



Why Study Technique and When to Study Which?

There is no difference between the greatest actor you admire and you, when you are *In the Zone*. You know when it happens- and so does the audience. In those moments, you are observing your self express in ways unlike any other time. All is effortless. And the ability to get into that zone is innate. I bet you felt it before you ever took any acting lessons- probably as a young child. Seeking to experience it more frequently is one of the most compelling reasons we act. Yet, that *peak* inspiration doesn't show up on a regular basis. How can one call oneself a professional without being able to deliver consistency? The greats can do take after take and night after night with a brilliant constancy. Training and experience are the basis for this. Quite simply, to be a professional, you must learn technique to use when inspiration fails.

Which technique will work for me?

There has been some interesting exploration done with understanding how people work by actress/coach Dee Wallace Stone. She proposes that you fall into one of two categories- those who are safest in "reality" and those who are safest in "pretend". By doing kinesiology, you can muscle test to determine which you are, if you don't know instinctually.

It is neither good nor bad to be one or the other. However, if you are training in techniques that lead you out of your safety zone, they will often prove painfully ineffective and crushing to your esteem. We are fragile enough. We don't need to pay people to humiliate us and we don't need abuse to stimulate peak performance.

I have been working with this Reality/Pretend concept for several years and found it stunning in its impact. I will try to explain what it means to be "safest in...." When you are in your safety zone, your ability to express yourself soars. The feeling of being unsafe is one of the leading causes of cliché, stiffness and overall lackluster performances. It manifests in frustrating nervousness, predictability and loss of believability. When you find a technique that fits your "safety zone" your acting ability will flourish. The potential to act is intimately connected to the degree of love that you have for it. That love is like the fuel for the radiance that shines when you are inspired. Inspiration is a natural state that often gets blocked by doubt, inhibition and habitual patterns that don't allow the character to fully inhabit your body.

Any technique that increases your love of the art will do more for you than a technique that awakens fear – of judgment, failure, or being untalented or unskilled. So if you are currently training in an environment that decreases your love of acting, it might be time to consider another class.

What must I train?

Have you ever experienced the moment when you know exactly what you want to do and then it just doesn't come out the way you knew it could? This happens when you have great ideas and your body can't express them-physically and vocally. So, you want to train your body and voice to be unified in expressing images. Most all techniques ask you to have images – the image may be of your past, present, an abstract image, or the given circumstances. Yet few train the body and voice with the imagination. Be sure you train with the mind-body connection. You must be a gymnast of transforming thoughts, feelings and desires. Your body and voice are the only means to convey your images to the



audience. Training body and voice separately is only necessary when you have specific vocal or physical goals- like accent reduction, stage combat or dance. Even for voice-overs, physicalizing the character is critical since the entire body is the instrument producing the sound.

When you have accomplished the ability to communicate your ideas, you will want training in how to get great ideas to share. This will help you stand out in the crowd while maintaining the integrity of the script. Imagination oriented work will be very helpful here. Naturally getting ideas in the moment from your partner is wonderful. However, in film and television, your partner is often not even there. In auditions, you may be given very little to respond to from the casting person who is busy evaluating. If your technique is wholly dependent on *reacting to what is really there* you may want to add some imagination based tools to help you when nothing is there.

Once you develop techniques for cultivating cool images that you are trained to send out to the audience-- you'll have so many that you'll need a technique for deciding which to use when. The basic Stanislavsky-Vakhtangov System of Analysis and Michael Chekhov's Guiding Principles will be excellent resources for this. I mention the combination of Stanislavsky-Vakhtangov because in my opinion the System of Analysis taught at the Vakhtangov School in Moscow is the most complete and clear. Stanislavsky felt that Vakhtangov was the best teacher of his system and this school carries the lineage of the Second Moscow Art Theatre, headed by Vakhtangov and Chekhov respectively. While Michael Chekhov offers alternatives to Affective Memory, he built his imagination based techniques upon the System of Analysis. This System of Analysis- including beats, units, objectives, etc. is the closest thing to a common language that actors, writers and directors share. While some teachers change the basic terms, the concepts are well laid out and should be known by every actor.

