

# THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

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## Using Actors' Techniques as Stoic Exercises

by Martha Everett

*Martha Everett studied Stage Management at Guildhall in London where she received her BA Degree with Honors. She has been working as a freelance Stage Manager for 13 years in everything from fringe theater to national opera. Martha said, "I have always been fascinated by the daily discussions about the human condition that my job allows me to be part of; it's been really fun feeding that experience in to my Stoic practice."*

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### Introduction

Humans are natural storytellers. For thousands of years we have used narrative to help us understand how nature works, to persuade, educate and entertain. We use stories to help us remember the triumphs and mistakes of other people, and to help us live our lives better, we tell stories to our children to prepare them for life in the world.

Not only do we tell stories to each other, but we are also constantly telling ourselves our own personal narratives. We select and tell ourselves our own subjective stories about things we have thought and done which make us feel like *us*. Through the narratives of our lives, we gain continuity of character, we feel that we make sense as individuals, we can predict and manage our own behaviour ("I'm a perfectionist, that's why it takes me so long to get ready in the morning!" or "I had a bad experience with a dog as a child, so now I can't go near them".) But this narrative is not the truth about who we are; reality is infinitely complex, and our narrative is a filter without which we couldn't cope with everything there is to comprehend.

Once we understand that *our* story is only part of the *whole* story, we can play with the filter to produce helpful results. Alan Carr in his book on giving up smoking advises that the first step is not thinking of yourself as someone who is trying to give up smoking, but thinking of yourself as an ex-smoker. You pick a different story to tell, and bam! You've given up smoking! Of course it's not simple

to turn your whole life around, but deciding on a change of narrative can be a catalyst for change, as you give yourself permission to do something out of character.

The stopping smoking example seems clear when it's explained to you, but how do we find the right narrative to help ourselves? How do we manage to get in the right frame of mind to switch our story up and do something different? Finding the right narrative is especially difficult when what we're trying to achieve is something that takes all our efforts for every minute of the day, which is what Stoics are trying to do in practicing our philosophy. Luckily, the ancient Stoics have given us plenty of options as far as narrative goes (Marcus Aurelius advises us to tell ourselves a story every morning about the kinds of people we will meet, and how we can react to them) but there are a lot of ways to approach changing our minds, therapy is one way, as is meditation. In my daily life as a Stage Manager, I work with a group of people who specialise in character and narrative, and have a toolkit of techniques that are not only effective, but fun to experiment with. I think it's about time we looked to actors to help us become better authors!

So what makes actors such great agents of authorship, when all they really do is act out other people's scripts? Well one thing that all good actors understand is the narrative paradigm, that our inner lives take place not in a logical world where one thing leads to another, but in a complex web of interrelated causes and reactions. Actors know that people generally don't act based on logical, factual information, they act on what *seems logical* to them. There is not one cause of behaviour, our actions are a result of myriad factors, from where we were born to what we ate for breakfast.

Unpicking this nest is what actors do best, and by doing this they make the story seem real, because that is how reality actually works! They apply the narrative filter in different ways to find the way that makes the story most meaningful.

When hearing a believable story we are more persuaded, we draw more interesting conclusions, we are more engaged with the outcome and consequences than if we were just read a series of facts, however true. This is important for those of us seeking to take authorship, as what we're trying to do is persuade our brains to see things differently. It's one thing to repeat to yourself 'It seemed so to him', it is quite another to go in to his mind and see a chain of reasonable thoughts and actions leading with perfect clarity to whatever he said that frustrated or annoyed you. Creating a backstory for characters is one tool actors use often. It might not make you agree with the character, but it might give you some understanding. If you have no sympathy for their circumstances at all, you are not going to be able to play them believably on stage, so coming to some kind of understanding of them is crucial. As Stoics we might often disagree with the actions of others, but if we can find even the small amount of sympathy needed to say "they can only act the way they have learned to act up until now", then we will already be ahead of the game.

With all this in mind, I would like to guide you through some of the tools that actors use during their daily lives to analyse a play and create and develop a deep understanding of characters and their circumstances. I believe that many of them have valuable applications for Stoic philosophers in practising and internalising our philosophy. I will outline here a few different techniques and explain how they can be co-opted in to your daily Stoic practice.

## 1. Fact Checking

### **Actor's Exercise:**

One of the first exercises any actor will do is fact checking the script. This means noting all of the information that we know because it is explicitly mentioned by the playwright. So for example we might know the name and age of the character, what country they are from, where they live at the time of the play and what they do for a job. Events that happen to people can also be considered facts. So for example we might know that in a scene a character is angry, but we might not know whether they are angry because they think someone hurt them or because they were scared – that part is down to interpretation.

