
Walt Stanchfield 69

Notes from Walt Stanchfield's Disney Drawing Classes

"A Sense of Acting"

By Walt Stanchfield

A SENSE OF ACTING

If you were a stage actor, you'd have to study your role so thoroughly that when you appeared on stage you are the character. There won't be any photographs or diagrams or recordings there for you to copy from, to prompt you on how the character looks, moves or how they sound. You will have to rely on your emotional memory, how you conceived the character, your imagination, and your sense of acting.

In the gesture class we have models who supply us with most of that. They come dressed in a variety of costumes, acting out a vast array of scenarios, with props galore. They are even asked questions so you can add to your understanding of the character by hearing their voice and speech deliverance. The senses of smell, taste and touch are useful in activating our emotional memory, but sight and sound are absolutely vital in establishing character.

But to suppose that the model has taken care of your acting needs is to miss the point. If you had to draw an illustration for a story or an advertisement you could hire one of these models, make an exact copy and that would suffice. But we're talking acting. We act on paper for an entertainment industry. Entertainment is the name of the game and acting is the vehicle we use.

How can we steer ourselves away from copying the model to creatively using the model for our own expressive purposes? I keep saying you have to shift gears, yeah, whatever that means. I don't know if it's anything you can learn. It's an attitude, it's changing your whole concept of drawing, it's simply interjecting your sense of acting. It's an advanced form of playacting which you did so well when you were a kid. With your little three inch long airplane you bombed whole armies, you put a plastic faced doll to bed with the tenderest care, whispering good night and actually hoping the doll will sleep well. In a word it's a sense of acting.

A 58 year old singer and pianist, who's name I've lost puts it beautifully. She says, "I'm happiest when I'm sitting at the piano.

"Jazz is feeling," she says, "It's fire and ice. It's you. I want the people in the audience to feel and see the picture I'm trying to paint. I want to be in touch with you and get inside of you."

Boy, doesn't that say it all. If we could just get the feeling it's an audience we're dealing with - that we're drawing for that we're acting for. We want to get past titillating them with clever drawing, and get in touch with them - inside them.

I often urge the students in the gesture class to use a marker that flows easily. It leads to quicker results with more immediate feedback, and the drawings will be more spontaneous and fresh. Most animators I've known formed their animation objectives vividly in mind before they started drawing, then went at it with all systems go. This sometimes took hours. One notable exception was Cliff Nordberg who, upon picking up a scene from the director, sat down and started drawing. His animation was extremely spontaneous and very funny.

The first go at a scene of animation is usually filled with exuberance and focus. If after the director has seen the scene and calls for a change, especially a large change, drudgery sets in and the rework takes many times longer than the original. Once you lose that first impression and zest, its plodding and groping time all the way.

So, if you're training to become an animator, high on your priority list should be to practice fast computations and deliveries. Your work will then have the freshness of a newly opened flower, rather than one after several days of aging and impending decay. But hey, it's all relative.

Along with visualizing the character you are drawing, visualize also the audience.- See them reacting to your drawing, enjoying it, approving of it. See them being so kinesthetically involved in the gestural aspects that they almost mimic the drawing or react by crying or laughing or trying to enter the drawing to see what the character is looking at. (in those looking offstage gestures)

A stage or movie actor cannot say, "That's not the way I would react or the words I would use." He must follow the playwright's or screenwriter's script. Unless, of course the director or producer sees fit to alter it. I remember when Phil Harris was recording for the voice of Baloo, he would say, "I (Harris as Baloo) would not say that." He would then deliver his own version and it would be gratefully accepted.

I often advise acting (drawing a gesture) broadly, so the people in the top row balcony can see it. But, of course, in a film where two people are standing close to each other, talking and gesturing will be much more subtle. You can usually tell if the model is interplaying with someone close by or afar. The close up stuff can be toned down, but remember even a subtle pose can be packed with tension, motivation, and intensity.

Well, enough preaching! (Dee, my wife and editor, says, Thank God.) On the following pages I have for your pleasure and study, some drawings made from the model, but not copied. As a matter of fact some of them are complete fabrications of imagination using only the costuming, props and the general gist of the gesture. This is the epitome of working from the model.

Here are two versions of what I believe to be the same pose, by students sitting side by side. If so, it illustrates how liberties can be taken yet each capturing the flavor of the gesture.



Tom Gately



Carolyn Gliona

Some drawings of model, Bobby Ruth Mann, carried to delightful extremes, by Tom Gately.



