

# Bringing Out the Actor Within – How to Find Your Authentic Stage Presence

by Dave Zielinski

## ***Acting. Pretending. Assuming another persona.***

*Checking your own identity at the door and slipping into someone else's skin. Conventional wisdom tells us this is the modus operandi of successful stage and TV actors. We're also led to believe it's the process used by many good communicators and presenters. In reality, accomplished presenters don't leave their everyday, natural selves behind and unleash another persona when they step onto the podium. Acting instructors and presentation coaches say that "bringing out the actor within" does include some acting secrets, but mostly it's about getting to know yourself.*

Most people think acting is pretending, says Jan D'Arcy, a presentation coach and professional actor who credits include "The X-Files," "Twin Peaks" and "Outer Limits." Acting and, to a large extent, presenting are both about self-revelation," she says. "The successful performer always searches for the truth in herself, and then uses dramatic means to present that truth to the audience. The more you're aware of your own identity, the more powerful you'll be as a presenter.

"When people ask what I do as a presentation coach, I don't say I package people. I say I unwrap them."

The essence of modern acting is "to appear not to be acting, because the moment you're identified as an actor – a phony – you're dead in the water," says

Tony Stelbay, a veteran actor, playwright, director and teacher in educational and professional theater who runs an acting studio in Minneapolis. "The emphasis is on realism, naturalism and authenticity.

Authenticity is also what you need to be persuasive as a communicator, and I don't see much difference between an actor and a successful corporate communicator."

Bringing out the actor within, says Stelbay, requires "becoming more profoundly what you already are. You'll have a heckuva time adopting another persona and being believable if you haven't yet come to grips with your own persona."

## **To truly be yourself on stage, tap into memory**

All of us "act" repeatedly throughout our workdays, says Stelbay, and that's doubly true for those presenting to an audience. Each time we repeat a communication effort, we become actors. "The first time you deliver a message, you're a communicator," he explains. "The second time you deliver the same message, you're an actor. You're trying to convince your audience that this is the first time you said it, to maintain the illusion of the first time. That's exactly what an actor does."

Good actors, says Steblay are believable only to the extent that they're in touch with their own authentic feelings. Conjuring up past experiences and emotions – rather than trying to manufacture them in a vacuum – is known in the acting field as “The Method,” or sense memory.

Sense memory can help presenters build a more engaging stage presence, D'Arcy says. “When you're walking up to that podium, you want to find a sense memory, a visualization, of those times you felt especially good, when you were confident and in control,” she says. It might be the time you received kudos for extraordinary job performance, gave a well-received impromptu speech at a wedding reception, or were recognized publicly and represented yourself well accepting the honor.

Presenters in the corporate arena often mistakenly believe they only have to communicate ideas and words, D'Arcy says. The truth is that presenters, like actors, also have to communicate emotions and energy to truly capture an audience's interest. “To do that, you need a sense of theater. You might have to talk a bit louder, use larger gestures and so on,” she says. “But that doesn't make you an impostor or inauthentic. For some reason, we feel inauthentic when we prepare or orchestrate our use of emotion and energy. The truth is, when you're committed to an idea or cause, you have to become a larger version of yourself.”

### **Leverage the power of fear and be real**

Feeling fear at the prospect of such a public release is a good sign, D'Arcy

says. “My students often ask me how I can help take away their fear,” shy says, “and I tell them they would be poor performers if they didn't have the attention, alertness and concentration that comes from fear.”

Plenty of research shows authenticity – presenting your natural, albeit more-animated self on stage – is the surest path to forming a bond with an audience. You need look no further for evidence than the behavior of recent U.S. presidents and England's royal family, Steblay says.

George Bush grew up guarded about his authenticity, a belief that carried through much of his public life. “He decided he wasn't going to be authentic, but instead would project something that might appear to be authentic,” Steblay says. “He was very selective about revealing his true self, and thus the audience felt his public persona was somewhat contrived.” The public had positive feelings for Bush, “but those feelings didn't run very deep,” Steblay says. “When push came to shove, the feelings were gone.” Although some might argue he's just a better faker than Bush, Bill Clinton shows more of his authentic, emotive self in public, and people respond extremely well to that, Steblay says.

The English public, due in part to Princess Diana's personal style and influence now demands a new level of authenticity from the royals, Steblay says. “They're telling them to give up the renowned English stiff upper lip, because it doesn't play anymore,” he says.

Audiences expect the same level of "realness" from presenters. "If a presenter superficially delivers a speech, the audience will nod and listen," he says, "but they won't make the ultimate connections with the actor/communicator and won't internalize the message."

### **Developing An Authentic – And Engaging – Stage Presence.**

Although you might pick up a tip or two from the presentation styles of Tom Peters or Tony Robbins, the last thing you should do is try to remake yourself in another presenter's image.

"We certainly don't want everyone to look and sound alike when they present," Steblay says.

How can you find your authentic stage presence without undergoing psychotherapy? If you view yourself as naturally reticent or undemonstrative, how can you feel comfortable as a more animated, emotive and confident presenter, without feeling like an imposter?

