

The Seven Secrets of a Power Audition

by
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Ever heard of an actor described as having “presence” - that ineffable quality of being that is completely captivating and eminently watchable? Every move, every word of dialogue, every *gesture* seems so “right” - so earned, and yet so startling at the same time. It’s no surprise that these are the actors we honor - treat like royalty, even.

It may seem that this quality, this near-mystical state, is a condition bestowed by chance on a lucky few. Or at best, if one is lucky enough to experience a blessed moment of “being there,” it comes in fits and starts, totally unexpected and so mercurial that it disappears as quickly as it arrives, without leaving any clues as to how to recapture it.

Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Although some actors are given this gift with little or no work or training, **this quality of “presence,” like any other aspect of the craft, can be approached as a technique and practiced - just as one would develop one’s voice, body and emotional life.** With focused and sustained effort, the “gift” of presence can be accessed, developed and utilized. The key is in harnessing the power of the present moment – “being here now.”

It’s All About the NOW!

The key lies in the word itself: Presence. Power actors are **present**, alive to the reality of **the present moment**. While completely adept at being able to navigate character, plot, scenery, camera, audience, dialogue, other actors, etc. the power actor remains completely “in the moment” - responsive to whatever comes his or her way.

How does “being in the moment” help with auditioning?

Let’s imagine...

You’ve done all your homework. You’ve worked on the scene, you’ve read the play or screenplay (if it was available). You’ve made all your character choices and marked up the sides and are ready to convince the people in the room that you’re the actor for job. You have a lot of thoughts and ideas about this character - and that’s fine, you must bring all your intelligence to the work, but *only if you are willing to throw it all out and “go organic” the minute you enter the room to audition.*

The people on the other side of the table want to see *you*, to experience *you*. Even though you are presenting a “character,” it is vital that you allow *yourself* to truly be “seen”.

When I’m casting, whether as a director or producer, I always expect an actor to be well prepared, physically comfortable, and familiar with the text and the style. But what I’m *really* looking for is an actor who is able to live in the moment with the piece, no matter how much they have prepared, rehearsed, performed or auditioned it. I would much rather witness an actor *exploring*, and making discoveries about the character, thought by thought, in the moment - than be shown a library of pre-conceived “ideas” that may or may not match mine, or the playwright’s.

Believe me, you may be totally wrong for the part, and you may not get the role, but if you can achieve this sense of discovery and surprise, this exploration of the possibilities of the moment, you **WILL** be remembered. You will have reminded everyone on the other side of the table why they entered this business in the first place. You will have given them a great gift, and they will thank you, some day, by handing you the role of your dreams.

This power is available to all actors, all the time. But how do we cultivate it, practice it? How do we create the context for the present moment to be fully experienced, on an ongoing basis, all the time?

The following seven secrets make up the foundation for accessing the “Now” in an audition or rehearsal situation:

- 1) Breathe**
- 2) Listen**
- 3) Take it up off the page, one thought at a time**
- 4) Let it land**
- 5) Put a period at the end of the thought**
- 6) Practice**
- 7) Courage...Dare to be**

SECRET #1: Breathe!

Take a breath. Then let it out. It’s as simple as that. Breathe before you start, breathe at the end of a beat, breathe in a transition. Feeling “out of it”? Take a breath, and let it out. Feel like you’re “nailing it”? Take a breath, and let it out.

It’s no coincidence that the word for taking a breath has the same roots as the word for access to the artist’s soul... **INSPIRATION**. Breath creates a dynamic bridge between the left side of our brain - the part involved with speech, linear time and logic - and the right side, the side attuned to impulse, spirit and inspiration. This is the realm of imagination... the realm of the visceral, uncensored response to the present moment.

Because breath can be *both* a conscious, left-brain function and an unconscious, right brain instinct, it serves as a *bridge* between both hemispheres - and is therefore the connective tissue, the key to the nuanced communication between the artist's intellect and his or her soul.

Even on a very practical level, there is *nothing* a director likes to see more, or a producer, or a casting director, or an *audience* for that matter, than a living, *breathing* human being on stage. In an audition situation, usually because of nerves, many actors deny their own humanity by avoiding that most important human function... breathing.

Breath is essential to the actor's instrument: the body-mind-spirit. Not only are you sending a message to the director/producer that you are indeed "alive" - a player, willing to make discoveries *with* them, you are also sending a message to all the emotional and physical centers of your instrument, your body/mind/spirit, to activate, integrate.... come alive. So take a breath. Let it out. And see where it takes you.

