

THE HOWEY ACTING STUDIO

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Vulnerability Is Your Subtext

Subtext is the unspoken, underlying thoughts, desires and motives of your characters -- its what they really think and believe.

When you look for subtext, look to your own vulnerability. This is because you can't become the character, so your subtext becomes the character's subtext.

Your actual unspoken considerations desires and fears are what make you vulnerable. The power of these true feelings joins the character to the actor and connects them to the audience.

Your vulnerability contains, among other things, what you consider to be your embarrassing flaws. But they don't upset you until you admit them, they are revealed or they are pointed out. To avoid hurt or ridicule your unspoken thoughts or beliefs are protected. This makes actors with a bald spot not lower their head or actors who are overweight decide to sit through a scene thinking their flaws won't be noticed.

When revealed vulnerability stirs your emotion and motivates your actions. When you are vulnerable you are at risk of being ridiculed or thought less of so you protect yourself.

The normal human reaction to vulnerability is to hide or cover these flaws or thoughts. This habit impedes an actor from accessing his or her vulnerability and not utilizing the power they have in creating character subtext.

Actor's problems with subtext are simply their own unwillingness to let their own true thoughts, flaws and quirks affect them and their characters.

Time and again, I see actors play a scene in a way that they see as definitive, only to be surprised when they open up their vulnerability resulting in compelling subtext for the character.

One reason is that we human beings are carefully socialized not to go around blurting out exactly what's on our minds or openly revealing our imperfections.

We do that for our safety because what we really think is usually critical, negative or harmful.

In day-to-day living we try to hide the negative and accentuate the positive. Your acting should take advantage of your negatives and vulnerability and resonate with the audience's vulnerability.

Your vulnerability becomes the character's subtext when you almost allow your deep personal thoughts to almost spill out while voicing the character's words. Allowing your personal withheld thoughts to affect you forms subtext.

There are times when your vulnerability is uncontrollably revealed. For example, when you make a blunder. The moment you realize your mistake you become vulnerable. You blush, laugh or otherwise reveal your weakness.

These reactions make for a great character, so be willing to make a mistake. Then do not cover up or apologize for any reaction.

Hidden Acting Agendas are a good resource to find your vulnerability. These are your secret beliefs that exert control over your thoughts and actions. Beliefs such as: "I can't be sexy; "Crying makes me look ugly; "I can't show my bald spot," open you up to ridicule if you reveal them and so you keep them concealed. It is your action of you really coping with these thoughts during the scene that intensifies your character.

If your own impulses and intuition take you into your susceptibility, trust them. Revealing them is invigoratingly joyful and takes you into places your defenses would never lead you.

Genuine feelings create magic and cannot be generated if your honest feelings aren't electrified and are not revealed.

Challenge yourself to include your concealed thoughts and feelings into your character's emotion. After all, without risking and even losing your way sometimes, how will you ever discover anything new?

You don't only have to be tough to survive as an actor; you have to be vulnerable as well because vulnerability makes the connection between actor and audience. When the audience has empathy for your character, you are rewarded.