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Learning and Participation Resource Pack

Musical Theatre:
Developing the Life of a Character

Suitable for KS4 / KS5



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Overview

This resource has been designed and constructed to aid the Musical Theatre performer in developing the internal and external life of a character. All the exercises in this pack have been chosen to help the actor succeed in giving their best performance and can be completed individually or as part of a rehearsal process.

Lesson Ideas

Starting Activity

Choose a character from a musical or play you are familiar with; this can be one you have played recently, are currently rehearsing, or one you have always wanted to perform. For some of the exercises, you will need to have access to at least some of the text; a monologue, scene, song, or a moment from the play. If this is not possible, try to search online or skip the exercise and move onto the next.

Note: For the purpose of this resource, I have chosen the character of *Moritz* from the musical *Spring Awakening*.

Task Introductions

Exploring Worlds

Two main worlds that exist in Musical Theatre are the *internal* and *external*.

The *internal* world is your inner being; your *thoughts* and *subconscious responses*, and often rears itself through the medium of



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song. The **external** world exists as reality through the **dialogue** and portrays the characters **personality** and **physical reactions**.

The way a character lives in their two worlds will be very different; *sometimes our thoughts and feelings aren't reflected in the way we act.* In theatre, the audience are in a unique position in that they often get to **see** both worlds of a character, in life we only ever see the external of others. This technique helps the audience **understand** and **connect** with a character on a more emotional level. You will often find your character slips in and out of their two different worlds many times throughout the course of the play.

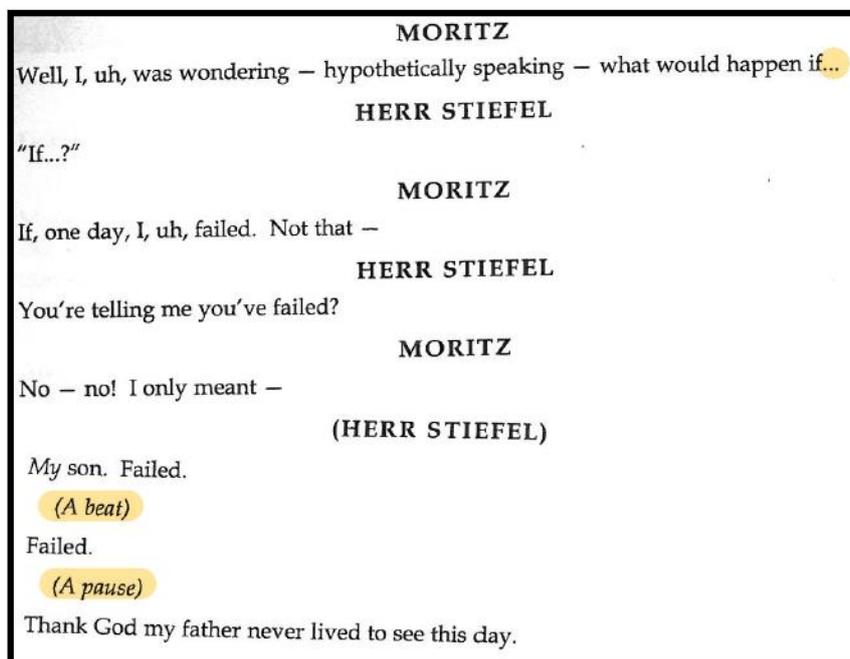
Character Charge

Every song, monologue or line in a play serves a purpose. They have been written to tell a story and carry the narrative forward, not just fill a void in time and space. To be able to deliver a convincing performance, you must know **why** your character is speaking or singing the words they are; what is the **kick, charge, or intention** behind the lines and their actions. Particularly the internal world is often a reaction to something that has just occurred so you must try to realise the **catalyst** for this *internal outburst* happening in the present moment. This understanding of their **drive** is crucial to help provoke emotion and react truthfully on the stage.

