

April 13, 2020

This Week's Theatre Activity

from

DTC's Department of Education & Community Engagement:

Acting Exercise—Exploring “Given Circumstances”

One of the greatest acting teachers of contemporary theatre was a man named Konstantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski often coached his students to reflect on the “given circumstances” in a play: that is, what are the circumstances surrounding a character’s words and actions? Think about how someone’s circumstances might change the way they say the words, “I’ve got it.” A character who is a baseball player might say the words when calling off her teammates in the outfield as she moves in place to catch a fly ball. A character who has been confused about a puzzle clue might say the words as he gets a great idea to solve the problem. The circumstances, then, influence how actors might use their voices and bodies to express the lines and action in a play. Actors in plays will spend time reading the play, thinking about the circumstances that are provided by the playwright, and using their imaginations to build upon those circumstances to better understand how and why characters behave the way they do.

This activity is called “Open Scenes,” an activity that exercises the actor’s three tools of mind, body, and voice as they consider and make choices based on the given circumstances in a scene. These short scenes are expressly designed to sound a little vague at first (even the characters are only named “A” and “B” right now). Act out the scenes with a partner, and change the circumstances each time you try the scene.

Open Scene I

A: What do you want to do?

B: Nothing.

A: Nothing?

B: That’s right.

A: Sounds good to me.

(B takes a deep breath.)

Given Circumstances

Circumstance 1: Characters A and B are friends. It is their first day of summer vacation after a busy school year.

Circumstance 2: Character A is a hair stylist/barber. Character B knows that Character A is new on the job with very little experience.

Circumstance 3: Characters A and B are family members whose car ran out of gas on their way to a surprise birthday party. Character A promised to fill the tank beforehand but did not. Character A also promised to buy the birthday present beforehand but did not. Character B knows that Character A did not do either of the things they said they would do.

How did each version of your scene change as the circumstances change? What did you notice about your partner’s vocal or physical expression? What do those voice and body changes tell you about the actor’s thinking?

Try this next scene and the various given circumstances, too.

Open Scene 2

A: What's that?

B: What's what?

A: That.

B: Oh, nothing. Just something I—found.

A: It's for me, isn't it?

B: *(After a pause)* Why would you say that?

Given Circumstances

Circumstance 1: Character B has a ring and is getting ready to propose marriage to Character A once all their friends and family arrives to witness the big moment.

Circumstance 2: Character B has a ring and is getting ready to propose marriage to unseen Character C. Character A and Character B used to date a long time ago.

Circumstance 3: Characters A and B are pirates seeking treasure on an island. Character A is the captain of the pirate ship. Character B is considering his/her options.

Which elements of the scenarios in each of the given circumstances were especially helpful to you as an actor in making choices for how you behaved or spoke? How does “specificity” affect your ability as an actor to understand your characters and their situations?

Try the scenes again and flip roles. Or try them and invent your own circumstances to explore. Think about characters' relationships, ages, the setting for the scene, the action that is happening, and the characters' history (sometimes referred to as “back story”) in your circumstances. And as you work, know that you are exploring the same process that actors have used for over one hundred years, thanks to the pioneering teaching of Stanislavski!



Konstantin Stanislavski, courtesy of German Federal Archives. Used according to Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Germany.

Theatre is for all ages and abilities. Find creative ways to get everyone involved in the activity!

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