

Handout: Dramatic Storytelling for the SCA

By Caitlin Christiana Wintour

Introduction

- Written tradition dates back to ancient cultures, and oral tradition probably goes back even farther. Storytelling grew because:
 - Of the playful, self-entertainment needs of humans;
 - It satisfied the need to explain the surrounding physical world.
 - It came about because of an intrinsic religious need in humans to honor or propitiate the supernatural force(s) believed to be present in the world.
 - It evolved from the human need to communicate experience to other humans.
 - It fulfilled an aesthetic need for beauty, regularity, and form through expressive language and music.
 - It stemmed from the desire to record the actions or qualities of one's ancestors, in the hope that this would give them a kind of immortality.



Exercise: Why do you tell stories, or want to? What do you want to learn about storytelling this morning?

The SCA period covers a variety of storytelling styles. Not all of them were naturalistic – witness stylized drama in the east and early liturgical drama in the west. However, all theater and performance that we know of *aims to engage the audience's attention*. That motivation crosses every culture, every performance type, every performer. Otherwise... there is absolutely no point and everyone should just get up and go home.

So what constitutes the “dramatic storyteller?” It’s not a storyteller who customarily does acting and dramatic storytelling, even though that’s my personal style. It’s not highly dramatic singers. The dramatic storyteller is that performer who is able to *engage the audience's attention*.

How does a storyteller do that? Not by merely being talented. That helps, but means nothing if the audience does not care what you are doing in your talented way. Not by being loud. Volume may draw the audience’s attention in a startled reaction, but unless you are engaging the audience’s attention with qualities of performance than the attention quickly turns to tuning you out. Instead, the performer successfully engages the audience’s attention first and foremost by 1) *physical intensity*, 2) *reading the audience*, 3) *portraying emotional states using muscle memory*, and 4) *varying the voice*.



Exercise: Share your names and preferred storytelling sources.

Physical Intensity: Fight or Flight

“Intensity” does not equal “tension!” Tension, which are tight muscles that you cannot relax without effort, just leads to awkward movements and restricted vocal cords. Instead, intensity is a state of readiness where your muscles are not tight but are primed for action. You can think of this as the classic “fight or flight” response where you are ready to spring into

Dramatic Storytelling for the SCA

action, whether to run or bash the threat's face in. Presumably you will do neither where an audience is concerned! But this muscle intensity *draws attention from humans*. Why? Because something is going to happen! A person who is primed for fight or flight is a person drawing attention because *something exciting is about to happen*.

You've got your audience's attention when you come on stage and you are intense. You are focused. You are full of physical power! And it does not matter one iota what you look like or how slowly or quickly you move or how large or small you are or if you are a man or a woman. Intensity is intensity, and your audience will be drawn to it. Now, it is up to you to *keep* that attention – and maintaining intensity throughout your performance is one of the keys.

Being an effective performer of any stripe takes intensity. This is the quality that rivets the audience's attention. It's not all there is – you can be intense and still be a poor performer – but it's the starting place. Without it, you are just a person who is talking too much. Out of intensity grows *focused attention*: attention to your body, attention to your facial muscles, attention to your voice, attention to your audience.



Exercise: Fight or flight! Guided meditation to produce a physical response to perceived danger.

- **You are walking through the forest. Twigs crackle next to you and something is stalking you. Bear... or human? The trail lies ahead of you. Do you run, do you pick up a stick, do you throw a rock? *What are you doing?***
- **Now – stay with that feeling. Hold onto it. Freeze your body and pay attention to it. What does your body feel like? Are your muscles tense? Where? Is your face tense? Where? How does your heart feel? How do your legs feel? Are you ready to run?**
- **Open your eyes and relax. Discuss your physical reactions.**

All right then! When you are on stage the point is *not* to feel fear! *It's to recapture the physical state of readiness that you just felt*. Your body becomes an orb of energy!

Reading the Audience: You're Watching Me!

Once you have your audience's attention than you need to keep it. Focused intensity throughout your performance is key, and so is watching your audience and gauging their reactions. If you are ignoring your audience – or do not know how to vary your performance to keep them watching – then you are at the mercy of the mob, and that is not a pretty thing. Lead your audience where you want them to go by pulling their attention on to you.

How do you read your audience? You pay attention to them! I grant you that this is a lot to handle when you are first starting out. You pay attention to your material because you are nervous or uncertain, and paying attention to your audience seems like an extra layer you just cannot manage. But you can and you will, and you must if you are to be a good performer.

Has anyone ever been present at a performance where a storyteller was technically good but went on... and on... and on... until you wanted to kill him or yourself just to make it stop? And have you also heard a person who was not a particularly experienced storyteller, but whose enjoyment of the material provided energy and entertainment for the audience?

Dramatic Storytelling for the SCA

Ideas to Draw the Audience Into Your Sphere

- Start off strong. If you don't get the attention of at least some of the audience immediately you might not ever get it.
- Maintain a musical tone that is interesting to listen to. Monotone is not your friend. Variance in voice levels draws people's attention. You can and should vary volume but never drop your voice so low that your audience cannot hear you. Also slow your speaking speed down and then speed it up again, all within reasonable rates. Note that you do not necessarily have to be a dramatic storyteller to do this, and many oral traditional styles deliberately don't act anyway. But even traditional tellers need to pitch and vary their voice.

