CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT - GET PHYSICAL

When you're building a character, you want to spend as much time developing the outside as the inside.

Actors often get caught up with internal development: objectives, relationships, back story, learning lines and blocking. It's easy to forget the physical side to character development; how you appear to an audience. Physicalization is a powerful tool. How do you build a character from the outside in?

Exercise

Google and download images of the character Oberon from A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM. You will find numerous examples, all of which will look completely different from one another.

Divide the class into groups, giving each group one picture without saying who is in the picture. Have each group discuss the person in their picture: Where do they live? What do they fear? What is their relationship with their family? What is their favourite food? What's their philosophy of life?

Once the differences in the pictures are discussed with the class, see if students can come up with the big similarity between all the pictures. Does anyone get that they are all the same character?

The point of the exercise is to show how different the physicality of a character can be from actor to actor. The way an actor uses their physical body will affect the way they play character.

Where are Your Shoulders?

The most effective way to start physically developing a character is to define the placement of the shoulders. Shoulders give the audience an instant image of who a character is, their power status, and their emotional state. That's a lot of information packed into one body part!

Exercise

Everyone walks around the room in neutral. Neutral stance and neutral movement are important to establish when working physically.

Neutral stance: straight body, arms at the sides, head up, breathing softly, eyes open and alert.

Neutral movement: straight body, arms at the sides, moving at a consistent measured pace, eyes up, aware of everyone around you, breathing softly, no talking.

Bring students into neutral stance. From neutral stance students will change the position of their shoulders, on your cue. Once they establish the position, create a character based on that position. How does this character, stand, move, walk? How old are they? What is their social standing? Their job? Allow students to talk to each other in character.

Once the first position has been firmly established, bring the students back to neutral movement, then neutral stance, then change the position of the shoulders.

Afterward, discuss what kinds of characters were created based on the shoulder positions. Were there any unexpected characters? Where did other parts of the body end up based on the shoulder positions?

Shoulder positions

- As far back as they will go.
- As far forward as they will go.
- As high toward the ears as they will go.
- As sloped down toward the ground as they will go.

Pose, Gesture, Walk

Beginning actors tend to physically create characters much like themselves. Encourage actors to find what makes their character physically unique.

Exercise

This is a great exercise to do in the middle of rehearsals to solidify physicality. Give each actor fifteen minutes to practice the following scenario.

Scenario

A character rushes into their house to escape the rain. They shake off the rain and remove their coat. They walk into the living room and sit down. They pick up the remote and flip through the channels but there's nothing they want to watch.

The character gets hungry. All of a sudden they're starving. They run into the kitchen. They open the fridge, pull out their favourite meal and devour it. They move back to the chair and sit with a contented sigh.

Discussion

After presenting the scenario to the group, have the class discuss what they saw. Was the character clear? Did you see more of the actor or more of the character? Based on the scenario, what's one word to describe the character?

For even more insight, perform the scenario for another class. Will the class be able to guess the characters solely based on their physical action?

When actors prepare the scenario remember that they should react to all aspects in character. How does the character deal with rain? With watching tv? With making a sandwich?

Get it on tape!

All actors have bad physical habits that can creep into their character work: shifting from foot to foot, vague gestures, brushing hair out of the eyes. It's hard to know what you look like from the inside! The best way to correct bad actor habits is to videotape a scene and watch it back with no sound. Let actors see for themselves what they look like to others. How often do they fall prey to wander-itis, or move in a way that reflects themselves rather than their character?