

Ardent Resources

Working with Text: Titles and Units (text version)

Written by Jim McCarthy

Jim McCarthy taught and trained actors as an Associate Professor in Higher Education for many years. He graduated from the University of Leeds with an MA in Drama and Theatre Arts and was awarded a PhD from the University of Wales for his research into twentieth century Spanish theatre. He also trained as a Drama teacher (PGCE Bretton Hall College). He has directed numerous productions with students at various educational levels. His current projects include translating contemporary Spanish plays into English. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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.

PREPARING SCRIPT FOR REHEARSAL

Introduction

Have you ever acted in a show where you felt you didn't know what you were doing with your lines? The lines didn't make sense; they were flat and lifeless. The director makes you do the scene again and make it 'better'. But you can't do it better because you don't know what you're

supposed to be doing at all! We've all been there. What follows is a tool to help you know what you're doing with your script.

Shots in Your Locker

I want to stress that this tool is one of many you can use when you're rehearsing a script, so think of it as just one of the shots in your locker. It's definitely useful but it's far from the only tool. Get it out of your locker when you feel it's going to help you in rehearsal. I'm sure you'll find it useful when you're rehearsing a script that is full of subtle, changing emotions, but it will work just as well if you have three lines in *Eastenders*.

Two Speeches

We'll use the tool on two Shakespeare speeches. One is by Lady Anne in *Richard the Third*. Anne enters with a group of mourners carrying the dead body of her husband, murdered by Richard. She confronts Richard (he's onstage but doesn't speak) with the corpse of his victim.

The second, from *Measure for Measure*, is by Claudio, aged 21, who is sentenced to death for getting his girlfriend pregnant before marriage. His corrupt judge has offered to release him if his sister, Isabella, a nun, gives her virginity to the judge.

Before and After

We'll work with the tool in stages.

First, imagine you've been cast to play one of the roles and read the speech(es) below. Read them 'blind', don't look things up, don't check the speeches online, don't worry about any words that you don't understand. The situation is clear from the context I've given above.

Second, make an audio recording of yourself delivering the speech.

Anne:

Foul devil, for God's sake hence, and trouble us not,
For thou hast made the happy earth thy Hell,
Filled it with cursing cries and deep exclams.
If thou delight to view thy heinous deeds,
Behold this pattern of thy butcheries.
O gentlemen, see, see, dead Henry's wounds
Open their congealed mouths and bleed afresh.
Blush, blush, thou lump of foul deformity,
For 'tis thy presence that exhales this blood
From cold and empty veins where no blood dwells.
Thy deeds inhuman and unnatural
Provoke this deluge most unnatural.
Oh God, which this blood mad'st, revenge his death.
O Earth, which this blood drink'st, revenge his death.
Either heaven with lightning strike the murd'rer dead,
Or Earth gape open wide and eat him quick,
As thou dost swallow up this good king's blood,
Which his hell governed arm hath butchered.

Claudio:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling: 'tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury or imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.
Sweet sister, let me live:
What sin you do to save a brother's life,
Nature dispenses with the deed so far
That it becomes a virtue.

LET'S USE THE TOOL

Acting is *doing*; it is not *describing*. When we are living daily life we are *doing* it. Our emotions are real and we are *really* experiencing them. It's this quality of real, authentic feeling that we want to find in the pretend living that is acting. If you watch unconvincing acting it's because the actor isn't making emotions appear as real, actual living. The actor is merely *describing* the emotions rather than *doing* them. You often witness this when you are watching an actor onstage and think to yourself: 'he's just saying the lines'. The tool will help you discover and rehearse the emotions of a speech so that you engage and convince an audience.

Frame Title:

Anne, in grieving despair, angrily denounces her husband's killer.

From your audio recording you can see that the Frame Title I've created is a useful description of what's going on in the speech. So, a Frame allows you to separate out the key emotions so you can see them clearly and rehearse them. In this speech all the emotions fit into a single frame. In other speeches or scenes you'll find the emotions keep changing because the scene is very emotionally tangled and develops 'messily', like life. In that case, separate out the various emotional changes and create *more* frames with titles that reflect what's happening emotionally.

