

## SHUTTING THE DOOR

Putting monologues in context by Arthur M. Jolly

It has been said that there are twelve meanings for the phrase “shut the door”, depending on the emphasis and intonation. “*Shut* the door” - don’t open it. “Shut *the* door?” - there’s three, which one do you mean? “Shut the *door*” - not the window, etc.

When we get into interpreting monologues, we soon learn that when that line is part of a scene, there are many more possibilities. There are approximately 874,282 meanings for the phrase “shut the door.” I believe they’re all listed one by one on wikipedia, but as an example:

Character A says something, Character B replies “Shut the door.” What does the line mean? As an actor interpreting the role, the only way to know is to put it into context. What happened before? Afterwards? Who are these people? Today, our scene is the top of the show, Act I, Scene One. Here’s the scene:

Lights up: A room with twelve open windows. Snow blows through them, piling up on the floor. The door opens and B enters.

A: It’s freezing in here. Shut the door.

B: Shut the door?

Lights slowly fade.

When I pick up the sides and read this for the first time, I’m going with meaning number three: “Shut the *door*?” (meaning not a window.) - but what does the line mean? It means “You’re an idiot!” and if I’m playing B, that’s how I’ll say “Shut the *door*?!” I’ll look at the snow blowing in, react to A’s line and call A an idiot by saying “Shut the *door*?” in a sneering, contemptuous... wait. I just read the rest of the play. (I’m a quick reader.)

This is Act One, Scene One of a play about an elderly woman (A), whose daughter abandons her. Her long lost son B comes home after three years abroad, and walks in to find that his mother is no longer able to take care of herself. His line “Shut the *door*?” is a realization that his mother suffers from Alzheimer's and might have died if he hadn’t come home. (Number 723,669 in wikipedia.) Delivered correctly, that line might bring the audience to tears.

Too often in auditions, it is painfully apparent that the actor doing their best up on stage with the latest monologue culled from an audition book, or downloaded from an online collection, hasn’t read the play. To portray a character in two minutes is fiendishly difficult - to attempt it when you only have two minutes of that character to work from merely creates another obstacle to landing the role.

I'm not belittling monologue books - I have had several monologues published in various collections, and I think they are invaluable. I'm certainly not casting aspersions on the monologue collections online, I have one of my own, but the first step when you have found that perfect monologue that speaks to you, that highlights your strengths and illustrates your type, is to read the play it came from.

To use an example from one of the monologues I offer on my site: *Svetlana* from the play *A Gulag Mouse*.

Svetlana is talking to Anastasia, who has returned from a tryst with a prison guard, and she starts out:

There is no shame in this place. The walls, and the dogs, and the guards... there is no shame here. It is only survival. You do what you have to. Lubov, tell Anastasia. You have been to the guard house - you know these things, tell her. Speak words of comfort.

(beat)

She has no words to give you only because she too must find a way to survive.

... And she continues. If you download this monologue for an audition, it will stand alone and serve you pretty well. If, however, you have read the entire play, you know that Lubov is hiding a knife under her pillow, and is waiting for Anastasia to lie down, whereupon Lubov will stab her in the neck... *and Svetlana knows this!*

Svetlana, when she tells Lubov "You know these things, tell her" is using meaning number 365,288 in wikipedia: *Don't kill her*. If we really want to get picky it's meaning 365,289: *I'm trying to tell you not to kill her without telling her what's going on, because then there'll be a fight and someone will get killed, but if I can convince you to empathize with her and put the knife away maybe we can all get through this night*.

That's what's going on - and when one actor gets up and auditions having only read the monologue, and another auditions knowing the entire play, and the subtext, and plays the character with all those conflicting levels... guess who's gonna get the part?

I use examples from my own work because I can quote them without worrying about who has the rights, but this holds true for any monologue from any source. Read the play. Do the homework, because without it, you're going up on stage with the barest of tools to work with. In a well written monologue, there are multiple levels of meaning, there are 874,282 different options... read the play. Find the context for your monologue: Who, where, when. What happened before, what happens after and what are they trying to accomplish by saying this monologue, at this time, in this place?

Don't tell your dying Mom she's an idiot when you tell her "Shut the *door*?"

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