

What's 'Repetition' all about?

From the Actors Temple Studio London - By Simon Furness

At the Actors Temple, the craft of acting is a serious business. The need to listen and respond truthfully to each other seems more pressing than ever in the world around us. The twin skills of truly listening and answering one another are equally crucial in the world of acting.

In daily life, we tend not to listen, but instead we hear selectively. We have become highly skilled at filtering the information we receive through the five physical senses. Here at the Actors Temple, where our work is rooted in the pioneering example and principles espoused by master actor and teacher Sanford Meisner, we make extensive use of his Repetition exercise.

At its most basic, two people stand opposite each other and one of them begins by making a neutral, truthful and objective statement about the other: 'You're wearing a blue shirt'. This is then repeated back and forth 'I'm wearing a blue shirt. You're wearing a blue shirt'. There's no intellectuality involved, no need to think about what to say next because the other person tells you what to say. During the course of this repeated statement, other odd words may be added spontaneously: 'Alright, I'm wearing a blue shirt'. The other person must repeat these additions. During the course of this Repetition one or other of the two may notice the other's behavior which accompanies the words. Eventually this leads to a change in the Repetition: 'You keep rolling your eyes at me', etc. This change in the behavior is the result of an underlying feeling which eventually is picked up: 'You're irritated' etc. This leads to the expression of an outright opinion or point of view: 'You know you're a really boring person'. Finally, an honest answer caps it all: 'Why don't you get lost!'. As the practice grows, the conversation becomes more emotional driven by impulses and not thought. Eventually there's a very rapid 'ping pong-like' exchange between the two with the Repetition changing quite frequently.

It's a gradual and painstaking process. The drama happens to you rather than you the actor actively manipulating or provoking it. Such overt manipulation of the exercise is to be avoided.

The Repetition exercise is only the beginning of the work but it represents an important phase. The actor learns to place their attention firstly on another person and take their responses from what the other actor gives them, Thus, he or she learns not to do or say anything unless something happens to make them do it or say it. More sophisticated exercises lead to a fuller kind of improvisation and finally to a script.

This simple but profound exercise is the gateway to a unique journey of discovery relating to oneself in the craft of acting.

What's required of the student? The ability to listen, to direction and to remain open, responsive and flexible.