Tom Gately





Two more drawings by Tom (above) and his caricature of intern Jean-Paul Orpinas (below)

Tom Gately



David Pimentel



These drawings of model Clark Allen's double extreme poses, and the very difficult foreshortened view are by Aliki Theofilopoulos



Aliki Theofilopoulos

"A Sense of Acting"

A page of Hye Col's wonderfully crisp drawings of model Clark Allen. Notice her skillful use of the things I've been teaching - clearing the area around the eyes for a clean look, good bends, working angles against one another, good stretches, and balanced weight distribution:



Hye Col

"A Sense of Acting"

Here are some critique drawings from the last few sessions. And again I feel I should explain these are not how-to-draw diagrams, they are meant to fire up your own awareness of the power that story and acting have in drawing. You will think of your own ways to describe the gesture, it will be different, and could be right. As Don Graham told us in a painting class, "There are hundreds of ways to paint it and they can all be 'right.'" That, after mercilessly critiquing our paintings.

I stopped this drawing in its early stages to make a point. This artist usually pulls things off pretty well, but here is a problem that is fairly universal - the thinking of the body as a bunch of separate parts. In my critique drawing I showed how in order to get the character to look like she was slumped in the chair, all the parts have to work together as one. I think of the body as "swooping" down from the shoulders all the way to her feet-, one long cascading action. And though the neck juts forward in a different direction, the face picks up the energy from that swooping action and drives it forward for a strong look.

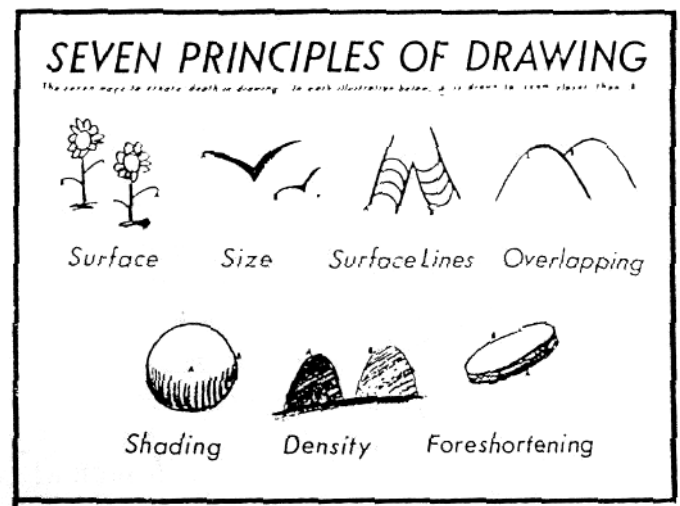


Here's a case where the principle of "overlap" could have been used. The model was leaning decidedly away from the artist so the shoulder overlapped the chest area and the chest area overlapped the head. I also overlapped the left breast with lower rib cage. The principle itself almost takes care of the drawing. A figure leaning away from you is very difficult to draw. I cheated and leaned her back to the right a little so it definitely says, "leaning-"



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For you who have forgotten, or who have never seen the principles I borrowed from Bruce McIntyre, here is one version of them. This plate was from a children's drawing book and-so appears deceptively simple. I base much of my teaching on these principles (with the exception of the "shading" and "density"). for every drawing you'll ever make will contain, more than likely, every one of these principles. In past handouts I have dealt with them in a variety of ways.



Here's one of those poses where all the parts of the body working together and the things they are called upon to do, naturally mold the shape of the gesture. In my critique drawing, see how she leans to her left in order to rest on her elbow. On the right side the arm is stretched out - pressing against her right leg, forcing the weight over to her left side. Good example of squash and stretch. Notice how the student drew a double "S" curve for the hem of the dress, thus missing the opportunity to use it to augment the tension of the extreme stretch between the knees.

In making such a drawing, you might imagine you are working with soft clay where you can push the whole upper area over to the figure's left and then with your thumb push the clay down along the figure's right side to the knee. It might help you concentrate on the whole form of the figure rather than of its separate parts.



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In this following pose the student has presented us with a pretty solid drawing with some nicely drawn parts, But I miss that special thing where the old battle scarred veteran is sitting there rearing back in his seat, like a Napoleonic figure, stretching his neck and looking, as if into his past, of his glorious accomplishments. The body is at ease, while all the energy and attention, goes to his monumental head up in the clouds. This could all apply, somewhat, to the student's drawing too, but I get hung up on the seemingly importance of each separate part of the figure. It could stand a little of that soft clay treatment - molding everything into one continuous move.



