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Abstract

A short discussion of repetition in acting.

Keywords

Acting, repetition, stage, performance, human brain

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Acting is repetition

Job Barnett

Acting is repetition. From the reading and rereading of scripts, to the memorizing of lines, to the long rehearsals of working a scene over and over again. But repetition is more than just practice to make perfect. It is a useful tool for the artist.



I was introduced to the concept of repetition during a month long Summer Arts workshop with the Steppenwolf Theatre Company. We worked on expressing internal and external repetition. The external being the shapes, gestures, and movements of the body; and the internal being the repetitions of a personal memory or emotion.

These were useful tools for the actor, even in improvisation. I was improvising a scene with two other actors. The scene was in a bar, and I was tasked with cleaning while the other two actors were playing the scene as two former lovers in a confrontation of sorts. I didn't know what to do in the scene. I was terrified. All I knew was that I needed to help. At one point, during their lover's quarrel, I found myself walking back stage, in the dark, and bringing back a random item into the scene. I had no idea what it was until I looked down and saw that I was holding a box of printer ink cartridges, which had nothing to do with the scene. The audience roared with laughter. A few moments later, I walked back again, grabbed another random item, walked out, and it was a replacement seat cover. Again, the audience laughed. I did this one more time, again with audience approval. When all else failed, and I didn't know what to do, I just repeated something I already did.

Our brains love repetition. We see this in the rehashing Hollywood plot lines, or the jokes that come in threes, or the use of a third example in a paragraph because two examples doing quite feel right.

There is a science behind repetition. Most of the research on repetition has to do with learning or advertising. What the research shows is that our brains need repetition for learning, but that repetition needs to be spaced out over a period of time. Too much in a short amount of time results in fatigue and annoyance.

However, we are creatures of habit and routine. Our brains are wired in maps with neurons that fire in patterns and loops. It is why we are mesmerized by rhythm in poetry. We love music that repeats a chorus or a progression of chords. We will read one book multiple times, and we love to tell the same anecdotal stories to our friends and family, even when they have heard them before but are too polite to say anything.

As artists, we use repetition as a tool to tap into the wiring of our brains, to tell repeatable stories, with repeatable gestures and jokes that feel familiar and relatable. To express a repeatable emotion that is then repeated into the minds and hearts of our audience. Acting is repetition.