

Acting

Character building and what makes a truly great actor

What makes an actor truly great? The actor's job is to bring a scripted character to life. RADA's Dee Cannon outlines 10 questions that must be addressed in order to create a fully-realised three-dimensional person

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- Dee Cannon and [Lyn Gardner](#)
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Acting technique is paramount to anyone wanting to be a serious actor. It's quite easy to imitate a character or even an emotion, but where's the depth in that? How can you sustain or repeat again what you might have found intuitively? Do you even know what you did or how you did it?

The technique, however, will help you find a character, which in turn informs how you approach the script. How do you bring the dialogue alive? How do you know what choices to make? The goal of a trained actor is to become a fully realised three-dimensional character, with a rich backstory. I must believe the character you play is truthful and not a cliché, a caricature, a thin external representation of someone who barely resembles a human being. I must believe what you say is real and that you're not reciting, spouting or commenting.

In order to help you understand, I will lay out the backbone of what I teach at RADA (The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in England) and around the world to professional and student actors alike. This is based around Stanislavski's acting technique and his seven questions which, over the years, I have adapted into 10 key acting questions every actor should answer in order to be a fully rounded and connected actor.

1. Who am I?
2. Where am I?
3. When is it?
4. Where have I just come from?
5. What do I want?
6. Why do I want it?
7. Why do I want it now?
8. What will happen if I don't get it now?
9. How will I get what I want by doing what?
10. What must I overcome?

1. Who am I?

The first question is dealing with the type of person you are. I'm sure if I asked you that question, you would be able to tell me about your family background, your parents, grandparents, siblings. You would be able to describe them in detail. Also the house you grew up in, what it looked like, inside and outside. Your favourite room, what you could see out of your bedroom window, the smells you remember. Your earliest childhood memories, the kind of games you played, family holidays. Your education, favourite teachers, best friends, times you got into trouble. Your first kiss, first job, your likes and dislikes, influences, attitudes, anecdotes. All these good, bad, funny, interesting experiences shape us into who we are today. Most people don't walk around with all these memories on their shoulders like baggage. They've seeped into our being, our muscles, our subconscious, allowing us just to be, to exist.

When you play a character in theatre, TV or film, you should know your character as well as you know yourself, so you can just exist and live. Of course that doesn't just magically happen, nor does it evolve just from rehearsals. As an actor you have to plant those memories, anecdotes and backstory.

So how do you build a character? Well, first a good *script* should give you some initial information about your character, and also what other characters say or think about your character can be very revealing. All this should be extracted and written down in a separate notebook. The next stage is *research*. You need to find out through detailed research what the history, economics, politics, music, art, literature, theatre, film, foods, fashion, religion might have been at the time the play was written, in order to know how you would have lived and what and who your influences were, just as you know these things in real life. Possible sources include the internet, films of the era and finding images of landscape, as well as going to museums, art and photographic galleries. Fill your mind with images - not facts and figures.

The final stage in building a character, once you've filleted the script and completed your research, is to use your *imagination* to flesh out the details you've gathered and bring them alive. Don't underestimate the power and the necessity of your imagination in the acting process. You can't use your imagination without the backup of research and reading. Nor can you use your imagination alone.

2. Where am I?

You might find in the script a description of the room you're supposed to be in, including details such as the style and period of the furniture. What does it mean to you though? Is your character supposed to be familiar with the surroundings? Is it the first time you've entered this room? Is it a cosy cottage? A freezing barn? A familiar street? We usually behave differently depending on our surroundings. You need to establish your relationship with your environment because this affects the way you use yourself. For example, you wouldn't start walking around, touching ornaments and putting your feet up if it wasn't your home. The geography will have an impact too: playing someone from very cold northern climates such as Norway or Russia will be different to playing someone in a baking Mediterranean climate such as Italy or Spain.

3. When is it?

We need to know what season it is, what year, what time of day. We tend to carry ourselves differently in the colder months than we do on hot, muggy summer days. We would also hold ourselves differently if the piece was set at the turn of the century. We must be aware that we can't bring our modern physicality to a play that is of another period. People expressed themselves differently then and didn't slouch or use modern gestures.

4. Where have I just come from?

You need to work out what your character has been doing, where they've been. *When you make an entrance on stage it shouldn't look as if you've just stepped on stage from behind the curtain.* Even if that's true, you should have worked out during rehearsal where you would be coming from - the bathroom, having just brushed your teeth? The kitchen in the middle of baking an apple pie? The car after being stuck in traffic? Shopping? What is your state of being supposed to be on your entrance? Does it tell you in the text? Has your director informed you of what they would like it to be? Or do you have to invent it? What's just happened in the scene before? Have you just had an argument? Have you just been proposed to?

Whatever the situation, you should always know your previous circumstances at all times. It can be good fun inventing it, and no entrance should ever be the same. Just think about real life: do you always enter your house in the same way every night? No. Where you come from will have conditioned your mood.

