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USING LINES OF DIALOGUE

Many beginning actors don't know how to listen—onstage, that is. They receive their scripts, memorize their lines, and try to perfect the exact way each line will be delivered. Once they decide which specific vocal inflections and facial expressions work best, they make sure each line comes across exactly the same way for every single performance. After a while, it is no longer necessary to listen to the other actors onstage. As long as they recognize their cues, they're safe. Why bother worrying about an honest response to another character on stage when you've already figured out the perfect way to deliver your lines?

Obviously, real life doesn't work this way. We respond to more than just words; we respond to the *way* words are spoken. If someone were to call you an idiot, you might become very angry, or you might laugh—it all depends on your perception of the person's tone of voice and visible expression.

Theater, of course, is a reflection of real life. If the audience of a play sensed the characters weren't really listening to each other, they might not be so willing to *suspend their disbelief* and view the play as a reality.

One of the reasons acting instructors use improvisation is to teach the actor to listen. Since no words or actions have been prepared ahead of time, the actor *must* listen in order to respond. The improvisation starters in this chapter force the player to listen very carefully to how the other player in the scene delivers the opening line, since that line will determine how she will react. She will be

compelled to respond not only to the *words* she hears but also to the meaning *behind* the words.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section includes one hundred single lines of dialogue that will serve as the first line spoken in the improvisation. Simply have your players take the stage, choose a line, and whisper it to one of the players. *The other player should not know the line in advance.* The scene begins when the first player delivers the line. The second player should pay close attention to the first player's visible and vocal expression and tailor her response to align with the way the opening line is spoken. Character relationships, objectives, and motivations will most likely become clear early in the scene. The players can end the scene themselves after they feel they've reached their objectives or exhausted the possibilities for reaching them, or the instructor can signal them to stop after a predetermined amount of time.

The second section includes one hundred pairs of opening and closing lines. To run these improvisations, have two players take the stage and whisper the opening line to the first player and the closing line to the second player. *The players should not know each other's lines in advance.* Once the first player speaks the opening line, the second player should respond *with something other than his assigned closing line.* The conversation should continue until the second player is motivated to use his closing line to end the scene.

Before the second player responds to the first player's opening line, it's important that he keeps in mind his assigned closing line, since it will determine the direction of the scene. For example, if the first player's opening line is "I have a problem," and the second player's closing line is "Problem solved," the second player knows he must say and do things during the course of the improv that will logically lead toward a resolution. Once the closing line is spoken, the second player should say "Scene!" to end the improvisation.

Note: The player with the first line of dialogue doesn't necessarily have to begin speaking immediately. Some silent action may precede the line. For example, if the opening line were "This place

is a mess,” the player might look around at the condition of the room for a while before speaking. However, the other actor must not say anything until the line is spoken.

You may use the following questions to guide your discussion of the performances:

- How would you describe the first player’s tone of voice, attitude, emotional state, or mood when he spoke the opening line?
- Were you surprised by the second player’s response to the first line? Why or why not? Would you have responded in a similar way?
- What kind of obstacles faced each player?
- Do you think the first player delivered the opening line in the most conventional way? How could the line have been delivered differently to evoke a different response from the second player?
- Describe the overall mood of the scene.

Single Lines

Two Players

1. You’re under arrest.
2. I wish it would stop raining.
3. I can tell by your silence that something is terribly wrong.
4. Sometimes I wish I could just disappear.
5. I can’t believe I finally have the chance to meet you!
6. We have absolutely nothing in common.
7. Why don’t you just admit that you’re a liar and a cheater?
8. Why are you so frightened?
9. Have you ever seen a more beautiful sky?