"You mean like John Cleese?"

By Nigel Higgs.
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So, there I am, at a party, an exhibition or some sort of 'do' and someone says: "So, what do you do...?". My mind groans, but I smile anyway and say, "Well, I'm an actor."

"Oh, really. What sort of acting do you do?" comes back the inevitable reply.

I take a deep breath and plunge in, "Actually, what I do is use acting and drama techniques and apply them in the business environment. Management training, that sort of thing."

"Oh, you mean, like John Cleese?"

"Yes. Well, no, not exactly. His work is mainly video; ours is mainly live."

"Live?" they say, surprised.

"Yes, live. Like in the Theatre."

It's usually at this point that they start to look bewildered. "There are lots of different applications. It's surprising how many", I explain. And that, in essence, is the point of this article.

The different ways acting skills can be applied in the commercial sector are perhaps surprising if you're not an actor (or if you are an actor and don't have any business experience). After all, actors and business people don't immediately appear to have very much in common. It's that reputation for actors being larger than life, being, well, "Actorish". All those "Daaahlings" and "luvvies" and the like.

Well, some of that is true, to a degree, but think about what actually happens in the theatre. A group of people, typically with rather sensitive egos, who have never met before, get together and work extremely intensely on a project that will only last for three or four months, if they're lucky. They have to be creative, to give and receive ideas and information. They have to work together as a team so that they can create a product which will be original, interesting and will sell. It sounds pretty much like any other business really.

But of course actors are regularly used in business, as actors. Advertising and promotional videos have long used drama (and actors) to get across complex messages about the values of a company, how it feels to be a customer, how to use the company's products or services or what working for the organisation is like.

In training videos, drama is used in a similar way, whether it's the generic work of companies like Video Arts (with that man Cleese) or Melrose, or produced specifically for a company's sole use. In these, the objective is often to demonstrate examples of good and bad behaviour in particular situations.

What such training and promotional material have in common, apart from being on video, is that they need to convey emotions and viewer-identification in a short time period - Suspension of Disbelief, something that is almost impossible to do with the printed word alone. The viewer is being asked to identify, or even sympathise with the experiences of the characters in the video - which, if successful, makes learning more effective.

It's not only on video that actors are used as actors. In 'industrial theatre', what is important is having the live characters actually there. The situation can be tightly scripted, or totally improvised, but it will have an impact and immediacy that just is not possible on video. On an exhibition stand, it will grab the attention of passers by; at a conference it will provide a memorable moment; it allows for great creativity and flexibility of approach. And, of course, since most actors spend most of their time 'resting', they are prepared to do anything, be anything, to earn a crust. Although, when you have to dress up as a mosquito, a hypodermic syringe, a tablet, mussel or some such, the theatre of the absurd no longer seems so absurd!

But things do not always have to be quite so extreme; industrial theatre can be subtle and still make an impact. It is essentially about demonstrating ideas rather than just telling people about them. It can make people think and, when it comes down to it, that is what is needed - even if it's only to emphasise the effect a livid green shellfish can have an the human digestive system.

So far we've only looked at areas of drama which we are used to experiencing: the 'product', the performance. The next step is where the 'audience' begin to participate in the action, on the basis that learning points are better retained through experience than demonstration. (Was it Confucius who said, "I hear I forget; I see I remember; I do I understand"?) The point is: there are areas within drama which allow people to explore training situations in more depth, with a reality which you can't get from demonstration alone.

Using role-play in training is well established, but it is becoming more and more common for companies to use real, live actors rather than other members of staff or trainers. The actor is briefed on and researches a number of characters, then is put into a situation with the trainee and improvises his/her way through the situation, allowing the trainee to deal with the problems that arise as if they were "reality".

The difference between using actors and other trainees or colleagues is marked. It brings an energy to the situation and the effect can be unnerving. For example, some trainees have found themselves totally at a loss for words when confronted by the raw anger of a person who has just been told they are going to be made redundant. Or moved to tears when helping someone deal with a the grief generated from a bereavement. The emotions released in these situations can range from clamming up to blowing up, sometimes with everything in between thrown in for good measure. Most trainees, in my experience, remark on the reality of the situations they experienced or watched, and usually want to try it again and experiment with other scenarios.

This sort of work puts failure into perspective, allowing trainees to learn from their mistakes and to know to a greater extent how a given situation will feel in reality.

But from the actor's point of view, role-play work is still a performance, even though it is improvised. It uses the familiar skills of building a credible character. But what of the techniques which allow actors to seem so at ease on stage? The exercises and games that actors use in their training and rehearsal work can also be applied with great benefit in the workplace. Take presenting, for example.