There will be a huge amount of information we don't know about the characters, and that is where the actor will step in and flesh them out from their own imagination, experience, and research. Anything beyond what is in the script is up for grabs for the actor to invent a fleshed out persona. Fact checking often results in far less factual information than you thought was in there, because when we read we tend to make a lot of assumptions. As we absorb a play and get a feel for what the characters are like, we tend to mis-remember details that are not actually mentioned, because they make sense to us based on our previous experience of the world.

### **Stoic Exercise:**

In real life we also tend to make assumptions about other people, and often we find that rules of thumb are useful for getting on with people in every day life. Sometimes, however, our assumptions can hinder us, and harm our relationships with other people.

If you have an encounter with someone that could have gone better, stop and fact check the situation to see if you're making assumptions. To use the example from above, you might be annoyed with someone for yelling at you because they were angry, but are you assuming that their anger is a reflection to your actions towards them? Could it be that they were acting out of confusion, fear, or for a completely different reason that had nothing to do with you? Sometimes we assume that we know what someone is going to say before they even say it! Our brains are so used to explaining things using narrative that we will fill in the details to make sense of things, but our narrative is just one possible version, and is likely not the truth.

Practice fact checking your interactions in retrospect, by replaying the conversation when your emotions are clearer. Make a list of all the assumptions you made, and then divide the list in to things you know are true and things you guessed at. You might be surprised at how short the 'fact' list is! Take the list of guesses, and think about how the interaction might have gone differently if you had made different guesses, or simply reserved judgment. Could you have changed your own emotional responses? Hopefully, you will train yourself to see with more clarity in the moment and avoid reacting to things that are actually imagined.

## 2. Verbing

For actors, this exercise is a way of evaluating a script to figure out how best to play each line. For Stoics, it is a different way of looking at Seneca's guidance on how to structure your morning and

evening meditations; it is really a thought experiment designed to help someone look at events with clarity and honesty.

### **Actor's Exercise:**

Within each scene in a play, the characters will say things and perform actions. Everything spoken or done must be done for a reason; in the real world people do not say and do things for nothing, and the reasons can be complicated and mysterious, sometimes people don't even know why they say and do things. To help actors to unpick this knot, they will go through the scene and allocate a verb to everything they say, which describes *how* they say it. So for example someone might say the line "You're an idiot", and their objective in saying that line could be simply to express that they think someone is in idiot (Verb: I insult), but it could also be to anger someone to admitting the truth (Verb: I provoke), or to affectionately tease them and build a closer relationship (Verb: I flirt) or any number of possibilities, it all depends on what the character is aiming to get out of the interaction.

### **Stoic Exercise:**

Write down a conversation, thought process or set of actions you went through during the day. Try to report your words or thoughts as honestly and accurately as you can. For each sentence or thought, write down the verb which most accurately represents your intention in saying or thinking that thing. It might take quite a few goes to find the right word – try to avoid using more than one word, although if you really can't come up with anything a few words are better than nothing. The thesaurus is your friend!

Here is an example: I'm at the pub with some friends when a guy we don't know sits nearby and starts talking to us. The man says something racist, I say nothing. He says it again and one of my friends challenges him, at which point I join my friend in telling the man his opinions aren't welcome, and the man goes away. For my saying nothing, my verb would be 'I avoid'. I haven't kept silent because I agree with the man, but because I am afraid and trying to avoid a confrontation. When my friends give me the confidence to tell the man what I really think, I would choose the verb 'I unite'. I am saying my true thoughts, but using the safety of numbers to protect myself.

Now, look through the verbs you have written down & think about them Stoically. In my example I have chose two verbs, the first 'I avoid' is not necessarily un-Stoic, sometimes it's right to avoid a confrontation when that confrontation wouldn't solve anything or would be a show of pride. In this situation, though, I would have to conclude that I should have done a better job, I could have said something to challenge the man's views on race. The second time around I think I did a better job with 'I unite'. Not only did I advocate for acceptance, but I supported other people who had the bravery to speak out.

## 3. Past Scenes

### **Actor's Exercise:**

Where the script doesn't specify details of a character's life, it is necessary for actors to imagine what has gone before, even better is acting out scenes from a character's life. There is a certain power in getting on your feet and actually saying and doing things rather than just thinking or talking about them; living out a scene can help you to really feel the emotions involved, often reactions come out

during improvisation that people wouldn't have experienced if they had just answered the question 'What would you do if...'. The improvised scenes won't make it in to the final production, but they are an extremely effective tool in helping actors to *feel* more like their characters, and in helping to build up a personal history which then informs their interactions with other characters. They are literally creating the same narrative experience that real people have in their heads based on their past actions and interactions.

