

The Working Actor

The Four Keys to Translating Director-Speak

By **Stephen Tobolowsky** | Posted Feb. 6, 2014, 4:04 p.m.

I was watching classic movies the other night. There is almost no better laboratory for studying the evolution of film over the last century.

You can watch the changing standards for feminine beauty. In silent films, sex appeal was innocence. In the '40s, it was worldliness and the ability to accept a man even if he lived in Casablanca. In the modern era, sexy means being ripped, even if a woman doesn't have the money for a personal trainer.

The biggest change has been behind the scenes—the directors. Showmen like Mack Sennett gave way to narrative artists like John Ford, who gave way to revolutionary technicians like George Lucas.

Today, you never know who will be in the director's chair. In the last couple of years I have worked with directors who got their training in film school, in improvisation, in animation, in standup comedy, and in doing bad sitcoms for years. Each director approaches a script differently. More importantly, each director has different expectations and limitations in working with actors. In the old days, you could count on directors having a theater background. You could have discussions about "your motivation." That is no longer a given. Sometimes a director will say something confusing like, "When are you going to be funny?" Or

“Can you bend your knees and lean sideways when you walk? It looks better on camera.” What tools can you use to translate director-speak? I rely on four keys.

1. I ask myself, what is my character’s greatest hope and greatest fear? The answer provides real boundaries I can work within—even if I am walking sideways.
2. When I am rehearsing on my own, I never tie myself to a specific performance. I will imagine the scene on my feet, sitting down, in a car, making breakfast. You never know. I had a courtroom scene on “CSI: Miami.” I assumed it would be shot in a courtroom. They ran out of time. The director said, “We’re losing the light and our set. Let’s do this scene running out to the parking lot.”
3. High-definition cameras lend themselves to hand-held shots. The “swinging single” pops up all the time for getting lots of coverage quickly. I have a rule of thumb: The more the camera moves, the more naturalistic the performance should be. Even in comedy. The moving camera creates a faux-documentary style, with the director saying, “We just happened to have our film crew with us today. Talk about luck!” When the camera is stationary, the director is saying, “I am telling you a story. Sit and watch.” The size of the performance can rise to match the narrative.
4. The biggest key, the one you must never forget, even if your director can’t communicate what he or she is looking for: It is always about the story. When in doubt, discuss with the director how you see your role in the story. Find agreement. Then everyone should live happily ever after.

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