manifested in the physical score of the artefact; continues with the actor improvising and individualizing those acting choices that resonate with an audition script and themselves in the testing ground of self-taping etudes, which includes reflection on takes, and; eventually the actor reinforces individualized and inspired acting choices and psycho-physical gestures in a physical score that is manifested in a different artefact than the screen performance, namely the actor's final self-tape that is submitted for a casting.

This section illustrated that actors with basic training in the Method of Physical Actions can reverse the technique to analyse screen acting and use this knowledge to inform their individualized acting processes and produced artefacts. A gap was identified in studying how such learning works and how it can be put into words. Before applying the reverse Method of Physical Actions to screen performances to offer examples of its use, the following section situates the technique among other efforts of practitioners-scholars to analyse screen acting in a way that is technically useful for the actor. It highlights the field's need for a rigorous framework for practical use.

Positioning the reverse Method of Physical Actions among similar efforts

Even though broadly assumed in professional and training contexts, there has been little focus on how actors learn from watching outstanding screen acting performances, or even how their reception changes after their training. Similarly to how Evans interviewed Lecoq-trained actors as a methodological approach to deconstructing screen acting, Tom Cantrell and Christopher Hogg interviewed acclaimed and highly experienced actors, illustrating highly individualized approaches but also similarities in how Stanislavsky-trained actors approached scripts and characters and exploited improvisation.²⁵

Drawing on Stanislavsky's "objectives" and "given circumstances" as a framework for deconstructing screen performances, the actor and actor trainer Trevor Rawlins analysed North American actor Neve Campbell's acting choices in a scene from the television drama series, *Burn Up* (Global Television/BBC 2008). Rawlins suggested that "the obvious choice" for the delivery of Campbell's line "Mack, isn't it? I'm Holly Dernay" was to "use the question, 'Mack, isn't it?' to gain Mack's attention as he is not looking at her and then to use the second sentence, 'I'm Holly Dernay,' to introduce herself, perhaps with an extended hand."²⁶ Then he described and analysed what the actor did, which was contrary to his expectations. Rawlins wrote:

Campbell chooses to run both sentences together which risks losing the sense of what is being said and is therefore technically an "incorrect" stress choice. There is a slight pause after "Mack," which may fulfil the function of gaining his attention, but the rest of the line is said as one. There is a rising inflection at the end of the line much as if it were a question.²⁷

His deconstruction of the actor's choices identified and described three vocal gestures that made this performance memorable and worthy of analysis: the running of "both sentences together"; the "slight pause after "Mack"" which is the first word of the sentence, and; "a rising inflection at the end of the line much as if it were a question." Even though aimed to identify differences in how British and American actors acted on

screen, such differences were examined and described through the actors' psycho-physical score, which resonates with the Method of Physical Actions.

Rawlins's breaking down of screen acting relied on his previous training, which is illustrated by his judgement about what made an "obvious choice" concerning text delivery. When the East-15-trained Rawlins compared American actors to British actors, he concluded from similar acting choices like the above that American actors challenged "traditional ideas of 'correct' and 'incorrect' stressing."²⁸ This indicates that Rawlins' previous training worked as the framework that assessed Campbell's text delivery against a correct/incorrect binary. It also suggests that certain aspects of voice training traditions used in British conservatoires might embed specific ways of approaching stressing and line delivery that signify student competence but also work against "standing out."

A viewpoint that transcends binaries about correct/incorrect acting choices and resonates with how the Method of Physical Actions can deconstruct individualized screen acting processes is illustrated in Sharon Marie Carnicke's "analysis of acting on screen as an observable series of physical and vocal gestures" that the actor is doing to represent the character.²⁹ Such an approach prioritizes "the actors' labour and agency."³⁰ The traces of the reverse Method of Physical Actions can also be identified in Cynthia Baron's and Carnicke's *Reframing Screen Performance*, even though the book concerns audience reception rather than actor training.

