

“Working With The Monologue: An Essential Communications Tool”

This summer, I had the privilege of teaching at Gerry Spence’s Trial Lawyers College in Wyoming. It was an amazing experience, one I’ll never forget. Over 60 trial lawyers I got to work closely with were introduced to the monologue, a powerful communications tool designed to help tell the winning story in the courtroom and open up the “storyteller” fully to their greatest storytelling instrument... themselves. Working at TLC actually brought back a flood of memories attending The Juilliard School in New York City. At times at TLC, I had to remind myself I was working with trial lawyers and not actors... but I also understand now why that is the case. I believe the strongest connection between a great trial lawyer and a great actor boils down to one key word: *responsibility*. Both “roles” carry an enormous responsibility to tell the whole truth of the person they are representing, on stage or in the courtroom. And that responsibility requires one hundred percent commitment to deliver the story, in the most authentic way possible, to the audience.

While at Juilliard, a great teacher I was privileged to work with showed our class how to properly begin a play before we ever set foot on stage and began to “act.” He showed us the right mindset how to begin before we got the script in our hands, before the lines were memorized and the movements blocked out, and we stepped into our assigned “roles.”

We, of course, were very restless to just get on with it and act: imagine twenty cocky actors eager to blow their future audience away, eager to be brilliant, to be acknowledged by faculty members and our fellow actors and dancers and musicians at Juilliard, and future agents who would insure us our certain success in the professional world of the

arts. But this wise teacher (he'd been at Juilliard since the beginning of the school) gave us pause. He made us think about the space we were entering, and the space upon which we would soon bare our souls along with our sweat blood and tears. It was imminently important to take the time to acknowledge the profound implications of the place we were in personally before we entered it as a character. It felt sort of like saying a blessing to a house before a family moved in, or a prayer at dinner. It was also about how you wanted to leave it behind. This ritual, this awareness, made it a sacred space. I have this wonderful memory of standing on the bare stage, the day before the set designers and lighting professionals would go to town on it, transforming that empty space into another world that would transform the audience's minds and hearts and imaginations. On this vacated world, this empty planet, the space was alive, more alive than I could have ever imagined it being with the props and lighting and set, because of our teacher. He allowed us to envision all the future moments on this stage. "This is the place of possibility... what will you bring to this place?" he asked us.

This is the powerful question we get to ask ourselves in this "space" we're in right now.

Within every "performance," within every encounter, we can experience the greatest moment possible no matter who or what is before us. That's really all we have in life, isn't it? Moments. A series of moments where we have the choice to tell a mediocre story or a great story, acted out of kindness or bitterness. In the theatrical world, when an actor brings a scene or a monologue to life, what he's doing is working it, making it happen, "moment to moment." That's how we tell a memorable story—one moment at a time, like we're climbing a ladder, each emotional rung bringing us closer to the heart of the

story. This is the power of the monologue. This is your primary vehicle for making the life change. The monologue is a divine metaphor for life. The monologue *is* life. And you're breathing fire into it, just by thinking about it.

You have a choice to tell a new great story... or go back to your old one. You can rewrite your script. It's that simple.

Monologue Example

The following monologue is taken from a contemporary play. There are many sources on the internet to see samples of monologues being presented, and I encourage you to familiarize yourself with this art form as best as you can.

Picasso Reincarnated: Ultimate Jackass

A monologue from the play by Joseph Arnone

JOE: I was walking around for two days thinking I was Picasso, when really what I was, was a major jackass. I went to this store out in Long Island, Michael's and I spent a couple of hundred bucks on supplies. I was so serious about it-- bought three large canvases, brushes, paints, paint cleaner, spray paint and markers. Don't ask me why but markers. I went out to the bookstore, bought a few fifty-dollar books on Basquiat and Pop Art and I was doing all this reading and researching. I actually began feeling like I had a calling.

