


Pace and tempo in drama

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Faster, taller, more fun: Actors often joke about how directors of comedies really only have one note. And part of that note has to do with pace, the speed at which the actors speak. And more often than not, demand is for actors to increase that rate. Faster dialogue, snappier dialogue tells the story faster, moves the story along, and drives the show toward moments of excitement and release, which in comedy means laughter lines. But speed is not just something required of comedic actors. In classic plays, especially very long ones, like Hamlet, the need for speed is a big part of getting through the play and not losing the audience's attention. Often the problem of speed does not have to do with the pace of talking, but more with the pace of thinking. Came from one line to the next, picking up one's signals, switching from beat to beat, all requiring a dexterity in thought, nimble thinking. The drive to get what you want must be bound to get it now, and actors who revel in their emotional states are usually seen as being self-absorbed. Of course, in rehearsal, we have to take the time to be a little indulgent as part of the process of figuring out what is needed. In fact, it is very important to find a balance between slow, medium and fast, all in response to the right effort and response. Also some characters have different internal tempos, and a dramatic contrast can be created by playing with a different internal clock than a stage partner. Let's discuss pace as part of the range of skills that all actors are going to integrate into their performance, and we'll examine the types of demands placed on the performer at every speed. Slow Going slowly is often very difficult for some actors as they are tempted to rush through their performances. Going slowly through language, finding time for thought on words, rather than between them, requires some kind of joy. You have to lengthen the vowels and continuant consonants so you can stretch things out. By slowing down, you must work with the smallest chunk of language possible, the word, and in some cases, syllable. It gives you a chance to really feel the content of the language, its sounds, its links, its stop. We use the following passage today for our exploration. Take it for a walk, going very slowly, but to be sure to connect the words together, rather than putting Extra... Space... Between... The... Words... Sitting in solemn silence in a dull, dark dock, In a pestilential prison with a lifelong lock, Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp shock From a cheap and chippy chopper on a large, black block. Gilbert & Sullivan, The Mikado, I'm So Proud, 1885. Drag Of course there is always too slow. When you reluctantly change tactics, you can drag your feet to specify the Reluctance. But often, actors draw because of a problem, and it's my experience that they either have to deal with poor preparation; they just don't know what's coming next and desperately searching for the words, or with slow thinking. Both are pinned with focus on why you say what you say, rather than just drilling the words over and over again. What is the connection between this idea and the next? More importantly, how the thought goes before you move towards the thought that comes after. For example, if you could get through the first two lines of the above Mikado text but blanked before awaiting sensation, you should find out why lifelong lock would inspire Awaiting... If lifelong making you wait for life, then waiting is a logical next word. Making that kind of link makes it easier to remember the text. To explore the idea of draggin intenseionally, work your way through Mikado's text as if you didn't know what to say next. Hesitate in the middle of words, on vowels and on continuant consonants like final m, n, l, etc. Medium Finding a happy balance between too slow and too fast is not easy and certainly we do not want everything to have too even a pace. But compared to going Slow, Medium speed is where you play the phrase more than the word. In verse, such as Mikado text we use here, it's about playing the line. You have to find the triggering words, and play them, but let the unimportant ones be just that: no matter! I'll put Mikado text in again here so you don't have to scroll up to see it and try talking it again, play one or two important words per line, but generally think your way through thoughts. Sitting in solemn silence in a dull, dark dock, In a pestilential prison with a lifelong lock, Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp shock From a cheap and chippy chopper on a large, black block. This is the kind of text that needs to be spoken quickly. That's a big part of the fun of Gilbert and Sullivan. But when you limit your operative words, you'll find yourself playing things like nouns and verbs over modifiers like adjectives or adverb. (If you like me and grew up without a solid grounding in grammar, you can read up on parts of speech, now known as word classes.) Monotonous Pace Speaking monotonous doesn't just mean talking on a single pitch. An overly smooth pace can also be