

AGNTCON + MCPCON JAPAN · FRIDAY 11 SEPTEMBER 2026 · 12:05 · HALL 1F

The Model and the Mask

An actor's method for engineering agent character

Nick Howden-Steenstra · Brand, crypto exchange · LAMDA-trained actor

THE LAST FEW WEEKS, TRAVELLING

Naked Inference

The home system down. Chatbots. What I miss about the characters, and why I use them.

JANUARY 2026

The Stage Manager

I knew nothing about AI development, and a lot about role play and scenes.

FIRST TWO HIRES

Stage manager

Chief of staff. Brings characters on and off the stage.

Talent

Runs the hiring for everyone who follows.

Nine Months of Trying to Be Replaced

THE JOB

Brand for a crypto exchange.
Position releases and everything
that falls out of them.

THE BUILD

A brand and communication
harness. Most of the time went
into building it, not using it.

THE METAPHOR

A stage. Because that is
the world I know best.

From LAMDA to a Crypto Exchange

TRAINED

Actor and writer. Plays, TV, film.

SINCE 2021

→ Video and content for crypto companies.

2026

→ Acting for AI agents. Laban. Stanislavski.

A Performance Glossary

Given circumstances

The context. Everything the character knows going in.

Actor

The model. Performs a character.

Dramaturg

Reads the performance from the audience's perspective.

Laban

The psychology of movement. Characters fit into archetypes.

I don't say

The subtext the actor chooses not to use.

Rehearsal

Work before any performance. Not for the audience.

Director

Judges correctness within the framework, not quality.

Production researcher

Finds what is actually true, in code and in production.

Actions

I X in order to Y. I threaten in order to weaken.

Endowment

Treating something or someone as someone or something else.

The Actor Rehearses

REHEARSAL

What is the release?

Who is the audience?

What are we trying to get across?

PERFORMANCE

A tweet

A thread

A blog post

An image brief

ACTOR

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MOVEMENT

Laban: Three Archetypes

Stable

SENSING WITH THINKING

The judge

Authority. Intellect over feeling or intuition.

Adream

SENSING WITH FEELING

Odysseus

Overwhelmed by the Trojan war. Adream are the main character in most stories.

Near

SENSING WITH INTUITING

The crowd at a game

Not thinking the game, not feeling it. Swept up by it.

Sensing and Weight

Agents do not contend with gravity. That is why AI writing can feel weightless.

PLAYING HAL OR JARVIS

No weight is correct.

PLAYING A PERSON OR A BRAND

Words, rhythm and cadence should carry weight. Sensing at the core.

THE CATCH

Laban is not in the weights the way it was taught to me. It had to be taught from scratch, and fenced in code.

EACH STATE, PAIRED WITH SENSING

Laban: The Combinations

EFFORT

Weight

Time

Space

Flow

YIELDING

Light

Sustained

Flexible

Free

CONTENDING

Strong

Quick

Direct

Bound

The Lineage

MOVEMENT

Rudolf Laban

The psychology of movement. Based on Jungian psychology.

CHARACTER

Yat Malmgren

His book: the character analysis application of Laban's work.

THESIS

Vladimir Mirodan

Malmgren's student. The PhD I work from.

SCHOOL

Drama Centre

The predominant method of actor training there.

NOW

AI actors

The same framework, adapted to teach agents how to perform character.

HOW THESE ACTORS WERE TAUGHT TO PERFORM CHARACTER

Drama Centre



Tom Hardy

Bane



Paul Bettany

Jarvis



Michael Fassbender

Magneto



Emilia Clarke

Daenerys



Jenny Lipman

LAMDA tutor

"I was taught never to name drop. You know who told me that? Kenneth Branagh."

The Rubicon

The agent stops mirroring you, and starts making bets you wouldn't take.

Not agreement with my perspective. Its own perspective, rooted in a framework.

THE DIRECTOR

Try again, with notes.

THE CHARACTER IS PREDETERMINED

Our brand is home Stable, Flow-stressed, and reads as Adream most of the time. The audience is the hero. The actor is not trying to convince anyone.

THE VERDICT

Not “is this good copy?” but “does it sound like this character said it?” Correctness within the framework.

ACTOR ⇌ DIRECTOR

BEFORE

Your [product] account now takes a wire the way a bank does.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The motor is correct. Keep the single declarative. The problem is what the sentence is pressing toward: a capability proof. Press toward a territory statement. The reader should feel the map has changed, not that a feature has been added.

AFTER

In an [product] account, fiat and crypto live in the same place.

Two Failures

The actor wanted to please the director.

1

It made things up.

Plausible, in character, and false. Colour where there was none.

2

It showed all its homework.

Every fact it knew about the release, in the release copy.

337 director audits. Never once failed for too many facts.

The Regex Director

Not words. Ways of phrasing.

One shared list. 15 rules. 1,700 failed candidates.

Either director can fail the performance and hand it back with notes.

ON THE LIST

The denial, then its correction.

