

DUO TECHNIQUES

by Tony Figliola

CUTTINGS

Use one continuous scene (OR) smoothly and uninterruptedly connect a series of scenes (OR) link scenes together that logically lead into each other but do not form a continuous whole. In duo, to accommodate this last type of cutting, I suggest the following: (1) pause/freeze after scene one; (2) have each character clearly alter focal angles (maybe a tiny bit inward to a major swing outward depending on what is happening in the next scene, and the location of the action); (3) have each character alter body position (maybe in this scene one has grown tired while the other has become tense). These three noticeable alterations should clearly clue the judge into the fact that a scene leap has been made.

INTRODUCTIONS

Interesting possibilities open up because two people now must participate in it.

- (1) Each partner alternates the delivery of sentences.
- (2) One partner adds important words into the sentences spoken by the other.
- (3) One partner might interrupt/challenge/comment upon the words spoken by the other.
- (4) One person may be performing a part of the play as the other interweaves the written introduction.
- (5) One partner might sing (or do something physically interesting that is intrinsic to the script and consonant with tone and the character) while the other delivers the intro.

While not being too gimmicky and while keeping consistent to the tone and intent of the script, take advantage of the engrossing theatrical possibilities. Or don't.

FOCAL POINTS

When both characters look straight ahead they are looking at each other.

When both characters are angled inward, they are looking at each other (perhaps more intimately so; or perhaps they are tending to a prop, a baby-some entity between them.)

When both characters turn outward (at perhaps a 45 degree angle) they are addressing each other but not making direct eye contact with each other--perhaps one cooks while the other eats.

When one character faces front and the other faces sideways, they are not looking

at each other--one is obviously attending to something else or may be in another part of the room. The character facing to the side may turn in--face front--to make direct eye contact with the other.

When one character is out of the scene or picture, s/he usually is turned around; when entering the scene or the other character's focus, s/he will turn inward 180 degrees.

CHEATING WITH FOCUS

Staring ahead, both performers are looking at each other.

Scenario: one slaps the other. Question: How should the other's head move? Well, most would say that if (A) slaps forward with the right hand, (B) should move the head left. No cheating here.

Scenario: someone walks by (A) and (B). Question: If both were following the passer--by passing by, would (A) look left and (B) look right? Tricky. Most allow the cheat: that is, both (A) and (B) would follow the person from L. to R.

Scenario: (A) and (B) are having a wheelchair race--they are paralyzed vets, drunk as skunks, ready to tear into life. Question: In what direction would each face? Again, most would allow the cheat: that is, both would be racing straight ahead. You see, an accurate staging would look awkward, be impossible or ruin the illusion, whereas "the cheat" is generally accepted as the most convenient option. (Not all subscribe to this philosophy, but most reasonable folks tend to.)

DISTANCING

(A) and (B), by looking straight ahead are looking at each other. The expert duo performer, however, will play a clever proxemics (The study of cultural, behavioral, and sociological aspects of spacial distances between individuals -- *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition*), game with his/her partner. If (A) has emotional reason to encroach physically on (B)'s space--let's say s/he thrusts forward with the face--(B) must respond physically as well. If (B) is the craven sort, then (B) might slightly pull back the head and avert with the eyes; if (B) is angered by the advance, then (B) might meet the challenge head on, and thrust the face forward as well, a response that would cause (A) to make a move of one kind or another.

The bottom line: heads, bodies, and eyes are always responding to the advances and retreats of others. This proxemics dance/game does much to establish the realistic physicality of human interaction.

VISUALIZATION

Although (A) sees (B) while looking straight ahead, (A) should not stare incessantly and unflinchingly at the point/person. As in real human interaction, people often avert direct eye contact--to think, remember, cower, tease, etc.--only to bring it directly back again when a thought is found or courage is mustered, and so on.

As well, (A) sees the totality of (B)'s physical being--(B)'s face is straight ahead, but her broach is lower to the left, her belt is lower, looped left about the hip, and the boots run from foot to thigh.

Similarly, the two people are in a definable space--a living room, a basketball court, a car, etc.--so it is incumbent upon the duo partners to lay out the area precisely--the windows are here, the court and rim are there-- and to see the physical objects, when referred to, of course, but also as off focus points of reference when (A) is thinking away from (B)--when (A) thinks, for example, his attention seems to be drawn out the window in the direction of the basketball court.

TEMPO/RHYTHM

Tempo is speed; rhythm is intensity. Each can be rated from 1 to 10 (max). A person doing dishes at a 10 tempo but a 2 intensity wants to get them done but feels no great pressure or urgency to do so. A mother who suddenly sees her baby fall into the pool will no doubt leap into the water with a 10 tempo and a 10 intensity--her reaction must be quicker than lightning as she is most urgently motivated to save her child. And so on.

Each character has a normal T/R. The performer should find it, based upon character analysis.

Each character, put through various levels of conflict and confronted by others with varying T/R numbers, will be forced to alter his/her T/R.