Dissecting the Script

Punctuation is incredibly important but often forgotten about when learning lines and thinking about how your character delivers them. It tells you something about the nature, emotional state, and **intentions** of your character and offers advice in the way the words should be spoken. Ellipses (...), a word in italics, repetition, exclamation marks and others have all been written by the playwright for a reason. *Oh! It must be quite something?* And *Oh? It must be quite something!* will be

pronounced differently and have different meanings. The words are the same, only the punctuation different.



There are many different types of **silences** written into a play. An **ellipsis** is denoted by three dots and is used by a playwright to trail off the dialogue or come in mid-sentence. It can also be used in place of a **beat** to indicate a slight hesitation. A **pause** is a much longer break used when a character is in the middle of a deep thought process. This helps to create tension and an unsettling atmosphere. A **silence** is a dead stop during which no word is spoken because the character has encountered a conflict so absurd that they have nothing to say, and they are left in a completely different mental state from where they started.

Developing your Ideas

Acting technique is crucial to anyone wanting to be a serious actor. It is easy enough to imitate a character or an emotion, but the audience are unforgiving; they can sense when there is a lack of **truth** and

depth. The right **technique** will help you *find* a character, which in turn will influence how you approach the script, but this should be balanced with **instinct**. Technique is vital in the preparation, thinking, and planning aspects of bringing a character to life and creates a firm foundation, but individuality will **inspire** an audience. By being **bold** and making **brave** choices, by allowing action to happen that feels natural in the moment of creation, a character will be born that captivates and grips an audience.

A note to future Directors – Don't discourage actors when they begin to improvise their own blocking. Sometimes instincts are strong, and they want to follow them. Encourage them. The outcome will be far more exciting and interesting.

Stanford Meisner – “It is my belief that talent comes from instinct”

Task Developments

1. Exploring Worlds

- Identify and write down what you think the differences are in your character between their internal and external world; what changes and how would this affect the way in which you would play the character? Try to find clues in the script; what does the playwright or other characters say about you?

	HERR SONNENSTICH
Herr Stiefel.	
<i>(But, alas, MORITZ is asleep)</i>	
	HERR SONNENSTICH
Herr Stiefel.	
	MORITZ
<i>(Waking)</i>	
Sir...?	
	HERR SONNENSTICH
Continue. Please.	
<i>(MORITZ hesitates)</i>	

	MARTHA
<i>(Her secret crush)</i>	
But not so wonderful as that sad soulful sleepyhead, Moritz Stiefel...	
	ANNA & THEA
Moritz Stiefel!?	
	THEA
How can you even compare them?	

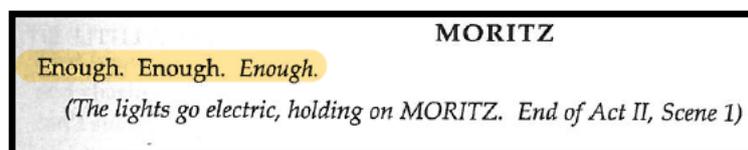
Example: Moritz externally is lazy and socially awkward; I imagine he

rarely makes eye contact with people and has a negative posture. He is shy and subdued around others and stutters over his words a lot. His *internal* is the complete opposite; throughout his song *And Then There Were None* he performs in a powerful and decisive tone. I imagine he is strong, now makes eye contact, and has a lot more energy and attitude.

- Decide which world your character exists throughout your chosen piece of text; this may change throughout so identify any points where this shift happens.

2. Character Charge

- Read through your chosen song, scene, or monologue and write down answers to the following as your character:
 - Where are you at this moment? Describe your surroundings.
 - What are you doing in this moment?
 - Is there anyone else on stage with you? If so, is your chosen moment aimed at them, in response to them, about them, or nothing to do with them?
 - What emotional state are you currently in and does this changed through the course of the action?
 - What has just happened? This could be in the scene prior, or action that you think might have happened involving your character but was not written into the text and is therefore unseen to the audience (**offstage action**).
- Highlight and annotate certain lines that stand out to you. Why is this line important and what has led you to say or think it?