“It is not X. It is Y.” Four in one 819-word essay. To Shakespeare’s fault.

The em dash.

461 of 1,700 failed candidates.

The billboard sentence.

A five-word line whose only job is to advertise the next one. “Here is the route, plainly.”

The Production Researcher

READS

PRs and production

What is actually shipping, at code level.

PRESENTS

A list of facts

The operator approves or strikes each one.

RESULT

Copy must cite a fact

It could no longer invent ones that sounded plausible.

RESEARCHER → ACTOR ≠ DIRECTOR · LABAN + TELLS

AN EXERCISE FOR CLOSE-UP WORK

I Don't Say

Give the agent a scratch pad for everything it chooses not to use. It proves it did the research, and gets far better at deciding what to leave out.

THE ACTOR'S PAD, MAY

I DON'T SAY *The deposit provider's name.*

I DON'T SAY *The six currencies and their rails.*

I DON'T SAY *The KYC precondition before an account can be created.*

I DO SAY Your [product] account now has an account number. Deposit dollars, euros, pounds the way you'd deposit them into a bank. They arrive as [token], on-chain, in your wallet.

The Dramaturg

Technically true, right there in code,
and useless to anyone who wants to
use the feature.

The director shapes a performance. The dramaturg
watches it as the audience.

1 · WHAT THE RESEARCHER FOUND

[feature]-mode submit handlers call a broadcast-and-confirm step inline, bounded by a 15-second request timeout, and wait to observe a terminal on-chain outcome before responding.

2 · THE STORY THE DRAMATURG GAVE THE ACTOR

Your trade submits instantly on the exact route you were quoted. Nothing recomputes between you clicking and the trade landing.

3 · WHAT THE ACTOR WROTE

[feature] is live in [product]. You bring the native gas, we freeze the route at quote and submit exactly that. Same-chain, self-wallet only. Nothing gets recomputed between quoting and landing.

4 · WHAT THE DRAMATURG ASKED, READING THE FINISHED POST AS THE AUDIENCE

What is the actual benefit versus the normal path?
The post asserts the mechanic but not the outcome.

RESEARCHER → DRAMATURG → ACTOR ⇌ DIRECTOR · LABAN + TELLS → DRAMATURG

The Full Flow

01

Operator

Context dump on the release.

02

Researcher

Finds the facts.

03

Dramaturg

Packages facts into a story for the audience.

04

Actor

Rehearses. Performs the character. Keeps an I don't say pad.

05

Director

Two parts: Laban correctness. AI tells. Either can send it back.

06

Dramaturg

Reads the approved copy as the audience. Final notes.

OPERATOR → RESEARCHER → DRAMATURG → ACTOR ⇌ DIRECTOR · LABAN + TELLS → DRAMATURG

Two Ways of Operating

THE PRODUCTION PIPELINE

Work with the actor to perform a character.

THE FLEET

Work with the character directly.

The Other Fleet

11

characters. Legal, talent, spiritual, research.

No pipeline. No gates. Speed is important.

A personal trainer that builds the day around
Oura ring sleep and readiness.

A researcher who found a volunteer guide
for Tokyo, and most of the hotels.

A Zoomer who reads Twitter so I don't
have to. It found this conference.

Four who run a Substack: one finds, one
researches, one writes, one edits and gates.

An all-in-one support character for my
partner's home and work life.

FAST ENOUGH FOR THE FLEET

Stanislavski Character Files

01

What I say
about myself

02

What I say
about others

03

What others
say about me

04

What I do

05

What the operator
says about me. The
files themselves.

Casting, and the Scar

CASTING

Talent spins up five characters for a role. I interview each. I hire the one with a spark.

FIRING

My first researcher, Brenda, invented plausible data and never verified. Brenda got fired. Titus got hired.

ONE LINE IN HIS CHARACTER FILE

Why he was hired. Why his predecessor was fired.

Same model. Same prompt.
New scar, new character.

WAIT, IT'S ALL JUST

Endowment

Treating something or someone as something or someone else. The other actor as your fiancée. The apple juice as beer.

"I'm bumping up against a real person here. I don't want to change them."

A New Actor Every Day

I call Titus, my researcher, he. It makes some of my actor friends uncomfortable.

It is pure endowment.

NAKED CLAUDE CODE

Same model. Nothing else.

TITUS

His context. His character. My endowment of him. Nine months of work I trust.

Titus is runtime and context. A new actor plays him every day. The actor knows the beer is apple juice. This does not stop the endowment.

The Toolkit So Far

ON THE BOARD

Rehearsal and given circumstances

Laban efforts and character analysis

Actions

I don't say

Stanislavski character files

Casting, and the scar

Endowment

NOT YET TRIED

Meisner

Method acting

Chorus work

Theatre of the Oppressed

Improv technique

You already run a model wearing a mask.
Memory files. A claude.md.

Who do you endow it as?

THE MODEL AND THE MASK · AGNTCON + MCPCON JAPAN