

Acting Lessons: Say What?

Level: 2-4

written by: Joshua Nicholson

In this month's acting lesson, I'd like to talk to you about speaking on stage. When a playwright gives dialogue to an actor, whether spoken or in gestures, there is usually some reason for it...some purpose. Your job as an actor is to find that purpose and show it to the audience. And, if you can't find it, any good director will be more than happy to point it out for you.

Now, you shouldn't feel that this applies only to "big parts" (i.e. characters with lots of lines). Whether you have one line or one thousand, you should treat each of them with the same amount of purpose.

This also entails speaking all lines so that they can be heard. Even if you're in a "quiet moment" on stage, you still have to speak loud enough for everyone to hear, including the old guy sitting in the back who is hard of hearing. If you're not delivering your line(s) so as to be heard, you're cheating the audience. Here's a good rule of thumb to gauge volume: "If you feel like you're shouting, you're speaking at just the right volume." Don't worry; the director will tell you if you're too loud.

Now that everyone can hear you, it's time to talk a bit about importance. Although there's a reason for each line to be there, it doesn't mean that each should stand out equally.

It's like a piece of classical music. Although the continual march of a tuba is painfully important (i.e. purposeful), it rarely has the melody, and thus should not be as pronounced as the instrument with the melody. If you took that tuba out, it wouldn't be at all the same or nearly as good.

This musical concept should be applied to acting. You might not have any speaking lines at all; you may be an extra, but the concept still holds true. Just as the tuba completes the musical picture, extras complete the overall effect of what's presented on stage. Remember the old phrase, "There are no small parts, only small actors."

"But, Joshua, I thought you were talking about speaking on stage."

I still am. As the saying goes, "Actions speak louder than words." This is the reason that I mentioned dialogue as being either spoken or made with *gestures*. When you don't have lines, speak with your actions. Show some intent, some reason of why you're where you are and why you're doing what you're doing. Show some (say it with me) *purpose*.

If you stand out when you're not supposed to, you've missed your purpose and probably weren't doing what you were supposed to. You can sort of compare it to somebody running sound, whether it be for a concert or church or whatever. As long as everything sounds good, you don't directly notice the guy. But, once microphones start ringing and everything gets out of whack, you most definitely notice him, and you know he's not doing his job. Be the smooth-running sound guy.

"But, Joshua, what if you're not a sound guy? What if you're the one standing at the microphone?"

What's that? You say you've gone from being a tuba to being a trumpet? Well, first off, congratulations. And, secondly, get ready for some hard work. As an extra, you were part of a large team of horses pulling the carriage. Individually, your load was pretty easy because you had so many others who were helping you pull. Now, you've become the driver, dictating *where* the horses should pull and at what speed.

You now have a nice bundle of lines to memorize, but remember, just because you have more lines does not mean that any of them have decreased in

purpose. Each line is still just as important as every other line. Some of them just need to be a bit more pronounced than others. So, in truth, you've become more than just a trumpet; you're now the whole brass section, and your co-stars are the woodwinds and the strings (so as not to leave anybody out, we'll say that the stage hands—those who work behind the scenes—are the percussion instruments in our symphony of theatre; the director is, of course, the conductor).

In most cases, when you're the lead character, you not only have to memorize the boatload of lines you've been assigned but also nearly everyone else's lines so as to know what your cues are. Memorizing all of the lines around your own not only helps you to keep track of where things are going; if someone forgets/misses a line, you're one of the few who can cover and have it make sense. By this time, the audience will be so used to hearing you talk that they'll think it was one of your own lines and never know the difference.

This leads back to the whole business of purpose. The *purpose* of you picking up these missed lines is to keep things running smoothly and making as much sense as they would if they were spoken correctly.

Well, that's the end of this lesson. I hope you learned something, but you shouldn't stop there. The old saying, "Knowledge is power," is a bit misleading. What it should state is, "*Applied* knowledge is power." So, don't just leave this stuff sitting on the backburner. Pick it up and start using it. You might notice a change for the better in your quality of acting.

© 2003 Joshua Nicholson and Mr. Jotz Productions. All rights reserved.

<http://www.ActorToActor.com>