

Learning How to Act: a Jigsaw Exercise

There are many schools of acting and theories about how to best get into character and to prepare for a role. Some actors spend many years honing their craft and believe it is a way of living, not just work. There are also some who would discount any "schooled acting" and believe it shouldn't be dissected and analyzed. As Humphrey Bogart once said, "The key to good acting is to remember your lines and don't trip over the furniture." But more often than not, actors are approaching their work seriously and with well-practiced skill. It's a very competitive world after all.

In order to learn this body of material - which can be quite extensive - arrange students into a jigsaw activity. Break into 6 groups, assign each group one of the topics on Acting technique listed below. Give them the handout to read and the flexibility to do some searches on the web - there are many on acting technique. Each group is to make a poster highlighting all the important points to share with the group on their technique.

Web Links:

Acting Gold Mine (links, articles, resources) www.actinggoldmine.com/

Stanislavski Biography (Stanislavski site)

www.kryingsky.com/Stam/Biography/bot.html

Resource Page (comprehensive list of books & sites)

www.redbirdstudio.com/AWOL/acting1.html

Lee Strasberg (official Lee Strasberg site, Method Acting)

www.strasberg.com/

Method Acting (explanation of Method Acting)

www.theatrgroup.com/Method/

ABWAG Acting School (an Acting school, alternative to Method Acting)

www.abwag.com/

Acting Quiz (interesting acting quiz from the ABWAG school)

www.abwag.com/acting_quiz_2.htm

Acting (acting resource site)

<http://free.prohosting.com/~jez/>

Meyerhold Biography (Meyerhold site)

www.dartington.ac.uk/~r.walton/work/meyerhold.htm

Acting Styles

A. "Technique"

Technique is sometimes thought of as acting "from the outside in". Actors are aware of the outside environment when they develop their work. The elements to consider are: the script, the stage, the physical personality, the emotional and intellectual personality and the physical movement within the play. The ultimate aim of the actor is to create a believable character who fits the playwrights plan. Actors are great imitators - watch how people walk, move, speak and gesture as they communicate. They must always listen, watch and pay close attention to details.

Sir Laurence Olivier, a renowned Shakespearean actor (known primarily in theatre though has also done film roles), is generally considered a Technical actor.

B. "Method"

Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) created "Method Acting" and has had a huge effect upon actors. Stanislavski proposed a new system for acting and has produced many books about preparation and characterisation.

"Everything an actor does is based on the characters internal NEED. Nothing is divorced from the desire and the objective of the character".

Stanislavski created seven steps to building a character. These are:

- ❖ Who Am I?
- ❖ Where Am I?
- ❖ When Is It?
- ❖ What Do I Want?
- ❖ Why Do I Want It?
- ❖ How Will I Get It?
- ❖ What Do I Need To Overcome?

This is a process of enquiry for both the character and their motivation for acting is desire driven. These seven aspects recognize the purpose of both your character and its movement.

C. "Actor's Studio:

Method Acting was brought to The Actor's Studio, the famous New York method-acting studio and the Theater Institute in Hollywood, through the work of **Lee Strasberg**.

The teaching includes techniques of:

- ❖ Relaxation
- ❖ Concentration
- ❖ Sense Memory
- ❖ Improvisation
- ❖ Cold Reading
- ❖ Affective Memory

Actors learn how to create a life for a character. This includes such specifics as:

- 1) Breaking down a script
- 2) Understanding a character's: choices, inner actions, physical actions, script subtext, emotions and perceptions, motivations.

Some well known Method actors are James Dean, Paul Newman, Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando, Dustin Hoffman, Robert DeNiro, Meryl Streep and Marilyn Monroe to name a few. Known simply as "method", it has probably had the greatest influence on theatre, film and television.

D. "Biomechanics"

Another teacher, a disciple of Stanislavski, is **Meyerhold**. He took the "method" further into the physical world. His teaching is something called "Biomechanics"

(or referred to as BM). It focusses on the performer's expressive movement (head, shoulders, arms, hands) to communicate emotion or attitude. Biomechanics, is a system of training aimed at making the body carry out a set task in the most efficient way possible. Meyerhold approached the technique as a system for training actors, but it can be used to perfect any movement.

"If we observed a skilled worker in action we notice the following in his movements;

- (1) an absence of superfluous, unproductive movements;*
 - (2) rhythm;*
 - (3) the correct positioning of the body's centre of gravity; (4) stability."*
- [Meyerhold, 1922]

Actors trained in this system would be part athletes, part acrobats and part animated machine. The actors worked on perfecting a constant awareness of themselves in space, they were to display no emotion. Basically they developed their bodies so that they could carry out any action in neutrality. Individuals could then add to this neutral state a single action or gesture that would epitomise a single emotion or event. Meyerhold looked in great detail at exactly what expression communicated what emotion. Using his actors with their advanced knowledge of themselves, Meyerhold could then compose directly to the stage abstract movement that communicated stories and emotion.

"The actor must train his material [the body] so that he is capable of executing instantaneously those tasks which are dictated externally."

[Meyerhold, 1922]

E. Advice from Hamlet to the Players:

"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounc'd it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use it gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who, for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipp'd for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod. Pray you avoid it."

See Hamlet Act 3, Scene 2 for the entire speech.

F. Augusto Boal

"Games for Actors and Non-Actors"

This book examines acting for social change. The purpose is to engage actors and non-actors in issues of social justice and working to make change. Another book is called, "Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy and Activism". His visionary technique encourages spectators to become spectators; active participants rehearsing strategies for change. The purpose of theatre is changed and the actor is involved on a different level. It is also referred to as *Theatre of Oppressed*.