

# What Can the **Speaker** Learn From the **Actor**?

Unleash the potential of theatrical performance.

BY ROGER HESSEL AND KAY RODE

**T**hink of the last time you saw a live theater performance. Were you drawn into the world the actors created? Did you find yourself transported to another time or place? Actors are trained to compel and enthrall audiences. They learn to command the stage with their actions, interactions, and delivery of dialogue.

Speakers, too, must learn to command the stage and engage their audiences. That's why they can benefit by borrowing a few tricks from the actor's toolbox—from stage presence to verbal agility—in order to elevate their speeches from mundane to captivating.

As team trainers located in Germany—a country with a rich theater culture—we jointly conduct role-plays (where participants act out different roles) at two German universities. In our teaching, we draw from our own decade-long experience working in theater and as international negotiators.

When coaching fellow members at our two dynamic Toastmasters clubs in Bonn, Germany, we focus on six proven tips to help speakers turn a speech into a performance.

## 1 Use a team to help you prepare.

Good actors don't merely pretend, they embody a character. For preparation, they make use of the power of imagination and are supported by a team of professionals: the playwright, stage director, fellow actors, and technicians.

Actors typically work together onstage whereas speakers are usually up there

alone. But that doesn't mean you should be a "lone fighter," someone who selects speaking ideas, writes down the storyline, edits, and rehearses all alone. See what happens if you invite a few others into your process. Ask for advice from your mentor or a club member. Get some insight from a friend.

## How you say the words is as important as the words themselves.

"Require an impact check from your fellow Toastmasters," says Klaus Volker Roth, director of the D.a.S. Theater in Cologne, Germany, and member of Bonn International Toastmasters in Bonn, Germany. "Find a 'victim' for your rehearsal. Become a team player before you speak."

Actors understand they cannot excel by doing it on their own. By forming their own support team before a speech, speakers can ask for advice on questions such as "Where will I stand?" or "What can I change in my gestures and voice?" Small changes can make a huge difference in communicating your ideas.

**2 Practice stage presence.** Most professional theater actors train for years. Acting is highly physical: Hundreds of training hours are dedicated to body language, voice coaching, posture, and general fitness. Actors keep the audience on the edge of their seats via the tension of their bodies. Even when they look away,

actors still connect with their audience through nonverbal communication.

Speakers can learn stage presence as well. Watch videos on effective body language or enroll in a course. Record yourself and see if your body language conveys your message. Connection with the audience is more than keeping eye contact. It is stage presence—using the expressiveness of your body, mind, and soul onstage in a manner that compels the audience's attention.

**3 Play with pace.** Next time you watch a live performance, pay attention to how the actors use vocal pauses, allowing the audience to digest what has been said. How you say the words is as important as the words themselves. Actors play with sounds and intonation. The duration and tone of the consonants and vowels allow them to add expression to the words' meaning.

Help your audience follow you. Vary your speaking pace in a way that conveys the points you are making. Don't be afraid to sometimes slow your speech when you want to emphasize points or focus the audience's attention. Don't rush with facts. Plan your gestures and words, then plan your pauses and stage movements. This will give your presentation a natural flow.

**4 Illustrate through vivid characters.** Some classical plays feature a messenger reporting to a king about a battle. The messenger portrays the dialogues among the warriors by mimicking



their voices to express their thoughts and feelings, taking care to accurately reflect their sound and look.

Likewise, speakers can bring characters in their speech to life. By changing your voice, you can capture different characters and convey different ideas. When crafting your story into your speech, your “role-play” will bring your speech to life.

“I must experience the emergence of the story so that others can experience it. Actors must have the ability to seduce themselves ... You have to seduce yourself if you want to seduce the others,” says Edgar Selge, an acclaimed German theater actor.

**5 Experiment playfully.** Toastmasters club meetings are a great place to try out new techniques as you turn the room into an experimental stage. What makes the message stronger or weaker? What type of speaker are you? Are you conveying your ideas in a way the audience understands?

You also need to give yourself permission to be more or less expressive when appropriate. Be aware when you are presenting in a culture where extroverted behavior is not well regarded. For example, we have worked with colleagues and

delegations from China, South Korea, and Japan who tend to not express emotions outwardly in a work setting and prefer to stay professional and more subdued. Just know your audience.

### Good actors don't merely pretend, they embody a character.

Don't be afraid to evoke colorful pictures or describe certain smells. You may have to overact. You may think, *Now I am going over the top. I look stupid.* But your teammate or mentor might give you the opposite feedback, saying you conveyed the tone perfectly and made the situation clear enough for those in the last row. However, if you are an outgoing, broadcasting person, you may need to underact to bring your message across.

With a wide range of options, you have the tools to make words exciting. Find your role.

**6 Feel the words.** The ultimate test for any speech is how it sounds out loud. Does it sound like a speech or a piece of text? Practice out loud to get into the

conversational flow. If you're struggling to make the words sound natural, try recording your voice first and then write the words down, rather than writing first and then speaking. Your speech may sound more natural, for we speak differently than we write. It is hard work—ask any playwright.

### Do as Actors Do

Although the craft of being an actor is different from that of the speaker, theater matters for public speaking. A leading European bank trains its managers using Shakespeare comedies, because in a high-speed, ever-changing world, role-playing boosts agility, imagination, playfulness, partnership building, and humor. We perform different roles every day. The charismatic lawyer plays two roles in court, one to convince the judge and one for the client.

To really boost your skills, take a class in improvisational theater. You will develop a fluidity in your communication, build confidence, and grow step-by-step. Simply telling a story isn't enough; you have to make it playful for the joy of everybody. In his comedy “As You Like It,” Shakespeare famously wrote, “All the world is a stage and all the men and women are merely players.”

These six tips transfer from the actor's stage to the speaker's stage and will enhance your presentation at your club, in your community, or at work. At the end, you listen to the applause, look at the audience, and know you have performed as a professional actor. **T**

---

**Roger Hessel** is a member of Bonn International Toastmasters (BIT). He is an attorney, university lecturer, and senior EU policy consultant and trainer. **Kay Rode** is a member of Redefluss Toastmasters Club. He is a professional actor and communication coach. Both Toastmasters clubs are located in Bonn. The authors can be reached at [post@rogerhessel.eu](mailto:post@rogerhessel.eu).