

Consider Acting Techniques:

Be a Star When You Speak

By Fred Rivera, ATM-B

With some practice, you can create a "character" that is far more commanding than you could ever be.

Acting techniques can improve your speaking and make you the best speaker you can be. To bend Shakespeare a bit, if you'll "lend me your eyes," I'll give you ample proof.

Cicero, a fairly well-known speaker, once said, "When I speak of an orator, I speak almost as if I spoke of an actor." Marcus Tullius Cicero lived from 106 B.C. to 43 B.C., but the above quote is as true today as it was then: Good speakers are good actors.

That last statement might sound wrong to some speakers, because they feel there is something inherently false about acting. As a former actor who is now a public speaking coach, something I hear regularly is, "If I acted in my speech, it wouldn't be me." This is a misconception of what good acting is. To these people I say, Don't we all act in our everyday lives? Don't we act differently with our mothers than we do with our boyfriends or girlfriends or wives or husbands or children?

We even refer to our different relationships as roles: "Tonight, John Smith is performing the role of Toastmaster." We may perform the role of peacemaker, employee or boss. Is there something false about these roles? I don't think so. We usually try to be as honest as possible in them. And that's exactly what an actor does: He or she tries to be as honest as possible in his or her role. So fundamentally we all act, whether we're on stage or in everyday life.

One of the key things that will help you be a star when you speak is to understand this connection between acting and everyday life. After reading my comment that we all act, I imagine some people thinking, "Whoa! OK, I can see that I play different roles in my life, but I don't create them like an actor does."

Sure you do. We all do. We just don't usually think about it. If we observe how and why we act in life we'll see that we have created our life roles. A dramatic example of this is when we're trying to talk to an infant or small child. We usually raise our voice pitch, get very animated and make sounds and faces we would never make to an adult. What we do in this role is use the aspect of the child in us and, for the most part, leave the adult out so we can communicate with the child. Again, that's what a good actor does to create a role: He uses certain aspects of himself while leaving others out, because they don't belong to the character he's playing. So using acting techniques when speaking is not as big a jump as you may think.

Of course acting on the stage or screen is not exactly the same as doing so in everyday life. One of the differences between us everyday folks playing our roles and actors is that actors consciously choose certain aspects of themselves in creating a character. Also, actors are trained to become familiar with aspects of themselves that they don't habitually use



never use. For instance, an actor may have to find the rage within himself or herself to portray a murderer, or the craziness to be a political fanatic, or the command to be a king or queen.

Just as we have learned to choose certain aspects of ourselves to live within the parameters of a given relationship – as we saw with the example of the young child – a star speaker does the same thing within the parameters of a speech. She knows what she wants to get across with her words.

Then, like an actor, the speaker consciously chooses the aspects of herself that will help her to convincingly convey her ideas to the audience. If it's a humorous speech, she'll have to dig to find what triggers that aspect of fun and delight in herself – then she can share this genuine fun with her audience. This digging is an acting technique. You rummage around in your feelings and experiences to see when you've been your funniest. What contributed to it? Maybe you discover it's when you're with friends, where you feel at ease to goof around.

With this understanding you could use your imagination and have your friends "around you" when you write and rehearse your speech. You could "put" them in the audience when you give the speech! If

you succeed in this imaginative exercise, you'll be as loose as a goose and at your funniest. By the way, this digging process will help you get to know yourself better. You'll become a wiser person, as you become a better speaker.

Here's another acting technique that can help you be a star when you speak: Do something as if you were someone else. Let's say you have a speech that demands a good deal of command. Think of what fun it would be to rehearse it as if you were a king or queen or the CEO of a major company. Try it – after all, there's only you and the four walls watching you at home.


Who knows what you might discover. Maybe with some practice you could create a "character" that is far more commanding than you

thought you could ever be. Wouldn't that be fun, to say nothing of useful, if you used that command in your everyday life? Don't try to mimic a king or particular CEO you've read about or seen on TV, but rather try to incorporate the feeling they imparted about themselves. Use your imagination and then let your imagination use you. Become someone other than the life roles you're used to playing. Remember you had to learn those life roles. You can learn another.

I mentioned the role of a political fanatic earlier in this piece. I once played Marat, one of the many voices vying for power in the French Revolution. He was one of the greatest political fanatics of all time. This was a dead serious role, but I had great fun playing him. As Marat, I was right and the rest of the world was wrong. How's that for fun? Who hasn't briefly felt like that a few thousand times? I got to do it for two

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whole hours a night with the rapt attention of hundreds of people – audiences absolutely love crazy people. I'm not asking you to be as wild as Marat in your speech, but you can definitely be a little crazy.

Cut loose in your rehearsals. You can always choose later what you want to keep. Be a star! Find that electric reality where a good actor lives. Act your heart out and you might discover what Oscar Wilde meant when he said, "I love acting. It is so much more real than life." 

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