

Old West Performance

How to be a Contender

#1. BE LOUD; That's right, the number one mistake of most teams who get poor scores is they are not projecting. If an audience cannot hear what you are saying two things happen.

First and foremost it becomes boring as hell, and boring means not entertaining.

Second, it could be the best show of the day, but because nobody gets to hear it or even most of it, nobody will know if it is any good or not. It looks unprofessional, makes you look unprepared, gives a poor example of showmanship and in general gives an unfavorable overall impression. That's 30 potential points up for grabs that just got tossed out the window simply because you were not projecting enough to make the show interesting enough to be entertaining.

We are not talking about screaming either, we are talking about resonating sound from the gut or the technical term the diaphragm. Belt it out like a singer, not from your throat or nose, from inside your torso and direct your vocals towards the audience. I tell people I direct to force the sound from their gut and when they feel like they are yelling be a little louder and you're almost there.

You are not there to talk to the guy next to you, unless there is something private you need to discuss. If so take it out back there is a show going on for crying out loud. You are supposed to be performing to the audience, especially the deaf guy in the back row who is busy checking his hearing aid because he thinks the battery went dead again. PROJECT! Yes you are performing on stage, you are not talking to the judges, or that pretty girl/guy on the front row you are trying to impress, you are talking for the audience's benefit.

People will tell you to face the audience by taking your back leg to the action and place it at a 45 degree angle towards the audience so you are putting yourself in the ideal position to direct your voice to the audience. Yes in practice and while performing make a mental note of doing this and before you realize it, it becomes a more natural act. In other words movements should be fluent, not rigid. Being stiff looks unnatural, unless it fits the character you are playing, and makes your acting look just as stiff. Before long you will not even think about how you use your voice and direct your vocals towards the audience because it will become natural.

The last thing I would like to discuss is turning your back to the audience. Under normal circumstances this is a theater no-no. The audience needs to see you facial expressions and hear your voice. This becomes more challenging if your back is to the audience.

Now this has become an issue with many judges who do not have formal training and are learning as they go. Another judge tells somebody they turned their back to the audience during important dialogue and docks them a point. Then a less experienced judge takes half that information and uses this as a literal discrepancy, not realizing it was the dialogue that was lost which was the true write-up.

Yes turning your back to the audience is something you should try to keep from happening under normal circumstances, but in some situations it may be necessary to turn your back to the audience. In those situations where you do have to turn your back to the audience, compensate. In fact over compensate if it becomes necessary for the benefit of the audience. Talk louder, or turn your head towards your shoulder when giving dialogue like you are looking around, so the vocal is directed towards the people who matter the most, the audience.

Example; The bad guy is in the saloon and the deputy calls him out and for the bad guy to stay within the safety distances of shooting a shotgun from a building and other blocking issues that come later, the deputy must turn his back to the audience to set up the scene safely. And, how do we compensate, by being louder and directing the dialogue towards the audience as best you can. Simple right?

#2. BLOCKING AND STAGING; Oh damn here comes another one of those technical thingy-do-hickeys!?"Dammit Jim, I'm a reenactor not an actor!" Excuse me but isn't actor part of that word? If you are performing, guess what? You are an actor. How good an actor depends on how well you prepare yourself for the performance? It really is all about the show.

Let me break this down in simple terms. Blocking and staging simply put is the movement and placement of the performers on stage. Choreography is the technical term. When scripting the show, basic movements should already be included, but keep in mind changes may be needed depending on the stage you are performing on.

Blocking and staging a show is like designing a moveable painting and any good painting is symmetric to be appealing to the eyes. The stage is your canvas so don't bunch everybody up in one place.

a. Unless physical contact is necessary there is no need to bunch up in the middle of the stage. Spread out and utilize the stage to your advantage.

b. Keep in mind the sets are the back drop, don't press everybody up against the buildings, you have a whole street there to use.

c. Don't perform to the judges table. They are not your audience. I personally hate how the judges table is front and center, but in a competition it is a necessary evil. Play to the audience, the entire audience. I see it happen a lot and yes I have been guilty of it too, but placing yourself too close to the judges table with the awning or the trailer they are sometimes placed on blocks the view of the target audience and makes the performance seem distant, making them feel almost like they are catching a glimpse of something they were not invited to see. So if you get to the point where all you can see is the judges when you look out, back up a bit.

