

WORKSHOP NOTES: AN INTRODUCTION TO RADIO PERFORMANCE

“Who do you think you are?”

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION.

First up, we need to define what we mean by “Radio Performance”. For the purposes of this workshop this term will refer to any kind of performance where you are invisible to your main audience. For example;

- voice over,
- narration,
- radio sketches,
- radio sit-com,
- radio drama,
- voicing cartoon characters
- etc

2. THE OBVIOUS DIFFERENCES.

There are some obvious differences to consider between theatre and radio performance;

- No stage setting. Setting the stage will usually be done in the writing.
- No audience? Depends. If recording a sketch show or sitcom that requires a laughter track, then you will have a small studio or theatre audience – even so, these are not your primary audience. On the other hand, you could be in a recording studio where your only audience are your fellow performers or just the sound engineer and director.

It seems odd but some performers find the prospect of performing to microphone more nerve wracking than performing to a theatre audience. This is in part because there is no direct feedback from the audience (during an audio recording (unless for the purposes of a laughter track) no extraneous noise will be allowed) and mainly because when performing on stage, the lights tend to blind the performer to the audience. In a studio, the audience is in plain sight.

So, if the audience are blind and you have no visuals to help establish character (costume, make up, scene setting, etc), how do you convey your character and your characters emotional condition?

3. THE WORDS ARE NOT THE MESSAGE.

What you say is not necessarily as important as how you say it. Different messages can be conveyed even when using the same words.

For example, try saying the following phrase in the tones indicated;

- a) “Who do you think you are?” (CAMP)
- b) “Who do you think you are?” (AGGRESSIVE)
- c) “Who do you think you are?” (ANALYST)

What do you think the emotional response will be of the person you are addressing? What would they deduce as to your emotional state from the tone of your voice and the emphasis of certain words?

Same words, different;

- Emotional state of your character
- Emotional response in the listener

And these are achieved by intonation and inflection.

Intonation

How we say the words enables us to give very different meanings to the message.

“Don’t you take that tone of voice with me!”

You may well have heard someone make this complaint in the past. But. . .TONE of voice?

If words were our primary method of communication, why would we be concerned with tone of voice? Because it tells us more about the emotion behind the message than the words.

Even by simply grunting, we can convey an emotional state. With a simple grunt we can communicate our curiosity or our anger or our delight.

If you ask someone “How are you today?”, you can tell more about their emotional state by the way they answer than by the words they use. A depressed person who responds “I’m fine” is going to sound very different from a deliriously happy person. And we don’t need to see them in order to deduce their true emotional state.

Inflection

The emphasis placed on individual words is another indicator of emotional state or the true focus of our attention.

“Im fine” is a different message than “I’m fine”. The former would indicate that the speaker is fine but others may not be, whilst the latter indicates that the speaker is getting fed up with the many inquiries as to how they are (or perhaps trying to reassure people that they are OK – intonation would resolve any ambiguities here).

Body Language

Body language? In radio work? Surely it is redundant?

Not so – in some ways it is even more important. This is because our body language, including our facial expressions, informs our emotional state and therefore the emotion being communicated by our voice.

A well known acronym among radio performers; M.O.V.E. - Movement Orchestrates Vocal Expression.

It does this because it affects our emotional state. Physical energy changes emotional energy.

An American university performed an experiment where they had clinically depressed patients grin into a mirror for 15 minutes straight each day for a month. At the end of the month, these patients reported a massive improvement in their condition. Apparently it is really, really difficult to remain depressed while grinning at yourself in a mirror.

As an exercise, try saying “I’ve won the lottery” whilst maintaining your body language thus;

1. Standing still, body rigid, said straight.
2. Standing still, body rigid, this time attempting emotional content.
3. Relaxed, free movement, thinking of a really happy time.

I’ll warrant you’ll be more convincing in the third instance.

Note – in comedy scripts you may well find that the author specifically gives you emotional delivery directions. This is not because they are directing from the page but because it may be important for the comedy. If they give these directions, they are doing it for a reason so follow it – otherwise, go with your usual instincts.

So, the words are not the message and for radio performance, intonation, emphasis and body language are essential ingredients for your performance.

4. CHARACTER

So, we know how to communicate an emotional state to the audience and we know how to induce an emotional response in them using Intonation, Body Language and Emphasis.

But what about your CHARACTER?

Without visual clues such as stage settings, clothing, hair style and makeup, how are they supposed to “get” your character?

