

Book That Job eZine

An Actor's Guide to the (Annoying) Phrase "More Energy"

You finish your scene in rehearsal and look to your director. Your director responds with "More energy." Ugh! As an actor, it's likely that at one point or another you've heard this phrase, or something like it. You may only hear it every now and then, or you may hear it constantly.

But what does it mean? And how in the world does this idea of energy specifically apply to the actor?

When I began studying acting in earnest, this phrase was continuously aimed at my work. From my acting teachers, my movement teachers, and my voice teachers. In fact, it was rare when I didn't receive this feedback. But I struggled to understand what, exactly, it meant.

Clearly, I knew I had some amount of energy as a human being. I was standing up, I was speaking—that takes energy. Maybe, I considered, that what my teachers mean is that I should work harder? So, in an effort to garner more energy in my work, I worked as hard as I could. I spat my words out and I pushed for results with as much force as I could muster. This, one of my teachers let me know, made me seem borderline crazy.

I was at a complete loss until one day one of my acting teachers illuminated the situation with laser sharp clarity. "Rhonda" he said, "watching you act is like watching someone who the vampire has sucked all the blood out of." Woah. That was not the effect I wanted my acting to have! My teacher's feedback may sound a bit harsh (and a little hilarious), but this vivid imagery really hit home and helped me begin the process of bringing more life into my work.

The challenge for actors is that the word energy, in the case of this pesky "more energy" terminology, doesn't actually mean "energy" as we know it. Even though the sought-after acting result may seem more energized, the word energy will not help create that result.

So what approach must an actor take in order to create this necessary X Factor, commonly known as energy, in their work? My answer: personal connection expressed.

Energy for the actor has everything to do with being willing to find a deeply personal connection to the script's given circumstances and allowing that personal connection to be fully expressed through the work. Instead of the word energy to explain this kind of connection, a better word for actors to use would be vitality.

A compelling definition for the word vital is "absolutely necessary or important; essential." And a definition for the word vitality speaks even more to the actor, "the power giving continuance of life, present in all living things." When asking for more energy, what the director wants from you is life—your life.

Here's an example of how I worked with an actor to create more energy (life/vitality) in their work.

My student was preparing for a scene in a film in which her character had to speak passionately about a particular topic. My student had done her work in terms of knowing the given circumstances and understanding the points that she had to make through the text. However, her work fell flat and seemed almost lifeless. Ah...she had a classic case of needing "more energy."

But I chose not to ask specifically for “more energy” because I knew the phrase itself would lead her to a forced idea of energy rather than the creation of genuine vitality that her work currently lacked.

Instead, I asked her several questions about her personal connection to the topic. Almost instantly she began to fill with life. As she expressed this topic in her own words, her connection to her breath became stronger, the conviction of her beliefs became more pointed and her words landed on her classmates with the definitive clarity of purpose.

When she went back to the script, her personal connection remained intact and became expressed through the screenwriter’s words. She was filled with vitality, life and, certainly, energy.

The outer result that she created in her work was, indeed, more energy. Success! But instead of running in circles trying to magically create this elusive idea of energy, the expression of her personal connection to the text was an executable technique for creating vitality and life that she can use in her work again and again.

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