Steblay teaches students in his acting-for-non-actors class to regularly exercise their three modes of communication:

- facial/emotional
- hearing/vocal
- kinesthetic, or body movement

Most presenters need to become reacquainted with their bodies, he explains. "Some people don't have the foggiest notion of what their body does, nor what it is capable of," he says. "They live inside it, feed it and might do a few things on the weekend to exercise

it. But communication is a very physical, kinesthetic thing, and using your body effectively on stage takes practice."

Steblay says the work of Wesley Balk, former director of the Minnesota Opera and now an acting and voice instructor at the University of Minnesota, shows the payoff of such exercise. Balk has had success helping opera singers better connect with their audiences by working on the three modes of communication. "These are people who sing in a foreign language, so many in the audience don't have a clue what's going on in a scene," he says. "It means they have to reveal more of themselves to help an audience understand." Without attending to their singing voices, but asking the singers instead to work solely on the facial and kinesthetic parts of their performances, Balk found the singers' voices also improved significantly as a result, Steblay says.

Why does manipulating the outside spark such a change on the inside? "As we start exercising the outside, we start to break up the concrete on the inside," he says. "Exercising the three modes leads to greater release of authentic energy – and helps fight the adult tendency in our culture to go stone-faced."

He suggests presenters take a dance, martial arts or yoga class to get in better touch with their bodies, work that will pay off in the form of more conscious, intelligent control of the body when presenting.

D'Arcy also recommends dance. She says benefits of ballet classes have

carried over to her acting and presenting. "I learned in ballet how to tell a story with my feet."

D'Arcy offers some other tactics to help unearth the actor within:

- **Write out your speech in longhand in place of - or in addition to - typing it.** Why take that extra time? Because the act of putting pen to paper provides a greater sense memory of your speech, she says. "It can cement the speech better in your mind," she says, freeing you to concentrate on the nonverbal aspects of your presentation.
- **Rehearse more than you think you need to.** Most presenters think they've rehearsed enough. They're usually wrong. Most presenters need to rehearse more often she says. "An actor spends weeks in rehearsal before he even dares to get up on stage - and he has the advantage of a director guiding him," she says. "I see speakers who think they can just get up and be brilliant after one run-through. If you don't use any skill often enough, it won't improve." Top TV actors also regularly return to the stage to practice the basics, she points out.
- **When possible, rehearse on site.** Whenever they can, actors rehearse on the same stage or set where they'll deliver their performance. That provides "home-field advantage," D'Arcy says. Without that kind of visceral knowledge of your site, "you'll spend valuable energy processing extraneous things, the physical conditions, temperature, sight lines and more, when your first get up there, rather than focusing on your presentation."

Actress Debbie Reynolds used home-field advantage when filming the recent movie, 'Mother.' "Her co-actor, Albert Brooks, said that every weekend during filming Reynolds came down to the set to rehearse scenes shot in a kitchen," D'Arcy says.

"Because of that, in the movie you can see her talking to Brooks in the kitchen scenes while almost effortlessly reaching into cabinets and the refrigerator behind her. She could focus on the acting because her movements were so practiced and second nature."

D'Arcy says her own contracts for speaking engagements stipulate prior access to speaking sites. "I don't care whether they're having a wedding party in that room; I want to be able to go in and check it out," she says.

- **Get involved in community theater or take a good acting class.** Acting in community theater, even in small roles, can help develop your authentic stage presence – and confidence. "Community theater also teaches that you have to perform even when you have a cold, just left your crying children at home, or got a traffic ticket," she says. "It teaches you how to concentrate and block out distractions, and how to keep your emotions close to the surface." That training serves you well when you're forced to deliver a presentation in less-than-ideal conditions, she says.
- **Have yourself videotaped – and then watch, alongside a coach or mentor, without the audio.** D'Arcy regularly videotapes students in her presentation skills classes, then watches the tape along with them – with the sound turned off. "Not a few students

come to me thinking their presentation styles are way over the top,” she says. “But when they watch their gestures and body language on tape, they realize they’re doing all the work with their voices, not their bodies.”

One particular exercise helps make students more self-aware, she says and drives home the value of sense memory. She asks students to “be happy” – maybe they’re announcing record sales for the year, for instance – and then “be sad,” and shoots both emotions on video. Reviewing the tapes, she says, “students usually can see when they’re giving a false smile and when the emotions appear more authentic because they’ve gotten in touch with a real event from their lives.”

- **Use role-playing to teach sense memory.** In a recent coaching session, D’Arcy asked a Vietnamese student, who was naturally quiet and reserved, to tap into a more animated part of himself by playing the role of a salesperson in a hypothetical open-air fish market. His mission was to sell “customers” – other students in class who would line up and walk past him one by one – some of the displayed fish. “He was transformed,” D’Arcy says, “waving his arms, very enthusiastic, engaging and effective.” It turned out the student actually had sold fish in Vietnam before coming to the United States. But the point was made. “He began to see he could use that sense memory of selling fish in his presentations – that it would be OK when he was presenting to groups in his new job, just as it was in the streets, to become a larger version of himself.”