

## TO BE OR NOT TO BE – THE CHARACTER

Characterization has been called the nuts and bolts of the acting process. Some teachers and directors consider it the be-all and end-all of acting. Characterization can be defined as the process by which the character in a play script becomes a three-dimensional human being who exists within the given circumstances of a specific theatrical production.

Does the actor actually "become" the character? The master teachers and directors have been doing that for years. Some practical approaches are needed which an actor can use to make the transition from self to character.

Many teachers think that the starting place is to fill out characterization worksheets. When and where was the character born, what kind of family background did she have, what are her intellectual and emotional qualities, what are the socioeconomic factors that have influenced her life -- and so on.

Pages of rich background information can be written on each character. Eventually it might be noticed that there is little connection between what students write and what they bring to the stage. They could write rich and detailed characterizations, but very little of the depth and reality they put on paper might make its way into their performance.

This is a perplexing dilemma. How can students be helped to create on stage the interesting, well-rounded characters that they could conceive on paper? What is the difference between what an actor knows to be true about his character and what he can actually play on stage?

Take, for example, an actor who states that his character comes from a poverty-stricken, dysfunctional family. If that actor attempts to demonstrate on stage this particular background fact, then he is "indicating," not acting at all. This is the very common actor trap of phony, amateurish acting.

Robert Cohen, in his book *ACTING POWER*, puts it this way. Character, he explains, is defined through behavior; an audience knows a character by how she acts, moves through space, uses language, and chooses tactics. The next obvious question, then, is what determines character behavior? A character's behavior, just like a human being's, is shaped by what she wants. A complex system of needs and wants dictates a character's behavior at any given moment of the play. Characterization can then be redefined as the process by which an actor discovers the system of needs and wants (objectives, if you will) and translates it into believable action on stage.

The first step in the characterization process is the homework, and, make no mistake, creating character involves a great deal of homework. It is both written and acted, done in solitude and brought to the rehearsal space in the form of possible objectives, verbs, actions, and tactics.

A good strategy would be to read the play through three or four times. Jot down ideas or images that occur to you as you read. Underline, circle, or star lines and passages that have special significance. When thoroughly familiar with the play it's time to begin questioning, jotting down answers, and getting into action to try things out. Remember, it's called "acting" for a reason. Your best discoveries happen on your feet while you're taking action.

Start this part of the process with the following three questions. Remember to pose all character questions and answers in the first person. It makes the work more direct and personal, and it takes the process out of your head, off the paper, and into your body.

1. What do I want? (What you want leads directly to a statement of objectives. Remember to choose a strong verb.)
2. What or who is standing in my way? Identifying obstacles is crucial, as it gives you something specific to fight against or overcome. It is at this specific point of conflict where the most exciting theatre happens.
3. What am I willing to do to get what I want? How far will I go? What am I willing to try? Generate as many tactical options as you can.

As the process of character building continues, some gaps may have to be filled in. Objectives, needs, and behaviors do not happen in a vacuum. They come from the character's experiences and background information -- the given circumstances. Given circumstances are all the details that make a character what she is, all the forces that are acting on the character at any given moment. How these given circumstances affect your character determines how the character views the world. And worldview determines behavior.

Here are some specific given circumstances to consider as you complete your character homework.

1. Where are you, and how does this location affect you? What city, state, country? Are you indoors or out? Describe the locale in detail. How do you feel about where you are? What is the time of day, time of year? Is it hot or cold? How does this weather affect you? How does it make you behave?
2. What is the political, religious, and economic environment? How does it affect your behavior, your attitude toward life?
3. What factors in your background helped to shape your view of the world? Where were you born, how were you raised? What are the significant events that shaped your life? If the play does not specifically address these circumstances, go ahead and create your own. Our behavior in the present tense, our current set of needs that propels us to act are often based on events in the past. Be specific; be detailed.
4. Robert Cohen talks of private audience. Who is your private audience? For whom do you secretly perform? Whose respect do you crave?

Whose envy would you like to solicit? Is it a parent, an ex-lover, a boss, or God?

5. What are your private victories, your most dreaded defeats? What makes you happy? What makes you unhappy? Fantasize or act out the perfect victory for you character. Create the worst defeat. Don't just write about it -- live it, act it out, speak in character.

The next step is to take this homework to the rehearsal space and begin to make action and behavior choices as you work through the scenes with your acting partners and your director.

It is important to understand that all this character work is for nothing if the character does not live honestly in the moment. As a matter of fact, the homework merely provides support and foundation for the more crucial part of the process, and that is living the scene truthfully. The lifeblood of characterization is flowing when a character can then make the necessary adjustments and fight back once again for what she wants.

This cycle happens continuously through the play. It is a reciprocal, unbroken chain: each character tries to get a need met, listens and watches to find out how effective the tactic has been, makes an adjustment, and goes in for another try. This is the essence of what some actors and directors call "throughline of dramatic action," and it is the payoff for all your work on characterization. When the throughline is unbroken, characters are rich, believable, and clear. The electricity between them is real, and theatre magic happens.