

# **Ardent Resources**

## **8 Aspects for Acting on screen (text version)**

**Written by Des Fleming**

### **ABOUT**

ARDENT RESOURCES is a collection of workshop notes, interviews, guidance and tips about working in Theatre. It is not intended as comprehensive advice or formal educational resource on which reliance should be placed; rather it collates various insights from people working in the industry that you can choose to incorporate into your own toolkit. Nothing should be taken as a representation or warranty as the correctness or fitness for purpose of any of the content.

Any links shared are for information only and are not endorsed by, connected to or representative of Ardent Theatre Company. We can't guarantee that any of the advice given will lead to future opportunities in the arts; but we do hope it provides resources to help build your own career strategy.

### **ABOUT DES FLEMING**

Every character needs a backstory to be fully understood, so here's a little of mine. I was born in Cork City, Ireland and was bitten by the acting bug in secondary school. I made my professional acting debut in 1992. Over the years, I have worked on stage in Ireland, Australia and the U.K., and I've appeared on cinema & television screens all over the world.

Being an adventurous sort, I travelled to Australia for a year but romance intervened and I ended up staying fifteen! It was during this time that I established my theatre company, ITCH Productions, based in Melbourne, which I ran for six years.

Europe kept calling though, so I moved to London in 2017. I had always wanted to work on the West End, and I fulfilled that ambition in early 2020. It was to be a short engagement... thanks Covid! However, it gave me the opportunity to start teaching, another ambition, and I'm very happy about that.

Since graduating from drama school, I have continued to grow my acting practice in workshops, masterclasses and scene-study. I've always loved being in class – exploring, working things out and improving as an actor. To get to do it as a teacher is a special gift. My goal is to use my experience to help my students develop their craft and flourish as artists.

In addition to my own classes and workshops, I currently teach 'Acting for Camera' at Mountview, London.

[www.desflemingacting.com](http://www.desflemingacting.com)

## **PREPARATION IS PARAMOUNT**

Remember the 5 p's: Professional Preparation Prevents Poor Performance. Your preparation starts with script analysis. Arriving on set or doing an audition unprepared is an act of self-sabotage. Consider the level of detail I would need to play you on screen. This gives you a sense of how much work is required. If your character knows it, you need to know it. Remember though, you're preparing for a performance not planning a performance. Spontaneous, in the moment play is the goal.

## **SCRIPT ANALYSIS**

Script Analysis is about empowering actors. It's what ultimately gives you the freedom to play. The **given circumstances\***, everything the script tells you about your character, is the foundation of the work. All other choices you make stem from the given circumstances. This doesn't mean you can't be original and imaginative, you can, but you must build on what the writer has given you in a logical way that makes sense to the story.

To truly excavate the text requires multiple readings. You're a detective looking for clues. This takes discipline and rigour. If resistance comes up to doing this work, look at it with a benevolent eye and ask it what it is? Befriend the resistance, it's most often fear. Acknowledge it and then keep going.

\*GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCE refers to the environmental, historical, and situational conditions of a character that influences their actions.

## CONFLICT IS KEY

Drama is the path of most resistance, not least resistance. I think Aaron Sorkin\* says it best:

*“I wouldn’t want to give the impression that I’ve mastered anything, but there are a couple of things I know now that maybe I didn’t know when I was starting. To begin with, **I worship at the altar of intention and obstacle**. Somebody wants something, and something is standing in their way of getting it. They want the money, they want the girl, they want to get to Philadelphia. Then the obstacle to that has to be formidable, and **the tactics they use to overcome that obstacle are what shows us the character.**”*

What does this mean to us as actors? You must have an objective, want or need ... something you are going after and there must be something or many things getting in your way, what we know as obstacles. Any writer worth their salt will have included obstacles, but that doesn't prevent you adding more as long as they have a logical place in the story. This is a way of creating even more texture in the work.

\*AARON SORKIN is an American playwright, screenwriter and film director. Writing includes Golden Globe-nominated The West Wing

## INNER OBJECTS

My favourite tool when it comes to script analysis. Having a specific relationship to people, places, objects, issues, timeframe and events is a surefire way to create specificity and point of view in your performance. It adds texture and layers of subtext. You have a point of view on everything in your life, so does your character. Vagueness leads to general and general kills the work. Be specific!

## BE THE CHARACTER, DON'T PLAY THE CHARACTER

Your job as actors is to be in service of your characters. In order to do that you need to ask ‘What do I need to do to make this real for me? What will carbonate me?’ Remember, it’s your life, not a scene... your words, not lines. Take ownership of the material. When working on backstory, use the autobiographical ‘I’, this helps narrow the distance between yourself and your character. Don’t judge your characters. Use ‘fossicking’\* to help you get a deeper understanding of what drives them. Everyone makes the best choices available to them at any given time.

Your past is the soil in which your life is planted, this is true for your characters too. Find their humanity.

\* FOSSICKING means to search for gold or gemstones. In this context, look for the gems - those little nuggets of gold - that define a character and make them tick.

### **WHAT'S AT STAKE?**

There's a time and place for safe choices but not in your acting. Be bold. Find what gives the material the highest stakes for your character. Firsts are always more interesting; strong feelings about what the other person has done to you create emotional context; and wanting something so bad that it feels like life or death is sure to carbonate you. Every scene has positive stakes (what it means to win) and negative stakes (what it would mean to lose). Consider what these are for your character. If you care, we the audience will care.

### **IT'S A CONVERSATION**

Less is more, is often a phrase you hear in relation to screen acting, but less than what? Less than life? I don't think so. You are having a conversation in which you have a want or need from the other person. That means the other person is always more important than you. Your focus then, is doing what you need to do to achieve your objective. If the conversation takes place in a car, then you bring the energy appropriate to that space. If the conversation takes place on a battlefield, then you bring the energy appropriate to that place and situation. The camera will do everything else. Remember, you must have an active inner thought life about what is happening to you in the moment, as we do in real life.

### **HAVE FUN**

This may be stating the obvious but it's worth highlighting. It's play, it should be fun. You've done all the work, now let it go. Your aim is to be in the moment, spontaneous, listening and responding. This is all much more achievable if you bring a spirit of play. Remember, you can't be exciting unless you're excited.

**This resource was written by Des Fleming**

**Last updated 12 August 2022**

[www.ardenttheatre.co.uk](http://www.ardenttheatre.co.uk)  
[contact@ardenttheatre.co.uk](mailto:contact@ardenttheatre.co.uk)  
Registered Charity No. 1161320