

Tips for Auditionees

Concentrate on Breathing Patterns to Improve Your Monologue

by Christopher Niess

The scene happens all too often. Another young actor steps forward during a crowded audition, introduces himself and his piece, then energetically attacks the text for the next few moments. The monologues seem to be well-coached and well-rehearsed. The beats are there with a clear objective, changes in tactics and reactions. But something is missing.

As the actor thanks the auditioners and leaves the stage, the missing element becomes clear. The student has not *breathed*.

And no, I'm not referring to the metaphorical prompt of "find the breath in the work," suggesting the discovery of ease, rhythm and flow while working with a text. I'm talking about the basic physical act of breathing as the actor acts, reacts, and "experiences" the moment to moment events within a dramatic situation. Yes, of course, he has breathed or he would not still be standing. But he has not breathed normally through the speech – and that has affected the outcome of his audition.

Rediscover your breathing pattern

Humans naturally inhale and breathe when we have a change of thought, when we react emotionally, when we shift tactics. Imagine the last time you shouted "Oh my God!" in joy, surprise or terror; the very first time you uttered "I love you"; or when you have taken a breath in the middle of an important argument and declared "I want..." The breath that you take before any of those utterances is charged with energy and full of life and color.

As you practice your monologue, think not just about the words you're saying but how you would inhale and exhale saying them in normal conversation.

Acknowledge the importance of breathing not just in terms of vocal and physical support, but as an additional acting tool that is as essential as gesture, blocking and

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vocal response to a situation. Rethinking the way you breathe will help you develop flexibility and control (in the same way that relearning how to walk can lead to big results for those using Stanislavsky's *Building A Character*).

Recognize the impact of stress

When you get up in front of auditioners, stress can take away the natural emphases that occur in conversation. Nervousness – "this audition is important, there are so many actors at this call, I need to be cast from this audition, I really need this job!" – can send you into a "fight or flight" mode, or into something that is more difficult to detect: a measured, inflexible breath pattern that does not match the action in the monologue.

This pattern is sometimes seen in everyday life, too. Think of the last time you really "locked horns" with someone. When you forcefully held onto a certain opinion or point of view, you more than likely also held onto a particular breathing pattern that kept you in one state of mind. Often this leads to one of the engaged parties declaring "we need to take a breath" – an action which literally allows you to react and refocus. This kind of pliability also is necessary for you to develop changes in your monologue.

How can you counteract the effects of stress? One way is to use breath to release the body and relieve tension. Most basic acting classes use some form of breathing/relaxation exercises to encourage actors to release tension and to focus on the "moment."

Yet one can quite often witness nervous actors at large conferences who seem to for-

get this basic technique as they prepare to audition. The old advice of "take three deep breaths offstage before you begin" is sound.

Use breath to show change

Look at your monologue anew, and note those instances where there is a change in tactic, a revelation or a discovery. Note whether you have actually been breathing there or just driving through the moment (and ignoring it physically).

Start with an aah moment

You may also find that a breath helps strengthen your monologue's beginning. If you take a motivational "moment before" that instigates the character speaking, it will trigger an energized breath, perhaps in reaction to what took place. This action is much more interesting to watch at the beginning of a monologue than an eventless "instant start" in which the actor projects his or her name, then races into the text.

Practice makes perfect

If the use of breath is not practiced and absorbed into the actor's performance, it can become overly exaggerated, forced or pushed. Just as you work to make gesture, blocking or vocal inflection intrinsic to your acting technique, strive to make your breathing pattern an understated but constant element of your performance.

Incorporating realistic breathing into your monologue can invigorate your audition and make you an actor that is remembered. It's simple to get started. Everyone, take a breath... ■

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