Portraying Emotional States using Muscle Memory

This next section is not as applicable to some storytellers, but if you want to do any characterization – and I think that's a good idea – then you want to know this. All right – portraying emotional states as an actor or storyteller seems obvious. But what is this about muscle memory? And why should a non-actor care?

Because first, portraying an emotional state to an audience can be done first and foremost using muscle memory in body and face. You *remember* what your muscles feel like when you are sad, happy, anxious, upset, joyful, sleepy, whatever. When you are in front of an audience then you merely match your muscle memory to whatever emotional state you want to portray. Of course you must match this ability with your lines, gestures, and timing; but being able to successfully portray rich emotional levels *without* sinking into the emotion (and therefore losing focus) is a terrific skill to have.

Second, there are varying levels of portraying emotion. An actor or dramatic storyteller will practice purer forms. But comedic storytellers, poets and singers – storytellers who do not consider themselves to be acting – can still engage the audience's attention by using hints of emotional states. Why? Because people's attention is riveted on strong emotion. Even when a pure emotion is not appropriate – as in a thoughtful song – shadowing the emotion on your face is extremely effective in pulling attention to you from your audience. A performer must not be *too* subtle – the audience will miss it completely if you are -- but adding shades of emotion into performances can be very effective. And of course, if you are a dramatic storyteller or actor than you need to know how to do this.

Now, "this" requires a lot of practice if you haven't done it before. But it is a wonderful way to learn how to portray emotion in many different shades. And it is simply this: muscle memory. That's it.

See, there are over 50 muscles in the face alone, many of which make various combinations in various intensities to produce expressions. You can use this in the service of your performance (which is ultimately in the service of the audience, who honors you with their time and attention).

- Body, Posture and body language, Standing tall
- Exercise: stand at natural stance, now straighten up an inch or more
 - Experimenting with various stances – explain first!
 - Explanation: not really an acting exercise, although it can certainly help actors and storytellers. Primary reason is to start remembering muscle states and being able to pull them out at will.

Dramatic Storytelling for the SCA

- Exercise: pull your body into different stances
 - Old person with a bad back
 - Withdrawn stance
 - Frail stance
 - Feeling distaste stance
 - Angry stance
 - Interested stance
 - Relaxed stance
 - Person who likes someone else, leaning towards them stance
 - Snake-like stance
- Exercise: Remind them of stances, ask what their muscles felt like
 - Ask for muscle memory
 - Have people identify what their bodies felt like
 - Parallel “emotion” with muscle memory
 - Identify difference between positive intensity and negative tension
 - Tension just makes you look nervous. Your mental state is tense and anxious. When the performer is nervous the audience is too in either anxious sympathy or annoyed boredom. Not the effect you are after.
 - Intensity does involve some muscle tension, but it is controlled and does not look tense. You can look “relaxed” when you want to. Your body’s intensity is controlled and regulated by your mind, which is not anxious but is clear and working fast.
- Facial memory
 - Like the body, you do NOT have to feel an emotion like you would in a situation. You do have to HAVE FELT an emotion and remembered what it felt like PHYSICALLY.
 - Your primary concern is not feeling the emotion itself but communicating to the audience
- Example: collapse my face into extreme upset
 - Point: was I upset? I was not. I merely remembered the muscle memory and reproduced it.
- Exercise: pick an emotion – happy, sad, excited, whatever. It doesn’t matter as long as it is an emotion that can be portrayed on the face.
 - O.K. – now pull your face into the lines of that emotion. Don’t laugh... too much!
 - As you are doing it, note what your muscles are doing!
 - O.K., now put your expression into motion – get more upset, dissolve into laughter, whatever. Mark your muscles!
- Voice
 - Project, project, project!
 - Don’t talk too fast, that is easy to do if you are nervous
 - Pause if you forgot what you’re doing and pretend you meant to do it. (Key: look meaningfully at the audience, and make the next thing that comes out of your mouth a different emotional pitch than what came before)
 - Vary pitch and vocal intensity
- Eye contact
 - Practice the 4-second trick – make eye contact with different members of the audience, resting your gaze on them for about 4 seconds. Then move on.

Dramatic Storytelling for the SCA

- Resist the urge to keep looking at the one guy in the audience who looks irritated or bored and wondering what his problem is. ;>

Practicum

Provide a selection of printed period stories, let performers either perform one of their own stories or perform one of the ones I have provided. Reading is acceptable in this case. I will stop each performer once near the beginning of the story to make suggestions, then I will let them finish without any further interruption. Afterwards I will comment on how well they did and what improvements they made. I am always proud of my students!

©2008 Christine Taylor. Permission is given to reproduce handout as long as my copyright information and SCA name (Caitlin Christiana Wintour) stay with it.

<http://caitlincrossroad.com>