Example: Moritz speaks the word *Enough* three times. This is an intentional decision made by the playwright. Each word will have a different meaning and intention behind it. They are the final words spoken in this scene.

The scene is in church and I think it is partly in response to the father's hypocritical sermon about the children hiding secrets when in fact the adults hide the most, as he also speaks the line that triggers Moritz's. There is anger and frustration. The last time we saw Moritz on stage was during his song *And Then There Were None* in which the audience see the character fall apart; he has tried to be strong for too long and can't bear to be let down again. The final *Enough* is in italics and therefore is the most powerful and definitive; it has a different meaning to the first two. There is an underlying subtext behind it. There is more to which he has had 'enough'. It is a statement within itself.

- Try and repeat this for every line in the piece of text. Ask yourself *Why is the character saying that?* Do they want something? Are they trying to make a point? Is there a **subtext**?

3. Dissecting the Script

- Highlight the punctuation in your chosen text. What is its purpose for being there; is it to let the actor know to speak the line in a certain way or for another reason? Try changing some of the punctuation and see how that alters how the scene plays out.

	MORITZ	
Well, I, uh,	was wondering –	hypothetically speaking – what would happen if...
	HERR STIEFEL	
"If...?"		
	MORITZ	
If, one day, I, uh, failed.	Not that –	
	HERR STIEFEL	
You're telling me you've failed?		
	MORITZ	
No – no!	I only meant –	
	HERR STIEFEL	
You've failed, haven't you?	I can see it on your face.	
	MORITZ	
Father, no!		

Example: The amount of punctuation in Moritz's lines signifies there are a lot of breaks in his dialogue. He is stumbling to get his words out, afraid of delivering the news, trying to find the right words, and scared of the reaction he will receive.

- Make a note of any other moments you think are important to be aware of; where there's a shift in emotion or whether certain lines are meant to be shouted etc. One sentence is not always equal to one thought, it can be broken down and there can be several intentions behind a single line.

4. Developing your Ideas

The following exercises will help to add depth to your character. They allow for answers that you never before considered and help in developing technique whilst creating an understanding, fully rounded, and **connected** actor enabling natural and instinctive actions and reactions in your final performance.

- **GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES**

When you play a character, you should know them as well as you know yourself. A script will offer some clues around your character but ultimately it is down to the actor to plant these memories and backstory yourself. This exercise is based around *Stanislavski's* system and his technique exploring the **given circumstances** where certain conditions will influence your performance. As your character, try to answer the following questions. Use some of the answers you have written down in previous tasks to help you (for example what other characters say about you) but try to be as descriptive as you possibly can.

- **Who am I?** *Think about your family background, the house you grew up in, what it looked like, and which was your favourite room and why, your earliest childhood memories, family holidays, education, best friends, a time you got into trouble, first job, hobbies and things you dislike etc.*
- **Where am I?** *Describe your surroundings, is the place familiar to you or is the first time you have set foot here? Are you comfortable in these surroundings?*