I set up shop in my backyard, right against this big beautiful tree. I tore open the paints and squeezed out red and yellow paint into my palette. I dipped one of my brushes into my palette—I look up and into my canvas and it hit me—I asked myself as I stared at this

large white canvas, “What the f am I doing?” It was like a spell had been broken. I felt silly and I started looking around and into the windows of neighbors houses, because I felt like I was being watched and sure enough there she was, a little girl named Meagan peering at me from her second floor story bedroom window. She had the look of disgust written across her face, so, to kind of, I don’t know, not feel inadequate in front of this child, I decided to prove to her that I could paint. It was as if I needed this child’s approval. Don’t ask me why. Maybe I’m just crazy but I did. I wanted this kid to say, “Good job Joe, you’re a freakin' Picasso, alright!”

What is a Monologue?

Here are the basic components that make a monologue a monologue:

- Text presented by a single “character”
- Uses the first person
- Can be comedic or dramatic
- Must reveal something (the character's inner thoughts, desire to change something, a secret, a story or the answer to a question)
- Character (person who is speaking) must go through a change

Creating and performing a monologue successfully can be boiled down into these **4 essential steps**:

- 1) Who are you talking to?
- 2) What do you want?
- 3) What is getting in the way of what you want?
- 4) What changes along the way of the emotional journey?

The Power of The Present

“A flashback doesn't work unless it's a flash forward.”

--Pauline Kael, American Film Critic

Let's look closer at what gives a monologue its power. First off, it's impossible to hide in a monologue. Beyond the fact that it's just you on stage delivering the goods, the monologue, as with all theater, operates entirely in the *present tense*. It's what you discover, what change is happening right now. The present tense--as opposed to the past tense in a monologue--is much more effective. This does not omit characters sharing a story from the past, as in a living history monologue bringing, say, Edgar Allen Poe to life. The magic is to make that story immediate, alive and brimming with emotion, by linking it into the present moment. The present is happening right now, instantly. There's no avoiding it. The present will always trump the energy of the past. Screenwriters take note: the event is always *now*. This is happening to me right now. This moment is all there is. Eckhart Tolle talks about this at length. In fact, his very book is on this core idea: *The Power of Now*. The Power of Now is also the power of theater. The theater would not be the theater if it didn't operate out of the now. Even in the past, it's present. It's not a movie. We're experiencing this collectively in this entire moment. In the monologue, we're interested in seeing how the past has an immediate emotional, psychological, and perhaps physical effect on you NOW. If an event happened in the past, and you keep it strictly in the past and just say “this is what happened to me...” there will always be an emotional barrier and a disconnect from the energy that we want to experience now. Now is the only time. Try to go from “It was...” to “It is...” Even if the memory or real life experience took place hundreds of years ago. This is another major difference between a

story, a confessional, and a monologue. A monologue is happening in the now. Here. In the moment. That's theater. There are no second acts. There is only now. Moment to moment.

The Difference Between Showing a Story and Telling a Story

The reasons why monologues operate in the present tense (what is happening to the character right now) is this is what creates the drama rather than strictly narrative-driven writing. A monologue in which your character facing a major obstacle will be infinitely more compelling than a monologue in which you (your character) just stands there up on stage telling a story without any real personal connection to the subject at hand. We, the audience, want to see how you're immediately *dealing* with something. Often, it's not even so much about getting to the ending. It's about the middle. The journey. The stretch. This is the heart of drama. This is seeing the value in the obstacle. And using it. The obstacle has a definite voice. You, the storyteller/performer/actor, are letting the voice say what it needs to say. That's powerful.

In theatre, in a scene or a monologue, characters usually do not describe what they're doing. They do it. It's in the moment. This is the fundamental difference between *telling* and *showing*.

In making a major life change, why write or work on a monologue instead of a story?

