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Improvisation: Creating Environments

From *How to Improvise a Full-Length Play* by Kenn Adams (pgs 123-129)

[In improvisation], a well-created environment can be a wonderful gift to the actor/improvisor. More than just providing a location, the environment can help develop the story. It can serve as a catalyst for the action, affect the relationships between the characters, and offer a symbol or a metaphor to feed the play's theme.

In fact, in a full-length play, the environment not only can do those things but it also absolutely must. The world of the drama has no room for the arbitrary [unclear]. Everything presented to the audience, great or trivial, must have significance in the context of the whole. If we choose to present our characters in a certain location and at a certain time, then that location and that time must be absolutely essential to the story. Indeed, it should be impossible for that exact story to unfold in any other place imaginable.

An all too common occurrence in improvisation is for a scene to take place regardless of its environment rather than because of its environment. For example, a husband and wife are in an ice-cream shop and a handsome, young man walks in, catching the wife's attention. The husband starts feeling insecure and jealous, and the wife becomes annoyed. They squabble, and the husband walks out, leaving the wife to take a second look at the handsome, young man.

This could be an interesting scene, but notice how independent it is of the environment. Rather than taking place in an ice-cream shop, it could have just as easily been set in an elegant restaurant, the deck of a cruise ship, or a park bench on a Sunday afternoon. It happened regardless of the fact that it was in an ice-cream shop and not because of it.

...Think again about the couple in the ice-cream shop and imagine if the scene unfolded differently. The wife rushes in, followed by her husband. He's tired, and she's pregnant. It's 11:30 p.m. and she's having a craving for Chocolate Triple Fudge, and until she gets it there will not be any peace between them. The clerk, however, is very sorry, but they just ran out of Chocolate Triple Fudge and can she offer her some Rocky Road Deluxe? The wife becomes insanely furious at the notion that Rocky Road deluxe can in any way be considered a substitute for Chocolate Triple Fudge and berates the husband for his inability to provide even the barest of necessities for her and her child. The two begin to squabble until finally the wife breaks down in apologetic tears and confesses that she is absolutely terrified of becoming a mother and riddled with insecurities. The husband assures her that they are in this together, and the two reconcile. Suddenly, the clerk discovers a whole unopened tin of Chocolate Triple Fudge. However, the wife is now in need of a pastrami sandwich, and she runs outside pulling her husband behind her.

Notice how, now, the scene could not take place in any other location in the world aside from an ice-cream shop. It simply wouldn't make sense for a woman in desperate need of Triple Fudge to go anywhere else. Furthermore, not only was the scene in need of its location, but also the scene was caused by its location. The fact that this particular ice-cream shop did not have any Chocolate Triple Fudge was what propelled the wife into hysterics and launched her emotional journey.

Establishing the Environment

The goal, then, is to create an environment without which your [scene] could never exist. To marry the plot and the place so closely that one would be meaningless without the other. Here, then, are some various ways in which you might approach the task:

1. Name It!

Before the environment can become an integral part of the [an improvised scene], there must be no mistake about what it is. Where and when does the action take place? ...The only way to establish the environment is to have the characters identify it, verbally, in the course of their dialogue. This needs to be done [quickly in the scene]. The sooner the better!

Otherwise you risk disastrous confusion, not only on the part of the audience, but also among the improvisers themselves. Nothing is tougher to recover from than a...scene in which everybody thought that they were someplace else. A simple line such as, "Wow, the living room looks great," or "I've never been in a real bank vault before," is at least enough to make it clear from the outset where the action takes place.

2. Describe It!

Naming the environment, however, is just the beginning. It is a common trap for improvisers to assume that the audience "sees" the environment as clearly as they do. But, they don't. While the improviser in the scene might see that elaborate Las Vegas casino, with mirrored walls, flashing lights, thick red carpeting, rows and rows of flashing slot machines, and hundreds of people milling about, the audience sees an empty [playing space]...It is up to the improviser to create the casino for the audience, and descriptive language is the only tool available. The skill is incorporating that descriptive material into the natural dialogue of the characters.

3. Use It!

Nothing helps to create an environment as much as filling it up with objects and furniture through the use of pantomime. Few things are more magical to watch than several different characters open up the same drawer, in the same nightstand, or play the same piano, or flip the same light switch, throughout the course of the scene. While pantomime is a highly specialized skill that does not come easily...it is not impossible to gain a basic competency with pantomime...in order for it to be highly effective.

Justifying the Environment

While naming, describing, and using the environment will establish it clearly, it will not necessarily justify it. Again, it is not enough for the environment...to be possible. It must be necessary. It must be at least partly responsible for causing the [action in the scene].

Justifying the Environment: So it can be a catalyst for the action

By [creating] an environment with attributes that affect the characters, it can easily become a catalyst for the action. (*meaning, the environment ignites, or is a cause for the action*) For example, if the environment is oppressively hot, it might cause the characters to become easily irritated and lead to an argument that would not, under other circumstances, have taken place. Or, if there's an unrelenting thunder and lightning storm outside and the characters are trapped inside, they might be led to an intimacy that would not have otherwise developed. Or, if the environment had a spider in it and one of the characters suffered from arachnophobia, the character's behavior would be in direct response to the environment. In each of the cases above, the environment causes the action. ***A Tip for Success: When improvising, try to talk about the environmental attribute as little as possible. Rather, allow its influence to affect the relationship on stage by affecting the behavior and the emotions of the character.***

Justifying the Environment: So it can affect the relationship(s) between the characters

By creating an environment that is of special significance to the characters, it can easily stir the relationship between them and add fuel for the drama. For example, a scene between two adult sisters will be different if it is set in the lobby of a hotel than if it is set in the bedroom that they shared as children for 13 years. The personal and emotional connections with their childhood bedroom are far more likely to tap into the inner core of their relationship and provoke a dramatic scene. It's very helpful, therefore if several of the characters have a [strong] connection to the environment [created].