flat, dull, and unsyrious to the listener. It may indicate a certain sense of boredom on that part of the speaker. Rhythmic text, which we see in the lyric above when speaking out of the context of the song, can be sung as if it were after the rhythm of the song. This should be avoided unless, of course, you do it for a reason. Try talking through the text and see if you can feel the potential for a monotonous pace. (Tip: be boring!) If a medium pace requires an awareness of the phrase, then faster pace puts our focus on the section, and its underlying argument. Sentences take steps toward our goals, while the section covers everything. Playing our way through this kind of language forces us to run through language, find momentum to move from sentence to sentence, thought to think, sentence to sentence, toward the end of our argument. Speed requires agility to move articulators faster than our usual pace, and it requires a sense of lightness or dexterity, so we don't stumble upon complex combinations and the alternation of consonants that are made in opposing manners and places of mouth. Quick text also requires a certain awareness of the exhalation requirements in the text. As we move quickly, we want to pause less for less time to get on with the ideas of the text. Less time to breathe means we have to catch up quickly without a build-up of unnecessary tension. Try the Mikado text again, but this time you'll work your way through it quickly – as fast as you possibly can: To sit in solemn silence in a dull, dark dock, In a pestilential prison with a lifelong lock, Awaiting the feel of a short, sharp shock From a cheap and chippy chopper on a large, black block. I find that switching from /s/ the sound of sensation to /f/ sound of short, sharp shock is a challenge. So I will loop the second sentence several times (at least 3) to imprint his efforts in muscle memory. Work your way through it, and every time you turn up, try looping a 3 or 4 word-long group to increase your ability to make text at high speed. Rushing This is what happens to an actress who skips over the moment, doesn't trust it or her partner. Sometimes, when an actor gets caught playing words at the expense of thoughts or feelings, this can also happen. Rushing is often a symptom of fear, in my mind. There's an interruption that occurs to get past something scary. As the cliché says, you must feel the fear and do it anyway. Embrace these feelings and pour them through the language, rather than trying to get it done, over, on to the next thing. [Probably the fastest voiceover work going these days is for disclaimer text one finds at the end of advertisements for drugs. In recent years, pharmaceutical companies have begun to rewrite these disclaimers so that they are more understandable, so there is less a sense that they are trying to hide something. But it's worth noting that many of these supersonic speed deliveries are finished using sophisticated sound editing software, to speed up sound without raising the track, and to allow voiceover actors to make the clips one piece at a time to get the fastest clearest takes.] Chopping and linking What is pace rhythm? Tempo is defined as or the pace of something. Rhythm is defined as the regular, repetitive movement pattern or sound pattern. In other words, rhythm is the ratio of the parts, making them equally large and regular or unevenly distributed and synchronized. So pace-rhythm is the speed and beat of a person, place, or thing. Understand that each person has his or her own basic pace-rhythm. It's an essential element of who we are. Since it's hard to recognize things in ourselves, think of a particular friend. What is her pace, and is it steady, or does it move with synchronization? Is this person slow and unsuspecting like a golden retriever or is she fast and nervous as a toy poodle? And how does this person's pace rhythm change in different situations? Think of yourself. What is your basic pace rhythm? How would people describe you? Are you staid and serious or nervous and nervous? Are you slow paced and diligent or fast and unfocused? When you have a feeling about your own pace-rhythm, you are ready to think of a character. As you prepare for a role, define the shape's tempo rhythm. How does this character move, react and react? You will get a sense of it from the

lines. The language the character speaks and their behavior will help you define their tempo rhythm. It is likely that one of the reasons you were cast is that your personal tempo-rhythm fits the role. Even if so, be sure to recognize that the character's tempo rhythm will change in different situations and in response to tonal or emotional shifts in the script. Tempo rhythm defines the tempo and cadence of the character and influences movement, emotions, motivations and thought processes. It's in all people and all things and affects everything your character says and does. So be sure that when you develop your character, you pay close attention to recognizing and defining tempo-rhythm and how it changes in response to conflicts and other characters. Eric Barr. All rights reserved

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