It's impossible to not deliver or write a great monologue without a change occurring (physically or emotionally) within the performer/storyteller. This is one of the main differences between telling a story. Although it can be very helpful to tell “the story of

your life” to objectively your life experience, a story can often lack the immediacy and the emotional depth that the monologue is designed to deliver. It's hard for transformation to occur when you're simply “confessing” a story. “Lessons From The Stage” is not about confessing anything. If you want to confess something, go see a Priest or bend the bartender’s ear! Here is where you’re *changing* something. It’s about stepping into a new role. It’s about making a change in your life. It’s not about “acting” or even storytelling, although you may find that you’re acting like the best of them and telling the greatest story of your life in the kind of language that feels perfect to use. It’s about “doing.” The age old picture of the therapist comes to mind where the therapist tells the patient, “Your dad is the chair. Talk to dad. Tell him how you feel. Tell him what you want.” Clichéd example, maybe, but all clichés carry elements of the universal truths within them. A good therapist gets the patient to act in the now. That’s where any change is possible. The therapist is not a time traveler. Neither is the director. Neither are you. The monologue is designed to get you to transform in the moment. It’s the vehicle to get there. You’re not here doing this strange theater work just to talk about what's happened in your life. The sole purpose of the monologue is to instill an effective and powerful change in every participant’s life and to keep going deeper into that story. You’re setting the stage for a lifetime of mental and emotional conditioning. You’re “living within your stretch.” As you delve into the artistry of your new story, it’s important to not lose sight of that.

The Personal Connection

Another reason why working with the monologue is more helpful to you (to make the change you’re seeking in your life) than just writing a story, is when you make anything

personal to you, you *own it*. It becomes a part of your narrative. Real or imaginary. This works for fear as well as success. We become the things we think about.

Returning to Your Own Crossroads

Within the power of the monologue is the opportunity to create immediate authenticity, empathy, and vulnerability for you, the storyteller. All of these components are effective ingredients for success in your personal and professional life as well, and in all your relationships. But the greatest relationship, the one that can never quite go away, the one we can never seem to escape, is with ourselves. When we are able to identify our own crossroads, our own obstacles, and use it within the context of story, the easier it will be to help others we work and live with “show up” in their own lives. That's also one of the big take aways of the work in “Lessons From The Stage:” achieving the ability to inspire others to tell their greater stories. That’s how we keep it fresh. To keep it you got to give it away.

Before defining your crossroads, if you haven’t yet (and it’s okay if you haven’t—procrastination may be one of your obstacles!) let’s take a look at what makes, in film director Elia Kazan's definition, a great character.

Contradiction.

Contradiction

“Look for the contradictions in every character, especially in your heroes and villains.

No one should be what they first seem to be. Surprise the audience.”

--Elia Kazan, “Kazan on Directing”

Here's another quote that I love. Walt Whitman, the great poet of "Leaves of Grass" wrote, "Do I contradict myself? Very well! For I am large, I contain multitudes."

Amen, Walt.

"Leaves Of Grass" is ripe with the contradiction of humanity, therefore it's a document burgeoning with humanity.

What are your contradictions?

Keep in mind that it's impossible for any human being to be "the same" all the time. We wouldn't be "interesting human beings" if we were the same all the time. Allow your own contradiction to spark your interests creatively. In writing and performing a monologue successfully, this will allow your character (you) to go from a one-dimensional character to a three-dimensional character. How is this helpful to you? In a myriad of ways. If you're a trial lawyer this will, in turn reveal itself in your courtroom demeanor, and if you're an athlete, to turn, to redirect "the weight of thought" into speed and stamina. Instead of fighting your contradictions, you're using them to your advantage. You're balancing your opposites. You're using your humanness to your advantage!

We are, each and every one of us, filled with an enormous treasure trove of contradictions. We simply spend an excessive amount of unproductive energy fighting them.

Think about the bully at school who pushes everyone, yet has an enormous capacity to express genuine feeling with classical music. I knew a guy like that. What's the softness under the rough exterior? Or vice versa?

Search through the giant canvas of your life. Go back to your childhood. Your college years. Look at your relationships. Take a look at where you are now. Look closely at your contradictions, those moments where what you were saying were not what you were doing, and visa versa. Where you felt like a million bucks giving a speech about spirituality and yet felt like the biggest fraud shaking hands in the crowd afterwards. Where you were caught in a lie. Like it or not, those moments help define our identities, our character. Use them. Don't downplay them. They're juicy on stage, and absolutely necessary to making your life change.