Scan the script

“Listen Kaplinksky I know you’re the kind of guy who lives by his own rules, the kind of guy who asks questions first and then shoots people when they answer him but as you know, I’m chief of police and I have to kow-tow to those pen pushers at city hall....”

Although the writer will be defining characterisation in the script, no writer worth his/her salt will be writing clumsy expository dialogue like that above. So you will need to scan the script for clues (even if you have been supplied with a character breakdown, you will still need to locate where in the script the writer is flagging up character traits for the audience).

Be on the look out for age, accents, lisps, self esteem, profession, relationships, etc.

Body Language (again)

Once you have that information, you can make a decision about our old friend, body language, for your character. Body language can be used not only to help convey emotion, but also for setting the general tone of your performance.

How does the character stand if they are depressed or happy or in love, etc? What is their normal body language? Make a decision on that and use that to express yourself.

Voice Location

You should also consider where their voice comes from – is it nasal, is it pitched high, do-they-talk-fast-and-convey-lots-of-information-at-once or are they...slow...and thoughtful...thinking before speaking?

Where in your body will the voice come from;

- Cheeks (mushy)
- Back of throat (breathy)
- Nasal (tight)
- Chest (boomy)

- etc

Pat Fraley gives 6 critical elements of character voice;

- Pitch – high, low, normal?
- Pitch Characteristic – Gravelly, breathy, husky?
- Tempo – fast or slow or average?
- Rhythm – plodding or loping? Average?
- Placement – normal, back of throat, chest?
- Mouth Work – accents, tight lips, lisping?

A lot of that comes naturally once you have refined your character but it's as well to be aware that these elements can be categorised if needs be.

You may find it useful to create a key phrase or word that will allow you to return instantly to the character's voice – once when playing an old toff, for some reason I found it difficult to get back into the voice unless I said “Dorking”. Why that word? No idea, all I know is I can instantly get back into that character's voice just by saying it.

So, when defining character ;

- Look for scripted character traits (regional accents, lisps, age, profession, etc)
- Decide on Body language / Facial expression
- Location of voice
- Key phrase

5. TECHNIQUE

- Wear comfortable clothes. Non-noisy clothes. Soft, non squeaky shoes.
- If you believe it, they will. Subconscious mind does not know the difference between reality and imagined reality – if you create a strong enough illusion in your mind, you will sound believable. This is why comedy is best played straight, it helps pave the way for the incongruities inherent in comedy which surprise the audiences conscious mind, making them laugh.
- Script – read and make sure you know who the intended audience is, who your character is and what the emotional dynamic of your scenes are.
- Don't read! Be conversational. Be real. Be in the moment as you would for any performance.
- Keep about six inches away from the microphone and keep your head in constant position – moving will alter the sound tone and make it sound like your character is physically moving. If that's what script calls for fine, else don't do it.
- If you are close to microphone your voice will acquire bass tones and sound more intimate. If you are further away, it will pick up more of the ambient tones of the room which is less intimate and more open.
- Do not blow into or tap the microphone. Blowing can damage it and tapping it can annoy the sound engineer – this is a person who can make you sound like Donald Duck if he so chooses.
- Pop guards – these sit in front of the microphone and soften the impact of sounds that tend to make a “popping” sound on the finished recording (eg, P's and K's, etc). If you have no guards, talk across the mic rather than directly into it. “Popping” is not something that can be easily resolved in post production so it is important that it is guarded against.
- Sound levels – talk consistently at the level required for the scene.
- Extraneous noise – script handling, for example, can introduce unwanted sounds on the finished recording. Generally, you should wait until the end of the page (if in a scene with others) before pausing after the last line and then turning over the pages. This is also why you should wear clothes that do not rustle and shoes that don't squeak/creak.

9. VOICE

Your voice is your best friend – treat it well. Keep lubricated, ideally with water, but whatever you drink, make sure it is at room temperature. Extremes of temperature (eg tea or coffee, or chilled drinks) will change the tension of your vocal chords and affect the sound of your voice. And, of course, avoid alcohol – you might not notice slight slurs but your audience will.

So, drink plenty of water. There is a saying in the radio performance community – “If your pee is white, you’ll sound alright.”

May all your pee’s be white.

10. FURTHER READING

The Art of Voice Acting (James R. Alburger)

This focuses on all aspects of voice acting.

Essential Radio Skills (Peter Stewart)

How the different types of radio shows work and how a studio functions.

Acting With the Voice: The Art of Recording Books (Robert Blumenfeld)

Not just about recording books, includes information about studio technique and creating a character vocally.