

Rehearsal Exercise – “Lightning Subtext”

Part One: “In Your Own Words”

Have the actor read the script aloud. With each complete thought (or sentence), have the actor put the line into her own words. For example, if the line is “O what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!”¹ an actor may put it into her own words by saying, “A great brain is crazy!” Encourage them to be a little more responsive to the context of the scene in the initial stage, though. The more direct thought might be “Hamlet’s gone crazy!” But remember, it should be *in the actor’s own words*.

It’s a difficult balance sometimes, but watch out for the actor integrating vocabulary from the script into her/his own thoughts. For example: “Hamlet’s noble brain has gone crazy!” or “Hamlet’s great brain is overthrown!” Do this subtly – remember, encourage the actor to use her brain to form the words.

The point of this part of the exercise is to get to the *meaning* of the complete thought, and to have the actor translate that into her own language.

Part Two: “The Implications of Your Own Words”

You may want to run Part One two or more times. After that, have the actor expound upon this new subtext. Shout out, “What does that mean for the future?” or “What could happen then?” or “What could this cost you?” – anything that will trigger the actor’s mind into thinking about the *implications* of her/his thoughts.

As a director, it helps to think of this as the “third degree,” that is, a very fast, rather aggressive interrogation. One important thing is to *be quick* about your question-asking. You want to encourage your actor to think at the speed she would think in her real life. You also want her to begin to translate these thoughts not just cerebrally, but *physically*.

Part Three: “In Your Own Body”

As stated before many times, it is important to get your actors to *think with their bodies*, not just their minds. The body is so much more than the exterior of the actor – it can be the seat of memories, emotions, and even thoughts.

In this part of the exercise, have the actor say the words of the script, but “mime” the subtext. The effect can be strange and comical, but encourage the actor to abandon blocking (if you’ve gotten to that stage in the rehearsal process) and be “overwhelmed” by the subtext. A great metaphor for the actor is this. “The subtext is the wind. You and the words of the play are flag that has been ripped from its pole. You’re tossed on the winds of your subtext! Let that wind take over your body!”

Encourage the actor to be physical. If you find that things are too out of control (though I suspect this will be rare), go through all three steps again, but combine them line-by-line – subtext → implication → body. The three steps in rapid order will help produce the *bodymind* experience, in which all of the mechanisms of the actor or working with, instead of against, each other.

¹ A line spoken by Ophelia in *Hamlet* III.ii, after Hamlet’s exit.