In the chapter "Stanislavsky: Player's actions as a window to characters' interactions," Baron and Carnicke use "terms from script analysis to describe the fictional interaction made visible by the actors' performances."³¹ Script analysis's terms to consider include "the given circumstances" and "each character's *objectives*,"³² which Rawlins also identified as important. They also include "the targeted *actions* or *counteractions*" and "the *units of action* or *beats*,"³³ which imply training on Active Analysis and the Method of Physical Actions. Baron and Carnicke suggest that the screen acting analysis can build on such script analysis, with a particular focus on:

Each unit of action, to see which character/actor initiates the action and which one resists.

How units of action are colored by the goal-directed tactics used by the actors in the scene.

How a change in the quality of an actor's expressions, gestures, and movements conveys a change in the character's intended action or counteraction or a shift in tactic.³⁴

An example of using such an approach to learn from screen performance can be extrapolated from Carnicke's analysis of John Wayne's acting in *The Searchers* (1956). Even though Carnicke's scope was different to actor training, her discussion of the physical score as something that the actor does to portray the character is beneficial for the actor's learning. The below extract illustrates a physical sequence from the scene which can be adopted by actor training as an exemplar to document the deconstruction of any screen performance:

- (1) There is tension in his lips as he turns his head away from the canyon to answer his two optimistic young companions with the scepticism of a man who has experienced such circumstances before. "I'll take a look," he says.³⁵

When she later discusses an acting segment that stood out for her as a “vocally rich performance,” Carnicke identified certain vocal gestures that are useful for the actor’s learning. She wrote:

He [Wayne] uses his eccentric pausing when he says, “I wrapped her in my [pause] coat buried her with my own hands through it best [pause] to keep it from you.” The sentence runs on without stop except for the two oddly placed breaths. This rhythm suggests the difficulty with which Edward speaks the truth.³⁶

Here Carnicke identified the John Wayne technique, which I previously discussed from Tucker’s screen actor training book. But she considered the John Wayne technique only as part of a bigger psycho-physical gesture, which also involved a quick rhythm line delivery to project the action of hesitantly speaking the truth. Such a sequence can be adopted from the actor and experimented with during self-taping for a role that hesitantly speaks the truth.

Writing from the perspective of an actor who is familiar with the Method of Physical Actions, Carnicke reflects on how specific memorable vocal gestures prompt “the psychological side of the psycho-physical act, thus achieving psycho-physical involvement.”³⁷ To put it in reverse, the Method-of-Physical-Actions-trained actor is drawn to certain gestures because of the observed psycho-physical involvement. And because the core of the Method of Physical Actions is that “before and after physical action, the student must use gestures of the body in order to project mental processes, such as thoughts, feelings, decisions, evaluations, attitudes,”³⁸ the actor is inspired to adopt observed acting choices to inform future physical scores and explore how such psycho-physical gestures work for them during self-taping, in individualized ways rather than copying screen performance.

The reverse Method of Physical Actions can be applied independently and irrespectively to the process of the screen actor that is being observed, which can be illustrated through Campbell’s previously discussed screen acting performance in *Burn Up*, with a focus on her line “Mack, isn’t it? I’m Holly Dernay.” Campbell’s “slight pause after “Mack””³⁹ manifests the action of engaging or interrupting and; the running of “both sentences together” and using a “rising inflection at the end of the line much as if it were a question”⁴⁰ manifest the action of rushing or dismissing Mack. If an actor finds these choices memorable, they can explore them in a self-tape that requires actions such as interrupting and dismissing, standalone or as a sequence.

This section highlighted in the screen acting analyses of Rawlins and Carnicke that they, unconsciously and to a different extent, involved critical frameworks that resonate with the Method of Physical Actions. To systematize the use of the reverse Method of Physical Actions as a rigorous framework for the contemporary screen actor, the following section documents the physical score of two scenes, extrapolating individualized techniques of Helen Mirren and Viola Davis that can be exploited for self-taping at home.

