

Chapter 17

ANALYZING A CHARACTER

Assignment due:

Time Limits: 6-8 minutes

Activity Sheet: Fill out the analyzation and group improvisation on the form at the end of this chapter.

IMPORTANT WORDS TO NOTICE IN THIS ASSIGNMENT

Actor's double role
Artistic selectivity
Character

External qualities
Internal qualities

BACKGROUND NOTES

Your ultimate aim as an actor is to create a stage role or character that satisfies the playwright's intention and that engenders audience belief throughout your performance. The projects that you have previously been assigned have been focused on helping you prepare for characterization. If you have adequately equipped yourself, you will discover that the experience of moving, talking, and thinking in character is highly stimulating and enjoyable.

Your knowledge of people is a valuable ingredient for creating a role. Past experiences with family, friends, and acquaintances; remembered observations of the study of individuals; and vicarious experiences from reading will provide creative inspiration. Vivid sensory and emotional recall, plus an active imagination further contribute to characterization material.

Regardless of your background and imagination, the development of a believable character takes time. Characterization demands intensive study of both the play and the part. If you are a devoted artist you will find your role gradually developing throughout rehearsals. If your play has a long run, your portrayal will even grow during performances.

Initial study of the part will give you general ideas about the character you are to play. As you progress you will modify those ideas, selecting specific qualities from your background and imagination that lend themselves to your voice and body. This process prevents any two actors from developing the same character, even though they study the same part. Experience and imagination provide each actor with his own distinctive touch!

To obtain a well rounded concept of your character's personality, analyze both his internal and external qualities. The internal aspect includes the following:

Background. What can you discover about his family, environment, occupation, education, interests, and hobbies?

Mental characteristics. Is he intelligent, clever, dull, slow, average?

Spiritual qualities. What are his ideals? What is his belief, ethical code, religion? What is his attitude toward other people and toward life?

Emotional characteristics. Is he confident, outgoing, happy, poised? Is he sullen, confused, nervous, cynical, timid? What are his likes and dislikes? How does he respond to other people? How is his temperament similar to yours? How is it different?

Answering the above questions should give you a basic idea about your character's personality. Now become more specific by determining his motivating desire within the play or scene. What does your character want? To determine this desire you may need to imaginatively supply the circumstances that precede the play or scene, in addition to studying the script. (See Chapter 10 on "Motivation.") If possible, state the desire in terms of action: what your character will do to satisfy his wishes. It may help you to use the resourceful "if." Ask yourself, "What would I do in the situation if I were the character?" Concentrate on the desire and the action. These in turn should release the proper emotion. (See Chapter 7 on "Emotional Recall.")

The external qualities of your character apply to those aspects that the audience sees. These outward forms are important because they can communicate inward traits. Externals include your character's physical appearance, costume, facial makeup, movement, and voice. You must develop these facets carefully so they will be consistent as well as believable to the character and to the play.

The following is a check list of external qualities:

- Posture. Is it slumped, stiff, relaxed, attractive? Does it suggest timidity, assuredness, awkwardness, grace?
- Movement and gesture. Does it convey poise, nervousness, weakness, strength? Does your character walk with a stride, plod, shuffle, bounce? How does his movement indicate age, health, attitude?
- Mannerisms. Does he bite his nails, clear his throat, keep his hands in his pockets, chew gum, scratch his head when he is thinking, doodle on paper?
- Voice. Is it pleasant, high pitched, resonant? Does your character have a twang, a drawl?
- Dress. Is his appearance neat, casual, sloppy, prim, clean, dirty? Are his clothes in good taste, flashy, fashionable?

As you develop your character's external qualities, avoid cliché or commonplace movements. Choose action that is consistent with your role and yet that is imaginative and refreshing. Be sure your movement conveys the same general idea throughout. Also, avoid trite hand properties. Dark glasses for the Hollywood actor, a pencil behind a reporter's ear, and a lorgnette for the society woman are examples of overworked hand properties.

The above external and internal check lists indicate that character analysis produces a wealth of material--much more than you can effectively use. The actor's problem becomes one of artistic selectivity. Instead of asking yourself how much you can do with your part, decide how little you can do and still communicate the necessary ideas and emotions. As a creative artist you must select, combine, and discard. The secret of artistic success is in knowing what to leave out! Your aim should be to produce an uncluttered effect that communicates with precision and clarity. You should simplify rather than elaborate. Economy is the keynote of all great art!

In previous chapters we have mentioned the actor's double role. You are both actor-as-character and actor-as-actor. If you are to play with conviction, you must maintain an imaginative belief in what the character is doing, feeling, and saying. When not speaking in character, you should think as he would think and listen to others as he would listen in that situation. Concentrate within your character and try to satisfy his desires. On the other hand, as an actor you must maintain technical control. Your voice must be heard, your movement clear, your tempo right, your position in proper relation to the others on stage. It should be evident that this double role must be balanced if you are to do your best. Character and actor must work together with precision.