### **Stoic Exercise:**

Epictetus tells us that when someone behaves badly towards us we should remind ourselves that that person's behaviour seemed right to them at the time. Sometimes I find that saying this to myself isn't enough to truly dissolve anger or annoyance at someone, and that I need to dig deeper to find true empathy. If you can't actually ask the person why they acted a certain way, you can create a narrative which taps in to your feelings of empathy and acceptance. One of my go to narratives is that when someone is driving really slowly in front of me I imagine it is my Nan who is driving. I immediately feel much happier to drive slowly behind them enjoying the view since I love my Nan & want her to drive as slowly as she feels is safe.

You can create your own 'past scenes' for people you encounter which might help you to accept that their behaviour seemed like a good idea to them. People go through lives as the protagonist in their own narrative, they are often literally self-centred and unaware of how they affect others. 'Do no harm' seems like a great idea in theory, but in practice sometimes hurting other people is unavoidable, or just something people do without realising.

Pick a time in your life when you thought someone harmed you. Work backwards through their day, imagining what could have put someone in the mental state necessary to act the way they did. Perhaps someone was rude to you out of the blue – perhaps they themselves had been hurt before they encountered you. They might have had some bad news, or a terrible shock. Act out the scene in your head, then go forward in time and look at your interaction with them again, trying to really understand their mental journey. It might not give them an excuse, but it can probably give them a reason.

## 4. Analysing Status

### **Actor's exercise:**

It is crucial for actors to know who has high status in a scene, and who has low status. People with high or low status have to use different methods to try to achieve their goals. The outcomes of discussion about status are often surprising and always makes a scene more interesting to watch. For example if someone with high status wants to obtain an object they can simply ask someone to bring it to them, someone with low status might have to convince or fight their way to getting it. The person with low status can be manipulated in to doing things by being offered the object, but if they decide the object is worthless then suddenly the power balance has shifted, and they are free to choose to do something completely different.

Social position doesn't always correlate to high status either, the balance can be shifted by knowledge, personality, objective, and many other factors. An excellent example of this is the story of Diogenes

meeting Alexander the great. Alexander offered Diogenes anything he wanted, demonstrating his high status, and Diogenes said all he wanted was for Alexander to move out of the sun, showing that status can be overturned purely by having different values.

**Stoic Exercise:**

Thinking about power dynamics touches on a central tenet of what it means to be a Stoic. If you are no longer competing with people and circumstances, then you are free to choose the way you want to live. I said in the last section that having higher status means there are less barriers to achieving your desired outcome. If that is true, then the highest status of all is afforded to those who don't desire any outcome other than that which happens.

Keep a note of times you find yourself worrying about status – perhaps you are trying to impress people by being clever or funny, or trying to make people think a certain way about you. Maybe you are trying to change someone else's mind by proving them wrong. Think about how the situations might have been different if you had not been caught up in the game of power dynamics. Where is it possible to remove yourself from that value system and where is it useful to play along to achieve a worthwhile aim? Could that goal be better achieved by accepting a lower status sometimes and working with what you've got?

## 5. Rehearsal

**Actor's Exercise:**

If you have ever learnt to play an instrument or practiced a team sport, you will know that rehearsing is not simply repetition. You must try to do something, think about how it could be better, make a plan, and then try again, attempting to follow the plan to the best of your ability. Sometimes rehearsals for plays are more talking than acting – actors must unpick the holes and figure out what made them before rebuilding and trying again. Eventually a scene becomes second nature, the moves become muscle memory, and the emotional journey becomes a sort of reflex.

**Stoic Exercise:**

Just as Marcus Aurelius prepared himself for the day ahead by thinking about the people he might encounter, we too can rehearse for possible future events. It's not for nothing that people practice job interview questions with a friend; practicing saying things out loud makes them a part of your vocabulary, it puts them in to your mouth and makes you more likely to say the right thing when the time comes.

Pick a situation which will test your Stoicism, and have someone act it out with you. At any time you can stop and evaluate your thoughts and behaviour, go back, and try it again but better. Through trial, error, and discussion, try to create a scenario in which you exhibit the best Stoic thoughts and behaviour you can think of. Finally, when you think you've made the best choices you can, run the scene through in its final form to cement the thoughts in your head - make those thoughts and behaviours part of your permanent narrative about yourself. Hopefully you will find that if and when the situation arises in real life, you deal with it far better than you would have had you not rehearsed it.

## Conclusion

Hopefully these exercises have given you an interesting insight in to how acting teaches us to analyse and create characters, and how using our innate sense of our own narratives we can turn these techniques on ourselves and use them in the real world. Theatre gives us the opportunity to explore everything from our daily small decisions to grand, life changing choices in an intense, visceral way. If you're interested in learning more about this fascinating tool I would encourage you to join a local acting class!

As well as drawing on my experience from my career in theatre, I drew ideas from Derren Brown's book 'Happy' which I highly recommend for those who are interested in changing their narrative.

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