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# acting for the camera

**Dr. Richard Blum gave the following address at the August meeting of the American Theatre Association in Chicago. He draws on his own experiences as an actor and teacher to touch on the particularities of acting for films.**

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by Dr. Richard A. Blum

Acting – in any medium – is finding an understandable reality of life. We must establish, delineate and live the character. The role described in the script has to become identifiable; the “lines” have to sound “true”, the inner values have to be truthfully communicated; the physical behavior must be credible and disciplined. It is only then that we give the audience an opportunity to believe in the character and the action on the screen. It is only then that

the audience becomes involved with the character portrayed and the developing interrelationships. The actor must “live” in front of us, but he must also know himself in order to bring the character to life. The character *is* the actor. Therefore, exercises must be practiced and techniques learned to give the actor a heightened sense of self-awareness, confidence and high concentration. This can be accomplished through the use of realistic techniques and non-realistic exercises.

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After the “Method” was adopted into film, an undercurrent of non-realistic experimentation occurred in theatre. From “happenings” to “theatre games”, the mainstream of realism was challenged. Eventually, Grotowski’s concept of the Poor Theatre became pivotal – theatre demanded a

live, assaultive experience between actor and audience on a skeletal stage space; television and film demanded an ultimate realism tied into the naturalistic effects of technology. It is now time to recognize that the two acting environments are not mutually exclusive, and that actors can benefit from a diversity of professional training experiences.

The theatre-trained actor is bound to be struck by the technical differences in acting for the camera. Blocking is infinitely more rigid and confining than proscenium acting. The television actor must learn to deal with the problems of continuity, matching emotional performance levels and inter-relationships from take to take. Still, the performer must have a strong grasp on the essential acting skills before setting foot inside studio doors.

Television and film acting is based on subtlety and realism, but the training process must encompass the widest span of contemporary and innovative techniques to heighten the actor's total growth as a performer and a person. This sense of individuality becomes the character's strength, and the personal resource for reaching the viewer.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the use of various theories is to place them in the context of the different phases of studio-acting situations: cold-reading auditions, rehearsals, production and post-production. The initial stage of casting requires only physical credibility, a criterion which supersedes the skill and artistry of the actor (roles are cast by type for heightened credibility on screen). The actor who "looks the part" has the better opportunity to confront the first phase of casting, i.e. the cold reading situation.

In preparation for cold-reading and rehearsals, it is important for the actor to be trained in traditional script-analysis techniques. He or she must quickly grasp the overall context of the audition scene, find the "spine", define the character's through-line-of-action and know the precise interrelationships taking place each moment in the life of the scene. These script decisions must be arrived at systematically and analytically. The contemporary idea of "building attitudes" is especially helpful in the analytical process.

Basically, the "attitude" allows the actor to determine what the character wants (the traditional objective), how badly the character wants it (sense of urgency), and how the character feels about each dramatic unit in the scene (the attitudes). The technique is used as a short-hand communication between the film actor and director, allowing for clarification and transitions of the character's moment-to-moment thought processes. The actor must define specific attitudes toward integral aspects of the scene, i.e. what he thinks of himself, the given situation, and the interpersonal action. The proper interpretation and balance of character attitudes (love, hate, anger, frustration, sensuality, etc.) help to create an intense and highly spontaneous dimension to the cold-reading.

From the standpoint of text-analysis, the actor must find the nuances of character, must learn to effectively "play against" the material, and must portray the dynamics of interrelationships in each scene. More experimental techniques can help him attain fresh insights into the characters and group-relationships. The techniques may range from animal improvisations and theatre games, to association exercises and group trust. Each approach is designed to get the actor in touch with himself/herself, the role, the partner in the scene. These exercises also provide a heightened sense of spontaneity, and help develop a crucial sense of timing and reaction.

Character work needs to be balanced with physical flexibility. In the blocking rehearsal, for example, the staging requirements and camera coverage are intricately interwoven. The actor must hit precise spike marks, "cheat" into camera (much like the theatrical "aside"), confine all body movements on close-ups, and move in visually dimensional areas rather than horizontal blocking patterns. Any deviation might cause the performer to fall out of camera frame, to step out of his/her light, to block an otherwise clear camera shot. A number of simple physical exercises can help develop the actor's body discipline: rolling, jumping, miming, masking, mirroring. In essence, the psycho-physical techniques provide a strong degree of relaxation, control, and self-trust.

In the reality of the production process, the actor must contend with many technical difficulties, and the loss of emotional and textual continuity. He must learn to sustain energy and spontaneity during out-of-sequence shooting, repetitive takes, long and tedious set-ups, etc. A range of exercises in the realistic and psycho-physical modes take on new significance in dealing with these problems. Traditional training provides a grasp on script continuity (through work on character analysis and throughline of action), and on emotional continuity (through work on affective memory). Psycho-physical exercises complement this approach, providing new means for reducing tensions, breaking through blocks, heightening concentration and awareness. Mirror games, for example, help the actor to cultivate and experience the concepts of focusing, observing, and responding.

In the dubbing phase of post-production, the actor must match vocal delivery with the original performance on screen. Looping is necessary to compensate for noise on the set, to add "wild lines", or to restructure dialogue and line delivery. Exercises which concentrate on mimicry, anticipation, and mirroring are important and relevant to this phase of studio work.

Different techniques obviously provide different answers to the common goal of acting: expressing and communicating truth to an audience. In this sense, an integrated awareness of acting theory provides a broader range of possibilities for the performer, and offers the freedom to choose techniques most relevant to specific needs as they occur.

Of course, training for the camera requires further work in the studio itself, where the technical environment can be absorbed and experienced. Unfortunately, studio facilities are not always available for acting training; even if they were, the development of basic skills remains the prime prerequisite.

It does not matter whether creativity is achieved through study of different techniques and approaches. The basic skills remain the same, and the artistic goals are consistent for integration: (1) a trained and responsive body, allowing a disciplined approach to vocal and physical action, concentration, and relaxation; (2) a heightened imagination and sensitivity that permits unique and vital insights into the human condition; (3) a freedom of inhibition that allows a spontaneous response to the world around the performer. These are broad prerequisites, true, but they provide a solid foundation for the development of the potentially effective performer in any medium.

In sum, we must not rely upon one theory, one style, one aesthetic to determine the whole thrust of screen-acting training. All approaches which emphasize sensitivity to oneself and others, and which free the actor as a creative human being, are valid systems for integration. Given the possibility of a diverse approach, the trained actor can create a new vitality for his characters in a truthful, sensitive, and forceful screen performance.