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## PROLOGUE

Amateur theatre is flourishing as never before, but often there is little time given to learning basic technique. People tend to find themselves cast, have to learn the lines, try to do what the director asks of them, and then hope for the best. Some, however, think that's all there is to it!

Whether we belong to a group putting on a sketch in the parish hall, or a sophisticated society doing several full-length plays a year, we can all benefit from considering the skills and knowledge needed by actors and directors.

In every town and many villages, clubs and societies work with enthusiasm and produce plays, musicals, pantomimes (very popular) and other entertainments. Standards of performance, scenic design, lighting and sound have risen consistently over the years, and no more is it considered enough to put on a show just for a giggle. Audiences have to pay for their seats, and the vast majority of groups are well aware of their responsibilities, and do their best to give patrons their money's worth.

Most performers and would-be performers are keen to do well. They are people who have to fit drama into their spare time, and many have little opportunity to learn the basic techniques of their craft. If they are fortunate enough to work with an understanding and experienced director, they will pick up a lot as they go along, but for many the director may not be sufficiently knowledgeable, or skilled enough as a teacher, to give them much help or guidance.

There is also the fact that audiences have far

greater access these days to good professional performances, both in the theatre – due to better transport facilities than were available years ago – and on television. This means that they are bound to be more critical of bumbling ‘amateurish’ displays, however much they enjoy watching their friends, relations and acquaintances disporting themselves on the local stage.

Having worked, acting and directing, with professional and amateur companies for many years, I devised this alphabetical list of related subjects during a term of evening classes for which I was a tutor. We worked our way through the letters week by week, with students suggesting the subjects for us to consider. The ABC format is not new, but I hope that aspiring thespians will find it helpful, and that they will add several more topics of their own under the twenty six letters!

# A

## **ACTING**

Is all about behaving convincingly as another person. The actor portrays the character that the author has written and acts out the story so believably that the audience thinks it is really happening.

So is acting an art or a craft? Many a long debate has raged in drama schools and colleges on this subject. We hear of ‘the art of acting’, but we also hear of actors ‘knowing their craft’. Surely good acting is a blend of the two. The art is, if you like, the ‘what’ and the ‘why’, whereas the craft is the ‘how’, and successful acting cannot be achieved without both.

Acting is sometimes likened to the performance of music. The actor’s instrument is their body. Technique is as essential to actors as it is to pianists, who have to master fingering, the use of the pedals, and the best position to sit on the piano stool, reading music and so on. They have to spend hours practising scales and exercises and they have to understand phrasing, timing, ‘light and shade’, and rhythm, before interpretations and feelings can come into play.

Therefore technique (the ‘how’) is vital, before the interpretation, which brings in all those lovely ‘I’s – imagination, intelligence, inspiration, intuition and so forth (the ‘what’ and the ‘why’) can bring the performance to life.

## **ARTICULATION**

‘Composed of recognisably distinct sounds, as human speech; clear; able to express one’s

thoughts with ease . . . To form into distinct sounds, syllables or words . . .'. Dictionary definition.

This, of course, is absolutely vital for anyone who addresses an audience, a congregation, a classroom or a lecture hall full of students. To a large extent it comes under the heading **DICTION**, although that covers a wider spectrum of which articulation is a necessary part.

Suffice it to say that anyone speaking on stage, even if they have but one line to deliver, must be heard with ease, or the whole point of the performance will be lost. As the words have to carry a greater distance than in normal conversation, particular care has to be taken over the pronunciation of every consonant and vowel, even if in this day and age microphones are used – more necessary perhaps, because they enlarge each sound and emphasise those that are sloppily produced.

There has been a movement away from the 'elocution' of the past because it often led to an impression of artificiality. It didn't sound natural and it did sound pompous and even silly. However, 'voice' is a major subject in an actor's training, particularly for stage work, and even the different needs of television and film studios still require dialogue that can be easily recognised and understood by all ages, including those with hearing problems.

Simple exercises can be of great help in developing good articulation, and keeping us aware of it, and a few are suggested under the heading **DICTION**.

### **ATTACK**

'An executant's approach to a piece, with crispness,

verve and precision.’ Dictionary definition.

A frequent criticism of stage performers is that they are lacking in ‘attack’, and it’s sometimes difficult for the performer to know just what is meant by this, and what they can do about it.

