

The Art of Acting eZine

The Real Magic of Trusting Given Circumstances

“When we let the circumstances dictate what we do, everything will have a reason, will seem perfectly natural, truthful. It’s only when we don’t understand the circumstances that we have to ‘act,’ that we have to fake it.” Stella Adler

I had been working in class with two students on a scene from the play *My Thing of Love* by Alexandra Gersten. One of my students was challenged by several lines of text where her character was recounting a past incident.

I asked my student several questions which led to the creation of a very specific exploration. As my student fully immersed herself in that exploration along with the text, the scene sprung to life.

Astonished by the actor’s quick and complete turnaround, my class almost all at once turned to me and exclaimed, “How did you know to do that?!?”

Ahhh, my favorite question as an acting teacher: how.

Though it was far from the first time I revealed it, I told them my big secret – it says so in the script’s given circumstances. They were shocked! They were amazed! They were incredulous, until they looked more closely at the actual given circumstances written in black and white on the page, for indeed all that the actor had done was deeply commit to the circumstances spelled out clearly by the playwright.

When it comes to characters, they say what they mean and they mean what they say—unless otherwise revealed somewhere else in the script.

Actors often make the mistake of not giving credence to the given circumstances. Doing this is much to their detriment. Starting with the facts, the 5 Ws of given circumstances: Who, What, When, Where & Why—supplies actors with all they need to bring a character to life.

Actors put themselves through a lot of unnecessary stress when they spend their time and energy searching outside of the given circumstances for that “special something” that they believe is essential to their material. It is a futile search that ultimately creates strain in the actor’s work and leads the material to flat-line. As an added bonus, it’s much more fun to trust the actual given circumstances of a script.

If it is more fun to trust the given circumstances, why is it then that actors choose to ignore or dismiss them? I think it is because they are looking for a magic ingredient that is not on the page. What I encourage actors to trust is that they themselves are the magic ingredient. This means that an actor’s own personal viewpoint together with their one-of-a-kind way of approaching a particular set of given circumstances will be unlike any other actor’s way. And that really is the magic.

About This eZine

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