In *Eastenders* you might murder your partner in a psycho-rage in the bedroom, then the doorbell rings and you have to have a pleasant, friendly chat with your best mate in the living room. Clearly, you need at least two frames for the scene. So, first thing to do with the tool is to write yourself a title for each frame of the action. Now, you're gaining control of what needs to be *acted*.

Frame Units:

The Frame Title describes what you're going to do. The units in a frame let you do it in practice. You need to act the *changing* emotions Anne shows in her grief just like we are constantly changing our emotions in real daily living. So, I've found there are five units in the frame. I've separated them out with a // and given each one a title.

Your task: Rehearse the speech. Act it by *doing* what each unit title says. Notice how I've used strong *doing* words: attack, denounce, appeal, confide.

You'll be *doing* not *describing*. You will not feel you're 'just saying the lines', you'll feel growing confidence that you know how to act each unit and they'll soon flow into a single, well-acted speech.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The more you use this tool, the quicker and easier it becomes. With some scripts it's very straightforward. If you're playing Mum and your line to a hungover teenager at the breakfast table is: 'What time did you get home last night?' you probably know quickly how you need to deliver the line. But what if you are playing a character with a complex psychology and your line is: 'Yes. I did it. I killed her.'?

You'll almost certainly find it requires a good unit title to act the line with the authentic quality of real, lived emotion. And it'll probably be part of a Frame or Frames in the script that need the actor to act a changing range of subtle or disturbing emotions.

The Frame/Unit Tool can be your way to gain control of your lines. You need never feel lost on the stage because you won't have to worry about the question: 'what am I supposed to be *doing*'?

This resource was written by Jim McCarthy.

Last updated 10 June 2021

www.ardenttheatre.co.uk
contact@ardenttheatre.co.uk
Registered Charity No. 1161320

Frame Title:

Anne, in grieving despair, angrily denounces her husband's killer.

Anne:

Foul devil, for God's sake hence, and trouble us not,
For thou hast made the happy earth thy Hell,
Filled it with cursing cries and deep exclaims. //
If thou delight to view thy heinous deeds,
Behold this pattern of thy butcheries. //
O gentlemen, see, see, dead Henry's wounds
Open their congealed mouths and bleed afresh. //
Blush, blush, thou lump of foul deformity,
For 'tis thy presence that exhales this blood
From cold and empty veins where no blood dwells.
Thy deeds inhuman and unnatural
Provoke this deluge most unnatural. //
Oh God, which this blood mad'st, revenge his death.
O Earth, which this blood drink'st, revenge his death.
Either heaven with lightning strike the murd'rer dead,
Or Earth gape open wide and eat him quick,
As thou dost swallow up this good king's blood,
Which his hell governed arm hath butchered.

Unit Titles:

Furiously attack Richard for destroying your world.

Determine to make him look at the results of his violence.

Confide in the mourners the horror of a corpse bleeding again long after its death.

Shame Richard for what he has done.

Appeal for justice to the whole universe in despairing anger.

Frame Title 1:

Claudio considers with growing horror what being dead is like.

Frame Title 2:

In desperation, Claudio pleads with his sister for an escape from his fate.

Claudio:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;

To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;

This sensible warm motion to become

A kneaded clod; // and the delighted spirit

To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside

In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice; //

To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,

And blown with restless violence round about

The pendent world; // or to be worse than worst

Of those that lawless and incertain thought

Imagine howling: 'tis too horrible! //

The weariest and most loathed worldly life

That age, ache, penury or imprisonment

Can lay on nature is a paradise

To what we fear of death. //

Sweet sister, let me live: //

What sin you do to save a brother's life,

Nature dispenses with the deed so far

That it becomes a virtue.

Unit Titles:

Ponder your body being extinct.

*Gaze upon your body eternally
burning in flames or trapped
inside ice.*

*Glimpse your body spinning and
hurling through space forever.*

*Stare in horror at becoming one
of the sinful souls howling in the
agony of Hell.*

*Realise how life is always far too
precious to lose.*

Beg her to save you.

Reassure her desperately.