Generally speaking, it involves energy, whether mental, emotional, vocal or bodily, or any combination of the four. It is about energy and focus, and needs to be the complete opposite of feebleness, dullness and laziness.

Enthusiasm goes a long way towards one’s goal, but it must be tempered with control at all times. If the performance seems slow or boring, or wishy-washy, then it is certainly lacking in this somewhat mystifying quality of ‘attack’. Even in quiet or sad passages it is still vital, just more subtle than in a blood-and-thunder, all-action sequence.

## **AUDIENCE**

The audience is an imperative fundamental part of the equation. No audience means no performance; it is a two-way operation.

The main thing is for actors to be aware of audience reactions at all times, while continuing to keep parts of their mind on both their art (interpretation) and their craft (technique).

As any performer knows from experience, no two audiences are ever identical, and they must be able to ‘play’ that audience as an angler plays the fish, in order to get it hooked, without deviating from what has been worked out in rehearsal. It’s a matter of degree, knowing when to play ‘up’ and when to play ‘down’, when to pause and when to



bash on. Part of the actor's mind is saying to the audience 'now listen to this' (or 'watch this') 'it's really intriguing/important/funny/sad/amazing'.

Fortunately, the days are long gone when audiences would show their displeasure by booing, heckling or hurling tomatoes at the players, but we still have to lead our audience along as skilfully as we can, in order to hold their attention and, hopefully, to please them.

## **B**

**BACKSTAGE** see **STAGE MANAGEMENT**

### **BALLET**

Although a specialist art form and not essential for actors, it is nevertheless a useful adjunct to stage work. Those people who have trained as ballet dancers have poise, and move fluently and expressively. The breathing for dancers is however different from that of actors, and needs to be considered if someone is going to carry out the two disciplines seriously at the same time.

What happens frequently is that pupils from local dance schools are involved in musicals and pantomimes, with their dance teacher often being the choreographer, and they bring a further dimension to the production.

### **BLOCKING**

This is the term for the cast to go right through the play, at the beginning of the rehearsal process, script and pencil (not pen) in hand, to be given their moves and positions. If these are different from the printed stage directions, then they must be noted down, not just on the appropriate page, but in the exact place in the script. While the published moves are helpful and effective, the director may well prefer to change or add some, depending on space available, and for artistic effect, and so on.

See **REHEARSALS**

### **BODY LANGUAGE**

Is just what it says – expression through movement and gesture. It can be formal and traditional as in

mime, or simply general behaviour, anything from a raised eyebrow to involved contortions, according to what is being conveyed.

There are certainly easily recognised gestures such as ‘thumbs up’ for ‘everything’s OK’ or ‘good luck, mate’, the victory ‘V’, a wrinkled nose for disgust, and a hand passing rapidly across the throat (killing or death). Then there is the lifting of the elbow for ‘have a drink?’ and so on.

It is as well, when studying a part, to incorporate physical expression as one learns the lines, although in many cases it comes quite naturally. Inexperienced players, though, can freeze up through fear of doing the wrong thing – so they don’t do anything.

Certainly gestures need to be definite. When pointing a finger, the whole arm should move easily from the shoulder so that the finger is just the tip of the straight pointing arm; a furtive gesture while the elbow is clamped to one’s side just looks awkward and silly. Notice the way that French and other Mediterranean people use extravagant gestures – they talk with their hands, as did the late Magnus Pike as he expounded a theory with great enthusiasm. This kind of thing, if there is too much of it, can be irritating to an audience, although a certain amount may add authenticity. It all depends whether or not it is in character.

Reaction to stress can be well depicted, as tension causes a person to wring their hands, tug at their ears or rub the backs of their heads.

Joy, shock, almost every emotion has to be conveyed by stance, whether with drooping limbs or rigid

immobility. If body language is not employed, then you do not have a performance, only perhaps a recitation!

See **MOVEMENT**

### **BREATH CONTROL**

Breathing is the key to all vocal activity. No breath means no voice; it is as simple as that.

For ordinary relaxed breathing it is best to inhale through the nose, but for any kind of public speaking, or singing, or active physical effort it is usually necessary to breathe in quickly through the mouth.

