

# Someone is

## *An exercise to help actors remember the other character in monologues*

MOST ACTORS AGREE on one particular issue. They hate to do monologues. It's one of the most difficult tasks an actor faces. There are several reasons for this, but the most glaring one is that doing a monologue feels totally unnatural.

In some ways, performing a monologue is similar to taking the SAT—a device used to measure one's potential or aptitude for success. In reality, however, neither has much in common with what a person would actually *do* in the situations they're supposed to measure. When we use monologues to help us cast a play, we are asking actors to talk to themselves or an imaginary listener and make us believe that this is what they are actually doing. That seldom happens in the play we will direct. Usually there is a person for the actor to talk to. Nevertheless, we expect our students to be convincing in their monologues, actually speak with purpose and urgency, and forward the story. In addition, our actors are doing all this without the full context of the play, but we still expect them to make it all make sense. Sometimes, and most painful of all, these actors will break the fourth wall and actually talk directly to us out in the audience—making us complicit in their problems and their pain.

The truth is, most monologues are not really monologues, particularly when seen in the context of a play. They are actually extended pieces of

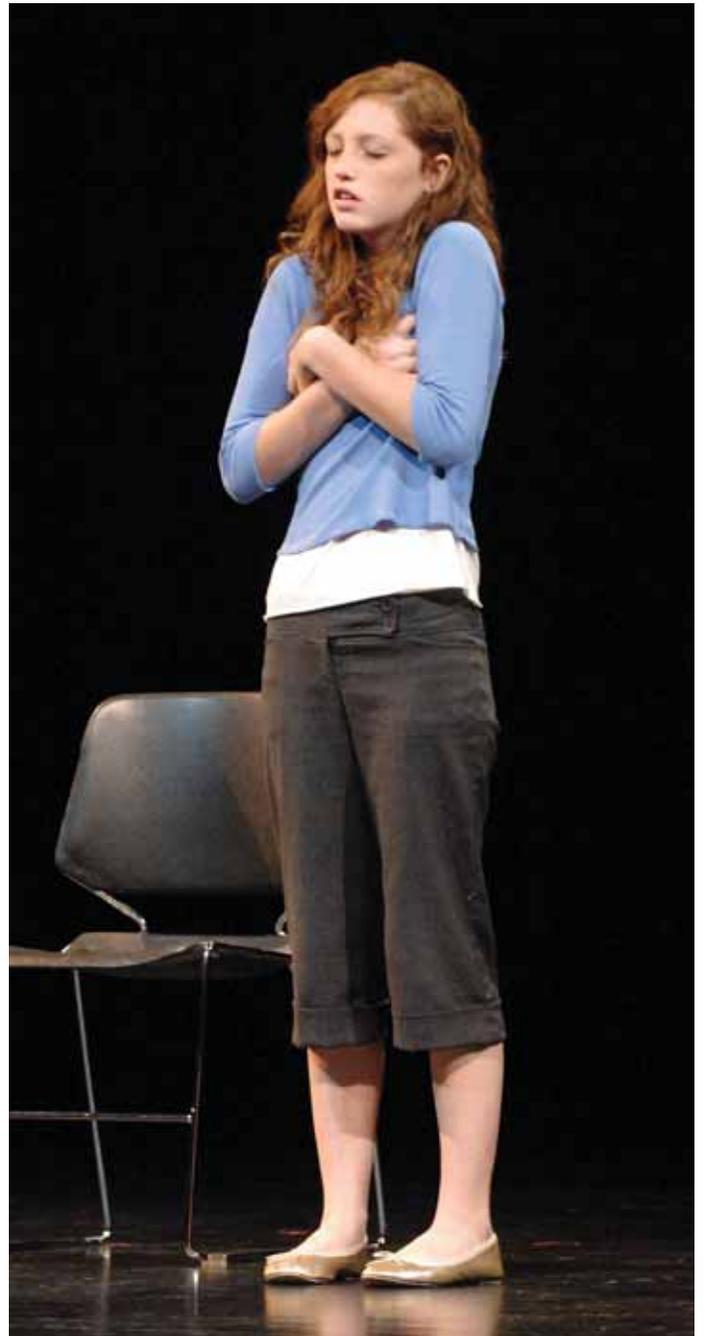
dialogue during which another actor-character is present and reacting. Sometimes the other actor periodically inserts snippets of his own dialogue; other times the reaction is non-verbal. One way or another, there is always a give and take between the actor-characters. When a playwright writes the dialogue, she is well aware that the listening character, through his or her reactions, will be helping to steer the course of the monologue with verbal and non-verbal feedback. The playwright intends for there to be give and take between characters, knowing that it will provide conflict as well as a dramatic arc as the speech unfolds. Of course, there are monologues in which the playwright intentionally writes for a character to address the audience directly. But even in these situations, the playwright expects that an exchange will be going on between the character and the listening audience, and the actor playing the character will be expected to make adjustments according to that feedback.

