

THE KEYS TO YOUR ACTING SUCCESS

Bill Howey
Carla Howey

The best training comes when an actor develops strong character choices by exploring and including his or her own qualities. Many actors try to develop a character without realizing that every aspect of who they are can be the key to a strong character story.

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates said that at his trial for heresy. He was on trial for encouraging his students to think for themselves. I encourage actors to think for themselves.

By thinking for yourself as you examine and discover your acting problems you will develop yourself and your character presentations. Therefore, in my acting workshop you really work on yourself as you work on the character.

Your goal is to affect the other actor/character, as well as the audience.

YOUR PREPARATION

Preparation begins with your decision to be tenacious as you develop the character throughout the work to come. This decision establishes your mindset to explore yourself and the character. Effective preparation is making up your mind that you are going to challenge yourself. Do not decide to get it “right.” There is no “right.” There is exploration and discovery.

It goes without saying, your preparation must include knowing the lines completely.

First, read the script as if reading a story, not as something you have to memorize. You should learn the lines from a “let’s see what I can do with this” point of view, not “how do I do what is written?”

Don’t make any decisions, don’t memorize right away - just read the script again and again. As you read, ideas will come to you about the story and the character. Write these down. These ideas you note are not “how to say the line” but are character concepts. Keep making notes as you begin to memorize, and even after. Pay attention to what touches you and generates ideas as you discover and reinvent the character story. Remember, you are working on yourself as well as the character.

The next important challenge is to be personal, to affect the other actor/character and the audience. Being personal comes from a determination to allow your thoughts, attitudes and individual qualities to be part of your character’s reinvention. The first step in this challenge is to describe what the character is going through. This concept must stir your emotions and can be one word or a sentence. Something

simple, such as “this character is struggling” or “this character is fighting for her life.” The most effective concept will electrify your own feelings and emotions.

Approaching a scene determined to reinvent the character’s personal story with your own personal story is very effective preparation.

There may be times when you didn’t get your lines down. In this case, by knowing the character story, you can improvise a forgotten line and present it with such confidence that we believe it. So the rule is: no matter how well you know the lines, tell the character story without reservation.

While learning lines make sure you explore connecting your personal qualities and traits into the character story.

While preparing, you always should be willing to change your mind. Look for a way to be more personal and challenge yourself by risking strong choices. These choices become your character story.

Understanding the character story is important because scenes do not always unfold the way you had planned. For example, if you or the other actor forgets their lines. If you have to stop and figure out how to deal with something, you aren’t listening, observing and being aggressive in the scene. By understanding the character story, however, you are ready to react to every situation.

WORKING ON YOURSELF

A major block for many actors is their own attitudes. An attitude is simply a habit of thought. Having the mindset that you like to take risks and have nothing to hide will open you up and become a powerful habit. But fearing that you need to hide something will close you off. Anything you repeatedly think can become an attitude.

One attitude that many actors have to change is fear of risk. To work on your self, what you don’t need to do is keep doing what is comfortable. Unless you reinvent yourself, you are just repeating the same actions again and again. It was said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

If you don’t aggressively reinvent yourself as an actor, discovering what works for a character or what might be blocking your character reinvention, you will not grow.

Hidden negative attitudes, what I call Hidden Acting Agendas, are the primary blocks to actors reinventing themselves and creating affecting characters. You must find any negative attitudes that block you. They will begin: “I don’t want to...” or “I’m afraid to...” even “I hate...” Attitudes like “I’m afraid to be sexy,” “I’m over that now and don’t want to think about it,” or “I hate people who act or do that” are agendas that cause actors to avoid certain behaviors. Instead they let their attitudes limit them, hoping somehow they can get new results without trying something different. You must discover your

hidden agendas by plumbing your feelings, fears and what you know about yourself.

