

What Is Sense Memory and How Should You Use It?

From Backstage - By Backstage Staff

Susan Giosa

The Susan Giosa Acting Workshop, Los Angeles

An actor's job is to "feel on cue." We walk into an audition, say hello, then sit down to cry over our imaginary mother's death. Most actors would say we do this through emotional recall. But it's through sense memory that we actually experience emotional recall. Everything we perceive, interpret, and ultimately feel in life is filtered through our five senses, and stored in our subconscious with sense memory.

The conventional use of sense memory helps actors create physical conditions — for example, the feeling of a hot day, a bad headache, or a broken leg. But decades ago psychiatrists discovered an "emotional release object," which can release an entire emotional event. After many years of acting and teaching, I have developed a method that enables actors to discover and use their emotional release objects on demand. The actor revisits one simple image, a sense memory — the sound of a ticking clock in a hospital, the feeling of a wire hanger hitting one's face — and immediately begins to sob, laugh, or even shake with fear. It's a powerful emotional acting tool when mastered.

Our imaginations are fueled by life experiences. The more actors are willing to feel their lives fully, the easier it is to act. Building our emotional muscles to their full potential is just as important as developing our physical and vocal muscles. Sense memory helps us do this. I believe it is the key to both our physical and emotional life as actors. Without sense memory, we cannot act.

Joan Stephens

Joan Stephens Acting Workshops, New York

As an acting coach, I work individually with each student to discover specific techniques they need to reach their potential as actors. Sense memory is absolutely one of the techniques I use. My philosophy is grounded in Meisner, Stella Adler, and others, so I define sense memory as Stanislavsky did. The technique involves recalling a sensual experience — sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch — to evoke an emotional reaction appropriate to a moment in the scene. If sense memory can help an actor

achieve this, we use it.

For example, I recently coached a young actress who was auditioning for an Off-Broadway show. The scene involved a competition between two friends, leading to bitterness and anger. Together we explored the actress's own background and discovered an event in which she'd experienced these emotions. In our coaching session, she was able to recall and re-experience this, almost as if she were simultaneously watching and performing in a film. She found that a piece of music playing during the remembered event and the feel of the rain that was falling were powerful stimuli. After some practice, she was able to quickly and consistently tap into these sense memories to inspire the appropriate emotions, both in class and, more importantly, in her audition.

As a final thought, I believe that sense memory is a preparation technique, not a technique to use during performance, when the focus should be on the character's life, not the actor's. An actor has to do the homework, trust it, and then let the performance happen!

Dianne Hull and Lorrie Hull
Hull Actors Studio, Santa Monica, Calif.

Sense memory is reliving sensations that were experienced through the five senses. We stress the term reliving, not just remembering. It's the difference between knowing something and truly creating it, between a mental activity and reliving an experience, and it's been substantiated by modern scientific discoveries: the principles and procedures of responsive behavior and responsive acting.

Training begins with the actor using various relaxation techniques to clear him- or herself physically, mentally, and emotionally. Relaxation is recommended before sensory exercise work, which involves reliving a sensation — a smell or sight or sound, for example — identified with a personal experience the actor had that's relevant to the scene. When working on sense memory exercises or on sensations needed for a role — whether in class, at home, or in rehearsal — the actor can concentrate on a particular sensation until it becomes second nature when performing the role. We have developed a battery of sense memory exercises, some original and others based on Kazan, Strasberg, and Stanislavsky. The exercise work gradually increases in complexity until the actor adds several sensory realities onto an initial sensation. Everything is cumulative.

In acting, the source is imaginary, but the responses are real. That is what creates a belief or a sense of truth in the actor, for both the audience and the actor him- or herself. When you develop a belief in yourself through the re-creation of sensory reality, then you can begin to create a truthful, believable life for the character you're portraying.

Tom Todoroff

Tom Todoroff Studio, New York and Los Angeles

Every time you act, you must adopt the posture that you've never acted before. To truly be a text detective, an amalgam of tools is required. In the ongoing (and antiquated) discussion of "this technique versus that technique," what is most important is that you work from yourself. The work must be invisible. Ask yourself, "What in my past best serves this text?" Strong acting is imaginative and deeply personalized.

In my work with actors, I rely on the imaginative much more often than the historical, as what one wants in a particular text is outside oneself. Therefore, sense memory, or affective memory, must be used judiciously. The danger here is the possibility of memory taking you out of the moment and into the past and preventing you from fully embracing your partner. If the principal event in a scene is the loss of your beloved childhood pet, and that has happened to you, by all means use it. You'd be foolish not to. However, your imagination is limitless. It can take you to the other side of the sun. Shakespeare is our greatest teacher, and he demands the epic, the imaginative. Your past — on this plane, anyway — is severely limited.

First, foremost, and finally, the actor's job is to interpret the text, to take the words off the page. Sense memory versus imagination? Read the play or film script! Let the part play you. Your only access to eternity is a single moment. Enjoy this surprising journey. Don't settle for anything less than your personal best.

-- Reported by Simi Horwitz