5. What do I want?

This is a key question. "Want" means what do you need, what is your intention, your motivation, your action? You should never walk on stage just to play a scene. You should always have an objective. Often in a good script, an objective is written into the scene: to end the affair, to propose, to move out. Your action can change from scene to scene but you should always work out what you are meant to be doing.

You may be in a scene, for example, where you have very little dialogue. Instead of sitting doing nothing, give yourself a physical action, which can be anything that fits your reason for being in that room, from making a salad to polishing your nails. Even if you are pulled away from what you're doing, so long as you're doing something, you've always got something to return to once you're no longer engaged in conversation. The importance of this is so that you don't look or feel silly on stage doing nothing. *You must have a life on stage, you must have a purpose for walking and talking*, otherwise you are in danger of "just acting", which is fake. Don't forget you're trying to be truthful and three-dimensional, and in real life, no one ever comes into a room and stands with their hands by their sides or sits with their hands in their lap and just talks.

6. Why do I want it?

You must always have a strong justification for your action. All right, perhaps in real life we don't always have a strong justification for everything we're doing but, particularly in the theatre, you always need one. Most plays present a heightened version of reality (this can be different for the naturalistic performances and stories we see on television, particularly in soap operas). Having a strong justification means you have a strong motivation.

7. Why do I want it now?

The "now" gives you an immediacy that is crucial in acting and in any drama. You must know why your motivation has to be right now, not before, not later but now. Why should we sit through two hours of this play if you're not that bothered about getting the money or the house or the power?

8. What will happen if I don't get it now?

The stakes should always be high. Otherwise so what? The consequences of not getting what you want should always be very important to you. If the high stakes are not clear to you in the play, you need to invent them, otherwise it will come across that you're not bothered at all about the outcome.

9. How will I get what I want by doing what?

This question brings us on to how you break down a script. How do you know how to play the line as opposed to how one should say the line? There's a big difference.

Once you've worked out what your action is (question 5) you then have to work out your smaller action, which is called an "activity". **You need to work out how you are trying to affect the other person with what you are saying.**

One way of doing this is called "actioning" your text. *Break your script up into chunks: every time you have a new change of thought, you need to find a transitive verb, a verb that is active, such as to beg, to entice, to charm, to get sympathy* (a good thesaurus is very handy here). Remember that this technique is not about the emotional content of what you are saying or feeling but about what you want the other person to feel psychologically. By playing these chosen activities you are trying to make the actor that you are playing opposite feel something specific in order to further your action.

So, you have to think: how can I affect the other character by doing what? At this stage you should know who your character is, and your choice of active verbs should be informed by your character choice and not your personal choice. If my character was a loving, open, sweet, sensitive young girl and my dialogue was: "I don't love you anymore, I think you should go", my verb will be determined by my above characteristics and not by the actual line itself. Therefore verbs such as to plead, to get sympathy, to reason, should be chosen, as opposed to verbs that might reflect another type of character, such as to demand, to threaten, to hurt. If in the rehearsal a choice doesn't work then you can change your choice. Nothing should be initially set in stone.

I like to call this process "scoring" your text. Just as a musician or singer would rely on their score to know how to sing or play their song, an actor works out how to play the monologue, scene or play. Once you've done it, you have to play it fully, otherwise it's pretty pointless. The challenge is the execution of it. *It's time-consuming initially to find the right verbs, but once you have them and tested them in rehearsal, not only will you have given your performance light and shade but also depth.* It also means you do not have to fall into a dreadful cliché performance by thinking of how to say the lines and what you should be feeling and emoting. This technique allows you to be free and truthful without playing external emotion. **It's really about what you don't say and trusting that actions will speak louder than words.**

10. What must I overcome?

Every actor should always have an inner and an outer obstacle. The outer obstacle is the resistance (usually the other character) to obtaining your action. The inner obstacle is your inner conflict, which you must always plant in a scene even though it can change. There must always be a problem you are trying to overcome. If you think of yourself in life, you're never without an inner obstacle. You'll have seen scenes on stage or screen where the inner obstacle has not been properly planted: you get a load of actors just shouting, over-emoting and sometimes just playing the aggression. If the inner obstacle is there, the anger, fear or hate, for example, then you've got something to fight against in the scene. Much more interesting.

Actors may believe that they can do without formal training. But I have worked with untrained actors, who have landed a film or a TV series on the basis of their looks, and seen them struggle to be able to reproduce what they were able to do in the first take. Natural ability will get you so far, but it's the trained actors who know what they're doing and how they're doing it and can produce that emotion take after take.

To fully transform into a character, to be truthfully and emotionally connected needs hard work, technique, good direction. But the audience should see none of this. They should see nothing other than the fully realised three-dimensional character right in the truth of the moment.

Dee Cannon teaches acting at RADA