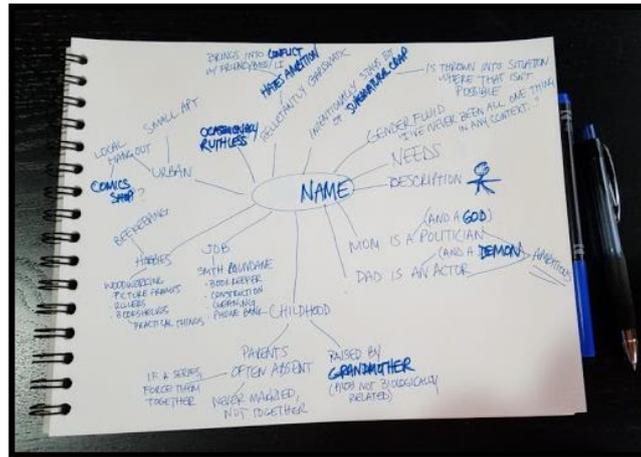
- **When is it?** *What season is it? Decide on a year, month, and time of day. We carry ourselves differently depending on our climate.*
- **Where have I just come from?** *What has just happened in the scene before? What has your character been doing in the moments before they stepped from behind the curtain? Coming from the bathroom will bring a different energy to your entrance and intentions to that of coming in off the street from a heated argument. The moments before will significantly condition your mood.*
- **What do I want?** *What is your **motivation** and intentions within the scene? Your objective may be written in the dialogue, or it could be in the subtext.*
- **Why do I want it?** *What is the justification behind your actions?*
- **Why do I want it now?** *The **now** is crucial in acting. Why has your character chosen this moment in the play to carry out their intentions?*
- **What will happen if I don't get it now?** *Stakes should always be high with consequences. This should be important to the character. If the stakes are not clear in the script, invent them. Give yourself a reason to achieve the outcome.*
- **How will I get what I want?** *How are your actions intended to affect others on stage? There can be numerous thoughts and intentions within a single scene; do your actions change with this? Are there moments where you intend to charm, to intimidate, to humour others to get what you want?*
- **What must I overcome?** *What are the obstacles in your way? These can be internal or external. Is there emotional conflict or something in the surroundings? **How** will you overcome these obstacles?*

- **MIND MAPPING**

Sometimes the simplest of activities can be the most powerful. This activity will take approximately 10 minutes.

- Start with an A3 or A4 piece of paper in landscape mode. Draw a smallish circle in the centre and then seven lines radiating out in all directions to about one third of the way to the edge.
- Put another small circle at the end of each line. Put your character's name in the central circle. Then, without conscious thought and as quickly as possible, write in each circle a word or two that pops into your brain as you think of the central character.
- If some of the new words lead to further thoughts, quickly draw another line from that particular word, add a circle on the end, and enter new words or thoughts there.
- Each circle might grow 5 or 6 extra bubbles. As this happens you might find that words on different extensions begin to connect. If this is the case, connect them with a line. Put a symbol on that line which represents the connection (a heart or lightning bolt for example).

Reflect on what you have created. Do any of the words surprise you? Have you written something that you never thought of before? By doing this activity at a heightened speed some of the answers will have been considered subconsciously and instinctively and will produce surprising and new ideas, connections, and realisations that can be explored later in the rehearsal room.



- **IMAGE STREAMING**

This exercise will bring to light certain conditions never imagined and give an actor a complete understanding of their surroundings; for example, the floor might be sticky, or you might feel safer or more drawn to a single area in the room. You will need your phone and a voice recorder app for this exercise.

- Start the recording. Close your eyes and concentrate on the scene you have chosen. Begin to describe out loud every image that enters your mind in as much detail as possible. Pay attention to the sensory as well as the visual. For now, focus on the surroundings without your character in the picture.
- After a few minutes, bring your character into the scene and *become* them. Continue describing **everything** that happens in detail. Let the stream happen naturally; whether they pick an object up, speak to another, or even leave the scene and start venturing elsewhere. If it goes off on a tangent, let it. It might provide answers to questions you never considered.
- Let the stream finish naturally; this could be 2 minutes or 2 hours.

Listen back to your audio recording and write down anything that you think is interesting or could be reflected on and explored through

rehearsal. This exercise done properly will lead the actor to have a real basis and understanding of their character. Image streaming is a very powerful tool for giving a character access to the actor's imagination.

Outcome

You should now have a much more in depth understanding of your character; from how their internal life differs from their external to their intentions and motivations within a scene, song, or moment from the play and how they're going to be achieved. This insight is pivotal to explore further in rehearsal but will provide you, the actor, with a strong and detailed foundation to develop from and *play* with.

Resources and useful links

The exercises, advice, and explorations in this pack have been developed from experience and with help from the resources below. For further guidance and development, please utilise the following books

- Trusting the Actor – Brian Astbury
- Stanislavski: An Introduction – Jean Benedetti
- Sanford Meisner on Acting – Sanford Meisner
- Directing in Musical Theatre – Joe Deer
- Play Directors' Survival Kit – James & Wanda Rodgers

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