

## **The Moment Before**

Every actor uses it. It is a Stanislavsky acting principle that has infiltrated nearly every other acting system ever devised. A playwright should also use it to give motivation to a scene.

Where a character has been just before they step onstage can be very important to how he or she will react, or even act, once they are ‘in the room’ where the action of the play is taking place. It is a way to inform and strengthen choices that an actor makes.

It is a way for a playwright to build stronger scenes that lead to the actor portraying the playwright’s characters being able to take more creative risks.

When you begin the play, where have the characters been prior to their entering ‘the room’? On a holiday, in court, at the doctor’s, from a hard day at work, from a day struggling with the raising of children? Every possible moment before will bring with it something unique to a scene, if the actor/playwright chooses it.

For other scenes in the play, if they are continuous from the previous action, you still have what happened in their previous scene for them to remember and bring onstage with them. Or not. Maybe the character wants to forget what just happened! Maybe they want to change what happened; take it back; apologize — or not. All valid moment before choices.

Some moment before choices may seem obvious. If a scene has a husband sleeping on the couch, he may have done something to upset his wife, or vice-versa. But what goes beyond that? What other little nuances can an actor or playwright bring to a moment before? What was the tiff about? Who wanted it more? Was it about work? Children? Neighbors? Mother-in-law? The other woman/man? Each of these brings in a subtle shading of want, need, desire, character flaw, character strength.

They are not just ‘moods’ that the character is feeling. Those are temporary and fade/change quickly. These choices are things that contribute to every future action in store for the character through the end of the play. They have a continuous and longer-lasting effect on the characters. I use a note in my word processing program in the color RED, placed at the top of each scene, in order to remind myself of the moment before for each scene.

All this being said, we, as playwrights, must not do all of the actor’s work; we must leave something for them to discover, while giving them enough clues to do so. Quite a balancing act — writing — eh?

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