Self-taping techniques inspired by Helen Mirren and Viola Davis

Mirren’s acting process is influenced by her training with the Royal Shakespeare Company and her work with Peter Brook. Davis received more formal training at one

of the most prestigious US conservatoires, The Juilliard School. The choice of a British and an American actor, one trained on the job and the other at drama school, helps us observe how the reverse Method of Physical Actions works for screen acting that draws on different acting and actor training traditions and varies in its proximity to Stanislavsky processes and concepts. I break down the physical score of Mirren in a telephone scene from *The Queen*, which won her an Oscar,⁴¹ and the physical score of Davis in a confrontation scene from *Fences*, which won her an Oscar.⁴² I find both performances outstanding, by which I mean an experience of being moved and inspired at the same time. Readers are invited to use the reverse Method of Physical Actions to inform self-taping processes, inspired by how I extrapolate techniques from Mirren and Davis. Most crucially, actors and actor trainers are invited to adopt or be inspired by the methodology and create do-it-yourself pedagogies for extrapolating, improvising and individualizing acting techniques from outstanding screen acting.

The extract that is discussed from *The Queen* portrays a telephone conversation between the Queen, performed by Mirren, and Prime Minister Tony Blair, portrayed by Michael Sheen.⁴³ Because the death of Princess Diana caused unprecedented public grief, Blair calls the Queen and urges her to make a public statement that recognizes and addresses such grief. The Queen states that private mourning is a priority for the Royal Family, rejecting Blair's request to fuel press coverage with a public statement. Here is a breakdown of Mirren's physical score in the scene:

- (1) Mirren walks to her desk holding a pen, which she taps on the desk before picking up the phone, saying "Prime Minister" with a rising inflection as if this was a question.
- (2) In response to Blair mentioning the day's papers, Mirren looks at the newspaper *The Sun* which is already on the desk with a photo of the Queen on the front cover and an article titled: "Show us there's a heart in the house of Windsor." While pulling the paper towards her, she says "We've managed to look at one or two [papers], yes."
- (3) When Blair requests a response, she grabs the pen and fidgets with it, then puts him on speaker, and while cleaning her glasses with her cardigan says "No. I believe a few over-eager editors are doing their best to sell newspapers. It would be a mistake to dance to their tune." As her eyeline moves from the low position of her hands that clean her glasses, which covers her eyes from the camera, to a position at the same level as the camera, we see an inner monologue that balances and rebukes Blair. She finishes cleaning the glasses and puts them back on.
- (4) As Blair insists on his request for a response, and particularly when he mentions that the public "mood is quite delicate," she turns away from the camera and towards her left to meet her husband's eyes in fury.
- (5) Then she turns her attention back to the pens on her desk while articulating "So, what would you suggest, Prime Minister? Some kind of a statement?" with an emphasis on "statement." As she looks at the pens, her eyes are not visible but her quick and high-pitched vocal delivery suggests that she tries to control her anger.

As she encourages the Prime Minister to make his request more specific, she arranges the pens on her desk in a line.

- (6) When Blair clarifies that he suggests “flying the flag at half-mast above Buckingham Palace,” she interrupts her dealing with pens and looks at her husband again before looking down and tapping her hand on the table twice.
- (7) As Blair asks her to return to London to help “people with their grief,” she corrects him by picking up the phone abruptly, articulating “Their grief?” with an emphasis on “their.” Then, in stillness and with eyes at the level of the camera, she balances Blair while saying “If you imagine I’m going to drop everything and come down to London before I attend to my grandchildren who’ve lost their mother [pause] then you are mistaken.” The pause is initiated with a short breath after the word “mother” and the suppressed emotion implied at this moment helps her transition to a stronger action such as cautioning or even censoring Blair when saying in a low breathy tone “you are mistaken.”
- (8) She patronizes Blair in stillness while saying in a calm voice “I doubt there is anyone who knows the British people more than I do, Mr Blair, nor who has greater faith in their wisdom and judgement.”
- (9) She defies Blair in stillness while saying “And it is my belief that they will, at any moment, reject this [pause] this mood [with emphasis], which is being stirred up by the press in favour of a period of restrained grief and sober, private mourning. That’s the way we do things in this country, quietly, with dignity. It’s what the rest of the world admires us for.” During the pause she looks to her right and makes facial expressions as if to find the right word for the public’s behaviour, eventually articulating “mood” with an emphasis that mocks Blair. After raising her voice to denounce the media while saying “which is being stirred up by the press,” she returns to stillness for the rest of the line.
- (10) Accepting her rejection, Blair says “let’s keep in touch.” Mirren resolves the scene by responding “Yes, let’s” in a stern tone while slightly moving her head right to left, both of which suggest challenging Blair. She hangs up the phone.

