

House of Cards

Independent Activities - the breakdown!

From the Actors Temple Studio London

Here at The Actors' Temple we use the Meisner Technique, inspired by the pioneering method and example of master actor and teacher Sanford Meisner, as the basis of our acting training.

We define acting at The Actors Temple as 'the ability to live truthfully under given imaginary circumstances.' From our observation and experience it seems that actors are hampered by two obstacles: self-consciousness and the inability to listen accurately. Both of these fundamental difficulties are addressed in Meisner's key exercise: Repetition. Here, actors learn to place their attention firstly on another person and take their responses from what the other actor gives them initially by repeating back and forth anything and everything the other person says to them. Thus, he or she learns not to do or say anything unless something happens to make them do it or say it.

The exercise then evolves to include what is known as the independent activity. It is this phase of the work that helps bring home what it means to "live truthfully". The best kind of independent activity is one which is physically difficult to accomplish because that will require concentration and therefore hopefully a degree of struggle on the part of the actor. Struggle is always interesting to watch and is the basis for conflict... which is at the heart of drama.

In terms of the Independent Activity, there are certain guidelines which are introduced individually.

1. Difficulty

Examples: **building a house of cards (4 stories high)**, copying a photo exactly using watercolours, glueing a broken pot or plate back together to its perfect condition.

The above examples contain a standard of perfection, a point of completion to aim at, without which no activity is truly difficult. The person doing the task can see at a glance how near or far they are from its completion. It is not enough to have a task - you must have a standard to which you are working towards. Moreover, there must be a genuine obstacle preventing you from completing your task. Without an obstacle, there is no struggle and the actor is therefore not interesting to watch, from an artistic point of view.

2. Reason or Justification for Doing the Activity

Examples: forging your flat mate's signature to cash a check of his so you can get the money for his share of the rent before the landlord arrives. Within this activity lies the possibility of failure or success if the task is completed on time. There are significant consequences for either success or failure for the person doing this task. Under the pressure of difficulty, a compelling and driving reason for doing a task and a time limit, the actor will become emotional whether they want to or not.

3. Time

Using the imaginary scenario outlined above, a time limit is clearly implied. This supplies the actor with the necessary impetus to complete the task and there's a clear consequence for failure (eviction or whatever other penalty is implied by the terms of the scenario). An activity that does not integrate all of the above named criteria won't work fully. In applying them, actors learn to hold themselves accountable for their work.

What else does the Actor learn from the Independent Activity?

The activity grounds the actor in **'the reality of doing.'** **What that means is that actors learn how to really do something, eventually under imaginary circumstances.** If they choose to paint a picture, they really paint, and really give themselves a standard of perfection to help them know if they are succeeding or failing.

It reveals that emotion is a by-product of DOING. The more they REALLY do the activity, and the more they struggle with it, the more likely REAL emotional life will start to emerge. The actor must never try to become emotional: this must arise from the act of doing something.

Actors learn that the more specific they are in their crafting, the easier it is to accept the imaginary circumstances they have created. It begins the exploration of what makes the actors 'tick', what excites, repels or disgusts them, what they would sacrifice everything for, etc. As we start to make the reasons for doing the activity more compelling (what we call raising the stakes) the actor is forced to craft from personal points of view – they get to grips with what makes them angry, or scared, or exhilarated.

The Partner: While one actor is working on their independent activity, their partner will start the repetition exercise, placing their attention on the person with the activity. That is their primary focus. In attempting to accomplish their task or activity, the other actor will often attempt to 'tune their partner out' in order to work on their activity, or they will stop working on their activity in order to work off their partner's behavior. Instead they must pursue the goal of successfully completing their activity and respond truthfully out of what their partner's interruptions really mean to them. It is at this point that actors are confronted with the degree to which in daily life they avoid conflict by resorting to habitual and polite responses. The partner who is just repeating must allow their responses to come directly as a result of what their partner is doing both in terms of their activity and their behavior towards them. Thus genuinely unanticipated moments arise between the two actors and the possibility for conflict is heightened. These exercises were created to help actors explore the truth of conflict as often in the real world many of us avoid conflict at all costs, but as actors we have to be comfortable living in the drama.

In summary, the Independent Activity teaches the actor to:

- Create an imaginary circumstance within which they can live truthfully and consistently.

- Place their attention wholeheartedly on the completion of a given task which directs their attention away from themselves.
- Use the significance that people, places and things have for them in their actual life at the service of the imaginative demands of their craft.

Crafting work out of 'real life' circumstances, on the other hand, doesn't give chance for the imagination to function and in some cases may be unhealthy, psychologically speaking. The actor must always work from their own "sense of truth". Only then will their 'actor's faith' (in themselves and their ability to create meaningful circumstances) start to grow.

Repeated practice of this basic improvisation form results in actors who are able to respond truthfully out of whatever is said or done to them. They learn to create and live within an imaginary circumstance and like two sticks or stones rubbed together create life between and within each other. The exercise at this stage powerfully reinforces two of Meisner's basic injunctions: '**Don't do anything unless something happens to make you do it**' and '**What you do doesn't depend on you; it depends on the other fellow**'. This exercise is a key element in the student's ability to create a powerful and compelling presence on the stage or in front of the camera.