

Lesson #3:

“Always Make ‘The Hot Choice’—Always!”

Your Highest Potential Lies Beyond Your Comfort Zone. Move Beyond Your Limits and Fears To Better Connect With Jurors.

In this seven part series I am sharing seven Lessons From The Stage designed to help you become a better communicator both in and out of the courtroom. As a trial lawyer you face multiple challenges, or “Obstacles” as I prefer to call them, in your cases as well as in your own personal lives. The first lesson (“The Power Of The Obstacle: Embracing The Conflict”) provided a framework to begin to appreciate and powerfully use Obstacles to your benefit both inside and outside of court. The next lesson from the stage focused on the “Power Of Perspective.” In this third lesson, we’ll be looking at the value of making “The Hot Choice—Always!” when it comes to emotionally connecting to “the winning story” in order to better connect to the heart and minds of jurors.

I have this wonderful memory of “striking a set” from a play I was doing a number of years ago in a tiny theatre in New York City. It hadn’t been long since I’d graduated from The Juilliard School, wide-eyed and eager to conquer the world. The director said to the actors: “Let's make sure we're leaving this place better than we found it.” That one line has grown stronger and stronger for me over the years, and I “bring it” into much of my theatre-based work with trial lawyers. I love those words. You could certainly apply that statement to life. “Leaving this place better than we found it” means to me that *everybody* can begin to cultivate the kind of awareness that are prerequisites for artists in order to deliver and communicate their vision powerfully to the world. It can also mean making the greatest moment possible no matter who we’re with or what we have to work with. 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. In the acting world, when an actor brings a scene or a monologue to life, what he's doing is working it "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.

The Minute You're In A Courtroom, You're In A Performance

The minute you're on your feet and out of your chair, you're in a performance. You're in a story, verbally or non-verbally. You're on. What are you communicating? When you're "caught up" in the nuances of a case, it's easy to forget that you're actually in a performance. But the quicker you can accept this truth, the easier it will be for you to tell the winning story.

The Monologue—A Powerful Tool In Telling “The Winning Story”

No matter if you’ve done any acting work before, or have any interest in the theater whatsoever, you have within you the ability to tell a great story. Telling stories is part of your divine right to be on this planet.

I love this quote by Viktor Frankl: *“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”*

You have a choice to tell a great story... the winning story... or not. It’s that simple. One of the greatest tools for transformation there is in the theater is The Monologue. It’s the same tool to help trial lawyers tell the winning story. It is, quite literally, a vehicle for change. When people enroll in A Lessons From The Stage workshop, it’s critical they familiarize themselves as much as they can with how The Monologue operates.

Here are the basics of The Monologue:

What is 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

The steps of performing a monologue successfully can be boiled down into these **4 essentials**:

- 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

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, however, alive and brimming with emotion, by

linking it into the present moment. The present is happening right now, instantly... The present will always trump the energy of the past. The event is always *now*... This is happening to me right now. This moment is all there is. In telling the story/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. 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/trial lawyer/actor, are letting the voice say what it needs to say.

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 telling the “winning story” 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. 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. In the Lessons From The Stage weekend intensives, participants are committed to making a major life change, and the monologue is the vehicle to get there. They're not there doing this strange theater work just to talk about what's happened in their 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, long after the workshop commences.

The Personal Connection

Another reason why working with the monologue is more helpful to you to tell “the winning story” rather than just writing a story, is when you make anything personal 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.

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. Among many, one excellent online source for viewing actors delivering monologues can be viewed at <http://100monologues.com>

Identifying your own crossroads

Within the power of the monologue is the opportunity to create immediate authenticity, empathy, and vulnerability for the storyteller/trial lawyer-- all of these are effective ingredients for success in your personal and professional lives 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.

Before defining your crossroads, lets take a look at what makes, in film director Elia Kazan's definition, a great character. “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. Walt Whitman, the great poet of “Leaves of Grass” wrote, “Do I contradict myself? Very well! For I am large, I contain multitudes.”

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 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, and this will, in turn reveal itself in your courtroom demeanor. We are filled with an enormous treasure trove of contradictions. Think about the bully at school who pushes everyone, yet has an enormous capacity to express genuine feeling with classical music. What's the softness under the rough exterior? Or visa 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 top five 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. They're juicy on stage.

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 the winning story.

My top five contradictions are

_____ and _____

Remember, in the courtroom, you are a walking, talking, breathing, feeling three-dimensional character. The very fact that you are full of contradictions, make you a three-dimensional character. And it's your willingness to use your contradictions, obstacles, and crossroads that give you your depth as uncomfortable as they may be. 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. Lessons From The Stage teaches you how to step outside of yourself and drop the façade in order to become more of who you really are. 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? Define your current greatest 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?”

Purposeful writing. Purposeful living.

Compare our emotions-- the stuff inside us-- 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.

The Hot Choice List

For the actor giving an audition, they want their monologue to stand out in order to nail the part. In a play, the actor wants each scene to be rich with emotional truth. For the trial lawyer (and we're *all* actors at heart), we want to tell the winning story that captivates the hearts and minds of the jurors and helps us win the case. Think about it this way: after a long day of skiing, do you want to crawl into a tepid bathtub or a hot, bone-soothing skin broth that makes you go *AAAAAAAHHHH*... This is the difference between a Yawn Choice and The Hot Choice.

In working with The Hot Choice list, it's not entirely necessary to dwell upon the entire checklist every time you approach the monologue-- any of the tools on the checklist may be one that unlocks “the truth” of the story for you.

What do I want? (Objective/Intention)

What's getting in the way of what I want? (Obstacles)

How am I going to get it? (Tactics/Choices)

Where am I coming from? (What happened before the scene?)

Where am I going?

What's the personal connection? (What can I use from my own life to apply to this character?)

Is there an opportunity to “flip it?” (If the monologue requires anger, is there a way I can hide it by laughter?)

How am I climbing “The Ladder?” (How can I “build emotionally” in the monologue?)

In telling the winning story, The Hot Choice allows for the emotion in the story to be front n’ center, not buried in the details of a case. The Hot Choice allows for you, the trial lawyer, to recognize that emotion, carefully and intentionally utilized in a story, can set the story into orbit... and right into the heart of the jury.

Take any case you’ve given or are about to give. As an exercise, see if you can pull away from it and turn it into a monologue. Challenge yourself. It would not be time wasted, believe me, because any emotional highs and lows that you will

inevitably experience in the monologue will funnel directly into an effective courtroom presentation, no matter the case. Every nuance of the monologue will trickle into your winning story.

My goal for you is to turn that trickle into a river so that you have full access of the power of the theater at your beck and call.

Moment to moment.

Three helpful tips to practice and implement The Hot Choice in your next courtroom performance:

**It does not serve anyone, certainly not my client or the jury, to “pull my punches” in telling the winning story.*

**Stepping outside my comfort zone in preparing my client for trial will allow them to step outside their comfort zone.*

**Balancing the facts with the “raw emotion” of my case is a dance
I have the ability to make appear seamless.*

*If you're looking to implement theater skills to tell “the
winning story” and to work with Jesse Wilson in a future “Lessons
From The Stage” workshop, please contact him at
jessekwilson@gmail.com or visit his website at www.lftstage.com*