

Natural Speech: Losing the ‘Actor Voice’

By Lorraine Thompson

Robert De Niro once stated, “In acting, I always try to go back to what would actually be the real situation, the real human behavior in life.” The actor’s aim should always be to tell the truth — truth in character, truth in movement, and truth in voice. While the playwright provides the words, the actor supplies the voice. Our voices are the way we send our energies into the world. You can tell a lot about a person by listening to the way they talk. Our voices paint tiny portraits of sound every time we open our mouths. Our natural speech patterns are wonderful to listen to. They are filled with a variety of pauses, pace, pitches, and inflections. Why is it then, when a young actor opens his/her mouth to perform a monologue or scene, the words uttered sound stilted and artificial? Why is “talking like a person” so difficult when acting? In order to tackle this challenge, I have devised four exercises for the student actor.

Activity 1: Show & Tell

Observation is key in building any actor’s vocabulary. Being a “natural” actor begins with listening and watching. Ask students to bring an item from home. This item should have a story behind it or have some sentimental attachment to it. Have everyone sit in a circle. One by one have students share their stories. After each story, have the other students share what they noticed about the telling. Were there pauses? Were the words motivated? Could you see the mental transitions and the thought? What was the pace of the story? What about the inflection? Also, have students comment on the physicality of the teller. Where did the speaker put his/her eyes? Was eye contact constant? Sporadic? What about the speaker’s body language and use of hands? Did they shift around? Pick at their clothing? Play with the object? Where was their focus?

Discuss with your students the wealth of physicality and vocal variety they observed. How can these observations be used by the actor? If these stories had been given to them as written monologues, would their choices have been as interesting or as varied?

Activity 2: Seeing is Believing

We have all heard the expression “In my mind’s eye.” Discuss with your students what this phrase means. So much of our “world” takes place solely in our own heads. Our thoughts are filled with all kinds of visual footage. Memories of the past, visions of the present, and predictions of the future fill our brains. We “see” just as much behind our eyes as we do through them.

Divide your class into two groups. Group A will share a description of their bedroom. Group B will give verbal instructions as to how get somewhere (the cafeteria, the library, the gym, their house...). Pair members of Group A with members of Group B. Give them a few minutes to share their descriptions and directions. Call them back together. Discuss what was observed. What was the person’s body language? What were the vocal patterns? Could they see the thought? Did the person talking “see” what they were describing? How did this internal sight and thought translate in the telling? How important is seeing with your mind’s eye when you talk? How can these observations be used by the actor? If these descriptions/directions had been written as a monologue, would you have thought to make similar vocal and physical choices? Why is this activity called “Seeing is Believing”? Why are actors that “see” internally more believable than those that don’t? How does “seeing” aid with natural speech?

Activity 3: Audio Interview

Students will need some sort of recording device for this activity. My students used their phones, but an old fashion tape recorder works just as well. Give them the following directions:

Find a person to interview. Do not tell them exactly what you are doing. You do not want them to be self conscience about their speech patterns.

Record their answers to one of the following questions/topics.

- Would you rather be poor and work at a job you love or be rich and work at a job you hate?
- Would you rather be blind or deaf? Why?
- If you had a million dollars, what would you do with it?
- What is something you have never done but would like to do?
- What is your dream job?
- If you had three wishes, what would they be?
- What is one weird thing about you?

Next write down verbatim what was said in the interview. Make any helpful notations as to exactly how the words were spoken. You want to re-create the monologue's tone, rate, inflections, volume, etc. as closely as possible.

Rehearse reading it multiple times! You will perform this monologue for the class.

We will listen to you, then we will listen to the recording.

Be prepared to share/discuss your observations. How can you use these observations as an actor?

Activity 4: Making It Personal

This activity builds on Activity 3. In addition to the auditory recording, students will also need a visual recording. After filming and writing the interview down, students should begin to study the speech patterns and physicality and of the person interviewed. Memorize and rehearse the piece until it is solid. The pieces will be performed for the class followed by footage of the original interview. Discuss the process, their observations, and how this exercise can be used when acting.

I once heard Carol Burnett relay a story of playing “radio show” as a young girl growing up in an apartment she shared with her grandmother. She explained that she was already honing her talents as a performer by providing all the sounds and voices for a make-believe radio show. She was performing away when the voice of an angry neighbor sounded through the open window. “Turn that radio down!” the voice demanded. She stopped her radio show, thrilled that someone had believed her! A reaction — a belief — in her voice changed everything. Encourage your students to listen to others and to themselves. Encourage them to observe, to analyze, and to reflect on what they see and hear. Daniel Radcliffe, of “Harry Potter” fame once said, “As an actor, the most valuable thing you can do is talk to people and hear their stories, because it’ll all come in handy.”