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How the actor handles emotion

BY JON JORY

TOUGH ONE, huh? When I'm teaching, I try to stay away from talking about this subject because it's so fraught, but eventually we have to bite the bullet, right? The reason that I usually get drawn in is that false emotion is such an acting buzzkill. So, anyway, here's what I say.

Dear Actor,
I feel your pain. It says right there on page 38 that your beloved parakeet, Hotchacha, has been killed on the Los Angeles freeway when it flew out of the window of your car and was squashed flat as a pancake by a 16-wheeler carrying string beans to Sacramento. Further, it says right there in the acting version that you have to cry.

So here's the deal: The first thing about emotions is that people don't like having them. They are not trying to have them; they are trying not to. As an example, at least one student each semester comes into my office with a problem, and soon there are tears, and it invariably makes the student furious. The last thing in the world they want to do in the office is cry, and when they cry they hate it.

This leads to the golden rule: When your character begins to, or needs to, feel an emotion (other than anger, which is the only emo-

tion every single actor alive can play convincingly), fight that emotion with every fiber of your actor being. There should be giant red letters on every acting class wall that say, "Suppress emotion!" I feel safe saying this because it's what Stanislavski says, and he was almost never wrong. It is the battle to suppress emotion until you can fight no longer that makes the eventual expression of the emotion believable.

This also keeps actors from making a terrible, no good, perfectly dreadful mistake: trying to find a tone that the audience will mistake

for emotion. Tonal acting. No, no, no! The sad tone, the love tone, the hurt tone, the happy tone. Yuck, and once again, yuck. Sometimes it goes so far that when the actor sees the word "sad" in her speech, she says "sad" in the "sad tone." These generalities are plain old, bad acting.

A perfect example is the *Romeo and Juliet* balcony scene. Far too often, the actors in tights and nightgown are so busy playing "I love you," "I love you more," "I really, really love you," "Yes, but I adore you!" that the audience can't control an impulse to kill



STEPHEN DALLAS

them both with giant pinwheel lollipops. The balcony scene is about two kids who are wildly attracted but have so many problems to deal with they can't keep playing the love tone.

Play the problem not the false emotion. Let me say that once more: Play the problem not the false emotion.

Love, Jon

The director needs to recognize false emotion and suggest that they put all their energy into the following equation: You need an objective (what you want, or better still, what you want the other person to do, to feel, or to understand) and (this is the crucial part) you need an obstacle in balance with that objective that prevents you from easily getting what you want.

The obstacle is the part most often underplayed by young performers. The good news is that if you really,

really want something and there is something that makes it really, really hard to get, then it is conceivable, and emotion may actually show up, and you won't try to make up for its absence by trying to sound like you are having an emotion, which unfortunately is fooling only 3.8 members of the audience.

Now, if the emotion doesn't show up on Wednesday at 9:06 p.m., you still have the fascinating reality of somebody who profoundly wants something or other but who is having a heck of a hard time getting it because of the fire-breathing dragon who is guarding it. That's dramatically viable enough to get you the Tony even though the emotion refused to come out of the green room.

The ideal emotion is when tears roll down your cheeks as you are completely occupied trying to carry your grandmother to safety in the

middle of a tsunami. That way, you don't have to try out your "sad tone" when you say, "Grandma, get your hand off my windpipe. You're choking me."

As soon as you have been cast in the role (Congratulations!), go through the script and cross out any stage direction that says you "cry" at a certain point in the text. Concentrate on the objective (what you want), the obstacle (what is preventing you from getting it), and the tactic (which is how you try to get past the obstacle). Let the emotion alone. Fight to not let it get in the way of your objective. All will be well.

Actors love to pretend they are having emotions they aren't having. It doesn't work. Stop it. It's yucky.

Sooooo, after 75 years of acting, directing, and teaching, that's all I know about actors and emotion. Suppress it, and it might show up.