#3. CHARACTERS AND COSTUMING; I see a lot of people who wear the exact same stuff all the time no matter what character they are portraying. I know you have this persona you wish to present and there are always clothing that accentuates your eyes, or a sentimental piece of clothing or accessory that your mom/dad or girlfriend/boyfriend gave you, but if it doesn't fit the character you are playing, change clothes or take it off until the show is over and then by all means honor your relatives, friends by

wearing the personal stuff. They will understand and be just as proud that you are wearing it throughout the day when you are not performing.

Costuming is extremely important for the characters we play. When you are putting together your show, wardrobe the character and don't just assume the clothes you always wear is correct. Don't ever just get up the day of the competition and just think you can put on just anything. A sheriff should be dressed like a sheriff, not a cowboy.

Clothing helps make the character and if you want to get into character the best way to do so is be the character and intermingle with the public throughout the day, up until the show starts. Nothing gets the audience more involved than talking to them and getting them to know you as the character you will be playing in the show about to take place. Don't use dialogue from the show, save that for the show, but say things that your character would say. Put yourself into character before the show begins and see if it doesn't help you a better performer in the show.

#4. PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE; Learn the dialogue, get together as a team and actually run through the show as many times as you possibly can. If only a few key characters can get together run the lines with the people you have. When the team is complete, video tape the show, then take the RGA score sheets, give one to each team member and be the judge. Hell, even get a few friends to watch it and give you constructive criticism as to what they liked or didn't like about the show, take notes and correct the issues at the next practice. I know, I can read your mind as you sit there reading this and saying to yourself, "PRACTICE?" Then you go off into all the reasons as to why you can't practice. "We don't have time for practice." "We have real lives away from the reenacting." "We live too far apart." "We don't need practice, we just did that show a month ago and the audience loved it just the way it was."

Trust me I understand, and if you are just doing it for the fun and honestly do not care if you come in 1st or last, then more power to you, don't practice. Go to the event, do your show when it is your turn, have fun, and congratulate the winners when it is all done and said, whomever they may be for a job well done.

But don't bitch about the other teams who did practice for months in advance once, even twice a week to put together a winning performance.

Don't bitch at the judges who you placed yourself in front of to be critiqued.

Don't make excuses about your blanks, or the sun got in your eyes, or the stars were not aligned in your favor, because that wasn't it.

In fact don't bitch about anything and if you find yourself asking yourself 'why didn't we come in first place?' Or if you find yourself looking for someone to blame, look in the mirror and point at that person, because they went to a competition unprepared.

Writing A Show

So what is a show? Well it is a mini play or in our case an acted out 8-15 minute short story.

We can debate the issue of whether we do skits or shows, but IMHO a skit is a short 3-5 minute filler. This is a skit, done by a couple of the masters, Abbott and Costello, with the assistance of Shemp Howard.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo4NCXOX0p8>

You could actually have a skit within the storyline of your show, but a skit doesn't have the essential structure to meet the requirements of what constitutes a complete show.

Now let's begin with the plot structure. The Greek philosopher Aristotle put forth the idea that "ὅλον δεῖ εἶναι τὸ ἐχὸν ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσον καὶ τέλος" ("A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end").

This is the three parts of a plot structure, a protasis, epitasis and catastrophe. There is also the 5 part plot structure which is made up of the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and revelation/catastrophe, but 2, 3, and 4 are basically just the climax broken into three parts.

Are we good and confused now? Let's try to look at it this way maybe it will sound better. A show is made up of three basic components, the introduction/beginning, the climax/middle, and the conclusion/end.

- a.** The introduction is where the story provides some background information to the audience about the plot, the characters, the setting, and the theme. Basically this is the set up for the show, which leads into the main action of the storyline.
- b.** The climax is the point of greatest intensity in which the trials and tribulations of the main character increase and build toward the final conclusion.
- c.** The conclusion is the resolve which ends the story. Whether it is a happy one or not is totally up to the writer, but in most cases the majority of audiences like to see the story wrapped up in a nice, neat, warm fuzzy, finale where good triumphs over evil or where the knight on his white horse rides into the proverbial sunset with the beautiful princess and they all live happily ever after.

So now that we are familiar with what a show is, let's look at the actual writing. Since we are reenacting the history of the 19th century, reading is going to be a big part of composing a show. To be a good writer in any case requires a lot of reading, but to be a good historian reading is a necessity. Although you may use some of the snippets from your favorite westerns and television shows, they are not really a good source for historical accuracy or period correctness.

(All this information is available on the internet from many sources.)

First you need to do a basic layout of your show. Most importantly, plan the story before you start writing. Make sure you know what the beginning, middle and end are. Plan what happens in them. Work out what pieces of the puzzle you need and the order in which you want the audience to piece them together. You don't need to know all the exact details of the ending, but you need to know where you are heading and what kind of ending you are trying to reach, whether tragic, comic, romantic, thrilling, horrifying, bittersweet and/or ambiguous.

