

## FEELING THE BEAT

Kellman 2\_22\_20

Directors talk about beats. We talk about feeling them, taking them - playing them. Many of my students struggle to identify beats so I went to a jazz composer for advice. Assuming that feeling the beat was something like having “swing” I asked my friend what that word meant. Without hesitating he quoted the great Fats Waller who, when asked for a definition of swing said, “Lady, if you gotta ask, you’ll never know.”

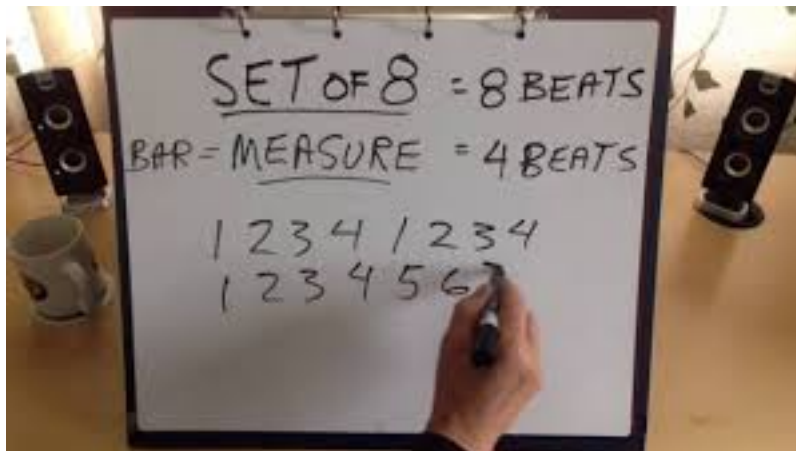


Thanks for nothing! I appreciate the impatience of someone who’s swung for so long that he can’t relate to the question, but I think it’s a lazy response, and probably forgetful of some generous mentor who, long ago, hipped him .

Swing is the feel of a changing pattern in rhythm. To play together, jazz musicians must swing together. I think that's similar to the feel that actors and directors need for the subterranean shifts - the emotional oscillations - of a scripted encounter.

Before we go deeper into the question of feeling the beat, let's recognize that the word itself is problematic. For one thing, "beat" has more homonyms, synonyms, and sundry uses than Ringo has rings! When we say "beat" are we talking about a rhythm, a silent pause, a plot point, a behavior, a bit of stage business, a change of subject, a change of intention, a new tactic? All of these are possible.

Beat comes, of course, from music where it denotes a rhythmic accent, and sometimes directors liken a dramatic text to a musical score and speak of its rhythmic beats.



Writers use the word when making an outline. They “beat out a story” and their “beat sheets” catalogue important milestones that must be reached. A few of the items listed may be beats, some are plot points, character reveals or even exposition. This mingling of ingredients isn’t helpful for those of us trying to isolate “the beat.”

Writers also use the word in stage directions when they want a pause.

JOHN

Oh, Mary...

(beat)

...you shouldn’t have.

Why? Is the author asking for a musical silence, or suggesting that in taking the beat the character is registering a moment? If it’s the latter, moments aren’t the same as beats, and then, why not write:

JOHN

Oh, Mary...

(a moment)

...you shouldn’t have.

And now we come to the origin of the most profound source of confusion - the appearance of the word *kusok* in early drafts of Stanislavsky’s writings. Konstantin Stanislavsky, the great director, used

*kusok*, a common Russian word that translates as “bit” (as in “a piece” of something) to denote a subsection of a scene.

Stanislavsky’s first English translator rendered the word as “unit”, but while spreading the master’s teaching in America, his disciple Richard Boleslavski retained the simplicity of Stanislavsky’s “bit”. In his Slavic accent, however, the word “bit” came out sounding like “beat”.

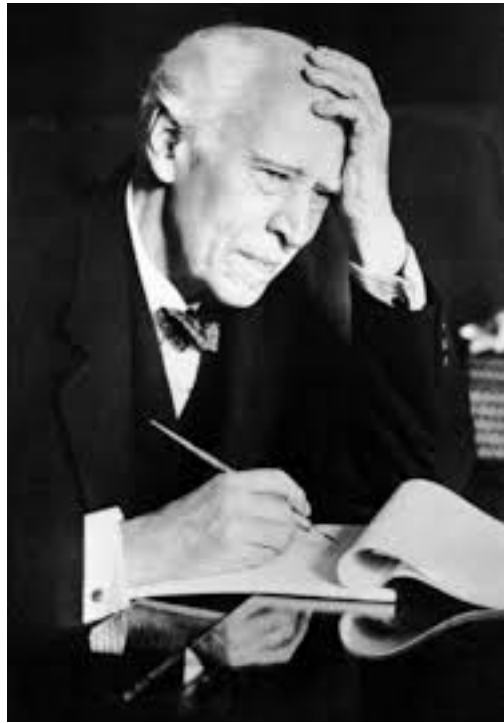
The American actors, members of the Group Theatre who were sitting at Boleslavski’s feet,\* weren’t thrown by his pronunciation; many were themselves the children of Russian immigrants. Bobby Lewis, who with Elia Kazan went on to found the Actors Studio, said that to them “bit” had another meaning. Steeped in the traditions of vaudeville and the Yiddish Theatre they knew “bit” as the English translation of *schtick*, the Yiddish word for “piece.” *Schtick* refers to a set piece of comic business or behavior - one that has been rehearsed, refined and repeated - intended to define character and get a laugh from an audience.