Characterization is a demanding job, but don't allow it to become a strain. Tension inhibits. Relax and enjoy yourself as you create a believable individual on stage.

ASSIGNMENT AND ITS PURPOSE

Your resourcefulness in analyzing and creating a role will be challenged with this assignment. You are to create a believable character within a group improvisation. Draw from your background and your imagination to supply the details of character within a given situation. You will be graded on the completeness of your characterization (internal and external traits), the projection of your character's motivating desire, your artistic selectivity of movement, mannerisms, hand properties, etc., and the belief your character instills in the audience.

HOW TO PREPARE

1. Divide into mixed groups of five. (Your instructor may wish to assign groups, scenes, and roles.)
2. Select a situation for improvisation and the character you will play in it. The following are suggestions:
 - a. Situation: a spring rummage sale in an empty building downtown.

Characters: antique dealer - who has hopes of finding something valuable
old woman - wanting woolens for a braided rug
costume chairman - for a university play
poor woman - who needs to outfit three boys
sales person
 - b. Situation: waiting at an airport for take-off which will be delayed until the plane can be repaired.

Characters: ticket agent
business executive - who has an important appointment
model - flying to the Caribbean on her job
orphan - being sent to a foster family
college boy - going back to school

- c. Situation: young man picking up date for the first time.

Characters: young man
his date
her mother
her father
her aunt - who is visiting

- d. Situation: a family reunion after a wedding reception. All are happy until an old argument is renewed.

Characters: grandfather - retired railroad engineer
his brother - owner of an orange grove
his oldest daughter - mother of the bride
a nephew - a minister
a distant cousin - a librarian

- e. Situation: a group of vacationers being welcomed by the manager of a lakeside resort.

Characters: wealthy society matron
her young secretary
newspaper reporter
Olympic swimmer - in training
manager of the resort

- f. Situation: a detective is questioning a group of people in connection with a recent murder in a boarding house.

Characters: Chinese cook
college professor of mathematics
middle aged landlady
crippled girl - who is a seamstress
detective

- g. Situation: a group of citizens are meeting with the city manager to discuss a proposed dog-leash law for the town.

Characters: city manager
young attorney
president of the local kennel club
housewife who is tired of dogs in her yard
wife of a local veterinarian

- h. Your choice

3. As a group, decide the basic step by step action of the scene, including how it will begin, what will happen, the climax, and how it will end. Plan so that you can stay within the 6-8 minute time limit. Be sure you know the action sequence. Keep it simple; emphasis should be on characterization.
4. Decide who will introduce your scene. Your work as a group now ends until you perform your improvisation in class.
5. Outside of class, analyze your character in the situation. Drawing from your background and imagination, supply the necessary internal and external traits. Determine your character's motivating desire in this scene.

Get to know your character as much as you can in the time allowed for preparation. Decide what your

character will do and say. Avoid memorizing specific movement and words, but have a general idea in your mind that you can modify as you improvise the scene.

6. Fill out the activity form at the end of this chapter.
7. Rehearse your characterization, working on movement, speech, thoughts, and mannerisms that will help to satisfy the motivating desire.

HOW TO PRESENT

When your group is called upon to perform, go quietly to the playing area. Set up necessary properties. Introduce your scene by describing the setting and by briefly giving any information pertinent to understanding the scene.

Play with conviction and belief. Move, think, and talk as your character. Keep alert, readily adjusting to the action and dialogue. Stay in character no matter what happens!

At the completion of your scene, return with poise to your seat. Your instructor may wish to lead a class discussion on character effectiveness and then have you re-do your scene.

ADDITIONAL PROJECTS ON CHARACTERIZATION

1. Select newspaper human interest stories. In groups, supply the necessary characters for the action. Analyze the characters. Then improvise a scene built around the printed story.
2. In groups, build a scene around a historical event such as Lewis and Clark's first meeting with Sacajawea, Madam Curie's discovery of radium, Alexander Graham Bell's first successful use of the telephone, etc. Be sure your story has dramatic value, a clearly defined plot, and a climax.
3. Select a picture from a magazine or from a reproduction of a famous painting that shows an interesting looking person. Analyze that person in the light of what you see in the picture. In class, show the picture and report what feelings, thoughts, and behavior make this character distinctive.
4. Choose an external hand property or costume accessory such as a pair of white gloves, a colorful silk umbrella, a pocket watch, dangle bracelets, a battered hat, a nosegay of violets, a rusty pocket knife. Create a brief scene in which you portray a character suggested by the object.
5. Rent and show the following film:
Acting Problems. 10 minutes. Sound. Shows an improvisation of Tom Sawyer. Discusses characterization. A-V Aids Service, University Extension, 704 South 6th Street, Champaign, Illinois 61822.

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