Which techniques are safest for Reality?

Anything that asks of you to draw on your personal life- either memory or substitution of something that is in your past or present life; any technique that asks you to respond as your everyday self to the exact stimulus that is really coming to you in that moment; is "reality" based. This would include Affective Memory, sensory recall, personality based acting (just be yourself in different professions and emotions), or the Magic "if" I were in this situation. A reality-based technique might have what one could call a Freudian definition of the self – all that is brought to you through environment and genetics in this life time – your consciousness and sub-consciousness.

Reality techniques encourage finding the similarities between you and the character and accenting them. If you are *reality*-based, you'll want to make the situation very real for yourself.

Several comments of caution are in order. We've all heard stories of mentally unstable actors and actors who believe they must have terrible lives in order to act successfully. This is simply false. It's called acting! For every five minutes a person spends recalling anguishing moments, your immune system is lowered for over six hours. So I recommend spending an equal amount of time recalling wonderful things to balance yourself before going on with the rest of your life. You can visit www.heartmath.com to see the scientific research on this.

Additionally, the neurolinguistics of "recalling" require first disengaging from the "Present", sending your energy backwards. Stage Presence- or star quality- comes from being very present. As an audience member, you may see an actor doing a recall exercise who is feeling very strong emotions. The problem is as audience, you are in an observing mode, perhaps feeling compassion for the actor but rarely emotionally engaged in the character. Ultimately we must be sure the audience is having the experience- that's our job.



Substituting someone in your present life who you need something from can fail the actor who is seeking emotional balance, spiritual growth and health. Fewer and fewer people will evoke in the actor, the degree of pain the character must express. I know many people who actually pretend to have memories to recall or people who they have issues with, just so they can use these tools. They are probably safest in pretend and should keep reading for tips of what might work with their health and balance.

Reality based acting often leads to actors repeating their performances from role to role. If you always play yourself in different situations, it's great if you're on a series. Once that series is over, you'll be in trouble if you don't get a spin off that let's you play the aspects that made you popular. Few folks are able to sustain a career just through their spark. Consider adding some transformational techniques. Oscars for Julia Roberts, Charlize Theron and Nicole Kidman all came from biographical portraits where their own personalities were sacrificed. We award transformative acting even if personality acting sometimes pays better.

An actor can often be confused about needing to really feel what the character is feeling. Many teachers make their living convincing actors that they must "feel" the moment. Yet, the reality is when we are in "the Zone" we are feeling elation and not what the character is feeling. This separation in consciousness has a biological correlation that creates effortlessness. Some actors get so surprised and disoriented when it happens that they fall out of the "Zone" quickly. All peak performances have a feeling of effortlessness. I suggest we aspire to the effortlessness of playing that we used as little children. The Actor need not really feel any more than an animated character which makes us cry. If the performer had to actually feel it in order to deeply impact the audience, there would be no animation, no stuffed animals, no Seven Wonders of the World. What performers must do is move and speak **as-if** they are.

Which techniques are safest for Pretend?

Anything that asks you to play in the world of imagination and fantasy allows you to pretend to be someone who... The child instinctively plays acts from imagination and experiences very dynamic emotions. Pretend based techniques might be said to have a more Jungian definition of "I" to include super-consciousness. This means that the actor can draw upon the parts of the self that are not used in everyday consciousness, but can in fact connect to the collective consciousness with the imagination. Since it is always your own imagination, the expanded definition of self includes anything you can pretend to be and any kind of person that exists. So we can all play the murderer and the saint regardless of never having actually lived those. Instead of focusing on the similarities of between you and the character, focus on the differences- knowing the similarities are already present. *What is similar between you and the character doesn't need to be emphasized, because it ain't broke.*