

Have you ever heard the term “Realistic Dialog”?

It is a very misunderstood concept.

There is a huge difference between words sounding like someone could say them, that they come from a character's heart, and out of their mouth after hopefully passing through their brain; and speech that is directly off the streets, out of the boardroom, the school, the hairdresser's salon, or any myriad of other types of locations where playwrights set the action of their plays.

It is a good thing that the words being spoken by a character sound like that character would sound -- logical, regional, conscious of their class and place in the world (unless of course, they are lying or creating a subterfuge).

It is not a good thing for the words to sound like they just walked in off the streets, or out of the boardroom, or the boss' office, and slapped the character in the face with their ordinairiness, their sense of commonplace, their utilitarian slang-ness, and then popped out of their mouth.

When we playwrights wrought a play (like an ironworker wroughting something out of metal: shaping, twisting, hammering, stretching, reheating and reusing) we do not take just ordinary words as our arsenal. We, like all good fiction writers—whether it's truth or fiction that is the basis of our story—must build a world for the characters of our plays to inhabit. That includes language. Even the character of lowest social standing will, in a play, have words chosen for him that fit the time, the place, the emotional subtext, and nuances of his personal life and education, or lack of it. But they are not the words of a person similar to our character, who could be sitting in the audience, listening to this character so much like him or her; wondering how this character sounds so right and yet not just like the person sitting there, but so appropriate for the character speaking to us out of the created and heightened world of a play on a stage in a theatre.

It is NOT reality, folks. You should never use words or phrases simply because they ‘sound real.’ Each word, clause, phrase, main thought or subjunctive, is carefully chosen by the playwright to help the character inhabit his or her world; give insight into thought and feeling; give rise to action.

There was a movement in the early part of the 1930s where producers went to Europe, and other places, and actually cut the room of an apartment, and other locations, out of a building, and brought it back to NYC and put it on a stage as the habitation for the actors of the play he was producing. The actors felt out of place. The dialog created for them did not work in a ‘real’ environment.

Neither does ‘real’ dialog work in the wonderful physical creation of a playwright aided by a brilliant scenic designer.

Listening to real people talk CAN give you rhythms, a cadence of speech, sounds of vowels and consonants, accents, regionalisms, speech defects — all those things that make people interesting to

listen to. But these words, in and of themselves, do not belong on a stage. Unless they are ‘chosen’ by the playwright because they need them to ‘live’ for a moment on a character’s journey.

In almost all cases, the time of a play is between 20 minutes and two-and-a-half-hours. The time span of the play may be days. Our dialog cannot be ‘real’ because we are not dealing with ‘real’ time.

A character’s life on the stage is heightened, sped-up, made up of carefully chosen moments of a day that are edited together by a skillful playwright. I think you would, as would I, be bored to tears if we attended a two hour play and the action was just like a real two hours just excised from the lives of a group of associated people. Not interesting. Not DRAMATIC.

We have language. It is a gift. The purpose of dramatic writing is to time warp along the tesseract of a character’s life, hit the high points and the low points, in some sort of artful and meaningful imagined arrangement, and cause an audience to be compelled along with these characters on their ‘pretend’ journey. We cut the mundane in order to present the moments that will elicit a laugh or a tear or a gasp or a sigh. This can’t be done with random everyday words.

Actors are not the people they play. They are actors. Language is a tool for all disciplines in the theatre, even those who do not speak onstage. Everyone on a production team focuses on the words. Lighting punctuates scenes where emotion is brewing in a roiling sort of way. Costumes often are constructed based on what one character says about himself, or about someone else. There are strange angles and levels on the set to heighten the emotion and the perception, telling the audience where to focus.

If the play wants to be ‘real’ just put an overhead ceiling light on and let the actors perform under it in jeans and a t-shirt, with the back wall of the stage open to view. See how many tickets you sell to that one.

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