Capturing a character's unique T/R and allowing it to confront another's during a script's rising action and climax create an appropriately interesting and arresting effect on the audience.

INTERACTION

With two performers, interaction can--and must--be genuine during all types of sequences, be they slow and low-keyed, slow and intense, fast and furious or fast and empty-minded.

Responses--cue pick ups--will vary. Sometimes, (B) will vocally respond to (A) immediately; sometimes, (B) will vocally respond to (A) after a pause; sometimes, (B) will overlap (A). Duo performance allows for all types of rhythmic interactions.

LISTENING

On stage, characters, in some way or another, attend to each other. In duo interp, each character must listen while the other is speaking. The silent character must not "turn off" --that is, s/he must maintain his/her unique personality and physical portrayal, must continue to exist in the defined space, must remember to acknowledge the presence of another.

One listens with ears, eyes, face, and body. One may not appear to be listening but really is.

One may be determined not to take heed, but actually is.

However way one character attends to the other, the bottom line is this: duo performers must be sure to have their characters listening to each other.

RESPONSES

The words of one character will affect the physiological/psychological states of the other. Therefore, the listening character must show that what s/he is hearing is having an effect on him/her, an effect that is obvious even as s/he is listening.

CONSISTENCY

In single dramatic/humorous, we see only one character rendered at a time. In duo, two characters are present for the full duration of allotted time. Both characters must be physically, vocally, and emotionally consistent throughout. Sometimes, the listening character tends to forget that s/he is still "on stage," resulting in an erroneous shift in body carriage, stance, shoulder/head/face adjustment. Be careful.

PHYSICAL REALIZATION

Some folks, in single performance, (especially in humorous,) are content to have a recognizable pose for each character, and will rarely move within the character's chosen (*Figliola to Page 8*)

(Figliola from Page 6)

body carriage. While many feel that this is a questionable choice even in DI/HI, it is certainly an ill-advised one in duo. In Duo, characters must have physical existences justified by the text and kept consistent throughout the performance. But physicality in duo is not a pose; rather, it is a three dimensional body that moves within the initially framed "body picture," all the while remaining consistent and true to the psycho-physical state justified by character biography. It responds in realistic and "easy" ways.

Additionally, actors in duo should be free to physicalize events and actions, provided that the choices are true to reality.

At college nationals, last year, two young men, even with binders in their hands, convinced me that they were racing their wheelchairs at top speed. I saw them spin their wheels (the wheels kept their size, shape, texture, resistance) and I saw their arms, initially pumped with adrenaline and coursing blood, gradually tense up and weaken as they began to tire, despite a determination not to do so.

My high school students, again even with binders, have staged sword fights, mountain climbing, wrestling, executions, and the like. Be inventive, but be real and thorough.

THE BASICS OF ACTING

As when performing single interp, the actor engaging in duo must (1) read and re-read the play; (2) cut it for consistent and plausible plot build and character development; (3) comb the text for clues to the character's inner (intellectual, psychological, social, spiritual, emotional, ethical, personal-historical, and the like) and outer (body carriage, stance, tempo/rhythm, way of gesturing, facial expression and expressiveness, vocal distinctiveness and expressiveness, idiosyncratic movements, etc.) makeups; decide what the main goals in the scene are for each character; divide the scene into smaller units or beats and decide what the characters want in each of these beats, keeping in mind their general goals; do a subtextual analysis of each line, trying to figure out what the character really wants, what the character

is thinking and feeling, what the character is remembering, and what the character is experiencing with the senses. Explore and appropriately vary interaction possibilities with partners; practice and add nuances.

MOVEMENT

From 1970 to 1993, college duo actors moved little during performances, pivoting to indicate exits and entrances, perhaps moderately shuffling the feet if characters in the script were skating or sword-fighting. On rare occasions, partners switched sides as when a husband and wife were exchanging sides of their marriage bed. In the last several years, college duo actors have begun to shake, rattle, and roll, leaping and dancing all over the room, sometimes banging into walls, moving the performance into the audience's space, pawing each other during potent sex scenes, or playing leap frog during poignant nostalgic moments. MY ADVICE--because NFL Duo is new and needs time to grow and breathe; because illusion is best served via suggested and limited movement of the non touching sort; because it's truer to the type of performance we appreciate in NFL--should off-focus performance BE so extravagantly blocked?; because it's easier on the judge to rank duos that are similarly "contained"; because those high school judges accustomed to script duo--there are many--are likely to downrank the excessively blocked performance, while the novice judge is likely to be dazzled by an adequately acted duo "dance," and bored by a beautifully acted scene with only pivot movement; because , because, because. . .) IS TO COACH NARROW. It took college forensics nearly a quarter of a century to experiment with monumental changes in movement; we can wait a few years. Don't you think?

The aforementioned techniques are by no means exhaustive, but they are a fine and fair start. And since I'm sure that many students, new and not so new to forensics, will want to participate in the event, these hints will hopefully help you manage the numbers and insure a modicum of fun and success.

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