

Creating Dramatic Presentations

Drama can communicate to both the head and heart simultaneously. By engaging listeners in a story about a human being and his or her journey, you gain their interest and draw them through a time and place which was initially unfamiliar. By the end of the story, they have not only lived through a character's trauma, adventure, or development, but have also come to know the world the character lived in.

FIRST PERSON NARRATIVES

For the dramatically inclined, crawling inside the experience of another person can illuminate their life and times in a way that no other form of presentation can. Training to become and allowing yourself to breathe as another person is an exercise in blending historic research, character-development, and communication skills. It allows one to speak from a single specific perspective with a clear and certain voice. If you shape your presentation with care, you can also shed an enormous amount of light on the era you speak of.

For the sake of this guide, I have chosen the topic of *lives of domestic workers* as an ongoing example to demonstrate how to create a dramatic character. I have developed a character named Hattie, through whom I will present techniques and ideas about the skill you will learn here. Let us imagine that you are considering tours through a new exhibit '**View From the Kitchen: *The Lives of Domestic Workers.***' Your exhibit will be a retrospective of one century from 1850-1950, and you would like it to be conducted by a person playing a domestic worker. The two groups that dominated domestic service in the 1850's were Irish immigrants and African-Americans. Choose to portray the group for which you feel the greater affinity, and begin your research.

RESEARCH

Time Line

Begin with a time line of the era in which your character lived. The character can be created as a composite by you or modeled upon a specific person. In your time-line, include not only historic events, but also social, economic, and philosophical trends. People's lives are greatly influenced by the world into which they were born. Be sure that your time-line includes these forces. It will be helpful to you in many ways as you continue to develop your character and tours or talks that you will give as that character.

Weaving Strands

You can secure greater historic authenticity if you base your research on the life or lives of known historic figures about whom you have some transcripts or documented information. It is too easy for us to make assumptions and value judgments about peoples lives, ideas, and motivations from our contemporary vantage point. A good actor enters the world of his or her character, rather than drawing his or her *own* world into the characters. A realistic base is a strong foundation.

You may begin with an oral history, biography, or interview. Read and reread the information. If you want to create a composite character, read a number of interviews

and biographies, initially culling specific details of the subject's life. Note all the obvious details that will tell you about the person. Where is she from? What did her family do? What was her early childhood like? A good deal of factual information can usually be gleaned. Once you have done this, begin looking for the subjective information. For instance, try to find details that will tell you about how your subject feels, her motivations, passions, and style. *These things are explicit in the written documentation, but some of the most compelling information is actually only implied by these sources.*

Consider the following quote by our character, Hattie: "She think I ain't got no mind to it. She be wrong. I got more mind than she ever took to notice."

What does this quote tell you about the speaker? What does it say about her class, her attitude toward her employer, and her opinions? The most interesting things we learn about people are indicated by *how* they tell it, not only by their words themselves. When the speaker says, "I got more mind than she ever took to notice," what else is she saying about her employer that remains unvoiced? By sifting through direct quotes and looking for the subjective, you will find the most interesting and accessible window to your subjects's world. Note down everything you have learned and begin to write a biography of the character.

MAKING A BIOGRAPHY

Given the fact that we are creating characters from the histories of "undistinguished Americans,"¹ it is unlikely that you will be able to find the detailed information required for a full biography. This is where the fiction of "historic fiction" comes into play. You must creatively fill in the information that the sources leave out, but it must be based in the realities you've uncovered from work on the time line and drawn naturally from the character you have begun to design. Let's say, for example, that you read that the domestic worker who spoke above worked in Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1890's. You know that she came to her employment first in 1889 and that her mother had taught her to cook and wash where they lived in the country. Let us say that in creating her biography you want to paint a fuller picture of her childhood. It would be both historically correct and a logical extension of what you already know to assume that she grew up as a tenant farming on what was once a slave holding plantation. Both of her parents had most likely been slaves. From this beginning you could go in many directions. As long as you are true to the historical fact and logical in terms of what you have already learned about your character, you can create a rich, detailed biography. In giving tours you will find that your point of view on all issues will be constantly influenced by this background you have created. Your character's biases, hopes and desires, as with all of us, are shaped by our earliest memories and life. You will want to know your character well enough so that later experiences and observations come from this well-informed base.

