

It always comes down to the same questions: How to begin? Where to begin?

Before we meet our actors in rehearsal we begin by thinking about the scene - not in generalities - but in a particular, concrete way. We have a mode of inquiry and method to guide our preparation. It's called *scene analysis* and *scene breakdown*.

## SCENE ANALYSIS AND SCENE BREAKDOWN

To help our actors find the life of a scene we break the scene down into its component parts. We do this by asking and attempting to answer certain questions of the material. This is our *scene analysis* and *scene breakdown*. The "analysis" is the mode of questioning the scene. The "breakdown" is the actual dissection of the scene into its component parts – the identification and isolation of its elements.

This is a director's homework – a system of preparation for rehearsing a scene - a method of inquiry and investigation. It is designed to help find the behavior that begins the scene. It guides our search for the event of the scene and helps the director develop a vocabulary for keeping the actors engaged in the scene's moment-to-moment progress.

In some ways this process may be likened to what an attorney might do to prepare to argue a case. What is that argument, after all, but a story that a lawyer is preparing to tell in order to advocate for her client? In order to do so the lawyer has to research and discover the real, hard facts of the case and distinguish those facts from their potential implications. Knowing the difference between fact and implication helps the lawyer arrange the narrative elements in a way that compels the jury or judge to arrive at a desired interpretation.

What follows is a method of examination, inquiry and exploration designed to give shape to the director's thinking and to enhance the director's ability to make coherent, original choices.

## CIRCUMSTANCES

First we identify the "facts" of the scene that must inevitably influence the behavior of the characters.

A "fact" - or, more accurately, a "story fact" - is an element in a story, a circumstance *given by the author* that we must accept. It *cannot be altered by interpretation*. Instead of "story facts" we might call these "true circumstances", but when we are dealing with a fictional universe words like "fact" and "true" become problematic. Therefore we will call all facts specified by the author *Given Circumstances*.

### **Given Circumstances:**

*Given Circumstances* are the facts or conditions that those who participate in the story - the actors, the director, and the audience - must accept as pertaining to the character or predicament. All action proceeds from these immutable given circumstances.

Example: In *The Graduate*, Elaine Robinson and Benjamin Braddock's parents are social friends. Mrs. Robinson is Elaine's mother.

These are the given circumstances. If you were showing a scene to an audience out of context you would need to inform them of these given circumstances in order to make the behavior they were about to see intelligible and meaningful. A guest on a talk show to promote a movie, sets up a clip for the audience by stating the given circumstances.

Interpretation or extrapolation should be avoided while identifying given circumstances.

It is important to recognize that *feelings are not facts*. For example in the film *The Skeleton Twins* we must accept the given circumstance: "Kristen Wiig and Bill Hader are twin brother and sister," while rejecting "Kristen and Bill are twin brother and sister and they hate each other."

The emotional characterization "hate" is too vague, too general and too fluid to be useful here. It causes the director (and therefore the actors) to jump to an unexamined, untested, conclusion too quickly and, possibly to *play a result*. That's why we stick to the immutable, concrete observation that they are siblings.

The rights, privileges, intimacy and social prohibitions of the sibling relationship are *given circumstances* that govern the action and cannot be changed. The emotional temperature of the relationship may change - in fact we hope it does change many times and in many ways in the progress of the story. The given circumstance of being siblings will not change.

The ability to isolate the *given circumstance* and separate it from the interpretation of its implications is a critical tool in the director's analytic arsenal.

### **Beyond Given Circumstances:**

Inevitably, directors and actors will engage their imaginations and envision additional circumstances in the lives of the characters. While possibly suggested by

the text, these circumstances have not been specified by the author. Such extrapolation is an entirely appropriate, and often productive, activity. It helps to “flesh out” the lives of characters and add a third dimension to the two dimensional outline of a script. Sometimes this imagining is an intentional activity – sometimes it may occur without the director’s or actors’ awareness. This process may begin upon the first reading of the script, occur during script analysis, and continue throughout rehearsal and even performance. It has great value and it should be supported. But directors – even as they foster the imagination - must be conscious of its limitations and its dangers.

That awareness, that caution, requires us to carefully separate-out the products of conjecture, and clearly label them as “imaginary”.

### **Imaginary Circumstances:**

*Imaginary Circumstances* are hypothetical facts pertaining to the characters and their situation that are not specified by the script, but are imagined by the actors and director. They are meant to augment the actors’ reality, but they must not contradict the given circumstances laid out by the author. Since they are likely to influence the characters’ behavior, they should be *chosen carefully based on their usefulness to the storytelling*, and not merely for embellishment or decoration. *Since they are optional they may be altered at any time.*

This “optional” nature of *imaginary circumstances* goes back to the very purpose and importance of *Script Breakdown*. By separating and labeling component parts, directors remain free to recombine them in useful, creative ways. Without careful parsing it is easy to confuse and limit ones choices. *Choice*, it must be remembered, is the essential tool in a director’s kit. It is vital that a director always be aware of the possibilities of choice at her disposal.

To maximize the possibilities inherent in choice it is crucial, but not always easy, to distinguish between *Given Circumstances* and *Imaginary Circumstances*.

