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How Can You Use Improvisation in Preparing for a Role?

Ask An Acting Teacher

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Tom Ardavany

Los Angeles; The Ardavany Approach, www.theapproach.net

Improvisation is the art of finding your freedom within a moment. Acting in film is about creating and shaping moments for the camera. One cannot create and shape moments without freedom. So where do we get some of this freedom stuff? It's right here in the present. The present is what people who have presence command. They have cultivated their moment-to-moment existence into an energy that makes them magnetic.

This improvisational condition in an artist opens the magic door to unrestricted, unabashed intercourse with the "now," allowing attention, feelings, and thoughts to naturally progress, eventually giving way to fully expressed actions and words. At that instant, life attains continuity and rhythm, leaving your audience lost in your performance.

Film at its best is improvisation with an outline. The words in the script are not the limitation for your action. They serve as a catalyst for your free spirit to fly, giving life to the moment and guaranteeing an experience for you and your audience. Once this improvisational spirit is awakened in the artist, the possibilities become endless and the environment in which one is working becomes a playground.

Here's a simple exercise for the on-camera artist: Observe your breath. Try it. Do it until you become more relaxed and you notice an increased level of perception. You might hear sounds that were there the entire time that you weren't picking up on before. Or you might notice objects, colors, or reflections in your immediate space. Any sensory enhancement is an indication that you're moving into the present. You might also notice something else: You are free of anxiety and apprehension,

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Amy Lyndon

Los Angeles; The Lyndon Technique, www.coldreadingclasses.com

Improvisation is a great tool when creating your character's behavior in an environment. You don't always need another person to improvise. Expand your imagination. No matter what character you're playing, sit and daydream of what a typical day would be like for your character. Where would you be? What time of day is it? What are you doing? How are you feeling? Who would you be talking to and how do you feel about that person? What's the weather like? How would you behave in the given situation? Tell yourself the story and re-enact it as if it's happening to your character right now.

Having this information will keep you in the story and busy within that environment. You will feel

immersed in your character and less distracted by outside elements. Chances are you won't fall out of the scene, because you're deep into the scene you've created.

Ken Lerner

Los Angeles; The Ken Lerner Studio, www.kenlerner.com

You can really flesh out a character by using improvisation in a role. At home, answer questions that the character you are talking to might ask in the situation. You can gain comfort by getting more familiar with the person you're talking to. Make up a scene for yourself that furthers the written scene, and make it more complicated, so you can be ready if the director asks questions pertaining to your character's attitude toward the person you are talking to or about the scene in general.

Take the improvisation way out there. It will help make you more involved in the scene. In one scene I had with Tyne Daly on the show "Judging Amy," she approached me to improvise our relationship, and the scene came alive. On "Columbo," Peter Falk had me switch roles with him so he could see how the scene played out. We ad-libbed and, again, it made the scene better.

In comedy, there are many great improvisers who are up to snuff with new lines, and keeping up is essential in making the spirit of the scene funnier. The purpose of improvisation is to loosen both you and the scene. So embrace the opportunity. Come up with a funny line during an improvisation and it could make the final show on any number of sitcoms. Size up the situation and improvise.

Glenn Kalison

New York; faculty member, New York Film Academy, www.nyfa.com,
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An improvisational exploration can help flesh out the "moments before" the start of a scene or monologue, filling out details of the world created by the actor's imagination. Setting up the circumstances of an unscripted scene and letting the actors play can offer insights into the life of the character, revealing new aspects of relationship and history. Truly "living" a character's experience through an improvisation will stay with the actor and ultimately inform the performance.

Beginning actors sometimes ask what's relevant for their character biographies. Anything that will motivate characters and give them drive in pursuit of their goals is relevant. Ideas can be found in these kinds of improvised rehearsals. An improvisation need not be dialogue-driven. A behavioral improvisation can be useful.

Choose an appropriate activity for your character and during rehearsal get up and feel what it's like to do it as the character. For example, if you're playing Solness in Ibsen's "The Master Builder," what does it feel like to actually draw up architectural plans or build a model? We tell our actors that you are only a composite of all your life experiences to this moment. What makes you unique are your experiences. Well, the same is true for the characters you play.

This way of working is particularly useful to film actors, because you can do it alone in your trailer or in a hotel the night before a shoot. Film actors are also dealing with shooting scenes out of order, so filling out the moments before will help you stay on track in terms of the character's overall journey.



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