PUTTING ON YOUR CHARACTER

"Trying on" one's character's skin is a technique that actors love. How do you allow yourself to now become this person you have learned so much about? This part of the process is one of the many ways by which to move from the analytical to the visceral aspects of character-portrayal. I offer it to you as a starting point.

¹ A book by the title, The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans as Told By Themselves, is edited by Hamilton Holt and published by Routledge, 1990.

Visualization is process by which you allow your imagination to build images. Visualization is at its height when you are listening to a storyteller or a radio drama, or reading a fine novel and creating very personal mental images of the suggestions that are coming to you. It is now time to build a detailed mental picture of your character and his or her world.

A. Begin by lying down on your back with your arms at your side and your legs straight ahead (if you have a bad back put your feet flat on the floor, your knees bent, legs making an A shape). Close your eyes and completely relax your body. This is best done by alternately tightening and relaxing any tense areas of the body and focusing on deep slow breathing.

B. Begin to build a mental image of your character in a place that he or she might be most comfortable. You should make you own choice about the age you want your character to be during this exercise. For example, I want Hattie to speak from the latter part of her life, when she has a good deal of hindsight about her work and the folks she dealt with. I imagine her in retirement, in a two room shack at the edge of the farm on which her parents were tenants. With my eyes closed, I begin to build an image of her, piece by piece. I see her sitting, not in a rocker as she would have liked, because she could not afford one, but rather in a chair fashioned for her by one of her 17 grandchildren and great grandchildren. It has been filed away to approximate a rocker. I will continue to build the very personal details of her person and location in my mind's eye until, like the opening of a film, the first frame is fully completed. *You will find that by trusting this process which utilizes the imagination as the primary looking glass, you will create details and have insights into your character that would be unavailable in a completely solely analytical process.*

C. Once this image is full and rich, try it on! While maintaining your relaxed position on the floor, simply imagine her legs to be your legs, her feet your feet, her stomach, your stomach, and so on. Take on each part of her slowly and feel what each aspect is like on your body. You will discover that subtle changes and alterations will occur in you. Allow this to happen. Piece by piece you will try on another person.

D. Allow the physical to inform the emotional and verbal. Imagine one thing that your character has wanted all of his or her life, and begin repeating it in the form of a word or phrase, silently, deep inside you. Let this thing to rise slowly from your stomach, to your chest, to your neck, and into your head. Slowly keep thinking it at every phase. Finally allow yourself to whisper this thing aloud, and begin to say it louder and louder. Shout this one thing you want most, and then slowly let it fall back into your head and roll down to where it started.

In this process you will discover where you and your character meet. You will discover how best to physicalize the character, and you will have discovered a deep secret about his or her that all the printed information in the world would never have given you. Now that you have a sense of how he or she feels on you, its time to play, reinforcing both the personality and the historic accuracy of your character.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

You will make a great leap when you stop talking about your character as “he” or “she” and speak from his or her vantage point in the first person. From here on, in this section, I will consider you and the character you want to portray as one being.

Finding Heart and Detail

1. You can now read about yourself and the era you grew up in, but in order to deeply communicate your observations, visions, and concerns, you must speak from your heart. Finding your heart, or what has deeply touched you in this world and what you want from your life takes some honest introspection. Sometimes you will find that the key to what you do or say or what has happened to you has already been recorded in the biographical segment. For instance, I know that Hattie’s biological grandfather was white.

She might say about him: “That side of the family don’t exist for us,” “He never seen his babies, Momma wouldn’t let him.”

However, except for these few short, clear, statements, he is not part of her family life. This is a window to another world, beckoning you to jump in. Ask yourself how this would influence the ways you think about whites, men, and women. How have I protected myself from this legacy or the hurt it caused? Look at your biography and excerpt any statement that indicates piece of your past that was not addressed. It could be something that might be as profound as the quotes from above or as innocent as “corn pie.”

“I was weaned on corn pie and never stopped eatin’ it.”

Think about the statement’s origins. When did you really first eat corn pie? Who made the pies? How? What were the circumstances in which you ate them? Are you able to eat corn pies now? Where do you get them? How do they make you feel? A small window like this can lead you into a richer understanding of your roots and how they affected your present life. Play with and explore these excerpts. Every time you go to work, look into another one or two.

