

A graphic for Lesson 2. The word "LESSON" is written in orange, stylized letters, with each letter on a separate white fan-shaped background. Below it is a large purple number "2". The entire graphic is set against a black and white checkered pattern.

LESSON

2

Preparing Your Part

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Learn to analyze a play.
- ◆ Develop a character from a script.
- ◆ Learn how to memorize lines.
- ◆ Perform a role portraying thought, feeling, and character.

Warm Up



Working with your acting company or in small groups, discuss your favorite actors. Compile a list of today's top five male and female actors, and give two reasons for your decision. Compare your group's list with those of the other groups. Discuss the reasons for choosing the actors.

When you participated in improvisation, you focused on creating an imaginary character in a specific situation. Now you are ready to focus on developing a character from a play. Once you are assigned a role in a scene or play, it becomes your responsibility to do everything possible to bring that character to life for the audience. Your job is to learn as much as possible about the character in order to make the character an exciting, well-developed personality. The actions of well-developed characters are much more interesting and harder to predict than those of the stock or stereotypical characters we explored in Chapter 7.

Analyzing the Play

You should begin, as professional actors do, by reading the play for enjoyment and understanding. You should then reread the entire script, looking carefully for all the information the playwright has pro-



Doesn't this look like a perfect setting for reading and analyzing a play? If you don't have access to a theatre, a quiet room at home or in the library will work almost as well.



“
You need three things in the theatre: the play, the actors, and the audience; and each must give something.
Kenneth Kaigh
”

vided about your character. Become a detective. Make a list of every piece of information you know about the character. Various descriptions of your character might include references to physical traits, such as age, gender, height, weight, hair color, eye color, race, stance, posture, walk, and mannerisms. Also pay special attention to what other characters say and think about your character. Note any references to voice quality, accent, or dialect.

Once you have written down all of the descriptions from the script, try to create a mental picture of your character. Use your imagination to fill in any information not provided by the playwright. Refer to the character analysis questions in Chapter 7 (p. 133) for additional help.

Now ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ Who are you?
- ◆ In the play, what do you need or desire?
- ◆ What obstacle stands in your way of fulfilling this need or desire?
- ◆ What is your relationship to the other characters in the play?
- ◆ Where are you in each scene of the play?
- ◆ What are you specifically doing in each scene of the play?

As you read the play again, picture your character in each scene. Concentrate on understanding the character through his or her actions and thoughts. Personalize the character by making comparisons between your character and yourself.

Researching the Play

Suppose that you were going to play the part of Black Elk in the play *Black Elk Speaks*, based on the eyewitness account of the Sioux Indians. You would no doubt want to research the history behind the play. Research is an important part of preparing for a part in any play. You might begin in your school library or media center, looking up information on the background or period of the play. If possible, you would interview someone who was living during that time or a direct descendant of someone who had lived during that period. To further your understanding of the period, you would try to find the answers to the following questions:

- ◆ What were the major world events at the time of the play?
- ◆ What were the social customs of the time?
- ◆ What type of clothing was worn?
- ◆ What music was popular?
- ◆ What famous political or social characters were popular?
- ◆ In what type of dwelling or shelter would your character have lived?
- ◆ What type of food was eaten?
- ◆ What would have been the job opportunities for your character?
- ◆ What was your character's relationship to society?

At this point in your study, you should have developed a strong impression of the character you are to portray. But before you begin rehearsing the play, discuss your ideas with the director. With the director's help and guidance, you will continue to develop the character.

A few hours of research at your school or public library will help you better understand the life and times of the characters you will play. This greater understanding will enable you to make your roles more believable and real for the audience.



It is very important that each character in a play—even the ones with very few lines or no lines at all—seem believable to the cast and to the audience. Many directors encourage cast members to create backgrounds, memories, and “life stories” for the characters they portray. These exercises help make a role more than just a name in the script.

The more real and meaningful a character becomes, the more relevant the character is to the plot of the play. When the actor playing the guard creates a background for his character, it doesn’t matter that his entire part is to stand silently at the castle gate. The entire cast accepts the role with the same understanding as they do the king’s role, even though the king has many lines. See Figure 8–2 for a character biography.

A clear understanding of all the characters in a play makes it easier for everyone in the cast to act and react with emotion. When the cast understands and believes in the characters, the audience also understands and believes. That is the essence of theatre.

Memorizing Lines

As an actor, you have many new responsibilities. One of them is memorizing your lines. Actors must memorize a script exactly as written, “word for word.” Missing a line could leave out important information or confuse another actor.

The other members of the cast depend on you, just as you depend on them, to deliver the correct line at the appropriate time. Some of the lines may be cues for the other actors. **Cues** are the lines or signals that alert another actor to be ready to speak, enter, or exit. If you don’t say your line correctly, an actor might miss his or her cue. Missed cues often cause actors to leave out lines. Missed cues also slow down a rehearsal or performance, causing the show to drag.

