

What is the “Magic If”?

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From Acting Magazine by Tonya Tannenbaum

Every actor who performs a role is portraying a character who is not exactly like themselves, unless the role is autobiographical in nature. When preparing the role, the actor must find ways to understand and relate to their character. Otherwise, it is impossible to accurately portray them.

One technique, created by Konstantin Stanislavski, takes an important step toward solving this problem.

This technique is called the “Magic If”; sometimes referred to as “As If”. The Magic If calls upon the actor to relate to their character by asking a basic question or series of questions centered around the question word, “if”.

For example, while analyzing various moments in the script, the actor can ask:

- What would I do if I were in this situation?
- How would I respond if he said that to me?
- How would I behave if I found myself facing these problems?
- How would my life change if this traumatic event happened to me?
- What thoughts would go through my mind if I saw that happen to someone I loved? How would I feel inside?

“When I give a genuine answer to the “if”, then I do something, I am living my own personal life. At moments like that there is no character. Only me.” - Konstantin Stanislavski

By placing themselves in their character’s situation, the actor gains a better understanding of the given circumstances facing the character. And by analyzing how he or she would respond if they, themselves, faced those circumstances, the actor can take more truthful actions when performing the role.

“Magic if” Exercises

- You are getting ready to go out to an important party. What would you do (if) the lights suddenly went out?

- You are on your way to the airport, about to go on vacation. What would you do (if) someone from work called and asked you to postpone your trip?
- You are on a train going to a job interview. What would you do (if) you realized that you were on the wrong train?
- You are the best man at a wedding. What would you do (if) you left the rings at home?
- You are at the checkout with a weeks worth of shopping. What would you do (if) you realized you have no money?
- You turn up for dinner with a friend you haven't seen for ages. What would you do (If) you discover they are engaged to your ex who you are still in love with?
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