Too often, unfortunately, when beginning actors are auditioning for a role or trying to impress a college auditor, they forget many of the things that will help them perform believably. They end up performing their monologue in a vacuum in a way that inadvertently makes them ignore the very things that auditors or directors want to see. Those include an ability to be believable and to listen and react mo-



# listening

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ment by moment; act physically; tell the story clearly and sequentially; and be compelling as well as natural.

The fact is, an audition monologue is far stronger when the viewer is aware that another character is present, even when an actor performs it alone. In other words, since most monologues are really dialogues, the actor always needs to know how the other character is reacting. Acting is about telling the story—not just saying the words—and a central part of the unfolding story is the non-verbal part where an actor gets to react to his or her scene partner.

What I'm going to present here is a three-step exercise that can help actors prepare and deliver monologues more effectively by forcing them to deal with a monologue as though it were a scene rather than a solo piece. This exercise will also aid actors with most other essential elements of good acting including analysis, making choices from that analysis, physicalization, listening and reacting, and telling the story in a believable fashion.

The purpose of this exercise is to show young actors how to view monologues the same way as scenes. Ultimately, every scene must have a central conflict between characters; an arc with a clear beginning, middle, and end; and several storytelling moments that serve as dramatic stepping stones. Our actors must also keep in mind that good acting is not only about dialogue. Acting between the lines is as important as dialogue, and physical action can be as telling as the words provided. The exercise is intended to give students an opportunity to test and develop these concepts and help them to prepare and execute a monologue with success. Depending on the time you have, you can do all the rounds in sequence or, if your time is limited, jump right into the second round.

### Round one: find a monologue that works

The first round of this exercise is designed to teach your students how to find monologue material that will serve them well, or at least get them to un-

derstand and recognize the ingredients that make up a good monologue. Next, they will need to do the initial preparation on that monologue including determining the given circumstances, and finding the storytelling arc, basic conflict and objectives, and the most dramatic moments. Once you give the assignment and have explained it fully, you should provide everyone ample time to find and prepare the material for presentation. Then have your students present their monologues in class and get feedback from you and (if you allow it) the class.

**Discussion.** If your students are sophisticated enough, you may want to let them select their own material. The material should be something that they could actually play. Monologue work is difficult enough; no need to make it even harder by using material that will be too much of a stretch and require choices beyond your students' understanding or physicality. If you don't think your students have the capacity at this point to select for themselves, then you should pick their scenes for them. The idea is for them to be successful. In this exercise I like to use monologues that do not come from actual plays. Normally, I like to make my students have to deal with their work in the context of the bigger picture of the play, but for this kind of introduction to monologuing, I have found it to be useful for students to have to make up viable given circumstances on their own. It forces them to think in terms of clear, executable choices that will make the story compelling for the audience.

The problem is that many of those dozens of monologue collections that you find in bookstores—especially those original ones for student actors—are often not very good. You will need to judge them yourself, but I strongly recommend that you approve any selections your students make before allowing them to begin working. Even a good actor can be tripped up by bad material. I have found that the collections written by Jason Milligan are very effective for this kind of acting assignment. The three titles in his series, all

published by Samuel French, include *Actors Write for Actors*, *Encore*, and *Both Sides of the Story*.

Monologues from memoirs, oral histories, and novels written in the first person are also excellent source material. Some of my own students, for example, have had much success using gender-specific material from female writers—Jennifer Weiner's novels, for instance, and selections from *The Love-Ly Bones* by Alice Sebold. Others have found monologue-worthy excerpts from non-fiction offerings such as *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher or *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich. The important thing is that their selections sound like real people talking, and contain a significant conflict and a dramatic arc. You might want to suggest to your students that they start actively collecting potential material and keep it in a folder for future use. Finding a good monologue is always stressful, and what is not useful now may very well be later.