From Mirren’s many acting choices in the above physical score, the actor may wish to explore self-taping using physical behaviours that suggest “a playable choice” rather than decisions concerning “vocal inflection or facial expression.”⁴⁴ Playable acting choices include how she used her surroundings, including props, such as the pen, and costumes, such as the glasses and cardigan, and even her bystander husband, within indirect actions that stirred her psycho-physical involvement. She started cleaning the glasses after glancing at *The Sun*, an activity that was justifiable because she might have noticed a stain, and at the same time distracted her from the uncomfortable conversation with Blair. Turning towards her husband the first time showed frustration in response to Blair’s persistence and manifested the Queen’s annoyance. To control her anger, she looked down at the pens and arranged them, finding a believable excuse to hide her eyeline from the camera, as if the camera was Blair. When Blair made his request more explicit, she dropped her activity with the pens and turned suddenly for a second time towards her husband. Such acting choices clearly illustrated that the Queen’s boundaries were crossed, highlighting a transition

opportunity that prepared Mirren for resolving the phone call and scene with her stern rejection of Blair's request.

Inspired by Mirren, in self-taping etudes, the actor can explore different costume choices and props/surroundings that would resonate with the script and would offer opportunities to act and transition through costume and props. If the script does not involve a bystander, but implies the presence, or discussion about, a family member, the actor can improvise with a photo frame for their transitions, inspired by how Mirren used the bystander actor above. The most useful technique extrapolated from the above scene is to start a negotiation scene with acting choices that resonate with what has been described as "an *indirect* approach" that distracts from "the real objective beneath some other activity,"⁴⁵ which is what Mirren did with the glasses, pens and bystander. Such behaviours differ from the typical "*direct* action(ing) such as persuading, demanding, cajoling, begging, and so on,"⁴⁶ which is what Mirren did to resolve the scene. A gradual build-up and successful shift from indirect to direct actions would manifest outstanding acting in a self-tape.

The second outstanding screen acting performance that is analysed here is from *Fences*. The scene portrays Rose, played by Davis, confronting her husband, Troy, portrayed by Denzel Washington. Following the revelation that he fathers a child outside of their marriage, Troy expects his wife of eighteen years, Rose, to accept his second family and even follows her outside of the house to persuade her, where he finds her hanging on the garden's fence to collect herself. He uses baseball metaphors to excuse his attitude, which frustrates and infuriates Rose, who exposes and humiliates Troy while regretting that she tolerated his behaviour for eighteen years. Here is a breakdown of Davis's physical score in the scene:

- (1) As Troy develops his baseball metaphor in a loud monologue to excuse his infidelity, Davis, avoiding eye contact, shakes her head, followed by subtly transferring her body weight left to right, whispering under her breath "You should have stayed in my bed, Troy." Even though the text suggests dismissing Troy's excuses, Davis's sequence of gestures suggests "shivering Rose," as if initiating introspection concerning her marriage.
- (2) Troy continues his monologue unaffected, to which Davis responds with continuous movement of the head and body as if "shaking Rose," which builds up her emotion and eventually says under her breath "You should've held me tight. You should've grabbed me [with emphasis on 'me'] and held on." Before speaking, she looks at her scene partner, and while speaking she projects her head and core towards him trying to engage and nudge him. But the pointing at herself while speaking, suggests that she defends and rallies Rose among actions.
- (3) As Troy ignores her distress and continues with his baseball allegory, Davis interrupts him in stillness saying "We ain't talking about baseball" in a louder voice, looking at him and moving both arms in front of her and in a downward motion starting from the shoulders, as if to capture him.
- (4) Because Troy has now stopped talking, she confronts him directly with "We're talking about you going off and laying up with another woman, then bringing it home to me. That's what we're talking about. We're not talking about no

baseball,” speaking all these lines with almost one breath, in a rushed way that leaves her almost breathless.

