

Talking To Actors

Charles Marowitz (August 20, 2009)

Everyone has a language of their own – even if ostensibly we are all speaking English. Class-differences, where people were born, where they were raised, what intellectual stimuli they received or didn't receive – all of these factors make up the language we speak. On some level of social intercourse, we all understand each other, but that doesn't alter the fact that each person's idiom differs from another. A boy brought up in the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of a ghetto will possess a frame of reference very different from that of a boy brought up in a British Public School. Their language will reflect their differing social orientations; comprehension of certain words will ring differently in their respective ears. Just as everyone has their own penmanship and their own set of fingerprints, we all have our own personal glossary and, in the theatre where communication between director and his cast is the quintessential creative tool, it is important to find the language peculiar to each actor in order to be properly understood.

If, for instance, you are working with an actor who is intelligent, well-read and thinks conceptually, you can make reference to philosophical or psychoanalytical terms and, quite probably, he will grasp your meaning and your suggestions will bear fruit. But if you are working with an actor whose education stopped at junior high-school, whose vernacular is simple, unadorned and basic, those same terms will not only be confusing, but irritating as well.

What is the portent of 'a direction' anyway? Here is Glenda Jackson on the subject referring to work with John Barton, Michel St. Denis and Peter Brook at the Royal Shakespeare company:

"If a director comes as Barton and St. Denis did, with everything taped, very clear on specifics and how each scene should be expressed, what is never there, in that kind of work situation, is the real energy of the scene. Which is very different from somebody like Peter Brook, who may have no idea at all about the specifics but is absolutely clear on the kind of energy that each scene has to pour into an auditorium. He may simply say: "Well, it's just on too small a level. It's very nice but that's not really what the scene is about. The scene is about a clash of titanic forces." Well, if somebody says to you "clash of titanic forces" you already have to look and think in a different way and what you then find to express that is always exciting and interesting and invariably organic. Whereas if somebody says, oh, you know, "He gives her the letter" or "She kisses his hand" or something, and simply gives you a number of specific actions to perform, I find that utterly demoralizing."

In the instance cited, Brook found a direct path to Jackson's imagination. He used verbal imagery that gave the actress a kick-start into a general direction which enabled her to find relevant particulars. Knowing Brook, I know there are other actresses with whom he would employ much simpler terms, words more closely approximating "specific actions to perform" and they would be happily accepted by these performers because easily understood.

With some actors, it is sometimes useful to find terms that are specific to their particular frames-of-reference, once you discover what they are. I once had an actor who was an old cinema-buff and when I told him the scene needed "more of a touch of the George Zuccos", he knew precisely what I meant. Another actor was a car-enthusiast, and when I suggested a speech needed to be 'nitrus oxidized', he immediately leapt on the suggestion and charged up his interpretation. I am not suggesting that a director needs to acquire the full vernacular of each and every actor. In most cases, basic English does the trick but if one is trying for a nuance or something that has to be dredged up from a much greater depth, finding precisely the right words is like finding precisely the right key to open a chest or precisely the right power-tool to get a carpentry-job efficiently done.

The other point, alluded to by Glenda Jackson, is that a suggestion directed to the imagination can be much more effective than giving actors specific physical tasks to perform. Specificity of that kind speaks only to the actor's motor-actions, whereas a stimulating or provocative suggestion couched in a vivid simile or metaphor may activate creative buds that lie beyond signal reactions. Of course, an excess of the latter can easily generate semantic confusion and if a director is too fancy, it not only confuses actors but angers them as well. The great Russian actress and teacher Maria Ouspenskaya, an alumni of the Moscow Arts Theatre, once asked an acting-student to try to 'be' a chocolate malted. He tried with all his might to create the essence of chocolate-maltedness in his voice and body. When he was finished, Ouspenskaya shook her head and said in her Slavic-lilted English: "No, you vass vanilla!" - Directorial distinctions of that kind can drive actors to drink, or worse, into TV soap-operas.

The other point about direction is that it shouldn't be 'indirection'. If a director out of courtesy or timidity or fear of giving offence, or a thousand other lame rationalizations, pulls his punches, he will only exacerbate his problems. Obviously one shouldn't be insulting or contemptuous, but one should be direct, choosing precisely the right adjectives and adverbs to describe what is being presented by the actor and what is being sought. Some directors are blunt, others equivocate. The blunt ones can ruffle feathers because all actors have egos and no one likes to be found wanting. But acting is a profession for adults and if actors are hypersensitive to criticism, they are in the wrong business. Equivocating, finding weaker words to convey strong objections, does a disservice to both actor and director. A good actor will respect honest criticism frankly expressed; a hyper-sensitive actor may take umbrage, but nine times out of ten, the former actor's performance will be improved and the offended actor will come around. If one wants to achieve honest results, honesty among colleagues is unquestionably the best policy.