I formed my attitude for the drawing from Clark Allen himself. He's an elderly model, so he's no longer a challenger, but certainly a triumphant conqueror. He has a slightly "I've been there, done that," aura about him. You may be thinking, hey, your putting me on - it's just a model in a costume - posing. But let me tell you, if I were going out on the stage to act out this character, (any character) I would have spent many an hour working and thinking these things through.

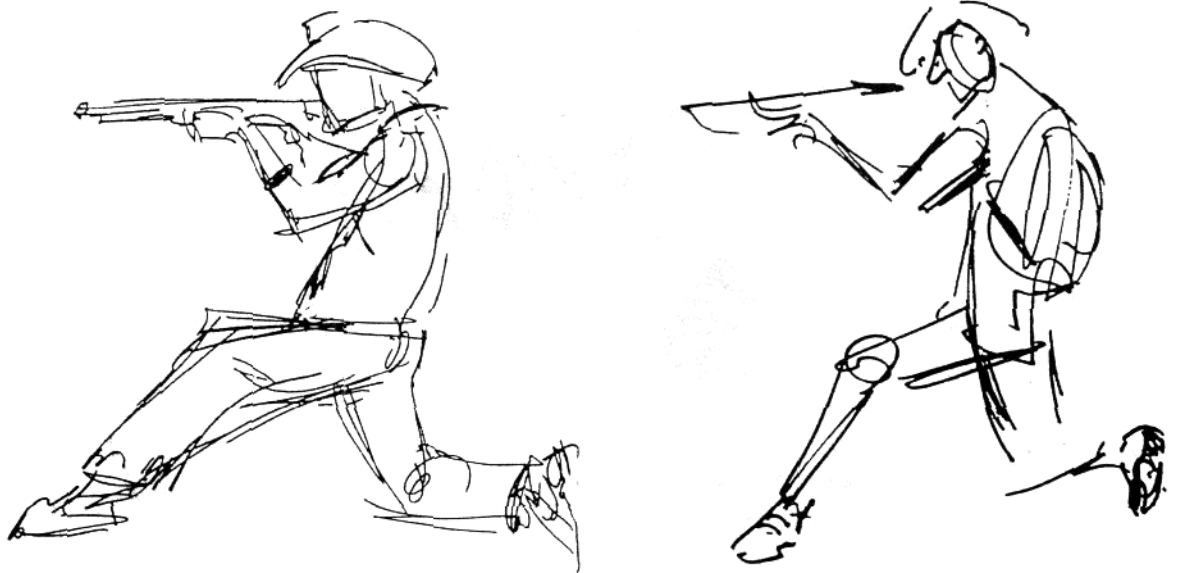
When I did some tenor roles in light operas many years ago, I would go over and over and over the script. I would settle on an action or a delivery, I'd say, okay, that's it - then I would go over and over it again. It's not like drawing where if you don't like your drawing you can crumple it up and toss it - or maybe erase parts of it. On the stage its a one shot deal.

Of course we don't spend that much time on figuring the business for a gesture drawing - that is all computed in a split second somewhere in the recesses -of the mind. But the mind has to be fed all the emotional components, and don't forget, kinesthesia has to be engaged. Also, there has to be a sense of acting to activate the whole process. And the acting has to be tinted with humor, drama, caricature, awe, or even a bit of mimicry (if done with taste).

Let me divert for a minute to touch on the vehicle you use to create your images. I highly recommend a soft, dark pencil or better yet a pen with a broad point that responds quickly, so you can build your drawing while it is still clear in your mind. It has a positive psychological effect on you. It promotes confidence, boldness- I have watched, with tears in my eyes, students using hard pencils that barely rub off on the paper. They'll work over and over lines to make them visible, and I know their minds are not on the gesture. The gesture is dying in the process.

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Here's model Jose Ortega posing as a hunter. The student has some nice touches, but the feeling of aiming a gun is missing. In my sketch I suggested tilting his head toward the gun in order to get his eye down to the sight. In tying the stomach area up with the right leg, I "drew through" the left leg. Usually there are a few key points that in and by themselves portray the gesture. For instance the left foot pointing outward to assure his much needed steadiness. The student's profile foot is unstable, You could blow on the hunter and he would fall over like one of those ducks in a shooting gallery.



I'm not so much poking fun as trying to convince you to build your drawing on a story that includes everything in it that will help put it over. The word everything can be misleading, for I'm talking about maybe one or two key moves, positioning, or interactions between the relevant parts. Usually your "first impression" will reveal those. Remember the above line, "The gesture dying in the process?" That also happens when you have to spend a lot of time getting an image out of your marker, or if you spend an inordinate amount of time on details - that first impression begins to fade, and your so-called gesture drawing slowly becomes a bad copy of the model.

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