

ACTING EXERCISES II: WITH TEXT

The acting exercises in this document suggest that all acting takes place between two people, but of course it's equally likely that an actor acts alone or in a large group.

Allowing for this range would produce unreadable English, so I have treated the duo as the standard. The follow exercises assume you are working with a text (screenplay) and they develop important skills at interpreting texts. They are intended to be applied to your rehearsals *after* you've done the initial dramatic beats breakdown. Some of these exercises are useful when actors get hung up during rehearsal or shooting.

Each exercise can serve as a resource to help solve common problems during rehearsal or production. Its “medicine chest” utility is provided under the heading “Useful when.” In alphabetical order, the main acting principles explored by the exercises with text (TXT) are as follows:

Actors' intrinsic characteristics, using	TXT-1
Beats	TXT-2
Beats, action at	TXT-5
Beats, characterizing	TXT-4
Character's inner life, spot-check for	TXT-8 (TXT-3)
Dramatic Units	TXT-2
Emotions, over-constrained	TXT-6
Improvisation, translating scene into	TXT-10
Indicating	TXT-7
Isolation, acting in	TXT-9
Interior monologue	TXT-3 (TXT-8)
Textual analysis	TXT-2

Exercise TXT-1: What the Actors Bring

Useful When The director wants to make thorough use of what each individual cast member brings.

Purpose To make decisions about the special qualities and characteristics of the actors for use in your thematic interpretation.

Activity After the read-through:

1. Make private notes capturing the intrinsic quality of each actor. This, for example, concerns an actor called Dale:

Dale has a slow, quiet, repressed quality that masks a certain pain and bitterness. He is watchful, highly intelligent, intense, and his first reaction is often a protective cynicism; really, it matters to him very much that he be liked. He reminds me of a stray cat, hungry and cold but cornered and defiant.

2. Develop ideas about how the actors' qualities can legitimately be used to polarize the performances, and how this will affect your thematic interpretation of the piece. For example:

Dale has the quality of honorable victimhood, and this stacks the cards interestingly against the father, who we assume has practiced subtle or overt violence against his son in the distant past, without Dale's mother caring to know.

Exercise TXT-2: Marking Beats in a Text

Useful When An actor fails to analyze a text satisfactorily.

Purpose To fully understand how the script functions and how to act it by locating the fulcrum points of emotional change, the beats (see “Scene Breakdown Sessions” in Chapter 21 and review “The Dramatic Units” in Chapter 4). Beats and dramatic units will also be important to your *mise-en-scène* (the combination of acting, blocking, camera placement, and editing that produces the dramatic image on film).

Activity Director and actors should separately study the scene looking for the beats. These are primarily the actor's concern, whereas dramatic units are mostly the

director's. A beat may be triggered by dialogue, an action, or incoming information such as a phone call. There may be one beat, or there may be several in a scene. All may belong to both characters or to only one, who may or may not be conscious of shifts in the other. The audience should be able to detect any important changes.

Discussion In rehearsal, agree where the beats are and what causes them.

Exercise TXT-3: Improvising an Interior Monologue

When an actor says he's got an interior monologue going, but his performance lacks evidence of it, ask for an out-loud inner monologue as a sure way to upgrade a so-so performance. Because it supplies a repeatable interior process, the inner monologue also helps stabilize a performance's timing. This is work that actors may evade or forget, but the mere possibility that you may ask for an out-loud version in front of other actors usually keeps them working at it.

Useful When A text refuses to come alive, and you need a powerful method of getting actors to externalize their understanding. Also good in rehearsal for unlocking intransigent trouble spots. Usually the problem lies with the actor's understanding, but sometimes it's with the writing itself.

Activity At a troublesome part of the text, have your actors improvise their characters' interior monologues. Ask them to use a full voice for the “out-loud” line, and a soft voice for the “thoughts voice,” or interior monologue. The cast may find this hard or baffling at first, and the scene will go at a snail's pace. But having to create publicly and on the spot always yields deeper understandings, and a high degree of commitment is unavoidable.

Discussion

1. Do the inner monologues show that your actors are on the same wavelength?
2. What did you (the director) learn from the actors?
3. What did you learn about your actors?
4. What do you think your actors learned about you and your approach?

Exercise TXT-4: Characterizing the Beats

Useful When You need to clarify and energize a scene or a passage that is muddy and lifeless.

Purpose To give each dramatic unit and its beats a clear intention and identity, which in turn sharpens each beat and fulcrum point. Also, to focus attention on subtext and on the actor's body language, movement, and voice range.

Activity

1. Ask the actors for their taglines for the steps leading toward each beat. Make sure each tag expresses volition. (Examples: "Leave me alone!"; "I need you to notice me"; "You're not going to hoodwink me again.") Correct any tag that is not in the active voice ("Let me go to sleep"—not, "I am being kept awake") so it expresses active will even when the character is being victimized. Each tagline should contain an element of "I want."
2. The actors play the actions and movements of the scene but speak only the tags as their dialogue. A character may have to say, "I need you to notice me" half a dozen times, developing the possibilities of the tag through bodily action and intonation, so they ramp up to the angry or desperate beat point. Where the text relied on verbal logic, they can now only use action, voice, and body as instruments of will. Shifting from verbal to physical and emotional expressiveness causes interesting developments in the actors' range of expression, with a corresponding increase in power.
3. Now have the actors play the scene as scripted, keeping the body and vocal expression developed previously—and marvel at the difference.