SECRET #2: Listen

What's the difference between *listening* and *hearing*? Next time you're in a conversation with a friend, become aware for a moment of how you listen to them. Are you truly hearing what they are saying, or, after hearing maybe the first two or three words, are you already preparing what *you* are going to say next? If it's the latter, you are doing your friend a disservice, innocent as it may be, by not truly listening to them... but you are doing yourself an even *bigger* disservice by preventing yourself access to the present moment. How can you be fully in the present moment if you are already "leaning into" the next? If you listen with care, staying completely present in the moment, there is so much more value to be gained by both parties. Communion, even.

How can we practice this kind of listening? First, become aware of, and acknowledge, when you are *not* listening intentionally. In the moments when you become aware that you are already crafting a response, or reflecting on what has been said in the past, simply "surrender" to the slip. Don't fight it, don't resist it, don't judge or condemn yourself, just surrender - take a breath, even - and in that moment, you will be gently bought back to the "now," and the present moment of intentional listening. With regular practice, the listening muscle will get stronger, and the essential power to listen intently will become more and more first hand.

In an audition situation, more often than not, you will be faced with a reading partner who is *not* an actor. Maybe it's a stage manager, or an associate producer who has been pressed into service for the afternoon. Chances are, they are deeply uncomfortable, and will have their faces pressed to the page, with their delivery by rote and in a monotone. Don't let it throw you. *Start listening with every pore of your being...* listen with your eyes, listen with your hands, listen with your belly. Be certain that no

matter how dry the monotone, you have devoured every last morsel they have fed you before you glance back at the text to pick up your next thought.

What if it's a monologue, a prepared piece? How do we "listen intently" when delivering a monologue?

Remember that no character, whether in dramatic literature or in real life for that matter, sets out to speak in monologues. Human beings communicate one thought at a time, and that one thought leads to the next, and then to the next, and so on. Each thought modifies, or builds on, the one before it. In the context of a play or a scene, a monologue is a series of thoughts conveyed from one character to another without interruption. (Unless it's a soliloquy, in which case it's a series of thoughts conveyed to oneself, or one's higher power, conscience, etc.) In an audition situation, since you are alone on stage, these "thoughts" are spoken to an unseen character – but that character is alive nonetheless.

The power actor *expects that the unseen character will respond* just as if they were actually in the room with you... and *listens for their response*. When they either give their unseen, *imagined* response, that leads you to the next thought... either modifying or building upon the last, or leading to the next. As you work the piece, look for the places that your unseen partner onstage might possibly respond. Allow for the possibility of their imagined response – and *listen* for it as you would a real scene partner.

SECRET #3: Pick it up off the page, *one thought at a time*

This is an invaluable technique for readings of any kind.

Memorization of a scene, or the sides, is in most cases death to a successful audition. As you commit the lines to memory, you are also likely committing to ways of saying the lines, to how you're going to stand, when you're going to sit down... you are "locking in" everything except the most essential: who you are, and how you connect with the text in the moment. You are also sending a message to your auditioner that this is a rehearsed - aka "finished" – performance... as opposed to giving them an opportunity to see *how* you work, how you make discoveries, and thus whether you are someone who can be worked *with*.

Just as with monologues, real people in real life don't think in "lines of dialogue". We think – and therefore speak - in *sequential thoughts*. One thought leads to the next, each one following on and building upon another.

Reading a scene should be no different. When you look down at the page, instead of looking for your first line of dialogue, *look for the first thought*. That thought may indeed be the whole line of dialogue, but chances are it will only be a portion of the first

sentence. It might be four or five words, but it will be a *complete* thought. It may even be just one word.

Let's look at the beginning of a classic monologue from *Hamlet*:

"O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew!"

"O," (or "Oh!") has energy, intention and a life all its own. It's a thought, an expression unto itself - make sure that you allow it the time and import to exist before building on it. The next thought? *That this too, too solid flesh would melt!* The next? *Thaw, even!* Do you see how it works?

Whatever that first thought is, lift it now off the page. Make eye contact with your partner, and deliver the thought. Just *that* thought, and that thought alone. Imagine, just for the slightest moment, that that's all you are going to say. Maybe, just maybe, the other character will respond. Take the slightest moment to listen for a response, then return to the script for the *next* thought, and repeat, thought by thought, until your line is complete.

At first, it will feel like this is slowing things down to a crawl – but once you get the hang of it, you will be able to achieve a fluidity, and it will make all the difference between a mere 'reading' and a moment of dynamic life between two characters.

Secret #4: Let the thought "land"

Your intention as the character is to deliver this one thought. You don't "know" you're going to say any more, just yet. Make certain that the thought "lands" on your partner, that he or she hears it, and has *received* it - *before lowering your eyes to the text to allow the next thought to "occur" to you.*

Staying with one thought at a time, and making certain that each thought *lands*, puts you in control and creates a context for *the present moment* and the potential for *surprise* to come into play. It allows an extra second for an association, or an emotional response inspired by the text to resonate or bubble up within you. There is an opportunity to make a *personal connection* to the thought – and thus to the text – that may well surprise you as much as your auditioners.