Bits and schtick have deep roots in theatrical performance. In commedia dell'arte they are known as *lazzi*, Italian for jokes. The Group Theatre actors were leery of mixing the lofty purpose of Stanislavsky script analysis with the argot of comedians. They abandoned the more accurate "bit" for the vague but important sounding "beat." Despite that effort, directors continue to conflate "bit" and "beat." In rehearsal we often say "let's take it from the beat with the cigarette", when we mean the "bit" of lighting the cigarette. Doing that we add to the general confusion.



It doesn't help our search for clarity that, over time, in successive drafts of his writings, Stanislavsky described this unit of action embedded inside a scene with other words - ones that translate as "episode", "event", and "fact". These are all evocative, and each has a place in our lexicon, but they don't denote the subtle thing we are trying to feel.



That thing exists, and it's essential to our work. We are stuck with the slippery word "beat," and so we'd better forge a serviceable definition.

### **Beat Definitions**

The published definitions I find for beat are obtuse, opaque, simplistic and all but useless. Among them:

*"An exchange of behavior between characters in a script".*

What does that mean? How does an actor exchange behavior?



*“The ‘beat changes’ are simple changes of subject.”*

If only that were true - directing would require no more than a working knowledge of English!

*“a single action for each character in each beat”.*

That recommendation is offered by another teacher who encourages actors to score their performances by working from verb to verb.



I think that reduces art to Paint By Numbers, with predictably stilted results.

I could go on, but I won't. Instead let me offer a concrete definition, and some commonsense rules of thumb for recognizing beats.

**Beat (def.):**

**A Beat is a Decisive Moment**

We described a moment as a place where something registers or resonates.

**A beat is a decisive moment. It's a turning point - a point of inflection.**

It's a moment that lands with enough impact to suspend the action and hinge it in another direction. Beats are joints in the structure of the scene.

They guide the progress of the action toward the event.

**Recognizing the Beat by Analogy**

Since the beat isn't material, since it can't be touched or measured, we must approach it through metaphor. I will offer several; embrace whichever speaks to you.

**Beats are like Musical Phrases bordered by Chords**

Think of moments as musical notes which, when played in succession, produce a melodic line. At certain intervals two or more



different notes are played together to form a chord. That chord can be used to contradict the melodic line, sending it off in another direction. The bridging of musical phrases through the use of a chord is similar to the way a beat marks a change in the direction of a scene. The chord is the beat change, and we can liken the musical phrase contained between two chords as the beat itself. Using this analogy we can talk about what happens **in the beat** (the musical phrase), and what occurs **at the beat** (the chord change)\*\*.

### Beats are like Downs in Football



Imagine a beat as a down in a football possession. The team on offense has the ball for four downs. Each one of those four downs has a different set of imperatives. You would choose to do different things on first down than on fourth down. On the second down your options have

narrowed, influenced by what happened on the first. Each down is discrete, each down has its own objective and strategy. Each has a beginning, middle, and end. And in between each down you huddle and plan the next one. Each of these downs is like a beat. Just as one down depends on the previous down and determines the next, so each beat in a scene grows out of its predecessor and influences the one that follows.

### **A Beat is like a Skirmish in a Battle**



A war is made up of a series of campaigns, operations designed to achieve a defined objective. Campaigns consist of multiple battles. Each battle is defined in scope, and of limited duration. The outcome of a war is determined by the result of battles and campaigns. If we think of a story as a war the military campaigns are acts, and the battles are like scenes. Nested inside each battle are limited engagements with less than decisive

results. These are called skirmishes.

A beat is like a skirmish in a battle. A series of skirmishes leads to the outcome of a battle, in the same way that a series of beats leads to the event of a scene.

### **More Analogies**

Beats are like handholds on a rock climb. They are stages in a journey. Just as stepping stones in a stream are a pathway to a crossing, beats form an emotional pathway to the realization of the event of the scene.



### **How to Recognize the Beat Change - A Rule of Thumb**

A beat is a place where the scene would end if nothing changed.

Characters enter an encounter - a scene - in the hope of getting or achieving something. When that thing is achieved the scene is over.

Where the hope dies the scene ends in failure.

In any scene there will be several points where it will seem the hope dies, and yet the scene, on paper, continues. We must treat those points as beat changes. If we respect them as decisive moments where the scene could end, we recognize the force of opposing action that is necessary to reboot it. One of the characters must restart the scene by initiating a new beat.

By identifying the places where the scene could end if someone didn't make new effort, we define the beat changes. By playing the scene as a sequence of mini-scenes (beats) we give it structure and definition.

### **How Many Beats are in a Scene?**

A scene is comprised of many moments and several beats. The number of beats may be a matter of interpretation. The same scene may be performed in four beats, three beats or even two beats. How sharply the beats are distinguished is a matter of choice. The director must feel all the beats and choose which to emphasize. Different directors may "hear" the beat differently or choose to "play" differing beats.

## Gymnopedie No. 1

E. Satie



Listen to Gary Newman's version of Satie's *Gymnopedie*; the impression will be quite different than De Leeuw's classic rendition. Newman makes you aware of the beats, he calls attention to the structure. The music is the same, the feel is distinct.

Beats shape a scene and the delivery of its payload. In order to understand the way a scene happens the director must expose the beat structure and determine how one beat ends and another begins. Directors can play the same scene to quite different effect by how we feel the beats and chose to address them. The writer has, in a sense, directed the words of the scene - the director directs the moments and beats.

\*an illustrious cohort that included Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, Luther and Stella Adler, John Garfield, Sanford Meisner and Robert Lewis.

\*\*Despite my emphasis on precision and consistency I am guilty too. I speak of what transpires inside the unit as "the beat", and also refer to the beginning and end of the unit as "beats". To be more accurate I should call the beginning and end "beat changes".