Once your students have selected their monologues—a minute to a minute and a half is more than enough material—they should begin their analysis process and, before any rehearsal begins, be solid on the following:

- The given circumstances—the who, what, when, and where or, in other words, the context for the speech. Who is talking to whom? What is their relationship, history, etc? Where are the characters? When does this scene take place?
- What are the conflicts and obstacles apparent in the scene? How do they connect with the unfolding story and the needs of the characters? No answers should be arbitrary. They should all contribute to the unity and effectiveness of the story.
- What do the characters need from each other (their objectives)? How does the dialogue work to help the characters get what they need? What tactics are apparent or implied in the monologue? What is the story arc or dramatic progression?
- What are the big storytelling moments in the monologue? How do they set up what happens next?

These questions all have to be answered specifically. The *where*, for example, can't simply be New York. A better answer would be New York in the spring in Central Park by the carousel. But these details are useful only if they enhance the story in a practical manner. The same process will need to be followed for the other given circumstances as well. The more specific your actors' answers are, the better their actual acting choices will be when they're attempting to put the monologue on its feet. I strongly suggest that you ask your students to do all their analysis in writing. The process of putting it down on paper will make their thinking clearer and far more tangible when the time comes to rehearse. It will also help your actors arrive at a clear and shared understanding when the scene becomes more than a monologue in the second round.

Below, you will find a monologue that can serve as a sample source for making preliminary choices. You might want to address the questions above using this monologue. Going through a sample session of analysis with your class before sending them off on their own will likely prove beneficial.

You think it's EASY, don't you? Well it's not! It's hard work, EXHAUSTING ... HARD ...WORK. Yes, it'll make me rich. Okay, very rich! But that doesn't make it any less exhausting, does it? Worth it? Of course it's worth it. But it's not a choice. It's not like chicken or fish; hair down or pulled back. Don't be ridiculous. You don't get it do you? This kind of life is not a choice—it's a sentence. Perfect bone structure may be an accident, but keeping the gift is like a curse. Watch what I eat, get the sleep, do the exercise, maintain the regimen. No, I'm not complaining; I'm grateful. I am. I am very lucky. Incredibly lucky. Yes, there was a moment. You really want to hear this? All right, but don't make fun of me. It was three months ago. I was standing right here in Times Square across from the Hershey store. A bus rolls by. There's an ad for Hugo Boss on the side. And it's me. It's me in my underwear covering the entire side

of the M5. And I realize. I am like a god. Fifteen feet long and ten feet high. And I'm everywhere. Everywhere at once. My face, my body, rolling down every major street in New York. You're laughing. Don't. It's a short life, you know. A butterfly only lives for a day, right? Tomorrow I'm gone. Let me enjoy it. Let me have the day. Please.

Even a cursory examination of this piece I concocted will yield several useful acting nuggets. Clues in the dialogue suggest many given circumstances—certainly regarding the who, the what, and the where. The when is open to interpretation, but your students would do well to make choices based on time elements that would add specificity and urgency to the situation. Perhaps the speaker is late for an appointment, or the weather is inclement. The basic conflict stemming from the model's new-found success and the listener's jealousy and skepticism about her profession provide a good starting place for deciding on objectives and tactics. The shift in the model's stance from defensiveness to honest vulnerability during the arc of the speech comes as a result of the moment-to-moment exchanges between the speaker and the listening character. Their growing mutual understanding is the source for the arc in the story. More on this later.

Once your students have completed their preliminary work in writing (if you choose that approach) and you have responded to their answers with suggestions or approval, they are ready to put the monologue on its feet. You can do this with them individually or work through their first presentations with the class watching. It is also up to you whether to have your students memorize their work or read from the script. Obviously time is a factor, but so is how well your students are able to act with their noses in the script.

Your feedback here should be based on believability, clarity, and intensity of the monologue. Is there a clear conflict? Is it a strong one? Is the speaker playing her specific objective? Is she using tactics appropriate to getting her objectives fulfilled? Is she us-

ing the dialogue to get what she needs or is she delivering the dialogue on the face value of the lines, forgetting about her purpose for speaking? In order to be believable your students will really need to create the illusion that they are speaking to someone specific and reacting to the listener's imagined verbal and non-verbal input. Many of your students are likely to have difficulty doing this.