Use it. Every single ounce of it.

Character is contradiction.

Defining your rich contradictions will pave the road for you to take a look at the crossroads in your life... and help tell "a greater story."

My top five contradictions are

_____ and _____

You, the Character

It's important to remind you that you are a walking, talking, breathing, feeling three-dimensional character. That may sound like I'm beating a dead horse (what a terrible

expression) and stating the obvious, and I am! But how many times do we forget the obvious? Things can be so obvious we forget that they're even there, right under our nose the entire time. So much about acting is about *unlearning* what we think we know. In order to achieve a degree of naturalism on stage, actors engage in very strange, unnatural exercises. If you've ever walked in on an acting class, if you didn't know it was an acting class, you'd swear you stumbled upon a mental ward. The training in the theater demands that every committed actor swim upstream, get out of their comfort zones, literally carve their old ideas of "being" or "acting" on the stage out of them, so that a new way of "behaving," reacting and listening on stage can take over. The more you can begin to look at yourself as a "character" the more uninhibited you'll be in every aspect of your life—and if you're a writer or an actor—your characters life. There's no escaping character, even if you're a sociopath! The very fact that you are full of contradictions, makes you a three-dimensional character. The difference is your *willingness* to use your contradictions, obstacles, and crossroads that give you your depth as uncomfortable as this may sound. This is your perfect opportunity to pour them into your "character." You can be anybody you want to be on stage as long as it's truthful to who you are in the present moment. All the great lessons from the stage can teach you how to step outside of yourself and drop the façade in order to become more of who you really are: your character showing true character. When you look at you, what do you see? Imagine a detailed character description in somebody else's play, writing about "you." You are the character. If you were "you" in a play, how would "you" (the playwright) describe "you" the character? What are your attributes? Fears? Dreams? Desires?

Let's return to your current great obstacle. What is the main thing that's holding you back from what you really want? Now personalize that thing into a person you are talking to. If it's a person that's holding you back, this can be the person you're talking to. If it's a strong emotion like fear or jealousy, turn it into a real person and form a relationship with it. If it's fear, it could be "Hey you... that's right... thanks for meeting with me... I really appreciate it... Why do I gotta keep apologizing to you, Frank?" Frank would then be the perfect stand-in for Fear.

Working With Your Emotions

Compare your emotions as the muscles of an athlete. Show me an athlete who achieves gold medals without a single warm up. The same holds true with our emotions. We have to develop them. "Getting in touch" with our emotions means we have to constantly sharpen our tools (ourselves) to gain full access to them to "show up" authentically.

What are the emotions that are hardest for you to express?

Can you provide an example of an emotion that you use or have used to hide your real emotion?

(example: anger masking sadness, humor masking jealousy)

By not showing your real emotions, where and how does the pain show up in your life?

In preparing for the monologue, I want you to imagine your emotions as no different than the palate of paint for a painter. The painter only deals with the essentials in order to create his masterpiece. And that is what this process in telling your new story asks of you. It asks you to go for the emotions that are the biggies for you, the emotions-- or maybe

the *one* emotion-- that is hardest for you to express... and use it, use it, use it! It may have a barbed-wire fence around it with warning signs that say “keep out,” “danger,” “do not enter,” along with landmines and snarling, feverish dogs guarding that emotion or emotions... but it’s a gift.

Questions

What’s one emotion that’s the hardest for you to express in your life, even to yourself in private?

What’s your biggest fear?

What’s the big emotion hidden behind that fear?

If you can answer these questions honestly, you are on your way to be able to not just tell the winning story for your client, but live *your* winning story beyond the courtroom.

From its origins in working with inmates, Juilliard Theater Graduate and TEDx Speaker Jesse Wilson has created a life-changing program designed to help trial lawyers breakthrough their personal and professional obstacles to tell and *live* the winning story. www.lftstage.com