- (5) In reaction to Troy’s excuse “I’ve been standing in the same place for eighteen years,” Davis, in perfect stillness below the neck, graphically articulates “Well, I’ve been standing with you,” loudly with a voice that breaks at the end. Tears come down her face.
- (6) She says “I’ve been right here with you Troy. I got a life too. I gave eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot as you,” loudly and clearly separating each line. Simultaneously, she shakes her head and looks down three times, once per period, as if she explores or assesses the “spot” every time. This change of focus illustrates wakening Rose.
- (7) Davis shakes her head and cries saying “Don’t you think I ever wanted other things? Don’t you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me? [looking down and moving up her shoulders subtly to emphasize ‘me’],” mothering and consoling Rose. She only looks at Troy at the end to blame Troy for Rose’s distress.
- (8) To portray mocking Troy, Davis looks at her fellow actor with subtle rolling of the eyes and a sarcastic tone of voice while speaking the lines “Don’t you think it ever crossed my mind to want to know other men? That I wanted to lay up somewhere and forget about my responsibilities? That I wanted someone to make me laugh, so I could feel good? You’re not the only one who has wants and needs.”
- (9) To inspire Troy and celebrate Rose, Davis holds her head high and points at the actor saying “But I held on to you Troy.” She continues moving her hands and shaking her head up and down while crying with her eyes closed, as if she describes an image from her head while saying “I took all my feelings, my wants and needs and dreams, and I buried them inside you, I planted a seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom,” pitying Rose.
- (10) Then Davis turns to Washington with eyes wide open shaking her head shouting “And it took me no eighteen years to realize that the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn’t ever gonna bloom,” humiliating Troy.
- (11) Short of breath and moving her whole body subtly left to right as if to lull Rose says “But I held on to you, Troy. I held you tighter.” She moves Troy by crying louder as she says “You was my husband. I owed you everything I had.” Then again looks down and moves as if pointing at herself saying “every part of me I could find to give you,” disappointing Rose.
- (12) She frowns her forehead, which belittles Troy and disheartens Rose in saying “And upstairs in that bedroom, with the darkness falling in on me, I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn’t the finest man in the world. And wherever you was going I was gonna be there with you because you was my husband [with emphasis on ‘husband’],” moving her hand up and down in a rhythm that reflects the line delivery but also charges her emotionally, finishing with a deep breath and uncontrollable sobbing, then wiping her nose and putting her hand down.
- (13) Davis resolves the scene by criticizing Troy, still shaking and with a trembling voice, as if she calmed Rose, saying in a stern voice “Cause that’s the only way I was gonna survive as your wife. You’re always talking about what you give and

what you don't have to give. But you take too, Troy. You take and don't even know nobody's giving." Davis leaves hastily.

Davis' acting choices in the above physical score are very inspiring for self-taping etudes that explore emotional intensity. Davis prompted and gradually climaxed an outstanding emotional response as Rose, using physical behaviours, a scene partner and visualization of Rose within actions that stirred psycho-physical involvement. Davis reacted to the other actor who performed Troy, but she also occasionally turned her focus to Rose, whom she visualized in the marriage, portraying introspection, and empathy for Rose. The speaking under her breath indicated soothing Rose, and her focus gradually shifted to Troy as he kept up with his excuses, oblivious to Rose's suffering. As if standing between the two characters, Davis shifted from pitying/awakening/championing Rose to exposing and humiliating Troy for the distress he caused. The subtle movement of the head and body, back and forth or side to side, turned the focus to Rose's distress while charging the actor emotionally.

In self-taping etudes that require emotional intensity, the actor can explore a dual interaction with scene partners and visualize their character, pitying, mothering, soothing, disappointing, and eventually calming themselves. This divided focus would work as an inner obstacle, the character's struggle to process the disappointment with themselves before they collect themselves to confront their abuser. This constructs an emotional journey for the character from the shock of hearing the bad news to accepting the bad news through individualized restless bodily movements such as shivering and shaking to support the emotional built-up. Then the actor can use the moment the character accepts their new reality as a transition to turn their full focus on confronting their scene partner. A successful journey from bodily restlessness and split focus to stillness and full focus on the scene partner would manifest outstanding acting in a self-tape.