### **Separating Given Circumstances from Imaginary Circumstances**

Consider this example:

In the film *Sideways* two male friends, Jack and Miles, are embarked on a road trip the week prior to Jack’s wedding. Miles is to be Jack’s “best man” at the ceremony. Reading the script one gathers that Jack and Miles are good friends who went to college together. Let’s break down these three simple sentences:

“two male friends are embarked on a road trip the week prior to Jack’s wedding. Miles is to be Jack’s “best man” at the ceremony.”

Everything contained within these quotation marks is an immutable story-fact. The phrase accurately describes and limits itself to exactly what the author has told us. Nothing in that phrase can be changed – everything in it must be accepted and embraced as “truth” within the context of this narrative. These are the author’s *given circumstances*.

“Jack and Miles are good friends who went to college together”

This clause is a mixed bag, conflating story-fact with interpretation, and dangling sticky branches onto to which conclusions and suppositions may readily adhere.

In the phrase “good friends” a vague adjective meets a vague noun. What are good friends? Are they always good? Are they always friends? We should conclude that “good friends” is a sticky notion that gives us no specific clues as to their relationship but leave us with a general impression that invites a lot of clichéd behavior.

Why do I bother to mention this? Because “good friends” is an inevitable, albeit lazy thought that is bound to arise in the director’s mind, in the mind of the actors, and will probably at some point cross someone’s lips. When that time comes it is worth knowing that it is a useless and possibly misleading notion.

And, anyway, the concept “good friends” is extraneous. We don’t need it because we have a very specific and much more potent “story fact” to work with.

We have the *given circumstance* that Miles is Jack’s “best man”.

Everything we could possibly want from the phrase “good friends” is contained more powerfully and usefully in the information that Jack asked Miles to be his best man and Miles said “yes”.

Right?

Watch out! Did you notice what I just did? I said that Jack asked Miles to be his best man. While that is a reasonable assumption as to how Miles got the job – indeed, it’s the most likely scenario – it is not information specifically provided in the text. All we know is that Miles is to be Jack’s “best man.” Those are the given circumstances. If we say that “Jack asked Miles to be his best man and Miles said ‘yes’” we have crossed over into the realm of *imaginary circumstances*. By recognizing these circumstances as imaginary it leaves us free to imagine an alternative. For example:

Isn't it possible that Jack told Miles he was getting married and Miles said "Congratulations, Man, I have been looking forward to being your best man since freshman year!" After which Jack, who possibly had no intention of even having a best man, didn't have the heart to say no? We could postulate those imaginary circumstances and try them out to see how they inform the behavior that tells the story. This may be a lousy idea or it may be a great one...but we only have the option to explore it if we understand and enforce the distinction between strictly *given* circumstances and their *imaginary* extensions.

### **The Lesson:**

As directors we want to distinguish between what we *know* and what we *assume* -- between the *given* and the *imaginary*. We cannot control the given but we can control and even manipulate the imaginary to valuable purpose.

### **Listing the Circumstances**

To begin our process we read the entire script and then reread the script and then reread it again. On the third reading we will want to start making a list of all the given circumstances.

On the fourth reading we will want to check our lists, adding any we have missed and editing out any that we realize are not really *given*. When we recognize we have made an assumption, we move it to a separate list, and label that new list: "imaginary circumstances".

We keep refining these lists as necessary throughout our work on the project.

### **A Note on Note Taking and List Making**

It is important to cultivate the ability to make our notes succinct. Each item should be like a bullet point - expressed by using as few words as possible. It is okay to write the initial observation longer and then, with each review, hone it down.

Brevity of notation has three important benefits:

1. It sharpens the thought down into its most essential elements, making the director's thinking more precise.
2. A sharp, succinct prompt is what an actor needs to incite an adjustment. Long, meandering conversations take actors out of "the moment".

3. Short notes are easier for the director to read quickly. If you are looking for a fix or an inspiration, stopping to read a paragraph is inefficient.

### **Using and Moving Beyond Circumstances**

Now that we have our two lists, let's set them aside for the moment and begin our approach to the specific scene at hand. To do this we start a homework document I call our "Scene Analysis Worksheet".

### **Scene Analysis Worksheet**

A Scene Analysis Worksheet is neither an assignment to be completed and forgotten, nor a rigid plan to be developed and then slavishly followed. It is a written manifestation of a living process of thought and investigation. It is intended to be a fluid and evolving document.

On it we organize our observations and ideas about the scene into a set of subheadings:

IMMEDIATE CIRCUMSTANCES

GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES

IMAGINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

OCCASION

GOVERNING SOCIAL OBLIGATION

THE MOMENT BEFORE

AGENDA

COVER

STRATEGY

Each heading serves as the prompt for a question we ask ourselves as we study and rehearse the scene.

### **The Importance of the Beginning:**

*Each question refers specifically to the beginning of the scene.* Our method of directing is based on creating an enactment of life lived in the moment – of *moment-to-moment* life. In our theory, one cannot create a second moment until a first moment has been truly lived. If a first moment has been acted honestly, a true second moment will organically follow. If, however, a first moment is acted falsely (for example, by virtue of being merely indicated for the audience) no true scene can follow. Therefore, in our analysis we focus on finding the first moments – the beginning of the scene.

