

In the Beginning was the Word

Learning lines as written is more than work—it's essential to the play and your performance

by Stephen Peithman

Learning lines is hard work. Actor Burgess Meredith called it "turmoil and head sweat," and many actors agree with him.

This effort is complicated by the fact that getting the words right is only part of the actor's job. Also on the list are character, nuance, rhythm, accent, projection, and movement. It's no wonder, then, that there is always the temptation to settle for an approximation of the words instead of those the playwright actually put to paper.

Add to this the widespread belief that real acting has less to do with the lines themselves than with how they are delivered. There is some truth in this. We all have seen actors who woodenly parrot their lines, oblivious of meaning, life or spirit. However, this should not lead us to conclude that *any* words are sufficient as long as the *meaning* is clear and the *moment* is right.

Confidence and Character

At the most basic level, learning lines exactly as written gives you, the actor, confidence in your role--a confidence you'll never have in performance if you are trying to remember what comes next. You can be convincing in your role because there's never a hesitation that isn't called for in the script.

More important, however, the words you speak are the essence of your character's personality, thought and speech patterns, and of his past, present and future. You need to know your character's words precisely in order to create a living, breathing human being..

It's during rehearsal that most actors paraphrase, when they must come up with a line, and approximate it as best they can. How much better to get the words right as quickly as possible. Otherwise, as Simon Callow writes, "it merely delays the moment at which the thought patterns of the part become *your* thought patterns, at which the impulses of the character become your impulses. Moreover, as it is the words which will provide the clue to your entire conception, the sooner they are passing through your brain and flowing across your lips, the sooner they will yield their secrets and their sensations." [*Being an Actor*, Grove Press]

"For me," he continues, "the whole point of learning the lines is to be as free to offer alternative possibilities as can be. If you're struggling with lines, your mind is only half-creating--it's mostly sending desperate fishing lines down into murky ponds of words."

The Choice is Yours

There is much talk of "choices" in theater. However, interpretation does not imply rewriting. Good actors work *with* the text, examining it carefully, mulling over its meaning, looking inside it to discover motivation, background, personality, stage business--whatever they need to create a believable performance.

In his book, *Coming to Terms with Acting*, Actors' Studio member-director Doug Moston discusses text technique, one of the mainstays of what is sometimes called "method acting."

"If a line is simple," he writes, "say it simply. But if the line is complex, you need to choose the parts that complicate the line. The 'parts' that can complicate a line of text may be an obscure word, a rhyme, some alliteration or assonance, or possibly sexual innuendo. There might be a word that is purposely repeated. When you find these 'clues,' ask your character to choose the complicating words, to do something theatrically with those words or phrases that complicate the lines."

In order to make these choices, however, you must begin with the words as written. Everything you need to develop your character and help propel the play can be found there.

Paraphrasing, on the other hand, destroys that connection between the actor and the playwright, and robs the actor of tools he or she needs to create a meaningful performance. It's not unlike the person who puts together a complicated piece of equipment without first looking at the instruction book. Sometimes it works. But in most cases the job is botched, takes far longer than it should, and is fraught with frustration. Not learning lines as written is to ignore the playwright's instruction manual.

It's true that improvisation can help free the actor in a multitude of ways. However, its value is quite specific. As Stanley Kahan writes in his *Introduction to Acting* (Allyn and Bacon), improvisatory work is useful "in preparing for a specific role or as process work in actor training."

The operative word here is *preparing*. In other words, outside of an improvisational theater group, improv work is designed to help the actor focus and listen to the other performers. The actor learns, in Kahan's words, to "concentrate on intentions, objectives, environment, and interpersonal relationships of characters within a play or scene."

In context of rehearsal or in actual performance, however, improvising lines can destroy the rhythm of a scene, and thus of the play. It can also do serious damage. For example, the lines in question may be echoed later on; to paraphrase might destroy the impact of the later lines or confuse the audience.

Paraphrasing can also destroy the illusion of a historical moment, or of a particular character, through inappropriate language. The wrong words pull the audience up short, distract them, annoy them, puzzle them, and distance them from the play.

Paraphrasing also weakens your role because your words will not have the carefully crafted touch of the playwright. "To live or to die, that is the question" may have the meaning, but not the impact of Shakespeare's original.

The Contract of Trust

There are other good reasons for sticking to the author's words. Your lines are cues for the other actors, and for those running light and sound. There is a contract of trust at work here. Those involved in the production need to know what to expect in order to do their jobs well.

Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, one of the great acting couples of the 20th century, learned lines together. They sat facing each other, their knees locked together, and drilled their lines until their words, thoughts, feelings, and were one organic whole. This, they said, freed their imagination and emotions so they could be separated by activities and behavior onstage and still maintain their connection with one another. Such a link is impossible without the words the playwright has written.

Learning lines as written seems like such a basic concept. An indeed, it is. But it is more than just a matter of rules. It also is a matter of common sense.

Once, when asked how he worked on Shakespeare, John Gielgud replied, "You know, it's really all in the lines. When I have questions, and I always do, I go to the text. I place the words in my mind and follow them. It's always in there, somewhere."

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