2. Begin work on your autobiography. This process will continue as long as you share the same costume and space as your character. As you consider your life, you will begin to draw fuller, richer scenes from the information and memories that are most flushed out. Like streams feeding a river, every new discovery will help build your living presence. As Hattie, I might choose to start work on my autobiography, the story of my life from the back towards the front:

“You see, as a retired woman, I got more time to do thinkin’ than ever before. Especially my last, Miz. Marcus and Dr. Tom, it’s a miracle I lived to leave that job, with all they had me doin’. And it’s not like they couldn’t afford two more! No, but they knew I would work hard and they took advantage. Nothin’ I ever did was half way, but they took dear advantage of that fact.”

Your biography might offer this information, but now you must fill in exactly what it

was you did for them, and the living tactile details of your day. There are many ways for you to fill in the details of your life, all depending on which medium you are most comfortable with. Some people like to collect actual objects representing specific episodes or people and weave their reminiscences around them, orally or on paper. Others like to draw pictures of their experiences. You may choose to use the guided imagery technique that was outlined earlier, theatrical improvisations, or word-for-word written accounts of your experiences. Take care that your use of language and cultural nuance and detail is consistent with what you have discovered. I have found that a combination of these techniques help you to deepen and understand your character and create an unconventional, but very usable autobiography.

PLANNING YOUR PROGRAM

Whether you are walking people through an exhibition, entering a classroom or social hall with artifacts to share, or simply speaking to a group gathered at an outdoor location, you will be well pleased that you have done more homework than simply creating a costume, shoes and a hairdo. The people you share your time with will see the exhibit, artifacts, or general environment through your eyes.

1. Stepping Into Your Character

Create a ritual for yourself by which you become your character. The putting on of clothes, make-up, and a head piece or wig are all part of this ritual. In addition to the obvious physical changes you make in your apparel, try to also make one in your physical stature. When you worked on the visualizations, you tried on your character's body. Make a physical alteration that will put it back on you. Whether it's a heaviness in the shoulders, a limp on one leg, a squint, a tenseness in one part of your being, or a special level of relaxation, find at least one literal physical change that enables you to feel like your character before you begin your program.

2. Be Literal

When you begin your tour or talk have a physical object essential to the character in hand. Whether it is a rag, a walking stick, or a bible, a prop will help draw you and listeners into this new place. It's also wonderful to have something to play with, especially if you're nervous!

3. Imagine Friends

It is always unnerving to speak to strangers, and even more so in the role of another person. Begin by thinking about the audience as a group of friends, distant relatives, or associates that you want to please. If there is hostility or fear between you and people you want to share with, the gates of perception will close and little positive sharing will go on. Welcome them as you might a stranger into your home. Begin by sharing something personal about your world, and something that will draw them immediately to who you are and to your perspective of this world. For instance:

"I'm glad you folks decided to come by. Deacon Brown said he was gonna send you round, but bless his heart, I didn't know there'd be so many of you! You won't fit into my little two room shack! Especially not you! [Points to a particularly large man.] You remind me of Ed Doherty. Used to put people under in the colored cemetery, but I hope you got a long time before you meet you maker. You all didn't come here to talk

about the Angel Gabriel though. It befuddles me that you want to know about my work. That's what Deacon Brown said. Is that for true? (wait for response) You're a brave lot, cause I got a mouthful of talkin' and an eyeful of seein' to share. I got some things here, ready to help me remember 'bout different jobs..."

As you begin to design your talk, know that you have the power to shape it any way you want, but that your most powerful tools are:

1. The freedom to introduce artifacts, conflicts, and pieces of history from a specific personal perspective.
2. The power to create a character who offers a highly underexposed vantage point.
3. The ability to interact with your audience from the vantage point of the character.

The more often you take that step into your character, talking and living and remembering from his or her perspective, the easier it will become. Eventually, putting on your character's clothes will be like welcoming an old friend back into your life.

*A book by this same title **The Life Stories of Undistinguished AMERICANS as Told By Themselves** is edited by Hamilton Holt and published by Routledge 1990