Conclusion: moving forward

Driven by the desire to develop Stanislavskian practice and terminology for the contemporary screen actor, I examined the potential of using the Method of Physical Actions to break down performances backwards to broaden the actor's skills. In other words, assuming that the Method of Physical Actions is the actor's key acting method, I investigated how it can facilitate the actor's lifelong development by studying outstanding screen performances. The breakdown of two different scenes performed by Mirren and Davis, who have different affinity to Stanislavsky training, shows that the physical scores are artefacts that can be objectively broken down into their two components: psycho-physical gestures and character behaviours, as chosen and manifested by the actors. But how I used the reverse Method of Physical Actions to extrapolate techniques echoes my training and understanding of my acting abilities and interests. My understanding of self as an instrument that manifests the acting craft was also influential in identifying techniques that I feel comfortable individualizing in etudes, instead of mimicking, which I don't expect to manifest outstanding acting. Studying screen acting material that moves the individual actor is also crucial for learning, a point that can be investigated in a future essay.

This article calls Stanislavsky practitioners to envision how the development of digitized and do-it-yourself actor training materials can help actors and acting graduates. Working with smartphones and editing software invites an independent process of building a practical understanding concerning the technical aspects of screen acting, such as how shots are framed, how space works on screen, and the application of eyeline and camera positioning. Training independent screen actors who can manage and showcase their talent and prepare at home for the fast-paced screen industry will improve the accessibility of actors and acting graduates. The development of acting alongside production and post-production skills, such as framing and editing, produces actors with greater insight and agency concerning filming procedures, reinforcing a better understanding of how acting processes shape artefacts. The breakdown of the physical score in self-tapes has the potential to distance the actor from their acting process, tackling the typical reluctance of the actor to watch themselves on screen. Because the phobia of watching their own performances is a common anxiety among actors, the possibility of the reverse Method of Physical Actions to address it begs for further research.

Notes

1. Rawlins, "Screen Acting and Performance Choices," 1.
2. Graeme Hawley in Cantrell and Hogg, *Acting in British Television*, 38.
3. *Ibid.*, 38–39.
4. *Ibid.*, 8.
5. Tucker, *Secrets of Screen Acting*.
6. Churcher, *Acting for Film: Truth 24 Times a Second*.
7. Britten, *From Stage to Screen*.
8. Graeme Hawley in Cantrell and Hogg, *Acting in British Television*, 39.
9. Churcher, *Acting for Film*, 76.
10. Britten, *From Stage to Screen*, 125.
11. Churcher, *Acting for Film*, 117–9.
12. *Ibid.*, 56.
13. Tucker, *Secrets of Screen Acting*, 164.
14. *Ibid.*, 164.
15. Arp-Dunham, "Page – Body - Performance."
16. *Ibid.*, 44.
17. Stanislavsky in Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 194.
18. Moore, *The Stanislavski System the Professional Training of an Actor*, 47.
19. *Ibid.*, 19.
20. *Ibid.*, 22.
21. Arp-Dunham, "Page – Body – Performance," 44.
22. Stephenson in Dunne, "Stanislavski on Stage," 185.
23. Evans, "Lecoq and Film," 400–4.
24. *Ibid.*, 402.
25. Cantrell and Hogg, *Acting in British Television*, 271.
26. Rawlins, "Screen Acting and Performance Choices," 11.
27. *Ibid.*, 11.
28. *Ibid.*, 23.
29. Carnicke, "The Material Poetry of Acting," 21.
30. Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, 17.
31. *Ibid.*, 208.
32. *Ibid.*, 213. Emphasis in the original.

33. Ibid., 213.
34. Ibid., 213.
35. Carnicke, “The Screen Actor’s ‘First Self’ and ‘Second Self,’” 195.
36. Ibid., 197.
37. Moore, *The Stanislavski System*, 19.
38. Ibid., 22.
39. Rawlins, “Screen Acting and Performance Choices,” 11.
40. Ibid., 11.
41. <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/2007> [accessed 15 January 2023].
42. <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/2017> [accessed 15 January 2023].
43. *The Queen*, 53:20–56:10.
44. Weston, *Directing Actors*, 92.
45. Benedetti, *ACTION! Acting for Film and Television*, 90.
46. Ibid., 90.

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