One of the problems for beginners is noisy inhalation; this is particularly noticeable when microphones are being used, or loudspeaker systems, and it is very irritating to listen to. The answer is to forget about mouth and throat, and concentrate on expanding the ribs.

If you expand your ribs you cannot avoid taking in all the air you need, therefore simple breathing exercises are vital to begin controlling the way in which one breathes in, holds the breath, and breathes out again.

Singers are usually much more aware of the importance of breath control than amateur actors, because their teachers will insist on breathing exercises. Strangely, many people who want to act don't seem to think about it at all, or consider it necessary.

Some simple exercises should be practised frequently; it will be well worth the effort:

- 1 a) Inhale slowly to the count of 5  
b) Hold the breath to the count of 5  
c) Breath out steadily to the count of 5
- 2 Repeat a and b then  
c) Vocalise the outgoing breath to 'AH'
- 3 This time release the breath more slowly, then do it vocally again, seeing how long you can make it last without strain or discomfort. Instead of 'AH' you can try counting out loud.
- 4 Repeat these exercises omitting the holding of the breath.
- 5 Now swap around a bit. Breathe in rapidly and out slowly. Then in slowly and out rapidly. And so on. Experiment. Always be conscious of what your muscles, ribs, and diaphragm are actually doing, how they are causing the sound to emerge as you wish it to, make it do your bidding and not come out all haphazard and anyhow.

Be careful not to let your shoulders rise up towards your ears when you breathe in; this means the breathing is too shallow, and the lower areas of the lungs are not being used.

Once control of the ribs and diaphragm is mastered, the quantity of air needed for a phrase or a sentence can be gauged; one knows just how much air is available before the next breath is taken, and how many words need to be uttered before the supply is used up, leaving sufficient for the final words to be given full value, not tailing off forlornly at the end of the phrase.

See **VOICE PRODUCTION**

## C

### **CASTING**

Often a cause of considerable anxiety for directors and actors alike!

Whether a club or society holds auditions, or simply invites members to play specified parts, so much depends on which people are available. Very often a play is chosen with the hope that enough people will be forthcoming to complete the cast list, whether or not they are the most suitable actors for the roles. However, one mustn't be too reliant on preconceived ideas, because sometimes, by keeping an open mind, one can discover that an unlikely candidate can actually come up with a marvellous performance. In the end, it is up to the director to make the decisions.

Finding sufficient performers of the right age or gender can be challenging for some groups. Another difficulty can arise when a performance licence stipulates that any ethnic role must be performed by an actor of the same ethnicity, and that if such an actor is not available then the play may not be performed.

At all events, when casting, all those interested should be given the opportunity to look at the script beforehand, and it is helpful, if time can be found, to have one or two informal readings of the entire play, giving each person the chance to read in turn. This not only brings the play to life more quickly, but enables the director to get a better idea of the probable cast.

One important point to bear in mind is that some people read extremely well but do not necessarily



How does one set about breathing life  
into the character on the printed page?

develop sufficiently during rehearsals to play well, whereas with others the reverse can be true. Watch out for poor readers who can be good performers. I once cast a dyslexic boy whose reading would never have got him a part anywhere, but who turned in a superb performance as Puck in a prestigious production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

## **CHARACTERISATION**

The essence of the art of acting.

A character on stage is really created by three people: the author who first envisages it, the director who decides how it should be depicted, and the actor who has to portray it, but it is the actor who carries the greatest responsibility because they provide the persona seen by the audience.

How does one set about breathing life into the character on the printed page? One needs to apply imagination and feeling, first and foremost. Think long and hard about this imaginary person, about their day-to-day life, their entire situation, their moods, their ideas, their enthusiasms, their dislikes, their interaction with other people.

Of course actors can call on their own past experiences in order to work out how to reproduce emotions and reactions, but they have to bring fantasy into play as well. After all, you presumably have no experience of murdering anyone in real life, so you have to imagine what goes on in the murderer's mind if you are portraying one.

This is the fun and fascination of acting; you can push back the barriers of your own experience by putting yourself into someone else's shoes – you can be as regal or as evil or as glamorous as you





You don't have to have killed someone  
in order to play a murderer

could possibly wish, and it doesn't matter at all that in reality you may be none of these things.

