

# Creating Memorable Stage Characters

## Untitled Document

I received a query from an elderly gentleman who wanted me read his autobiographical manuscript. His life story was actually the stories of the many memorable people he had encountered in 93 years. The names included common people as well as those from a history book such as Jack Dempsey, Lowell Thomas, and Henry Ford. But of all the people he described, two names leapt out at me: Rumpety Grunewald and Sally Bang.

After reading the brief descriptions of Rumpety and Sally, I created vivid images of these people and decided that they would make wonderful characters. This is the essence of creating a memorable stage character: using real people and filtering them through your imagination.

Elements of character include a name, physical appearance, emotions, and actions. You are not out to create a real person but a believable character that an audience will remember. Play Dr. Frankenstein and take bits and pieces of character traits from several people and make them into one character. However, your character is often not fully realized until portrayed by an actor. Provide a solid foundation for an actor to work with, but do not stifle the characterization with too much detail.

You can discover character by observing people. Pick a people-gathering location and watch various types of people and note their actions, dress, and mannerisms. One of the most memorable characters I ever saw was on a hunting trip with my father when I about 13. He was a big guy with scars across his face, and wore pistols and a knife. If you asked why, he would regale you about his close encounter with a bear when his rifle jammed and from that time on he never went anywhere without being loaded for a bear.

## Names

Names are an audience's first glimpse into a character, and they can add to a character's presence. They can hint at a character's personality (Rock), reflect a certain time period (Abigail Williams), point to an established character or genre (Blanche, Marlowe), or be symbolic (Billy Pilgrim). Unless you are going for broad slapstick (Bunny Wigglesworth), they should be based in reality. When I'm stuck for a name, I look through a book of baby names, combine the names of people I know, and check rosters of sports teams.

## Physical Description

Don't overemphasize a character's description because you can't predict the casting of your show, especially in schools and community theaters, where physical types can be limited. Describe a character physically as you would describe someone to a police officer. Present the basics: age, build, coloring, and ethnicity. Also describe any important peculiarities and clothing.

## Emotions, Traits, and Actions

While separate entities, a character's emotions, traits, and actions work together to make a character whole and memorable. The trick is to make each element believable and consistent for the character's being. It is hard not to think of any type of fussy, particular character without thinking of Felix Unger nor his play mate and counterpart, sloppy Oscar Madison. When Felix asks Oscar what about him that irritates Oscar, it isn't just the cooking, the cleaning, the crying, or other annoyances, it's his complete being.

Emotions are what drive a character, and they should be reflected by a character's actions. Characters express their

emotions through actions. Unlike when writing for film or fiction, a playwright often has to make a character's actions bigger or reinforced with dialogue and/or other actions. Your choice of language in describing a character's action and his/her dialogue helps give an actor needed direction. When Stanley Kowalski enters, he bellows at Stella (Hey, there! Stella, Baby!), heaves a package of meat, and utters several one or two word sentences (Catch!, Meat!, Bowling!). Williams' use of words describes Stanley. If he gently handed Stella package of meat and said, "Here are the pork chops you asked me to get from the butcher, dear," he would be a whole 'nother Stanley.

"Sally Bang dropped her handkerchief over cigarette butts and put them in her purse. At home she shucked the tobacco and put it in her pipe." This action can be the starting point for great characterization. If Sally carefully drops her handkerchief, you could see her as a less refined Blanche DuBois. If she does it brazenly, or with another emotion, it makes her a completely different character.

### Putting it together

"Rumpety Grunewald came to town every Saturday. He had a swayback horse and an enclosed buggy that was about to fall over. He stood in front of the bank shucking peanuts and talking to people. Rumpety was the town's honey dipper. He cleaned out the outhouses with a long pole that had a bucket on the end."

In this description, you have the foundation for creating a memorable character. Put him in an appropriate setting: a small town in the first part of the 20th century. Start with his name. Rumpety Grunewald gives the impression of being a comic character or perhaps, with its hard sound, one with a nasty disposition. Then create a physical description. I imagine Rumpety to be mid-50s, tall and gaunt. Like his horse and wagon, he has seen better days. He wears a worn hat and coat, overalls, and boots encrusted with dried mud and slop.

An emotion I would give Rumpety is anger. He is angry because work is becoming scarce. He cannot stop progress as more and more people are putting in indoor plumbing. He has cleaned outhouses for much of his life and now his livelihood is being taken away. How does he feel and act? Think of what it is like if you or someone you know has lost a job. Those feelings have not changed. Maybe Rumpety feels betrayed because his friends no longer hire him and avoid him, or perhaps he feels helpless and obsolete.

Using anger as an underlying emotion, how does Rumpety act? Instead of standing in front of the bank, shucking peanuts, and talking to people, maybe he comes to town on Saturday, drinks heavily, throws peanuts at people, and insults them. Maybe he tosses buckets of waste on buildings or at people.

Meanwhile, Sally Bang lives in a once fashionable part of the town. Like her house, Sally is also a fading flower but refuses to give in. As her name indicates, she will not go out without a fight. Unlike Rumpety, while grounded in the past, she embraces the present. This small, petite woman has a fiery personality. She wears modern dresses that may not suit her age, but no one dares tell her. The emotion that drives her is strength. Like Rumpety, she does not have much money, so she collects cigarette butts to smoke in her pipe.

By filtering these descriptions through your imaginations, you should be able to create completely different characterizations of Rumpety Grunewald and Sally Bang.

Randy Rehberg is an award-winning playwright, including Best Play from the Wisconsin Regional Writers Association, and his work has been produced in Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri, and Alaska.

© 2008