

## **Introduction to Text Analysis**

Text Analysis is a phrase used to describe the process by which we, as Theatre Makers, look to prewritten scripts for:

- clues as to how they should be performed
- supporting evidence for our interpretation of a character/script

Over the years, there have been many different approaches to this skill, and different ideas as to what information is most useful to a performer. This pack is an introduction to the most commonly used ideas, for you to explore in your own time with your chosen monologue.

Above all else, we serve the story. Humans are storytellers and communicators, we make theatre to tell story, and communicate ideas. If we don't know what story we are telling, or why we are telling it – what point we are making – we simply won't be able to connect with an audience in any meaningful way.

Before we can possibly begin to breathe life into a text with any kind of confidence or hope of clear communication, we have to mine it for information. What is the story? Who is telling it? Where? When? And then we can answer 'Why?'

This process can be applied over a monologue, a scene, a section of a text, an entire play. The more information you can mine the better, so it is recommended that where you can, you read around your monologue or scene to gain a deeper understanding of character and context.

When first sitting down with a text, it is generally agreed that you should seek to answer the 'W' questions –

- **Who** – Who is speaking? Name? Age? Profession? Sex? Gender? Partnered? Class? Wealth? Education? Anything else? **Who** are they speaking to? **Who** is this person to them?
- **What** – What is happening? What is the immediate action of the scene?
- **Where** – Where are they? Interior or Exterior? Familiar or strange? Hot or cold? Comfortable? Pleasant? Have they chosen to be there or do they have to be there?
- **When** – When in history is this happening? When in the day is this happening? When in the week? When in the season? The year? When in the character's life is it happening?
- **Why**

Our "Why?" can be broken down further as we will see further into the pack. But at this stage we can simply ask it in two seemingly simple ways;

1. **Why is this happening?** What are the driving forces making this scene take place in the way it is? Why is the character behaving the way they are?
2. **Why is this story being told?** Why did the playwright pick it? Why did you/the director/the company pick it? What were you drawn to? What does it tell us about the world? What can you tell us about the world using it?

This process of analysis is an ongoing one. This means that as an actor continues working on a text, through rehearsals, through performances, these questions can keep producing interesting answers which impact on interpretation and performance. You must understand what it is you are saying – what do the words mean? What does the imagery mean? What can the text tell you about itself? And you must be able to research anything that may help you contextually – the period the text was written in will hold many clues, as will the period you choose to set it in for performance. Make your world real for yourself.

An actor should be able to ask, 'What do I (the character) do?' and 'Why do I (the character) do it?', and these in turn will help answer 'How do I (the character) do it?'

## **Subtext**

Subtext is what is really being said underneath the play text – or if you'd rather, it refers to the meaning lying underneath the text/dialogue. This subtext is not spoken, but is rather communicated by the actor through intonation, gesture, body posture, pauses or choices in action. Through being aware of our subtext we can communicate our character's inner thoughts/world, the subtext can 'speak' to the audience.

Stanislavski said: "Spectators come to the theatre to hear the subtext. They can read the text at home". For Stanislavski, subtext added texture and richness to an action. According to him, even a truthfully executed action would fall flat without subtext. The spectators would want to be involved in the causes of the character's behaviour, emotions and thoughts.

There is a clear relationship between subtext and text/dialogue (and between subtext and objectives). To make this clearer, look at the scenario below

*Molly accidentally bumps into Dave, whom she finds extremely annoying. She feels she must be nice to him in public, while underneath she wants to get as far away from him as possible.*

So, the given text that contains polite and pleasant dialogue is in direct conflict with what is going on underneath, which is the first character's objective (we'll discuss objectives in detail a bit further in), her desire to get away from the second character.

The audience can see the duality of the first character's behaviour, they can see her performing 'politeness' for the second character's benefit, and also see her discomfort in the situation. This discomfort is being conveyed, sometimes subconsciously, through body language, gestures intonation, glances or pauses in speech.

This adds up to another interesting observation about subtext -- Subtext makes the audience complicit in the behaviour of the character displaying subtext. The audience and the character share a secret that the other character in the scene does not. This increases the audience's connection with a character, holding their interest much more than just a superficial interpretation of the text would.

It is important to note is that subtext and text/dialogue may or may not be consistent with each other (they can occasionally be the same thing, but are more often at odds with each other), but subtext must always be consistent with the objective.

## Uniting and Objectives

It can be exceptionally difficult to recreate a live performance night after night, over a theatrical run that can last six weeks or more. One of the ways we can try to ease ourselves in, or build in a safety net for ourselves, is to view our text as a map.

Our text teases out our character's journey, both physical and psychological, allowing us clear reference points along the way. In much the same way, a map allows travellers to navigate between points A and B by means of recognising clear landmarks along the way.

