

## THOUGHTS ON ACTOR PREPARATION

I want to write down for you some of the steps that I feel are important and useful in actor's preparation. Steps you can take before you come to rehearsal. As soon as you get the script. These are actor's preparations and techniques. They may have nothing to do with the writer's intentions or preparations or techniques. **THEY ARE FOR YOU THE ACTOR.** These notes are meant to be a clue to a thought process. Sometimes they are not even full sentences. These techniques complement your work in voice and movement and your instincts and talent. Try to follow them through. Write things down.

I prefer to use the work "*Spine*" rather than "*Super Objectives*", because it has resonance as an essential organic element. The spine is the central armature around which the body is organized. It is part of our basic character language. We say "*someone has spine*" when we refer to a gutsy, determined person's behavior. Or conversely someone with "*no spine*" refers to a weakling.

1. Read the play. Read it again and again and again. Some thoughts on reading the play. Read consciously! All of your thoughts, feelings, images and responses of any kind can serve you in this early work. Pay attention as you read. Do you "*see*" images? Does your inner ear "*hear*" the play? Are there physical responses? These will be connected to feelings, i.e. you may feel your lip curl with disdain or notice a frown on your face or tears may form. This is not the time to do anything about these. Simply notice them or write them down.

Each time you turn back to Act I, Scene I, Page 1 you will discover that these "*subjective*" responses will change as you gain more information about the task at hand. You will want to continue reading as more possibilities make themselves felt through your actor's "*equipment*".

Remember that you are beginning a relationship here. You are gathering information in a subjective way in order to take this knowledge of the play to the next, more objective step in the pre-rehearsal process.

Having "*experienced*" the play in many different ways, you are now in a position to think about it.

2. Compress the story into a short paragraph of four or five sentences. Just facts, no opinion, no psychology, simply the story. Use no adjectives, which are subjective, or as few as possible in telling the story. "*Just the facts, ma'am*".

(I'm going to take you through some of my thought processes when I was working on Hamlet for Great Lakes Theater Festival).

"Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is told by his friend Horatio that the ghost of late King Hamlet is outside Elsinore castle. Hamlet learns from his father's ghost that he was slain by his own brother Claudius, now king. He begs his son to revenge the murder and Claudius' hasty marriage to Gertrude, young Hamlet's mother and the late king's widow. Laertes, son of the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius, warns his sister Ophelia against Hamlet's advances. Ophelia tells her father that a very disturbed Hamlet has visited her. Polonius tells the king that Hamlet is mad for Ophelia's love. Hamlet has actors perform a play into which he reconstructs Claudius' murder of the late king. Claudius' reaction to the play proves his guilt to Hamlet. Polonius, hiding behind a curtain, is fatally stabbed by Hamlet who says he mistook him for the king. Frightened, Claudius sends Hamlet to England. Ophelia becomes distraught and commits

suicide. Hamlet returns and Claudius and Laertes plot to kill him, Laertes seeking to revenge his father's murder and his sister's suicide, with a poisoned foil, mortally wounds Hamlet, but the rapiers are exchanged and Hamlet kills Laertes, then the king. The queen having taken poison intended for her son, also dies. The play ends with Hamlet's body being carried off in honor."

This seems too wordy, not condensed enough.

"In the winter of 1601 in Elsinore, Denmark, the ghost of the murdered King, Old Hamlet confronts his son, Prince Hamlet, and demands to be avenged. Hamlet traps his Uncle Claudius, and the new husband of his mother, Gertrude, into revealing his guilt. Hamlet kills Polonius, the King's counsellor and father to Laertes and Ophelia, by mistake, and is exiled to England. Claudius' plan to kill Hamlet is thwarted and Ophelia goes mad and drowns. Laertes returns from France to avenge the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia but in a fencing match staged by the treacherous Claudius, Laertes, with a poisoned foil mortally wounds Hamlet, who in turn stabs Laertes and Claudius to death. The queen having taken poison intended for her son, also dies."

This reminds one of the story; the essential elements of communication after the acting problems have been worked out. YOUR CHARACTER'S NAME MAY NOT FIGURE PROMINENTLY OR AT ALL IN TELLING THE STORY. Note that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern aren't mentioned in the story although they figure in the plot.

3. REDUCE THE PLAY'S MESSAGE TO A SLOGAN – in words that stimulate you the actor. It helps you grasp the tone of the play by distilling its essence; like a punchy bumper sticker.

*Hamlet*

Readiness is all

Is that really a good capsulation of the play? Does it help me grasp the play?

Thought colors action – and should.

(This seems an "*idea*" to me. It may be right but it doesn't get me going).

When politics and power prevail, It devours the human heart and spirit (Too long. Not compressed enough).

Since my point of view for this production was the casual way the young people were sacrificed for power politics, this last theme statement had the most turn-on for me.

Politics/power kill heart and spirit.

