



LESSON 2

Creating Original Characters

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Use observation, emotional memory, and imagination in creating original characters.
- ◆ Develop skill portraying the physical attributes of characters.

As you continue your study of characterization, you will move beyond stock and stereotypical characters to ones you create on your own. In this lesson, we will concentrate on creating original characters.

Warm Up



Observation—Your teacher will divide your class into pairs. After observing each other for at least 1 minute, each student will write a detailed description of his or her partner on a 3-by-5-inch index card. Your teacher will then collect the cards and pass them out at random. Each student will read aloud the card received and attempt to identify the student described.

Observation

One of the most important skills you can develop is the ability to observe real people. Observing real people in real situations will help you develop original characters. Your purpose in observing is to “collect” as many different qualities as you can. As you begin to “people watch,” your memory bank will become a virtual storehouse for all the wonderful ideas you will collect. By borrowing bits and pieces from many different characters, you can actually create a whole new being. You will then use your own mind, voice, face, body, and imagination to give your own interpretation of the character, making the character come alive for your audience.

It is a good idea to record in a notebook the different ideas that you collect from your observations and relationships with real people. Then when you need to create an original character for class, you can refer to your notebook. You might choose to speak with the British accent you heard on television but walk and move like the man you see every week in the grocery store. Your character’s unconscious habits of pushing up her glasses and shifting from foot to foot could be the same unconscious gestures you observed your history teacher use.



“An actor’s art is like a beggar’s bag . . . he should pick up everything he comes across.”

Sakata Tojuro

External Characteristics

When you observe people, you will first notice their outwardly visible qualities, or external characteristics. Suppose that a new student comes to your class. What is the first thing that you notice? Appearance, of course! Now look at your classmates. What are the different components of their appearance? Your answer probably includes age, gender, height, weight, hair color, skin tone, manner of dress, and degree of attractiveness.

What mannerisms can you pick up in this classroom? What can you tell about these students by observing their posture and expressions? Practice your observation skills in your own classrooms.



An actor should be observant not only on the stage but also in real life.

Konstantin Stanislavski

mannerisms

unconscious habits or peculiarities.

Next, notice the posture and stance of the students in your class. Do they stand tall and straight or slouched and slumped? What about the way they sit? Do you notice any particularly interesting forms of posture?

Watch as your classmates move around the room. Everyone moves with a unique rhythm. One student might move at a frantic pace, while another might bounce or glide from place to place. These movements can be imitated as you develop your original characters.

Take special note of interesting habits. When simple behaviors such as nail biting, raising an eyebrow, or twisting a lock of hair are unconsciously repeated, they are called **mannerisms**. Certain mannerisms may become associated with a particular character. Whenever we see that character, we expect to see the familiar mannerisms as well.

Vocalization

Once you have developed your original character, you will want to be sure that the character can come alive vocally. A character's voice is easier to discover after you have established the external and internal characteristics. Actors need to be able to adapt their own voices to reflect a character's external and internal characteristics.

As a student actor, you will want to listen to as many different voices as possible. For each voice, notice the quality and tone, the patterns of speech, and the accent or dialect. The illusion of a character can be totally lost if the character's voice is not suitable. For example, if you have created an authoritarian, masterful character who dominates everyone around her, you will want your character to have an appropriately powerful voice to go along with her personality. A deep, brusque voice might be more believable to the audience than a soft, sweet voice.

Listen to teachers, friends, television personalities, and public figures to hear the special qualities in each voice. As you listen to differ-



Have you seen the famous Christmas movie *It's a Wonderful Life* with Jimmy Stewart? Watch this movie, then discuss with your classmates the ways that this famous actor makes his character's internal characteristics apparent. Does his voice contribute to his characterization?

Teaching Suggestion: If you have specific qualities you wish students to observe, you may want to prepare a "fill-in-the-blank" type guideline. One such example is found in your Teacher Resource Binder.

ent voices, take notes about the way they sound. Professional actors often work with recordings of dialects and accents to achieve vocal variety, master a particular vocal quality or tone, and build a collection of voices. Many actors study for years with vocal coaches or voice teachers to enhance their voices.