In addition, every monologue contains a series of significant moments that cannot be played through or ignored. Often they are moments that inspire the next piece of dialogue, and if your actors run through these moments, it's the equivalent of crossing out significant events in the scene and being shocked that the scene doesn't make sense or have power. In the sample speech, for instance, there are several lines of dialogue in which the speaker is responding to something said to her. If your actors simply play the lines without first hearing and reacting to the unspoken line, they will miss many of their significant moments. In our speech from a moment ago, there are also times when what the speaker says will have obvious impact on the listener. Those moments are actable as well, and taking in the partner's reaction will be essential.

If you work through your students' pieces after they deliver them, you will be able to point out some of these places and ways to help make them work. You might even have individual students use you or another skillful class member to play the other character as you work on some moments. Your reactions, or those of the selected student, can help your speaking actor find those moments and react to them effectively. But even when your students come to understand these moments, retaining what they have learned about them and the scene overall will be difficult. Not only will they have to remember their own stuff, they will also have to recall how you or the other stand-in actor handled their moments and be able to recreate them in their heads—not an easy task even for the best actors. So here's where round two comes in.

## Round two: work with a partner

The purpose of this round is to help your students see their monologues as scenes with the same obligations that scene work has. In this round of the game that fact will become clear because the other character will be injected into the scene. With the addition of the other character's participation, your students will be able to see that a monologue is a story arc consisting of give and take between characters.

Begin by assigning everyone a scene partner. For this round of the exercise, your students will have two scenes to work on. The first scene will be the one in which they deliver their former monologue. In the other they will be the reactors in the other actor's monologue. For ease in rehearsal scheduling, you may want your students to keep the same partner for both monologues unless that will contradict the given circumstances somehow—if gender is an issue, for instance. I have found when doing this exercise, about two thirds of the class will be able to keep the same partners. Then I just remix the rest. It usually works out fairly well this way. Do what's best for your class's circumstances.

The rules for this round are simple. Your students are to rehearse their monologues as though they are scenes. Wherever the script suggests that the listening character has said something or might have said something, the reacting character may actually create dialogue that would be appropriate. These snippets of dialogue should be short and to the point. Once the new dialogue has been settled on, it should be maintained as if it were part of the scene as originally written. The dialogue created, however, must never pull the scene away from the story arc provided by the playwright. It is possible that a particular monologue may require no additional spoken dialogue in response. If that's the case, it is perfectly all right, but the listening actor has no less responsibility to react and pursue his objective. Obviously, if he has no dialogue, he must accomplish this goal through the non-verbal things he does. He may even be trying to say

something but the speaking actor prevents it.

As your actors rehearse, they should be finding the story physically as well. That means there will be movement, gesture, and possibly business to take care of. By the time the partners have completed their rehearsing, the former monologue should be a fully realized scene that is balanced equally between the characters. This will happen if both of the actors in the scene fully play out their objectives. When your students present their scene, they should get feedback in the same way they would when they put up a normal monologue. You can then reassign the scene for further development, or simply move on to round three.

**Discussion.** The most important thing that should come out of this round of the exercise is the realization by your actors that monologues *are* scenes—with all the same elements any other scene has. The fact that the exercise makes the imaginary character real will enable the monologue speaker to see the piece much more clearly and with far more specificity than she otherwise might. When there are two people who must agree on given circumstances, it forces the actors to cover the who, what, when, and where with considerably more detail. In turn, the agreed on specificity narrows the range of choices while leading the actors away from generalized decisions. Finding the truth of any situation is often the result of seeing it with the same detail that real life offers up. And finding the specific truth of a situation is one of the things that makes a fine actor's work special.

Seeing the monologue in terms of its conflict between characters is also extremely valuable. Objectives that arise from a specific conflict create an urgency that beginning actors often don't find when working monologues on their own. Overcoming the obstacles provided by another actor, rather than imagining them, gives new actors far better stuff to work with and against. Playing off another actor also helps your students mark their victories, defeats, and discoveries because

they are being reflected off their partners. Finally, playing through the resistance offered up by another actor will help your monologue givers find the arc of the story and the dramatic benchmarks that occur during their journey.

Now, let's take a look at some of these concepts through the lens of an actual script. Before we do that, reread the monologue presented earlier.

