From the AACT Knowledge Base

Play the Intent, Not the Line

Why the script is only 20 percent of a successful performance

By Stephen Peithman

He: Good morning.

She: Good morning.

He: Did you sleep well?

The actress pauses and with a facial movement indicates that she's not sure she wants to answer his last question. Clearly something is not quite right between these two, but there is nothing in the lines themselves to indicate this. And that is the point, says Kent Brown, theater professor at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

"Lines are not what drive a play," he explains. "It's the intent, the subtext, the kernel that's important. Yet, most actors play the line, and that's where they fail."

Brown's explained and demonstrated his views on this subject at a workshop sponsored by AACT. Intent, as the dictionary defines it, refers to "a purpose, object or aim." And, as Brown points out, a character in a play normally has one central objective.

"If the writer's any good that objective will be fraught with obstacles," he says. "We then watch the character overcome those obstacles. What we call "drama" lies in the quality of the character's choices as he or she works toward the goal--whether it's achieved or not. As I tell my students, 'No risk, no interest,' and that applies to both drama and comedy: Audiences don't pay to see balance and harmony."

The Actor's Perspective

Making a character's intent clear to the audience requires action, Brown reminds us. Indeed, he says, that's what acting *means.*

For example, while most actors understand separation and loss, onstage it's impossible to act either one of these things.

"You can't *play* loss. What you play is the 'I want to get *connected*,' he says, 'because the playwright has already written the loss or separation. That's in the *story.* It's the actor's job to convey the sense of loss through the character's need to be reconnected. And that's all in the "now," in the moment the character shares with the audience. You can't play the past on stage. You must play the *now.*"

Thus, if the line is, "Paul, it's good to see you again. How's Dorothy?" the actor must know if she *is* glad to see Paul again. Perhaps, instead, she is afraid of him. Maybe something has happened earlier and she is testing the waters, trying to figure out where she stands.

"For the actor, it's all in the intention, in the subtext," Brown says. "It's in what my character intends to achieve by that line, in that scene. So I have to know what my character really wants."

The actor who comes at the lines from this vantage point will be much more believable in the role and will serve the play better, he adds. That's why he insists that an actor always make a scene about the other person. When one character interacts with another, the intent of each line and gesture takes on added importance. Brown recommends that when you analyze the scene and the lines, look for connections--words and actions that connect you with the other character.

"If you're playing with someone you're in love with, you can't 'love' that person because love isn't an action. You can't *play* love; you must do something that *indicates* love, whether in your voice or body."

In communicating, Brown points out, words account for only 20 percent of the message. Nonverbal communication provides the remaining 80 percent. This is both burden and opportunity for the actor.

"One of the wonderful things about the theater is that nothing up on the stage is real at all," Brown says. "However, while it's not real life, it must be *life-like.* The audience wants to *believe* that what they witness has a *consequence* to the people involved. If there are no consequences that the actor believes are real then why should the audience believe it, either?."

Brown does not mean to suggest that, because words supply only 20 percent of the message, they are not important. Far from it. However, he does think that too many actors try to replicate a line reading that feels right to them, or that the director likes. This, he says, is self-defeating.

"You shouldn't try to replicate a performance exactly--unless it's a French farce that depends on timing. If you play the intent, the reading will be right--even if the reading varies somewhat from performance to performance--because you're playing the *essence* of the line, not the line itself."

The Director's Role

If acting equals action, as Brown believes, then directing consists largely of helping the actors serve the play by making sure that the actions are appropriate, consistent, lifelike, and observable. But a director cannot impose these things on the actor. To be believable, a character must come from within the actor.

"Talk to your actors about their own experiences that relate to those of the characters, but don't over-analyze," he warns. "Actors will ask 'What's my relationship here? How long have we known each other?' Often we'll talk about this. But sometimes I will just say, 'Let's just see what happens." I might even say, "Why don't you just do something,' with the emphasis on the *do.* And I will watch and listen as they explore the possibilities".

A working relationship like this is built on mutual trust and clear communication..

"As a director you might tell an actor, 'Ted, why don't you just get that chair and bring it next to her.' If the actor says 'Where shall I put it?' he's not really thinking of the character's intention. Instead, he's saying, 'I don't want to be wrong, so tell me how to do it right.' As director you are

moving people on stage, but it's up to the actor to make that move work within their character. It's always a matter of choices. There may be a hundred ways to place that chair. Some will work better than others, and each will lead to different choices in the next moment. It's essential that the actor take the lead here, but it's up to the director to make sure the choices being made work for the play as a whole.

