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Ask an Insider

Repeating a Great Moment Night After Night?

By Simi Horwitz | Posted June 8, 2009, 2:37 p.m.

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Cathleen Leslie

Teaches at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles

There is no simple answer to this question. It's the problem that Konstantin Stanislavsky faced while creating the Moscow Art Theatre. It led to his System, which eventually became Lee Strasberg's Method.

For example, a young actor is setting off to the theatre to play Hamlet, and his child is running a very high fever. The actor is consumed with the thought of losing his child, and when he goes on stage to say "To

be or not to be," the question is so real for him the audience is spellbound by the reality of the moment. The actor is considered brilliant. The following night his child is on the road to recovery. The actor knows something special happened on stage the night before—but not how. So he talks himself into believing his child is at death's door. By the time the actor goes on stage to again say "To be or not to be," he has forced himself into such tension that he pushes and indicates, and the audience squirms in uncomfortable silence.

Stanislavsky discovered that the way to recall a past experience and express the emotion elicited by that experience is to be relaxed and in touch with your five senses. For example, the memory of a particular smell or a piece of music can evoke the feeling you had at your mother's funeral. Recalling the smell or sound will help bring the emotions to the surface. Of course, relaxation comes first. This technique—or the System—helps the actor find those great moments and perform them each night as if it were the first time, with an instrument that is alive, in the moment, and constantly in discovery.

Sandra Daley

Private acting coach, New York City

The key is to be authentic, honest, and true to the character or story. Here are the five steps:

1. Do your homework. Know your character, the circumstances, and the story. Speak to the writer, director, and/or dramaturge.
2. Draw from your personal life truths and feelings that are similar to those of the character and story. Dare to identify. Understand intentions and what motivates.
3. Trust your instrument. Trust that you're capable and you're able to tell this story with

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authenticity. This is no time to judge or belittle yourself. Quiet the negative voices.

4. Experience the moment. Live moment to moment in your choices. Listen, and then respond. Act each moment as new and newly revealed.

5. Finally, dare to play. Use each take or performance as an opportunity to make new choices, not the same choices: Challenge yourself, challenge your fellow players, and challenge the audience. That's what takes are for. They are there not just to make a choice better, but also to explore the different ways of conveying an emotion or message.

Kimberly Vaughn

Kimberly Vaughn Performance Studio, Circle in the Square Theatre School, and Pace University, New York City

Stop thinking about the great moment and stay focused on your action. Your action is everything. Your action is predicated on who your character is at the innermost core of his or her being. Great moments emanate from your character's human condition: your who, what, when, where, and why—what makes your character tick.

The minute you stop focusing on this internal landscape of your character and give over to the self-conscious externalization of the great moment, you will find that the great moment begins to elude you.

Stay focused on what your character needs and wants. Stay focused on the prevailing circumstances, obstacles, and conflicts that frustrate or support those needs and wants. Keep asking yourself what you're saying and doing in the moment and what is being said and done to you. Keep asking questions, and always listen. Focus on the character's actions, and your great moments will live, thrive, and grow.

Aaron Speiser

Teaches privately in Los Angeles

When a great moment occurs on film, it has been recorded and does not have to be repeated. This is the beauty of the medium. It can now be manipulated by the director and editor.

In addition, it is sometimes impossible to tell a great moment until one sees it edited in the finished product. A great moment for one person can be a terrible moment for another. The director has to make the final judgment as to what works best for the entire film. Many great moments remain on the cutting-room floor, as do many great scenes, because they hurt the overall film.

Whether an actor is in a film or on stage, he or she attempts to live in the present moment. An actor should not attempt to repeat a great moment. I would never tell an actor that he or she has created a great moment. It makes the actor self-conscious and defeats the purpose of what we're attempting to do: get the actor literally and figuratively "out of his mind"—not into it.

One should attempt to repeat the circumstances and needs that created the moment originally. The best actors attempt to create truthful behavior in a scene. Then they'll be creating many great moments, and the rest will take care of itself.

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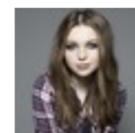
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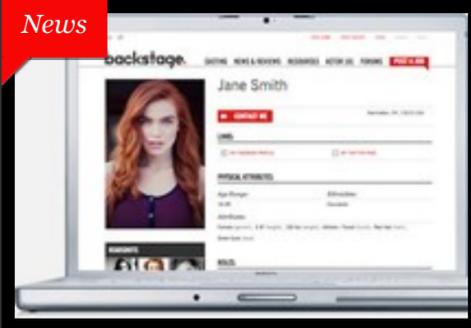
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