Notice that the change in wording makes you feel differently about the play.

Try to find the fewest and most pungent words for your phrase.

4. Phrase the Spine of the play with an active verb. A short sentence that generates the "*life*" of the play- what makes it "breathe", move forward? Every character is moved forward by this spine, active verb, or breath (life force, forward energy) of the play. Don't give up easily. Think about the action of the whole play, not just your character or the main character. What unites all of the characters and try to put it into words.

Keep refining the verb until it jumps off the page for you.

An example of a statement of spine for the whole play of *Hamlet* might be “*to grab hold of life at every moment*”.

In *Hamlet*, this must be true of Polonius and Guildenstern as well as Hamlet if it is to have usefulness for the actor. I think the one above is pretty good for Hamlet. Although a play as complex as *Hamlet* might be subject to other statements of its spine which would be just as apt and true. You have to test it for every character. If it is accurate and really is the “*spine*” of the play, you can see how active this phrasing could be.

If you have worked at finding the right articulation and words for the spine, it will then inform every decision you make for the play. It helps you make choices. It gives you a framework to operate from.

5. Phrase your character’s spine. To be useful it should relate to the spine of the play so that you are part of the whole. Find the most active verb that will justify every action of the character to the end of the play. Hamlet ruminates a lot, but he also fights a duel with Laertes, writes a play, stages a mad scene and displays other “*active*” choices. His spine must encompass all of this in order to be helpful to the actor.

“*Hamlet*” – “*To face every moment and do what is right*”.

“*To face*” is too general. It’s like the word “*survival*” – by itself it doesn’t mean much.

“*To confront every choice in life and act out what my mind and heart tell me is right*”.

“*To confront every choice in life and act out that choice.*”

You can see that I’ve now conditioned every general word in my first spine statement.

Trying to be specific and charged. “*Confront*” is more active than “*face*”, etc.

So why doesn’t Hamlet kill Claudius at prayer? THE TEXT WON’T LET HIM. This conditions your spine at that moment. It doesn’t change it.

“*To think through every decision and determine what is the appropriate action*”.

“*To think through*” goes backward. It’s less active than “*to confront*”. I’m trying to illustrate how one keeps working over and over and re-working words and phrases till they seem to “*activate*” your self.

If this phrasing of my spine is correct, it should stimulate me as an actor. It should help me weed out choices in behavior from the many possibilities that every scene and line offer. It leaves out “*the how*”. “*Confront*” how? By sword, by deception etc. But it seems very active and fun to play. You keep testing it at the table work and when you get on your feet. You keep refining it and re-defining it till it becomes something that truly represents your discovery in working through the preparation and rehearsals and performances of the play.

Will the play’s spine relate to a character like Ophelia who seems to be a passive character? How can I phrase her spine?

Ophelia – “*to question everyone’s action without direct confrontation*”.

“*To observe and overtly question everyone’s actions without direct confrontation*”.

Remember this is all an exercise. It keeps you connected to the life of the play. It keeps you thinking and searching in an active mode.

THIS WORK IS ONLY FOR YOU. You don't have to share it with the other actors or your director. It gives you a way of working on a role, shaping it. You continually check it against the playwright's intentions, your partner's actions, and the director's vision. It is used to clarify and enhance your ability to make choices. All actors do this whether they are aware of it or not. THIS IS HOW YOU MAKE IT A CONSCIOUS PROCESS SO YOU ARE IN CONTROL OF YOUR CRAFT. This is how you make it a conscious process so you are in control of your craft. Other actors might say, "*This feels right*" or "*I'll just do something till it feels right*". But not making it a conscious process can lead to confusion or justifying lines without an understanding of a character's inner life. CRAFT PUTS YOU IN CONTROL.

It does not rule out subconscious discoveries that occur when you set the right behavior in action or the happy accidents that can happen WITH YOUR PARTNER WHEN YOU STAY OPEN to respond during the rehearsal process. It is not the end, it is a means towards an end. Acting must always be open-ended. But the artist is in control.

There is other work you can do as preparation. All along the way you have spontaneous thoughts and questions that you might write down. Creating a psychological profile that is imaginative, but stimulated by the words and actions of the character as well as by what other characters say about you.

Then there is the breaking down of each scene into actions and beats. All written in the margin so it is available to you.

With texts of heightened language such as Shakespeare, Chekov, Moliere, you can analyze, identify and start work on your voice and diction problems: "*eh*" "*ih*" substitutions, final consonants, vowels that betray regionalisms, etc. All these can be identified, marked, highlighted and worked on before rehearsal begins.

Can you act without this preparation? Yes. Can there be great acting without every hearing of these methods? Absolutely. And if you think you are one of these geniuses, go for it. But all consistently achieving artists need and use some way to get beyond the panic, the anxiety, the chaos that often accompanies creation.

Gerald Freedman, Dean

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