

# 3 Ways to Build a Character

*From Backstage – By Laurence Cook*

Flair, comic timing, and a way with accents are all well and good but they aren't acting. Acting is being in character. Some people get away with not building characters for certain films but audiences almost always know the difference, especially on stage. They might not be able to put into words why certain actors are "great" and others aren't worth comment but it's normally because some are character builders and others don't take the time.

With that in mind, here are three ways to create and inhabit believable, cohesive, complete characters who can engage with the story and world of a script. Whilst some methods are strict, asking the actor to follow an unbending pathway to character, what follows are three different starting points. They can be combined or used in isolation but the end goal always remains the same: to create a character that hooks the audience, is satisfying to play, and utilizes your imagination.

## 1. Who, when, and where.

Answering questions like, "Who am I?" "Where am I?" and "Where am I going?" allow actors to know a character deeply. Begin by finding out as much as possible from the script, including what other characters say about you. Once you have that, work backward. Ask questions like, "Where was I born?" "What were my parents like?" "What was my first experience of love?" "What am I most afraid of?" Building a backstory can be useful and even mundane questions like "How much do I earn?" and "How did I sleep last night?" can be revealing as they'll begin to paint a picture of your character offstage. For some, it's essential to know where they've come from and where they're going, just like real life. If it's not in the script, use your imagination (within reason).

Understanding the historical and social context of your character is vital to creating a playground for your imagination. For instance, if you're playing Nora in "A Doll's House," your biggest fear isn't going to be credit card fraud—it's going to be based in her experience in 1870s Norway. Researching the when and where of the script will bring the world alive, informing the behavior of your character. Why does Stanley act the way he does in "A Streetcar Named Desire"? You might decide it has something to do with the heat, the tiny apartment, and the resonance of the words "ape" and "Polack" that Blanche uses to label him.

But what if the writer has left very few clues? And what if they're not interested in helping you answer questions? When a young actor asked Harold Pinter for the backstory of his character in "The Birthday Party," the playwright's reply was "mind your own ... business." Some people use this moment to justify the idea that instinct trumps research. In reality, I think it perfectly evidences that what's useful and interesting for you probably isn't for others. The intention of all background work is to allow you to behave naturally as your character, to root decisions in private knowledge, and to be able to react to anything. Your director might help you decide on shared experiences between characters during table work but everything else is up to you.

## 2. Objectives, stakes, and obstacles.

In order to create your character, dig into the script for clues as to what they want. They wouldn't be in the play unless they wanted something important and there was an obstruction to them achieving it. Even the smallest characters have purpose and discovering it is the difference between standing onstage twiddling your thumbs and creating an active character.

There's rarely a wrong answer when it comes to hunting the objectives, stakes, and obstacles for your character but it's important to remember that the most obvious answers won't necessarily be the most interesting. Interesting wants, high stakes, and multiple obstacles generally make for the most compelling characters.

**Objectives:** Also called intentions, wants, motivations, and targets. The primary or super-objective of your character should be fundamental to the story. In "Three Sisters," Olga and Irina announce they desperately want to go back to Moscow within seconds of the play starting. However, more than just spotting a want, dig

deeper and identify why the character wants it and if there's another, more interesting want behind it. In "Three Sisters" Moscow represents a million things: youth, life, energy, excitement, potential, escape.

**Stakes:** Objectives are pointless without them. Why should an audience care about a character if there are no stakes? For Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz," the stakes are sky-high. If her super-objective is to get home to Kansas the stakes are to get home safely versus never see home again. As a general rule, try to balance the stakes.

**Obstacles:** There would be no drama without an obstacle to your character achieving their objective, usually taking immense effort or the help of others to overcome. In "Rocky," the opponent is a pretty obvious obstacle, but look closely and you'll see Rocky's lack of self-confidence, his amateur status, and the shyness that stops him from declaring his love for Adrian are also obstacles.

### 3. Voice, body, and costume.

An integral part of Laurence Olivier's process was altering his nose with putty. Maggie Gyllenhaal picked a wig that defined her character in "The Deuce." Matthew McConaughey lost weight for "Dallas Buyers Club" and countless actors have bulked up for roles. For some actors, a voice, body, or piece of clothing can be fruitful starting points for characters. Wherever it comes in your process—and even if you don't change a thing—considering how your character looks, sounds and moves is vital.

Bodies aren't just altered by us, they're affected by their environment. If you're cold, you huddle and tense. If you're exhausted, you can't stand up straight. If you're in a period drama your character won't use modern gestures. Think about what influence the world of story has on your body. It might not look that different but it'll help you feel certain of your character's physicality.

Voice and accent are often confused but the qualities of a character voice should be developed separately to learning an accent. Voice is utilizing changes in breath, speed, volume, range, and quality (i.e clear or nasal). Listen to friends and family in the same accent range and you'll notice the vast array of voices.

You may or may not have a choice when it comes to costume but if you do, it's just as valid to pick based on what you've discovered about your character as to go with instinct and what sparks your imagination. Heavy, rigid period costume might do more for you than detailed research. If you're playing a real person, it may be the basis for your character.

There's a lot of value in discovering qualities and experiences you share with a character. But putting too much of yourself into a character (and vice versa) can be emotionally exhausting, perhaps even damaging. The same goes for undertaking research that puts you in danger. Acting isn't free therapy, it's imaginative engagement for the entertainment of others. Even if you're playing the worst person in the world, however you build that character, remember to make them something you can step in and out of and enjoy.