

LEARNING LINES - AN ACTOR'S PERSPECTIVE



© Tamsin Shasha

How do actors learn all those lines?

I imagine that this question is asked by almost all theatre-goers at one time or another. Recently I saw a fantastic production of King Lear at the National Theatre and I remember feeling absolutely in awe of Simon Russell Beale who not only gave a faultless performance in the central role, remembering massive chunks of text but delivered the performance so clearly that I understood the plot, having not really known the story.

The challenge of learning drama texts has struck me lately as our theatre company Actors of Dionysus, has just finished touring with a contemporary version of Antigone which is re-imagined in a futuristic, dystopian landscape. An initial two week research and development period allowed Artistic Director Tamsin Shasha and Writer Christopher Adams to really get to grips with the meaning of the text, and to explore new ways of presenting it. Along the way our Actors inevitably grappled with the task of learning, understanding and memorising lines and I wanted to share some thoughts about this process which may be of help to teachers and students working with classic texts.

I believe that to learn something wholeheartedly you need to understand the meaning of it, and in the case of classical text this is paramount – for the Actor and the audience. During rehearsals for Antigone, Tamsin Shasha and Deirdre Daly, our Associate Director, worked closely with the cast on their understanding of the original text, splitting it in to manageable chunks first before discussing themes, plot and character motives together, and then putting it on its feet, adapting and editing Chris's text as the show developed. I asked Tamsin about line learning and the rehearsal process:

Yes it's much easier to learn something when you fully understand it – it just sinks in much easier. When we rehearse our annual fund-raiser we rehearse and perform an ancient Greek drama within a week, putting considerable pressure on the Actors to learn their lines in advance of the process. This is a necessity (due to a very short rehearsal process) and it makes for a baptism of fire performance – it's worked for us for the last 5 years but there is only one crack of the whip so you have to get it right the first time! An adrenaline rush not for the faint hearted, but it proves it can be done.

I would argue that it is possible to learn something without fully understanding it, especially if you are learning parrot fashion and under duress – obviously this isn't advisable, but sometimes needs must if you have a short rehearsal period and then you can add layers of meaning and interpretation thereafter. The memorising comes first. The nuance and the subtlety follows after, depending on the performer, their interpretation and what the director wants to see.

It is an interesting discussion about which method is best: learning by rote, the old school way of learning by repetition, or learning by heart, taking the text to heart and inhabiting it in pursuit of memorising it. Thinking about a show at the start and in the middle of its run for example, and about how much it develops during this time, is evident of the process of learning by heart, about knowing something so well that the performance comes naturally, and there is something special and exciting about watching a show and its energy when it is at this stage, when it is comfortable but not over-done or tired.

I asked Holly Georgia, who plays Antigone in the show, how she learns her lines:

The most obvious, natural and long lasting way of learning lines for me is to use them to build the actions and intentions for my character. It allows the writing to be fully influential to the character, giving a reason to say those exact words (why wouldn't I say it any other way?), and I always hope to find things hidden in the text that the writer has put there for me to pull out and use to make my interpretation unique.

Once I've worked with the director and actors on this through the rehearsal process it's so easy to understand through-lines and super objectives. I get to a point where the lines have been broken down to the extent that they flow so naturally, following the narrative and the character arc. At this point there almost isn't any 'line learning' to be done at all!

I tend to spend a bit of time just repeating the words to myself to get the rhythm of the lines in my head - especially with classic texts or with dialects that aren't familiar to me. Sometimes I'll record sections or monologues onto my iPhone and play them back to myself when I'm on the tube.

I asked Holly if Actors find it useful to learn their lines before they begin acting, or do they prefer to block scenes first?

Because our version of Antigone is a physical show, we began rehearsals in this way.

Some Directors want you off-book for the audition let alone the first rehearsal. Others want nothing of the sort, in order to allow you to all work together to find the direction of the characters and the play. Although sometimes it all goes out the window and there is no structure or rules whatsoever, that's what keeps it exciting!

Tamsin added:

Obviously when you have a 2-4 week rehearsal period or longer you have a lot more time to nuance, adapt the lines, play and discover. It's more fun in a way because you have the freedom to play and experiment. I usually find though that however long you have in rehearsal you normally run out of time because that's the nature of the creative process and there's no such thing as a finished piece of art.



I remember a couple of years ago hearing about [The Accent Kit](#), a brilliant app which provides Actors with a range of audio samples in different accents, to assist in their learning of dialects. Nathalie Barclay perfected a perfect Glaswegian accent for one of her characters in *Antigone*, and I wonder whether more Actors are turning to this learning approach as we advance in to a technological age.

This type of assistance is so accessible, but does it come at a price? Perhaps learning lines in this way is detrimental to working against a real person - Interesting to think about, and this article in the Independent from Actor and Journalist David Phelan discusses it brilliantly: [Lights, camera, iPad: How apps are helping Actors learn their lines](#)

How I learn lines is by: Recording the other characters' lines and listening to it back. I literally just keep going over them again and again! Especially just before bed because then the next day they are just there in your head. (Crystal Brown, Antigone cast)

There are so many different approaches to learning lines, and each Actor values them differently; for some it is a case of repetition, repetition, repetition, whilst for others it comes from an understanding of the text and the scene, and a connection with other Actors in the space – For most, it is all of these things, mixed together. We live in an age where there isn't just one sole method of learning and this can only be a brilliant thing for an Actor.

This blogpost was originally written by Megan Rogers for [Poetry by Heart](#) in February 2018, and was edited in February 2019 for aod's resource page.