

Building Your Backstory

CREATING YOUR CHARACTER

Your chorus/quartet has chosen a new song and you have no idea how to “sell” it or get emotionally connected to or invested in it. Perhaps you don’t particularly like the song, or its message doesn’t really resonate with you. What do you do to ensure a unified approach and achieve success in developing your story and character so that your performance reaches beyond the footlights, achieves the emotional impact you want it to, and is truly engaging and entertaining?

This exercise is part of a tried and true method of developing a character for your singers regardless of the song you’ve chosen to sing or the story you wish to portray. **Place** and **purpose** define a framework for your art; a place you can keep coming back to and working from as you develop your story, visual and musical plans.

The following questions, based on Stanislavski’s acting technique, have helped performers around the world with character development for performances in theatre, musicals and film.

1. Who am I? (Who are we?)

It may not be apparent to you right away but that’s okay.

First, IMAGINE who you might have been in another life as the person singing the song and describe the following:

- Your family background, your parents, grandparents, siblings.
- The house you grew up in, what it looked like, inside and outside.
- Your favourite room, what you could see out of your bedroom window, the smells you remember.
- Your earliest childhood memories, the kind of games you played, family holidays.
- Your education, favourite teachers, best friends, times you got into trouble.
- Your first kiss, first job, your likes and dislikes, influences, attitudes, anecdotes.

All of these good, bad, funny, interesting experiences shape us into who we are today. GET CREATIVE!

Next, do your RESEARCH!

If you don’t know where to start, research the genre or era the song was written. Research what the history, economics, politics, music, art, literature, theatre, film, foods, fashion, religion might have been at the time. The internet is a great resource! If the song is from a movie or musical, watch it! Fill your mind with images. The more visceral your understanding, the better.

By doing these two simple tasks, the answer of who you are will begin to unfold.

2. Where am I?

The song may offer a description of the time or place you’re supposed to be including some details but what do they mean to you? Is your character supposed to be familiar with the surroundings? Is it the first time you’ve entered this room or place? Is it a cozy cottage? A freezing barn? A familiar street? The geography will also have an impact.

3. When is it?

Can you describe the season, year and time of day your story takes place? We carry ourselves differently in the colder months than we do on hot, muggy summer days. We would also hold ourselves differently if the piece was set at the turn of the century. Our modern physicality is very different from that era; people back then didn't slouch or use modern gestures.

4. Where have I just come from?

What has your character been doing? Where have they been? When you walk on stage it shouldn't look like you've just stepped out from behind a curtain. But if that's true, you should have a plan worked out for where you would be coming from – the kitchen in the middle of baking an apple pie? The car after being stuck in traffic? Shopping? **What is your state of being?** Know your previous circumstances. Inventing can be fun, and no entrance should ever be the same. Just think about real life: do you enter your house the same way every night? Where you come from conditions your mood.

5. What do I want?

Always have an objective. Don't walk on stage without one...ever! Often the song will provide the objective: to end the affair, to propose, to leave town, to fall in love. Your actions (choreography) can change throughout the song but you should always work from what you are meant to be doing.

6. Why do I want it?

Always have a strong justification for your action. In real life we don't always have a strong justification for everything we do but, when performing, you always need one. Having a strong justification means you have a strong motivation. Go big or go home!

7. Why do I want it now?

The "now" gives you an immediacy that is crucial in any performance. You must know why your motivation has to be right now, not before, not later but now...in the moment. Why should your audience invest in your performance if you're not bothered about falling in love or getting the money or the house or the power? Don't let them leave thinking "I didn't believe them."

In Closing...

To fully transform into a character, to be truthfully and emotionally connected requires work, technique, and good plan. But your audience should see none of this. They should see nothing other than the fully realized three-dimensional character right in the truth of the moment.

A great performance is always in the eye of the beholder but audiences almost always know when they are witnessing something special. The performances that thrill us the most are those where instinct and technique are in perfect balance making the performance seem effortless. It's when a mixture of abandon and control ignite and leave your audience reeling.

There's a lot of value in discovering qualities and experiences you share with a character. Acting is imaginative engagement for the entertainment of others. Even if you're playing the worst person in the world, however you build your character, remember to make them something you can step in and out of and enjoy.