To memorize your lines, you need to understand them. When you first receive your script, take time to read it carefully. The lines will be

cues

the dialogue, sounds, movement, or business signaling an actor or technician to respond as rehearsed.

business

small movements and actions that do not require the actor to move from place to place.



Every role is a challenge. You always start from scratch.

Jessica Tandy

ACTION



member of your family to help you with your lines. Soon you will be ready to put down the script, relying on your partner to prompt you—tell you the word or line—only when you forget. A good way to let your partner know that you need a prompt is to say “line” without breaking character.

As you go over the lines, visualize what is happening in the scene. Note your character’s movements and personal **business** (mannerisms, actions, or use of props) at that moment in the play. These mental “action” pictures help you remember the scenes as you master the script.

There are other ways to memorize. A good way to memorize when working alone is to cover your lines with an index card, removing the card after you recite the line to check for accuracy. Many actors like to memorize by acting out the lines as they move about. They associate certain movements with certain words.

Actors with many lines often divide their parts into small sections, or scenes, memorizing one scene at a time. Other actors record their cues on a tape recorder, leaving time on the tape after each cue to speak their lines. Some actors find that reading their lines aloud just before going to sleep is helpful.

Whatever method you use, memorization requires time, concentration, and drill. As an actor, it is your responsibility to spend the time needed to learn the lines of the script.

- 1. Letters of Introduction.** Write a letter in character introducing yourself to the other characters in the play you are rehearsing. Share these letters in one of the early rehearsals.
- 2. Character Collage.** Create a collage of magazine or newspaper clippings. Include descriptive words and pictures that might reflect your character’s personality. Mount these on posterboard or construction paper and label with your character’s name. Create a cast “art gallery” for display during the run of the play.
- 3. Memory Box.** Prepare a special “memory box” to fill with memorabilia that your character might consider important enough to save. Look through your closets or attic to see if you might have something that is similar to what you need. Secondhand stores, estate sales, or flea markets may have just the right items at low cost.
 - a.** Prepare your box and share it in class or at rehearsal.
 - b.** Select the one item from the box that your character would consider most precious. You might choose a locket, a lock of hair, or even a special rock. Prepare a 1-to 2-minute monologue revealing the item’s value and importance to your character. Share your monologue “in role” in class or at rehearsal.
- 4. Character Bag.** Create a “character bag.” Decorate the outside of a grocery sack to reflect your character’s external traits. Use pictures and captions that reflect the outer images that the audience will be able to view immediately. Fill the inside of the sack with several items that repre-

sent the internal characteristics that will be discovered as the audience gets to know the character. Bring the bag to class or rehearsal to share with the other members of the cast.

5. **Composing Subtext.** Write the complete subtext for your assigned part in the play.
6. **Research Your Character.** Combine your knowledge of your character in the play with your research on the historical period in which the play takes place. Put all the information together as a “life story,” or biography, for the character you will portray (see Figure 8–2).
7. **Analyzing a Character.** After reading the character biography in Figure 8–2, describe Monica.
 - a. What is her habit, or mannerism?
 - b. What does she enjoy doing?
 - c. What things does she dislike?
 - d. What is her greatest desire?

Figure 8–2

Character Biography.

The following part of a character biography, written by theatre student Melissa Bahs, describes Monica from the play *Twelve Dancing Princesses*, by I. E. Clark. After reading the excerpt, decide what you know about the character.

Student Example Character Biography

Monica

Monica is a very sarcastic and resentful princess. She resents being forced to sneak out of her father’s castle to attend the nightly dances at the castle of the Demon Prince. She also resents that she isn’t as beautiful as all of the other princesses. One of the things she wants most is to be as beautiful as her sisters. Being beautiful would make her feel as important as all of the other eleven sisters.

Monica is probably about sixteen years old. It would have taken her at least this much time to form such a resentful attitude toward herself and toward the other characters in the play. We know from history that young princesses were allowed to date and even marry at a very young age.

Monica’s posture is not very good because of her lack of confidence. She walks slowly and reluctantly as she journeys to the far away kingdom. She has a habit of twirling a ring on her right hand. Perhaps this ring was given to her by a prince with whom she was once in love.

Although Monica is not as beautiful as the other princesses, she is clean and neat. She has straight brown hair and greenish-blue eyes. She looks a little like I look.

She is physically healthy, but she is mentally unhealthy because of her constant depression over her situation with her sisters and her father. Her depression shows in her movements, in her reactions to other characters, and in her voice. Each time she speaks, her deep mature voice is harsh and cruel and very sarcastic.

Monica’s lines indicate that she is intelligent and that she has a good imagination. She is well read and well-versed on the current affairs of the kingdom, although she does not share these facts with her sisters.