Presentations are the fear centre of many an executive's nightmare. "What if I forget what I'm supposed to say, or miss a bit out? What if I start stuttering again? Why does my stomach churn up so badly? Have I included everything I need? Why do I need to go to the toilet just before I start?" Then, afterwards, "Did they understand those slides? Why didn't I put them in the right order? Why couldn't I say 'deteriorating' properly? And, why was I so nearly late because I had to go to the toilet?" When it comes to presentations, the combination of nerves, dry mouths, loose bowels and fear of looking a fool can cause a normal, sane, competent person to crumble into a gibbering wreck.

I can still remember the first time I stepped onto a stage (leaving the wc cubicle door flapping in my wake) trying desperately to remember my first line, any of my lines, and wishing I'd taken up something less traumatic as a profession - like bomb disposal. Now I find that it's become easier to make an exhibition of myself by using the techniques that other, more seasoned, actors passed on to me in those moments of terror.

I remember one saying, "Try breathing normally instead of hyperventilating, it helps."
Another asked, "Have you learnt your lines properly?"
"Yes," I replied, slightly irritated.
"Entrances and exits?"
"Of course," even more irritated.
"Then why are you worried? It's all in there, all you have to do is let it come out."
"Ay, there's the rub," I thought.

But I have learned how to do it. And the techniques - breathing, relaxation, voice exercises, the whole business of writing something to be spoken, and many more - are just as applicable to someone who may be experiencing the same problems presenting in a business situation.

Experience of direction, too, is a great help in finding different ways to work on those areas of presentation technique which need improving. One approach is to use exaggeration to explore the problem in question. So, for example, someone who is very

stiff and static may be asked to present 'like an Italian' (Stereotypically speaking, of course!) or to present while running erratically around the room. The trainees explore the areas they don't normally access and to use these areas to enhance their presentation technique. All these exercises, with trainer and fellow trainee support, allows that exploration, and soon actions which once seemed abnormal, soon evolve into normality.

Although presentation is an area where acting techniques are used rather than acting itself, it is still primarily about performance. But since drama and acting are, at heart, about communicating, there are other areas where such techniques can be applied. Many years before I discovered acting, I used to work in Architecture. In a typical architects' office, as in many other offices around the country, many disparate individuals were thrown together and called a "team", ostensibly to design and supervise the construction of many a carbuncle on the face of civilisation. Inevitably, people being people and architects being architects, there were disagreements, jealousy reared its head, rumours ran rife (especially after the Christmas party) and resignations were threatened left right and centre, and some were accepted with alacrity.

Very little was done to promote trust or communication within the "team". In fact, it seemed that the only concessions made by many companies to promoting teamwork were the annual cricket/football match, or the infrequent challenges from one company's darts team to another. These darts matches were a common occurrence at the Architects I used to work for, and were great fun. The only thing was, the people in the darts team were not the same people I worked with on a day-to-day basis in "the team", so it didn't really help enhance our "teamwork" back in the office.

At the beginning of this article, I briefly described the problems faced by a group of actors when they are brought together to become a cast - having to get to know and trust one another in a very short time. And it is the exercises and games that actors use, together with the nurturing of a supportive atmosphere, which allow the separate individuals to become a team. These exercises and games cover physical, mental and emotional areas and promote open communication between each member of the group. The objective is to use these techniques with the team so that they learn to 'play' together, to explore and solve problems together. Such play need not be frivolous, it can take many forms. Technical, interactive, personal, social problems - in fact, any communication based problem - can be explored in a very supportive and creative way. In work that we have carried out with some teams, we have noticed that some members have a preconceived idea that they already know each other well but, as they work together using these games and exercises, they discover more and more about each other's hidden depths. This builds a sense of camaraderie which is carried over into the workplace. Such camaraderie may not last indefinitely, as the group will develop and evolve within itself and members may change, but the tools they have learnt to use will give them a method for handling future conflicts.

Theatre games combined with role-play, life-skill games and improvisation, can be used in training in many different areas. It is an extremely powerful way to explore, and hence learn about, different aspects of person-to-person interaction. Selling, customer service, negotiation, crisis management, teamwork, and meetings are just some of the areas which can be explored using these techniques. The fact that no two people are the same means that, in these areas, although there are general principles, there are few hard and fast rules about the 'right' way and 'wrong' way to do things, only what works for the participants.

Using acting techniques and drama puts delegates in a creative frame of mind, allowing them to look at things from varying perspectives, putting aside preconceptions and discovering what does work for them. After all, the essence of theatre is exploration and risk, Going Boldly Where No Person Has Gone Before, and enjoying the journey as much as the arrival. And used in training, it can make learning fun as well as challenging. Anyway, the next time somebody asks me what I do for a living, maybe I should just say "I help people communicate.".... Better not, they'll probably think I work in PR.... "Management training"? Perhaps, but that leaves out the industrial theatre.... Never mind, I'm sure I'll come up with something pithy and effective, eventually. In the meantime, I'd better stick to saying I'm an actor and steel myself to having to explain.