When you rush back to the page to pick up your next line before your previous thought has landed, or before the other character has finished responding, you are robbing the present moment of its power to move you in a glimpse of truth. So have the courage to take that extra second, and let it *land*.

SECRET #5: Put a *period* at the end of each thought

Here's another great technique for invoking presence: Put an imaginary 'period' at the end of each thought. Forget about the punctuation as written in the script, or how many words of dialogue you've lifted together as a 'complete thought' off the page. Forget how many you still have to go... just make sure that you *end this present thought definitively*, with a downward inflection, a period. Even if it's in the middle of a sentence!

Let the *next* thought – or the next part of the sentence – modify, or *build* on, that one. Again, this sends a powerful message that you are thinking, living, breathing, in the present moment, one thought at a time.

Consider this section from Shylock's speech in *Merchant of Venice*:

"Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?"

Because it is one sentence ending with a question mark, our inclination may be to put a question mark after each comma. But Shylock does not set out at the beginning of the speech to list all these aspects, He says "Hath not a Jew hands?..." and *decides in that moment that he is not finished*. He continues, one thought at a time, to modify that first thought: "Organs. Dimensions. Senses. Affections. Passions!" One complete thought, naturally leading to the next, and the next. Putting question marks or commas after each element in a list or series of words, makes you "lean" into the next thought without truly living the current one. Put a period on the end of each thought. It will probably slow you down, but it will absolutely help you stay in the moment.

SECRET #6: Practice

Power auditioning requires skill, and skill requires sustained effort. Taking the time to consistently practice the techniques listed above will develop skills and train muscles that, in turn, give us the confidence to be successful. Practice is imperative. If you go into an audition situation attempting to lift the thoughts off the page and letting them land without first mastering the technique, then your head will be filled with nothing but the *technique* of lifting the thoughts up off the page and letting them land. But, once you have practiced enough that it becomes second nature, you don't have to *think* about lifting the thoughts off the page. Or, if you have found through sustained, committed practice a natural way to bring breath into your work, then you need not think about that. Like a minimized application on your desktop, they are there working for you, but you are not focused on them. Remember: It's not magic...it's a craft. Work it, practice it, master it. *Daily*. Then, throw it away and go organic. It will be there for you.

Courage: Dare to be...

Sure, incorporating any of the techniques outlined above is risky. They'll slow you down, make you more present, more alive... and therefore, more *vulnerable*. It takes *courage* to risk revealing yourself more truthfully. But it's the only way to discover the power of presence in your work.

Are there methods for mustering courage? Yes. There are powerful tools called *affirmations*, which we can use to cultivate and strengthen our nerve. Affirmations are statements of positive belief that can be used as powerful tools to loosen the grip of negative core beliefs.

Sometimes, no matter how skilled we become, no matter how adept with techniques, the memory of past experiences - or the fear of future ones - maintain a seemingly powerful grip on our ability to "show up" in the moment and do our best. What's going on here?

Some aspects of our subconscious - our 'egos,' for instance, or certain self-defeating habits and old tapes, can actually be *threatened* by positive change. These attitudes and thought patterns often *feel* very real to us, but they are not. They are illusions that can be gently acknowledged and let go. As actors and artists, we must be on constant alert, mindful of how our negative thinking can get in our way, and work to overcome these impediments.

Daily affirmation practice is an excellent way to begin the essential life-long study for finding and maintaining the power actor within us... the study of ourselves.

The following are some examples of affirmations on courage. Feel free to use them as is, or modify them to make them your own:

- I have the courage to go slowly and wait... *I dare to be boring.*
- I have the courage to play the fool... *I dare to be silly.*
- I have the courage to breathe... *I dare to be alive.*
- I have the courage to listen intently... *I dare to be compassionate.*
- I have the courage to be an artist... *I dare to be discovered.*
- I have the courage to ask for help... *I dare to pray.*
- I have the courage to let go... *I dare to play.*

Whether you are a seasoned professional or a novice, the auditioning process can be intimidating. Having the courage to reveal who you are and staying alive to the present moment is the best way to access your power.

Now here's the *real* secret...

The techniques above are not meant to become *additions* to your “actor’s tool chest”. They are not meant to add anything to your work. The reverse in fact, is true. They are meant **to help you get out of your own way**, to release the impediments to your power, and help you reveal yourself as an authentic, passionate human being.

I once asked a trusted teacher and mentor in my college years, “How do I become a better actor?” and he replied, “become a better person... know yourself.”

I am honored to pass it on.

Break a leg!