

What Lies Beneath

The unspoken thoughts and motivations of the characters in a play are its subtext. As Sonia Moore makes clear in her book *The Stanislavski System*:

A simple phrase such as ‘I have a headache’ may mean various things; the person who says it may be afraid that the headache is a symptom of a serious illness; he may want a pretext to go away; he may be hinting to guests who will not leave. The meaning, the thought, and the intention are all important—not simply the words.

A great deal of the work of directors and actors focuses on developing the web of unspoken meaning and intention suggested by the text. Gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, body language, actions and movements all contribute to the precise meaning of a line of text—in addition to the emphasis and implied meaning a line receives because of how it is spoken.

What to do:

The list below presents a series of minimal scripts—brief dialogues for two characters consisting of bare text alone. Your job is to flesh out these lines of text, anchoring them in a specific situation where their meaning can be made clear.

Choose a short script and:

1. Decide on roles for A and B and define the relationship between them, e.g., in script 1, A and B are a recently separated couple; A wanted to end the relationship; B didn't.
2. Decide on where and when the exchange between A and B occurs, e.g., in script 1, A and B bump into each other on the street. It is the first time they have met since their separation.

Minimal Scripts

1. A: I'll see you again
B: Next week
A: Perhaps
B: Goodbye

2. A: This is the right way
B: I don't think so
A: Think what you like
3. A: I've been looking for you
B: Yes
A: I wanted to tell you
B: Look
4. A: Afraid
B: Of course I'm afraid
5. A: Do you call that being careful
B: What harm have I done?
6. A: There's never anyone around here at this time
B: That's what I thought
A: Hurry
7. A: None of this makes sense
B: How dare you

You can ask a family member to act out these scenes with you! Or you can play both people in the scene. After you perform your scene, ask for feedback from your audience detailing what they saw, felt and understood about the situation. Avoid telling them what you were trying to achieve. If the audience was unclear about your work, try it a second time, aiming to communicate more specific information on character, place, situation, conflict and resolution (if any). Feel free to record your scenes and email them to me at katie.tozer@nbed.nb.ca – I'd love to watch them!