Beginning; Do something significant in the beginning, or the opening 'act', of your story. Getting the story started means hooking the audience's attention immediately and hitting the ground running. This doesn't mean an action sequence – it means starting the story straight away by showing characters in action and by showing who the characters are by what they do. Don't try to do too much. Find a focused, direct way in, and don't get lost in the details.

You don't have to introduce every character, show every theme/angle and/or every point right off the bat. Bring them in when you really need them to move the story along, or step it up or down a gear, but try and keep the audience intrigued and active participants in their mind.

Make your characters step outside their comfort zone. Make them want something and pursue it. Set them up with a problem or dilemma. Make the world they have grown accustomed to different. Give them some kind of call to action, whether it's to keep a small thing secret or to go out and save the world or just a small piece of it.

Middle; Philip Larkin once said we like stories because of the muddle in the middle. The middle takes up more story time and space than the beginning and ending combined. And making that muddle work dramatically or comical takes thought, planning and effort.

Once you've worked out where to begin and where you are trying to get to, you have to work out the most appropriately difficult way for your characters to get from one to the other – if it's an action story, you expect lots of action, tension and jeopardy, if it's a detective story, you expect the twists and turns of piecing together a coherent picture from the clues available. If it's a love story, you expect a blossoming relationship being beset with obstacles. Your characters need to get lost in this muddle – otherwise, the journey forward will be too easy for them.

However, you the writer can't get lost. You need to be in control of the muddle. You need to manipulate characters, events, actions and consequences. You need to make seeming incoherence and confusion still travel towards a climax and a conclusion. You need to make things difficult for the characters while keeping up the momentum of the story for the audience. You need to plan the muddle carefully.

Remember to surprise the audience. What do they need to see? What can you leave out? What might make them see the story, characters and events in a new light?

Remember to engage the audience. Are the characters developing and changing interestingly or remaining comically trapped in entertaining enough ways?

Don't let the story flat-line. Remember the troughs and the peaks, the dead ends and the moments of clarity, the domino-effect of actions and consequences. Otherwise the story will sag. And so will your audience.

End; The problem with many endings is that they are a let-down – unsatisfying, predictable.

What kind of effect are you trying to have on the audience with your ending? Does it follow from where you started and the journey you've taken us and the characters on?

Great endings somehow feel inevitable – they are what should follow-on from everything that has gone before. Yet they must also not be predictable – if we can simply see what's happening and predict how we're going to get there, then there's no surprise along the way. So does the ending truly deliver what you set up at the start? But does it also come in a surprising and somehow unpredictable way?

Great endings satisfy the audience – but satisfying them doesn't mean simply making them happy and being obvious. Satisfaction means following through, it means not having frustratingly open or ambivalent endings, it means not tacking on something that isn't necessary to the story or a plot 'twist' to make things exciting, it means bringing events and story to a meaningful climax. It means bringing drama characters to a point of understanding and realization about themselves. It means keeping comedy characters somehow trapped by their shortsightedness.

Great endings fit. Bad endings jar. Great endings bring the story to the boil and then deliver. Bad endings go off at tangents or fizzle out or just stop without any real sense of conclusion or satisfaction. Great endings have an impact. Bad endings implode.

Bad endings forget the audience. Great endings respect the audience.

Dialogue; Dialogue is not just about what characters say, it's about what they express by what they say. Dramatic and comic dialogue is not conversation, it is there for a reason, it is honed and shaped and carries the storyline, it is purposeful.

If the only reason for dialogue being there is to relate information to the audience, then think again. Find dramatic ways of making information significant in the moment and in the story. If you want the audience to realize a secret about a character, make the revelation of it difficult, with real consequences in the story. Draw the audience into the story by getting them involved as an active participant.

Dialogue isn't just about the words on the page - it's about the things that are not said. It is the space between the words. It is the silences that speak volumes. The subtext of what's going on below and behind the words. Unfortunately we are pressed for time, so dialogue must be direct to a point and relevant, even when it is creative.

Two guys standing in the street yelling; "Oh yeah?" "Yeah!" "Yeah?" "Yeah!", is not well written dialogue. But if you add a 'she loves you' into the mix from time to time it would be a Beatles song.

I doubt there is anybody out there who really expects an academy award winning script, to come from a reenactment show, but following basic rules of script writing can and will improve the shows we present to the public. One thing is for sure if you never try, it will never happen.