Think about the first question a well-trained actor might ask herself when she first approaches a scene. If you answered figuring out what the story is, you're right. Then, in turn, since stories start with a conflict, the next question ought to be, what exactly is that conflict? In our just-read speech, the conflict is over the perception of what big-time modeling is all about. The model sees it as extremely hard work and sacrifice in return for fame and a big financial payoff. The character she is speaking to sees modeling more as a result of good looks and luck. There is probably a bit of jealousy involved as well, an aspect that can raise the stakes. The monologue giver is trying to convince the listener that modeling is difficult work and the listener, at least at the beginning, is trying to somehow make the model feel bad for being so lucky. These comments are generalizations, of course, but they are specific, at least in terms of how the mechanics of a strong scene can work.

The monologue doesn't really offer up any details of who the listener is, or when this scene takes place. It does reveal fairly specifically the where—Times Square, New York. What possibilities does that offer up for movement choices that can help make the story effective? Your actors will want to make choices regarding other given circumstances as well. More importantly, however, they will want to decide on details that will help make their story as compelling as possible. If, for instance, the characters are standing outside south of the Hershey store, they will be able to point to the store when it comes up in the dialogue. They will also be able to refer to the high buildings that surround them, the traffic on the street, including buses, the people passing, etc. This can add texture and specifics to the work.

They could consider the time as well. If it is winter, for instance, the cold could provide urgency to the discussion and give the actors additional physical things to do.

In terms of story arc, clearly the words of the monologue suggest that both the speaker and listener undergo several changes during the course of the piece. Though seemingly antagonistic at the beginning, the listener has softened enough by the end to allow the model to reveal that she sees her professional life as ephemeral and fragile as a butterfly's—suggesting an intimacy that is earned during the course of the speech. This arc reveals, of course, that the listener's objective changes during the course of the story. A question like "is it worth it?" implies a shift in the listener—a shift that the actors will have to continue to make during the course of the monologue. These kinds of moments are the foundation of the story arc and provide those important moments of tactical victory, defeat, and discovery mentioned earlier. The actor will find many such moments as she works with an actual partner.

One more thing is worth mentioning about this phase of the exercise: the playable moment that actors almost always fail to utilize as they begin their monologues for auditions. Actors love to start their monologues with the first word rather than with the impulse to speak. But there is usually a big moment before the first line of a monologue is spoken. In fact, it is usually the reason that first line is spoken. In the model's monologue, that first line obviously comes from whatever the other character has been saying. And there has been, in the moment before, a comment or look that has triggered the opening monologue line. When the two actors doing the scene join forces, they will have the option to begin with the look or with a new line written in by the partner. A line like "Boy, you sure have it made!" could do the trick in the case of our speech. So could thousands of other lines. The point is, the insertion of the line will help make that first monologue line far more specific. Whether or not the monologue

scene is ever done again, the person doing the monologue alone will have a tight grasp on how the opening moment works and how to make that moment happen. In all probability, she will have a much better understanding of the entire monologue as well, and that brings us to round three.

### **Round three: go solo**

For this round, have your students prepare their monologues again, returning to the original format of delivering it in traditional fashion. In other words, have them perform the monologue alone. This time, your actors are to use all they have learned about the monologue from working with their partners in round two and make any additional adjustments necessary.

**Discussion.** You will probably find that much of what was discovered and developed for round two will be apparent this time. I did this series of exercises with my own freshman B.F.A. actors this past fall and was extremely pleased with the results. Most of my students retained what they found in round two and were far better in terms of urgency and believability than they were in round one. Clearly, the monologue had become a conversation between two people, and that second, invisible character was still a part of the scene—reacting and challenging just like in the second round despite the lack of physical presence. A good percentage of my actors were so comfortable at this point in the process that they were finding additional moments that added humanity, color, and depth to their performance. Don't be surprised if your students grow in similar ways.

Even if your students are not quite as successful as mine were, they should retain the idea that doing monologues requires the same give and take and moment-by-moment listening and discovering that scene work does. This will be invaluable to their future work. They will, in all likelihood, feel far more connected to the material as well and discover that they are *acting* far less and *reacting* far more. Their work will feel better to them and be far more believable and interesting for the audi-

ence. It is even possible that doing a monologue will no longer feel as artificial or as irrelevant as an SAT examination. But even if it does, their monologue scores are likely to go up several important percentage points.

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