Internal Characteristics

Learning about a character is like opening a present. Regardless of the size of the package or the way it is wrapped, you never really know what is inside until you open it and take a good look. As we get to know a person or a character, we discover that there is more involved than just the outside packaging, or external characteristics. Your goal as an actor is to look beyond one-dimensional stock or stereotypical characters and create a character who is complex and three-dimensional.

The dimension, or depth, of a character is based on what's inside the character. In addition to thinking about how your character looks, you also need to think about your character's inner qualities—the internal characteristics. These internal qualities include every aspect of the character's identity: background and life experiences, personality, intelligence, educational opportunities, personal interests, job or occupation, and physical, mental, and emotional health. Also included would be the character's place or role in society, as well as beliefs, attitudes and values, and wants and needs.

Desires, thoughts, feelings, reactions—these are all internal characteristics that are revealed as you get to know the character. Getting to know a character is much like becoming friends with a new acquaintance: It takes time and careful study.

In 335 B.C., Aristotle, an important Greek philosopher, defined character as the sum total of an individual's actions. In theatre, it is the actor's responsibility to use words and actions to explain to the audience what the character is doing and why. When the actor is able to think the inner thoughts of a character and react as the character would in a given situation, then the audience is able to see and believe.

ACTION

Real-Life Application: You may want to use this opportunity to explain to students the importance of developing good observation skills not just in acting, but also in real life. Ask students to cite examples of crimes that have been solved or criminals who have been apprehended as a result of someone's observations.

1. People Watching

- Carefully observe your friends, classmates, parents, teachers, and even total strangers for a length of time specified by your teacher. Look for interesting external characteristics to use when creating original characters.
- Notice the different ways that people walk, sit, stand, and carry their bodies.
- Pay special attention to unusual mannerisms and habits.
- Listen, and try to reproduce the different ways that people talk.
- Record all of your observations in your theatre notebook.

2. Building a Character

- Physically and vocally build an original character, putting together the bits and pieces obtained from your observations of people. Try

walking, sitting, standing, and talking like your original character. Check your original character in front of a mirror to see if you are physically projecting the image you want to convey.

- b.** On the assigned day, come to class as your original character. At the appropriate time, your teacher will invite you to model your character in front of the class.
- c.** Discuss with your classmates the value of observation and “people watching” when developing a character’s external characteristics.

3. Character Improvisations. Working with a partner, use sensory and emotional recall to choose movements and dialogue that will create believable characters and actions in one of the following settings.

- a.** A daughter tells her elderly mother that she has to move to a nursing home because the daughter can no longer care for her mother at home.
 - b.** There are two survivors at the scene of an airline crash.
 - c.** The principal tells a first-year teacher that her discipline in the classroom is ineffective.
 - d.** A surgeon must tell his patient that he has an incurable disease.
 - e.** Two waitresses discuss the manager, who is misusing the restaurant’s money.
 - f.** Two elderly people are bird-watching in a city park.
 - g.** A woman’s fiancé has just given her a diamond ring that she suspects is fake.
 - h.** A very shy girl is asked to the dance by the school’s most popular boy.
 - i.** A wife encourages her overweight husband to go on a diet before his high school reunion.
 - j.** A bellhop delivers numerous pieces of luggage to a hotel room, and the businessman gives him a \$1 tip.
 - k.** The president of the United States and his head of security must decide how to respond to a threat on the president’s life.
 - l.** A young bride serves a less-than-desirable meal to her husband.
 - m.** A couple are dividing up the property during a divorce settlement, and they can’t decide who gets the vacuum cleaner.
 - n.** After an unsuccessful weekend of fishing, an inexperienced fisherman attempts to purchase fish from an old man who has a plentiful catch.
 - o.** A teenager backs into a new car in the parking lot. The driver of the other car is hard of hearing.
 - p.** While in the veterinarian’s office, two pet owners brag about the talents of their cats.
 - q.** A judge sentences a pickpocket to 3,000 hours of community service.
 - r.** An airline reservation clerk is unable to find a reservation for an impatient businesswoman trying to get to Chicago.
 - s.** On the afternoon of the prom, a hairdresser cuts a teenager’s hair too short. The teenager becomes hysterical.
 - t.** An elderly man and an elderly woman meet on an airplane and compare grandchildren.
 - u.** A receptionist refuses to allow an impatient customer to see her boss.
 - v.** Bound for new lives in America, your ancestors share their hopes.
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