To do this we pretend to be ignorant of the action that – according to the script – follows. We are seeking the truth of the initial and initiating moments of the scene. We do this in order to concentrate our attention on solving *the mystery of the beginning*. We must answer the question: “How does this scene come about?”

### **The Scene as Encounter**

Each scene is an encounter – a meeting between two or more individuals, each of whom has an agenda.\*

In common parlance, the word encounter might refer to any coming together. Even the most casual, random, chance or meaningless meeting may be called an “encounter” in everyday American speech. It is worth remembering, however, that the original meaning of the term in Latin, Old French and Middle English was “to meet as an adversary”. This definition implies conflict. In dramatic literature, every scene contains a conflict of competing agendas.

An agenda is an underlying motive, and a plan for something to be done.

Thus a scene is an encounter between individuals who – either openly or covertly – are at cross-purposes. These people are, in some measure, in conflict.

In daily life most of us avoid conflict as much as possible. The dramatic stories we tell are about people who court conflict, or occur at those moments when conflict can no longer be avoided.

To crack the beginning of the scene we must investigate how two “adversaries” – meet? What is the behavior that initiates the encounter? What is the true behavior\*\* that explains how and why two people in conflict remain in the same space for a specified amount of time.

In other words, we must answer the question: “How does this scene come about?”

\*There are scenes in screenplays that are not dialogue-driven encounters between individuals in conflict. Such scenes are not the subject of our immediate attention. At a later point we may examine how even scenes such as the one that begins *Sideways*, in which Miles’ wakes up to the noise of the garbage collectors, can be enlivened by conflict and competing agendas.

\*\*“True behavior” means: behavior verifiable by the audience’s experience of human nature. Here, it is worth remembering Sanford Meisner’s definition of acting as “true behavior under given circumstances”.

These are the questions our Scene Analysis and Scene Breakdown, and our investigations seek to address.

### **Back to the Worksheet:**

Let’s consider each prompt, one by one.

### **Immediate Circumstances:**

*Immediate Circumstances* are the facts about right now. We determine them by answering the question:

“Where are we and what is happening right now?”

In asking this we are seeking the most obvious and most concrete answer possible. This is not the place for a long-winded exposition of what went before, nor is there room for conjecture about character motives or feelings. This prompt is to remind us of the active facts of the moment that *begins* the scene.

For example:

In *Sideways* there is a scene set at the Hitching Post restaurant during which we are introduced to the character “Maya”. The immediate circumstances of this scene might be stated thus:

*Jack and Miles are at a “great” restaurant in California wine country settling in for a meal.*

The clarity and the brevity, of this answer dispenses with the obvious. It establishes the known and, by contrast, highlights the unspecified elements that it will be the director’s job to determine. Is there a *maitre’d*? Are they being shown to a table or are they already seated? Is a waiter filling water glasses? Have the menus arrived? Have they chosen wine? How many diners surround them and what are their sexes and ages? Where and how does Jack see Maya? The writer of the screenplay may have provided some suggestion in the stage directions but these matters of *mise en scene* are the province of the director. Therefore the prompt to name the immediate circumstances is aimed at providing a factual, minimal answer, leaving open a landscape for choice.

### **Given Circumstances:**

Now we refer to the complete list of *Given Circumstances* that we made during our repeated readings of the script. We consider each circumstance one by one and ask the question:

Does this *given circumstance* – this particular “story-fact” - pertain to the scene in question? Does it have force and power at this time in this place?

For Example:

*Miles’ novel is being considered by a publisher.* That is a given circumstance, revealed by our reading of the script. It is an important “story-fact” that will resonate powerfully in certain scenes. In this scene, however, it has no particular currency.



We will not include it on our worksheet because to do so would overburden our approach to the scene.

Imagine you were making a journey. You are going to a specific place in a specific climate at a specific time of year. Although you have many items in your wardrobe at home, you will try to pack only the garments that are appropriate to the circumstances of the trip. If, through indecision or haste, you throw everything you own into a trunk, your mobility will be hampered, and you will waste a lot of time and effort digging through useless apparel to find the outfit you need. Likewise, if you carry every fact of a character's life into your rehearsal of a scene, your thought-process will become clogged with extraneous information.

Our Scene Analysis Worksheet allows us to sort out, select and carry into rehearsal only what we need. Thus we leave the circumstance of Miles' novel on the long list, and move on to consider other circumstances for this scene.

*Miles is an oenophile* – an aficionado and connoisseur of wines. Yes! Miles is the planner of the road-trip itinerary (also a given circumstance), he has chosen the restaurant (another given circumstance). His deep and active interest in the restaurant's wine has immediate relevance to the scene, therefore, we include it on our list of given circumstances.

We continue sorting through our long list. When we select an item to include on our worksheet we write it in as few words as possible and list it as a bullet point. No long backstory or extraneous modifying clauses are wanted here. These bullet points should jump off the page and catch your eye when you are studying your worksheet.

**Imaginary Circumstances:**

**To Be Continued....**