

Adaptations — An Aside

Actions in themselves cannot express all the emotional nuances involved in accomplishing an objective. Nonverbal performance attributes — facial expressions, gestures, body language, tones of voice — are also important to give special shading to dramatic actions. Stanislavsky calls these attributes *adaptations*, and devotes an entire chapter to the subject in *An Actor’s Work*. Adaptations are useful, he writes, when a character spends a long time with a single objective, in which case it would be easy to become monotonous. Using different kinds of adaptations helps to avoid this performance problem. Some examples of mental states, moods, and emotions that could stimulate fresh adaptations include: anxious, bitter, dreary, gracious, impudent, lazy, playful, rough, soothing, stupid, warm, wistful, etc. Any of these adjectives and more could be used as the basis for fresh and unexpected adaptations. On the other hand, there is also a risk of enacting adaptations for their own sake. For example, instead of “I want to perform my action in a worried manner, ” an actor could unthinkingly slip into “I want to be worried, ” or worse, “I want to look like I am worried. ” In theatre parlance this would be called *indicating* (playing an emotion), a serious performance error that leads to generalized acting and clichés. To avoid such indicating, Stanislavsky and his follower recommend that adaptations should be perceived by instinct rather than pre-planned, or else used only in rehearsal or class exercises to expand an actor’s personal range of emotional attributes.

Michael Chekhov and his followers agree with Stanislavsky about the need for nonverbal emotional attributes and that indicating is not good acting. However, they would avoid the risks involved with pre-planned adaptations by performing actions under the influence of specific *qualities*. Some would call this feature adverbs or tactics. Chekhov explained his approach by saying that actions are “what” the characters do and qualities are “how ” they do them, whether anxiously, bitterly, drearily, graciously, etc. It is a subtle but important question, and readers wishing to understand it better should consult the works of Stanislavsky and Michael Chekhov, as well as instructive writings by their followers. In any case, it is important to know that adaptations and qualities are not inbuilt but added to actions by the actors, which makes them issues for classroom, rehearsal, and performance more than for script analysis as such. For that reason, adaptations are an aside to script analysis. We study the issue here to make the distinction clear and add to the effort of standardizing theatre vocabulary.