Discussion What did you learn:

1. About the actors from the movements they used this time?
2. About how they extended their emotional range?
3. About their communion once the exercise had forced it into continuous existence?

Exercise TXT-5: Actions at Beat Points

Useful When A scene seems monotonous, wordy, and cerebral, and actors are playing the scene “in general,” that is, with intellectually correct but generally applied ideas. An actor must build their scene from behaviorally authentic blocks, each made of a single, clearly defined emotion in a sequence of human striving. A scene in which one character shows several emotions will be effective only if he or she builds each separately and sequentially.

Purpose To focus and physicalize the beats and differentiate the behavioral phases of the scene. This technique shines a spotlight on turning points.

Activity When the beat points are located and tagged, ask the actors to devise several possible actions for their character at each beat, or change of awareness. When actors invent from their own emotional range, the action becomes authentic to both actor and character. Actions can start out multiple and exaggerated so the director and actor can locate which feels best, then focus it at an agreed level of subtlety.

Discussion

1. Could you see what is at stake for each character at each beat?
2. How much interpretational leeway is there at important beats?
3. What is the range of options in terms of behavior that could be appropriate?
4. Of the range presented, did the director choose the most telling? If not, why not?

Exercise TXT-6: Give Me Too Much!

Useful When One or more of your actors is constrained, and the scene is stuck in low gear.

Purpose To release actors temporarily from restrictive judgments they are imposing and give them permission to overact.

Activity Tell the actors that you feel the scene is bottled up, and you want them to reach for the same emotions but exaggerate them. Exaggeration gives actors permission to go to emotional limits they fear would look absurd.

Discussion You can now tell your cast what to change and at what new levels to pitch their energy and emotions. Often exaggeration alone clears a blockade. When actors

switch from dabbling fearfully in the shallows to leaping with abandon off the top diving board, they often find they can let go of a specific fear and do the elegant dive.

Exercise TXT-7: Let's Be British

Useful When A scene has become over-projected, artificial, and out of hand. Actors are indicating like crazy, and now feel that the scene is jinxed and will never work.

Purpose To return the actors to playing from character instead of striving for effect.

Activity Ask your actors to play the scene in a monotone, with emotion barely evident, but fully experiencing their character's bottled-up reality underneath the reticence.

Discussion

1. Did a scene that had turned into sound and fury return to basics?
2. Did repressing emotions heighten them?
3. How did the actors feel about it?

Exercise TXT-8: Spot-Check

Useful When A line or an action repeatedly fails to ring true.

Purpose To probe an actor's process at a particular moment. This exercise is like a breathalyzer test, jolting the actors into keeping up the inner lives of their characters for fear you will pull them over. Use sparingly.

Activity Simply stop a reading or an off-book rehearsal at the problem point and ask each actor for their character's thoughts, fears, and mental images at that moment.

Discussion

1. Did this flush out a misconception?
2. Was the actor making a forced emotional connection?
3. Did the actors' concentration change afterward?
4. What other effects did this exercise produce?

Exercise TXT-9: Switching Characters

Useful When Two actors seem stalemated and unaware of each other. This can arise when a defensive actor's over-preparation precludes communion, or when actors distrust or feel incompatible with each other.

Purpose To place each actor temporarily in the opposite role so later he or she can empathize with another character's predicament and achieve an interesting duality.

Activity Simply ask actors to exchange parts, without regard for sex, age, or anything else. Then have them return to their own parts to see if the reading changes.

Discussion

1. Actors: Say briefly what you discovered about the scene from playing the other role.
2. Actors: What revelations did you have about your own part?
3. Director: What did you notice after the actors resumed their own parts?

Exercise TXT-10: Translating a Scene into an Improvisation

Useful When The cast seems tired and unable to generate emotions the scene calls for. Keep improv scenes up your sleeve for any scene that may give trouble. Actors may initially resist your request, but they usually come to enjoy the refreshment after a scene has turned oppressive and immobile. Most will be impressed when you whisk out an alternative approach like this. This exercise can also release the malaise built up from repeated failures with the formal text.

Activity Take the main issue in the scene, or the one causing a problem, and translate it into two or three analogous scene subjects for improvisation. If, for example, you are having trouble in a scene of conflict between a daughter and her suspicious and restrictive father, you might assign analogous improves on:

- A scene between an officious nurse and a patient who wants to leave the hospital
- A bus driver and a rider who wants to get off the bus before the next stop
- Two customers in a long supermarket checkout line, one of whom, having only two items, wants to cut into the line

Each of these situations has a built-in conflict hinging on rights and authority, and tackling them rapidly one after another will generate a wider emotional vocabulary that will flow back into the original scene. A variation on this is to let the actors themselves invent analogous scenes. Further mileage is available by doing the improv again with roles reversed.

Discussion

1. Which improv worked best?
2. What came of switching roles?
3. What were the differences when the cast returned to the text?