If our play as a whole is a journey from Beginning to End, we can break down our text into 'units', or smaller chunks of text, each one designed to navigate us between two smaller and more immediate points of reference. Each unit ordinarily contains a single objective for the character.

For example, when we first meet Hamlet, he is sullen and full of grief for his Father; he has doubts about his mother's remarriage, and feels without purpose. Moments later, his friend Horatio has arrived and told him that the ghost of his father has been spotted, and that he, Prince Hamlet, must speak to it. Hamlet's life has been altered, his focus and sense of purpose irrevocably changed. It would make sense for us to mark a change when Horatio enters with his news.

An Objective is just that – a character's objective within each unit. This is an active state, often written as an active or transient verb, that the character is trying to achieve. An objective must be directed at another person (present or not). For example, 'To annoy you' or 'To seduce you' would both work. It is important to remember that their purpose is to provoke interaction in order to get something done. Trying to use verbs such as *to remember* or *to think* will not activate anyone else, only the actor performing. This can lead to self-indulgent or overly introspective performances rather than true communication, and can cut out the audience leading to them losing interest.

When objectives are strung together one after another, chronologically through a text, a through line of action can be mapped out for each character. This can be called the 'Super-objective' and is commonly thought of as the ultimate answer as to **why** your character does the things they do throughout the story. The super-objective could then be looked at as the 'trunk' of a tree with the objectives as 'branches' fleshing out the performance for an actor. For example, the super-objective of one character could be to win back the love of the other character. In order to achieve this super-objective, the first character would have successive unit objectives such as, to tease them, to please them, to excite them, to provoke them and to flatter them. These objectives, when strung together, reveal the super-objective, the logical, and coherent through line of action.

Now we have created our map, we can use it to drop in and out of scenes for rehearsal (or filming which often happens in non-chronological order), and also to hold ourselves on track for our emotional journey in each evening's performance. It is there to steer us back if we get lost.

## **Imagination and Dramaturgy**

It can feel overly simple, and obvious, to state that imagination is crucial in acting. But there have been many heated debates over the decades as to how the imagination is to be used, and how important it can be to the actor's process with text.

Generally it is agreed though that an actor should be able to *imagine* themselves into the world of the play. That means that instead of an actor thinking "I AM Macbeth" (which is the path towards expensive therapy bills), an actor can think "*What if I was Macbeth*". An active and fertile imagination must be used alongside a rigorous and fierce interrogation of the text.

Stanislavski likened his approach to text, as to a study of the grammar of a language. It is worth noting however, that just as knowledge of grammar alone does not guarantee beautiful writing; knowledge of his techniques was only useful to an actor if accompanied by a fertile imagination. This applies to all approaches to text work.

Extended on from that is the idea of building a concrete world, with its own rules of engagement, and the ability to maintain those rules throughout. In a nut shell, if the floor is lava, you cannot walk on the floor without getting burnt!

This is the dramaturgy of the piece. Like your performance, the dramaturgy of the production can be built on the foundations of the clues found in the text, and is a comprehensive exploration of the context in which the play resides. So, if the floor is lava, how have humans developed structure, tactics and practices in order to maintain life? How has this affected our physical expression in communication? How did this happen? Has all previous ways of life been wiped out? How do we explain this to ourselves? All these questions will impact a production's design (Set, Costume, Lighting, Sound, and Props etc), a director's choices and approach, and (hopefully) each performer's preparation, choices, and ultimately, performance.

But the key to pulling it all together, and making our foundations fly, all lies in the performer's ability to imagine it alive, to imagine it real.

## **The Why**

There is a piece of advice that does the rounds about making theatre –

When you first think about making a piece of work, you must first ask yourself two questions; One – What is the story? If you can't sum it up in a sentence or two, you don't know the story well enough to tell yet. Two – Why tell this story? If you can't give an answer aside from "because I want to", don't do it.

As we said earlier – humans are storytellers. We communicate in story, and narrative is incredibly powerful. But we are always communicating *something*. Even our earliest folk tales, and later fairy tales all communicated ideas. Little Red Riding Hood is notoriously a warning to young women against deviating from the given path, Beauty and the Beast originally an exploration of the idea of 'skin-deep' beauty vs a good heart. It is vital to the effective communication of a story to know what is at its heart; this is the touchstone a company can always return to.

So, the *why* of a story is ultimately the most influential factor in its performance. But it also an intensely personal one, with one performer's answers differing hugely from another. A company must have a level of consensus, particularly with world creation, but as an individual a performer may have many varied reasons for pursuing a particular interpretation. And as long as they all serve a purpose, they are valid.