Beware of being too obstinate in your ideas of playing the role. Most directors are more than willing to let you try out ways of playing as you 'see it' or 'feel it', but you should bow to their overall view of it from 'the front'. However brilliantly we think we're doing in our part, we can never judge impartially the way someone seeing the whole performance from 'out front' can.

### **CHARISMA**

'A spiritual power given by God: personal quality or gift that enables an individual to impress and influence many of his fellows: a similar quality felt to reside in an office or position'. Dictionary definition.

When applied to performers, they either possess it or they don't. Possibly it's a quality that may develop as experience brings confidence, but there are many hard working competent people who never really exhibit it, whereas others only have to appear on stage and their personal magnetism causes everyone's eyes to be fastened on them, and them alone. Too much of it can actually hinder the balance of a play, but there is no doubt that the star system is largely based on the phenomenon.

It's a blend of glamour, sex appeal, vitality and individuality, quite often spontaneous in children but sometimes ironed out of them by misguided adults, or by burgeoning self consciousness.

### **CLIMAXES**

Absolutely vital to the shaping of scenes, and often badly neglected.

Any playwright worth their salt will provide ever growing climaxes right through the script. If they don't, however interesting the theme or characters, the action will become flat and tedious. It will drag.

A 'scene' does not necessarily mean defined sections of an act, eg Sc 1, Sc 2, Sc 3, but natural sequences occurring in the flow of the action, often between two or three characters, which will change as other people enter or exit, for example.

Usually, a sequence of dialogue will build up to a small climax or crest, then drop again. Think of the sea, with rollers coming in towards the shore, building up until they tower upwards and then crash onto the beach. They can be little ripples, hardly noticeable, or they can be steady and rhythmic, or huge and dramatic, but always there is this movement, rising and falling, rushing and pausing. So it is with the patterns of dialogue, of actions, of scenes. One expects the greatest climax of all to appear very close to the end of the play.

## **COMEDY**

'A dramatic piece of a pleasant or humorous nature, a story with a happy ending, an incident suggesting comic treatment'. Dictionary definition.

As actors we need to be sure whether we are discussing comedy as a dramatic style (*As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* are comedies, whereas *Hamlet* and *Othello* are tragedies), or whether we are considering how comedy should be played. In other words 'comedy' can mean a type of play or a specific manner of performing.

In the minds of the public, comedy means something that will make them laugh. It can be

anything from a gentle tale producing smiles to riotous nonsense causing roars or screams of laughter, such as may be produced by a farce.

Playing comedy successfully is something that cannot always be taught, except to a certain extent by example. Some people have a flair or instinctive feeling for it, whereas others never quite get the hang of it.

Comedy playing relies on timing, knowing where to put the emphasis, when to pause, and how to deliver a punchline to best effect. Much of it can be acquired with experience, so that an old trouper will usually have more expertise in getting laughs than a newcomer. Experienced comedians know just where in the script they intend to get laughs; it is not simply a question of the author writing funny lines and the actor saying them, to get people rolling in the aisles. It is how the lines are timed and produced that does the trick; Michael Bentine once came up with a masterpiece of comedy simply by reading out the football results. Another skill the actor needs to conquer is the ability to hold back a laugh, prevent a laugh, in order to produce a larger one later. Sometimes a laugh shortly before a punch or parting shot means that there is none left for the climax which then becomes a damp squib. See **LAUGHS**

In a nutshell, it has been said that comedy is the essence of surprise, whereas tragedy is the essence of conflict. It is the unexpected that triggers laughter. There is no doubt that playing comedy successfully is enormously fulfilling.

A word of warning: one thing that must never be allowed to happen is for the cast to laugh

inappropriately on stage (corpsing). This not only means that they have come out of character, but it kills the comedy stone dead. It is totally unprofessional.

## **COSTUME**

Really needs a whole book to itself, and there are several good ones available. Worth looking in one's county drama library.

There are two main methods of dressing a production: hiring or making. For modern dress plays there is seldom a problem except when uniforms of any kind are needed. However, when period costumes are required, it's a case of finding someone to make them, either from scratch or by adapting other garments. Where pantomimes or lavish musicals are concerned one needs as many helpers as possible to lend a hand, not only in providing the garments, but acting as dressers during the performances as well.