Once you have identified a Hidden Acting Agenda, one thing you can do is to make that a part of the character story. Your thoughts and attitudes - no matter how negative - do not block your reinvention when allowed to belong to the character. For example, say you have an "I'm afraid to be sexy" attitude. Instead of hiding this agenda, and just avoiding being sexy, make your character afraid to be sexy. Then this fear shifts from a negative agenda to a unique quality of the character and doesn't block you in any way because it's in the open. Your attitude can either be a great character choice or an obstruction. By hiding any of your thoughts or attitudes, you block potential qualities that could enhance the character. So make whatever's blocking you part of the character's reinvention and the character story.

Your intention when working on yourself is to reinvent the character by bringing your attitudes, thoughts, impulses, and behaviors to the scene – without flinching.

If you think of a choice and reject it, reconsider it by asking "Why not?" Remember, a choice that isn't risky isn't worth being called a choice.

Allowing your personal thoughts and attitudes to be revealed as part of your character choices takes courage, but this is what makes a real compelling character. Identify your qualities, your personal feelings and your blocks, then allow them to be a part of the character.

WORKING ON THE CHARACTER

Remember, strong characters are forced into conflict making them struggle, cope and survive in spite of any doubt or fear. This intention makes the characters challenge their vulnerability in spite of any risk; they must decide on actions in order to survive. This subtext is palpable to anyone watching. This is why your character story must be personal.

To make the story personal, re-read the script or scene and let it resonate with you and reveal your own attitudes, fears and intentions. When you're confident, so is your character. If you doubt, your character doubts. Your goal is to make an impact on the audience and the other actor with your choices. Character choices that have an impact come from your emotions, attitudes and pretty much everything that is you. When these thoughts and attitudes are not blocked or hidden, the character's objective, intention and behavior become more specific and affecting.

Working on the character also includes observing the human qualities in others and bringing these observations to the character. Your imagination is a great resource for character traits. When characters don't impact, it often stems from a problem within the actor, such as lack of imagination or fear.

WORKING ON YOURSELF AND THE CHARACTER IN CLASS

You present your scene in front of the class without first rehearsing with the other actor.

Performing without rehearsal, like all good acting, requires courage, boldness and incentive. Preparing for the unknown makes your choices more risky and challenging as you are reinventing a character with choices that may not work with the other actor. Since you are not sure what he or she will do, you must watch and listen.

You continue to work on yourself and your character by repeating the scene two or three times each class for two or more weeks. The first time you perform the scene is not a warm-up for the second time. Every time you are on stage you hold nothing back.

WORKING ON YOURSELF AND THE CHARACTER IN THE CRITIQUE

When the scene is finished and the lights come up, it is time to receive feedback. During the critique you examine what you planned, what you worked on, what happened from your point of view and how you affected the audience.

The critique begins with you describing:

- The story you were telling and discoveries or any problems you had with that story.
- What you were working on. This includes all your personal thoughts and attitudes that were brought to the character, as well as specific character choices. Also include what you were afraid or reluctant to present.
- Challenges, discoveries or any problems you had with the scene. This includes pleasant (or unpleasant) surprises.

If you have questions, doubts or fears, either let your character deal with them in the scene and/or discuss these problems in the critique.

You are training and preparing for the opportunity. The first opportunity is the audition where you need to bring a different, unique character that affects those in the casting session. This attitude should be your attitude in class. Training for the audition that will be your break increases your intention and prepares you to challenge the competition.

If you work a lot, then you know there is always more to discover and work on.

Your goal is to be the most vulnerable, the most emotional, have the most intention, have the most charm and be the most affecting. In short, become the most compelling actor in the room.

What you practice, you will become. If you practice lazy, you will become lazy. If you practice being personal you will become personal. You should practice challenging yourself in the scene more than you challenge the other character. In fact, challenging yourself will lead you to challenge the other character.

It is very hard to expose a human weakness unless you know it through discovering weakness in yourself.

It is your examination of weakness and the strength – both in yourself and in the life around you - that will challenge and enhance your acting. Explore your roots, your hidden agendas, and the attitudes you carry with you. With these in mind, reinvent an affecting character. When you book a role in a project, you will have the habit of a successful way to work. So get in the habit now.