"So, don't talk to your people about lines. Don't talk to your people about emotions. If an actor has just delivered the line, 'John--it's great to see you again,' and you say to the actor, 'Paul, you seem flat there. *Give* me something. Pour it on,' Paul is likely to just shout his lines. That's not what you meant, but you didn't help him with the character's intent. Suddenly, Paul feels very vulnerable. He's given you his scream, his tight-veined look, and that's not *right?* He doesn't know what you really want. The crucial trust between actor and director is breaking down.".

Instead, Brown suggests, work with the actor. You might suggest, "So, how long has it been since you've *seen* Paul? Are you *glad* to see him or setting him up for the kill?"

"Talk to your actors like intelligent humans and get them to respond in kind," Brown advises, "drawing upon their own life experiences to make the moment work."

Good communication skills can be a director's greatest asset, he believes.

"In rehearsal, when you say, 'Let's take it again,' let them know *why* you're doing it again. For example, you might say, 'There's a kind of stiffness here that's working against the scene' or 'You're playing this as though you already know how the play ends.'

That latter point can be a serious problem, he believes, because the actors *do* know what's going to happen. And such knowledge can pull them out of the "now." That's why rehearsing line readings is so deadly, he believes. It's mere repetition. But working with *intent* keeps things fresh for the actor, and the result is more real for the audience.

"So, ask difficult questions of your characters, not easy ones," Brown adds. "Ask difficult questions of what the play is about, apart from the story line. In rehearsal, ask if something is missing. Get your cast together the second week of rehearsal and tell them, 'Let's look at scene one of act one--are we missing any values there?' And the response should not be, 'Bob isn't loud enough.' A useful response would be, 'I don't think I should be moving away from Jane at this point. I think I have an unresolved problem that would make me want to look at her right in the face.' As director, listen and say, 'Let's try it.' Then *get up there on stage with the actors* and put it under a microscope for a moment."

Brown insists that directors get close to the actors in rehearsal.

"Don't direct from the back of the house. A director must share that space with those actors, especially early on. That's when you see the little movements, the choices being made. There's energy there that you can see and work with. Do you have one of those awful table scenes where everyone's seated? Do yourself a favor and sit in a chair alongside the actors and watch what's going on."

If there's an opportunity, a director may want to reblock an act, Brown suggests.

"Reblocking can sometimes give your actors something fresh, give them barriers to overcome, a new view on the situation. It's a great tool when you feel that the play isn't coming to life. Actors sometimes rely too much on things--a chair, a movement. They forget the vibrancy of discovery. Changing blocking can add freshness to their performance, and life to the play."

Play to the Intelligence

Ultimately, it is the audience that will decide the success of the venture, Brown points out.

"An audience is more intelligent than we give them credit for," Brown says. "Therefore, in the theater we should play to the most intelligent possibility when we're interpreting a play. .

"Good work is good because it makes the essential human connections. We know how hard it is to do that in our own lives. Don't you think the audience knows it, too? So those of us onstage need to make it tough, make it real so the audience can really bond with us in some way and go with us on this incredible journey we call theater.

"Acting isn't difficult. What is difficult is to do it well."

More words of wisdom from Kent Brown

- You'll see actors in the green room getting a cup of coffee more animated than they are on the stage. The reason is that they have separated acting from real life, which is what the dramatist is trying to recreate on the stage.
- When making choices about playing a moment, don't go to our first choice. The first choice is almost always the easy way out.
- If an actor is having problems with a scene, give him a prop or have him suggest a prop and have him use these during rehearsal. This will divert him from self consciousness and help him focus.
- A line-perfect actor may not be a good actor. He may be reliable, but he also may be hiding behind the shield of the text.
- If you're doing a funny play you may think you have to do funny things. Wrong. You don't have to do funny things. As soon as you try to be funny you lose the audience. You do *situations*.
- Take a look at where your characters are off-balance. Audiences don't pay money to watch balance and harmony in any play. They don't pay money to watch people do things easily.
- Look at the entrances and exits in your play. Plays are about leaving. Plays are about coming and arriving, about reconvening the human community.

- Even if someone has only have five lines in one scene, there's always a kernel here. Something has happened before, something is going to happen, and something we are saying and doing *now* is essential in the process.
- Here's the wonderful thing: If the show is grounded in the intent, a director knows he can walk away from it after opening night and it will continue to be good work, even if it's different each time.