

# Acting Secrets for Storytellers

Workshop with Dolores Hydock

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“Entertainment” comes from “entre tenir” – that is, to “hold between.”

Actors and storytellers both practice their art in the mysterious space “held between” the actor / teller and the audience. This workshop explores some of the things actors do in preparation and in performance that can be useful to storytellers.

## BACK STAGE: PREPARATION

1. Voice, Body, Breath, Energy: Caring for and using your instrument
2. Digging the foundation
  - a. The story starts before the story starts
  - b. 25 things only you know
  - c. The personal connection
  - d. Make specific choices: “In general” is the enemy of art. // The more specific something is, the more universal it is. // If you can’t see it, neither can anyone else.
  - e. Understand your intention; “why” changes “how”
  - f. The dreaded “M” word: memorization. Words meant to be read vs. words meant to be spoken
3. How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice! Rehearsal isn’t for repetition, it’s for exploration, discovery ... and for making mistakes! Someone once said of John Eckert, one of the inventors of the first computer: “Failures excited Eckert as much as successes, because knowledge was gained by knowing what didn’t work as well as what did.”
4. “Is this on?” Working with sound, space, and “stuff”: microphones, finding the light, shattering the glass, and rethinking the red velvet dress

## ON STAGE: IT’S SHOWTIME!

1. Walk out ready.
2. Understand the “fourth wall.”
3. Focus
  - a. It’s not about you! “Love the art in yourself rather than yourself in the art.” – Stanislavski
  - b. Stay present in the moment; pay attention to what’s happening in that space “held between” you and the audience.
  - c. *Choose* how to respond to what happens.
  - d. That moment only ever happens once.
4. Forget the “technique” and abandon all! *Trust the work. Trust the audience. Trust the gift.*
5. Allow the audience to appreciate you.

**What I hear, I forget. What I see, I remember. What I do, I understand.**  
-- Chinese proverb

### **Exploratory Exercise #1: Noticing Details**

1. Go somewhere unusual (unusual for *you*, that is). Examples: the zoo, an ultra expensive clothing store, a pet store, a motorcycle museum, a cat show, go miniature golfing, etc.
2. Observe the details of this new place and experience. A detail might be: "There were metal bleachers that were too hot to sit on because they were in the midday sun." Or "He was wearing a T-shirt that said 'Beast from the East'."
3. Bring a notebook with you – it will help you really do this! – and:
  - a. Observe 10 details about the environment / setting.
  - b. Notice someone who looks like they come here a lot or do this often. Observe 10 details about this person. How is this person's behavior – and/or appearance – different from yours?

***Use this exercise to sharpen your powers of observation – and help make your stories come alive with vibrant, specific detail!***

### **Exploratory Exercise #2: Finding a Back Story**

Find a photo of someone you don't know in a magazine. See if you can create a back story for that person by listing 25 details about the person. Examples: What is their favorite junk food? What is on their vanity license plate? Where were they born? Why time do they set the alarm for in the morning? What are they afraid of? What's their favorite junk food? What kind of driver are they?

***Be aware of the "back story" for each of the major characters in your stories. You can't make the characters real to your listeners unless the characters are real to you!***

### **Exploratory Exercise #3: Making the Abstract Concrete**

Describe a concrete image or situation for each of the abstract qualities listed below. Make these vague adjectives real and specific. For example, for the abstract idea "happy," a concrete image might be a child playing in a lawn sprinkler. For the abstract idea "foolish," a concrete image might be a person pulling on a door clearly marked "PUSH."

OR, if you prefer, rather than making up a concrete image, look through old magazines for pictures that show – in some concrete way – these abstract words. ***Let this exercise help you, in your stories, make vague or abstract images and ideas real, visible, and specific to your listeners.***

Try to express these ABSTRACT IDEAS in CONCRETE IMAGES:

Powerful	Breathless	Poor	Merciful
Elegant	Kind	Cruel	Jealous
Blissful	Despairing	Curious	Bored
Calm	Resigned	Indifferent	Afraid
Beautiful	Grieving	Glamorous	Silly
Stupid	Miserable	Famous	Confused

***Although these quotes and bits of advice were written for the benefit of actors, they can easily be applied to the work of storytellers. Just substitute “storyteller” for “actor” and see if this advice might be useful to you.***

**From *The Stanislavski Method*, adapted by Sonia Moore**

Truth on stage is different from truth in life. If an actor, while carrying out an action, uses logical, consecutive physical actions, justifies everything by answering “what would I do if I were this person in these circumstances”, and clearly understands the given circumstances, he / she will not overact and the action will be truthful. Without forcing it, the actor will believe in what he is doing because he will be doing it as in real life. In trying to make actions truthful, remember that there is uninteresting truth as well as interesting and unusual truth. Always look for what is unexpected and true at the same time. Actions must be free from unattractive everyday details.

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**From *A Challenge for the Actor* – by Uta Hagen**

The point is not an irrelevant imitation of nature, all the tedious mannerisms and nose-snufflings. Realism entails a search for selected behavior pertinent to the character’s needs within the prescribed circumstances of the dramatist. We take from life in order to create the reality of our new life on stage. The power of our selection is the measure of our artistry. Since we have only a few hours of compressed life on stage, our creation has to count. Naturalism, which pursues the unselective imitation of life, is the antithesis of art.

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**From *Acting is Believing* – by Charles McGaw and Larry Clark**

An essential part of any performance is the strength of determination with which the actor performs his actions. There is no place either on stage or in the rehearsal room for half-heartedness or indifference. The actor must learn to commit himself without reservation to the action of his character. This personal commitment is one of the principal generators of feeling. Strong commitment to proper action must not be confined to performance. You must practice this whole-hearted giving of your total being to what you are doing in every classroom exercise and every moment of rehearsal. Such commitment is an important part of all creative talent. The strength of the actor’s desire to do whatever he is doing determines how interesting his performance will be to himself and to his audience.

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**From *True and False* – by David Mamet**

**Regarding self-consciousness:** Interest in one’s own powers of concentration is, finally, a complete bore. The more you are concerned with yourself, the less you are worthy of note. The more a person’s concentration is outward, the more naturally interesting that person becomes.

The person with attention directed outward becomes various and provocative. The person *trying* to be various and provocative is boring. We’ve all seen the person trying to be the most vivacious person at a party. What could be a bigger bore? It’s your responsibility to become outward-directed. Why not direct your attentions toward the actions of the play? The audience should go out front and you should go onstage as if to a hot date, not as if to give blood. No one wants to pay good money and irreplaceable time to watch you concentrate.