You don't necessarily need beautifully finished stitching – it's surprising how an outfit that doesn't bear close inspection can look magnificent from a few yards away. A certain amount of 'cheating' can be very helpful. For example, when providing medieval or Tudor costume for men, borrowed cassocks can look fine worn with a wide belt which is studded with fruit gums and varnished, looking like superb jewels. Add a velvet cloak (simply made from somebody's cast off lounge curtains), a floppy velvet hat adorned with a feather, opaque tights, and felt covering for the shoes, and there you have it. All kinds of short cuts like this can be adopted, saving considerable expense and time.

Theatrical costumiers have the advantage of huge

stocks and a wide knowledge of what is required. They will expect as much notice as possible of your production, and will send forms for you to record the measurements of each character.

It is advisable, one might say essential, to visit the costumier and inspect the garments in good time, to make sure that they are suitable. As goods are charged for on a daily basis they are not usually delivered until the day of the dress rehearsal or the previous day. This allows no time to change any of them if they are in any way unsatisfactory.

Footwear must never be forgotten or neglected. Modern trainers just will not do unless they are appropriate for the character and the period – ie since the late 1970s.

Wigs need to be considered. Sometimes they are essential, and sometimes it's a matter of preference. Some actors like the 'disguise' a wig affords, whereas others find them uncomfortable to wear and prefer the freedom of their own hair or the compromise of a hair-piece.

Remember that the way a show is dressed is important for the overall presentation, and for authenticity. On the other hand, no amount of beautiful or effective dressing will make up for an uninspired or downright bad performance. Don't be so obsessed with how you look that you spend every second offstage fiddling about with trimmings and peering into the mirror. See that everything's OK before you make your entrance and then forget about your appearance and get on with the acting.

Another point worth stressing concerns period



Forget about your appearance and get on with the acting

costume. Remember that late twentieth century slouching was an impossibility in earlier times when the upper classes at any rate were severely corseted. Ladies: make sure that if you need to wear a crinoline you get as much practice as possible getting used to the hoops, particularly when it comes to sitting down. It is all too easy for the front of your skirt to shoot upwards as you seat yourself – revealing immodest views of your bloomers. Also, rehearse in a long skirt when necessary, and if a train is to be worn, tie a sheet round your middle to get used to managing yards of material behind you, particularly when making turns; a neat unobtrusive kick as you turn is vital if you are to avoid getting tangled up and tripping over.

Remember: HOW you wear your costume is as vital as WHAT you wear. See **DEPORTMENT**

## **CUES**

Your cue is the point at which you enter the scene either verbally or with action. As usually referred to it means the point at which you begin to speak (on every occasion).

Cues should be ‘picked up’ smoothly and without delay unless a deliberate pause for effect is called for; don’t wait until the actor giving the cue has finished their line before thinking what you are going to say, taking a breath, and then coming in with yours. Be prepared to speak immediately; this avoids go/stop jerkiness and general slowing down of the flow of dialogue. It is what is known as Pace (see **PACE**).

It follows, therefore, that cues must be learnt as thoroughly as one’s own lines. It is hair raising



to be unsure of a cue, and even more alarming if the cue when it comes is incorrect, or missing altogether. You owe it to your fellow players to give them accurate cues at all times, as well as making sure that you pick up your own efficiently.

### **CURTAIN CALLS**

Are sometimes given less attention than they should, tacked on as a kind of afterthought instead of being an integral part of the presentation.

For plays there are usually three types of call: a straight line-up of the cast, a tableau, or a series of entrances by individual performers who take solo bows before they join together for the final line-up.

The straightforward line-up is fine, provided that the bow is synchronised and the cast members are not bobbing up and down all anyhow. They take their cue from a specified leading player who is in the centre of the line, and when that player bows they all bow, and when that player rises they all rise. Applause should be acknowledged with charm, modesty and grace; after all it is the cast's 'thank you' for the audience's praise and appreciation. If the players appear gauche and self-conscious it spoils everything that has gone before, no matter how good it was.

Tableaux can be very attractive, particularly for large casts or for period productions. It is usual for the first curtain to show the motionless picture, and for the second to show the performers in the same positions but acknowledging the applause by smiles and slight lowering of their heads. They can, if wished, then line up for the third and final call.

Individual entrances from several points on stage are usually used for farces and musicals, swift moving and preferably to music – akin to traditional pantomime walk-downs. They can make a lively and cheerful finale.