

TIPS ON PLAYING A DRAMATIC ROLE:

The following is a series of questions to ask yourself about your character as you work on a performance.

- 1) What is your name? Does that name mean anything? For instance, in the *Henry IV* plays, we find two prostitutes with the amusing names of Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet, which implies something about the working girls' bedroom habits! The Puritan in *Twelfth Night* is called Malvolio, literally Italian for a "bad turn" or "ill-will." What does your name suggest about your character?
- 2) What is your character's role in the play? Do others like or dislike you? Whom do you like or dislike? Are you high ranking or low ranking? How will you demonstrate your superiority or subservience to characters of different rank?
- 3) How do people describe you? Read these words closely; they are hidden stage directions regarding dress, appearance, and mannerisms. In one text, Queen Anne refers to Richard III as a "rooting pig." How do we interpret that? Does that mean he tends to grunt and make piggy noises when overly excited or angry? Is it a reference to unfortunate dining habits, which might require some food as a stage prop? Does it refer to his house emblem, the Boar of Gloucester--indicating a herald holds up his coat-of-arms in the background as Anne speaks? The possibilities are many, if you read closely.
- 4) How do you interact with the setting? In the opening act of *Hamlet*, one of the guards complains, "'Tis bitter cold." How should the guard be dressed on stage? What physical actions should he perform to reflect the setting on a dark winter's night in Denmark? He could warm his hands over a fire, shiver and tighten his coat, or let his teeth chatter between lines. If the character is lost in a forest, like Hermione in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, how should she move about the stage to reflect her disorientation, irritation, or fear about her situation?
- 5) What words should you stress or unstress in your speech? Some words you might emphasize out of context, but if there is no context, try scanning the words to determine meter (See the scanning exercise here in the Course Packet for help).
- 6) How should you walk on stage? A braggart might strut, a beggar might cringe, a fool might skip, a prostitute might flaunt her hips. Half of what makes a character real is appropriate movement.
- 7) What are the basic themes, symbols, and the mood of the scene you are acting? How can you convey those ideas on stage in a visual or audible way?

Other Basic Tips:

- 1) Don't be afraid to ham it up. I will never criticize over-acting, only under-acting. Have fun. Remember what the word "play" means, in all its senses.
- 2) Project! Nobody ever spoke lines on stage too loudly. Even if you are whispering, you must whisper in such a way that the back row can hear you.
- 3) Work out blocking ahead of time. Who will stand where? Is every character visible to the audience? Does the stance look natural while still arranging the stage in a dramatic and aesthetic manner?
- 4) When you aren't talking, don't just stand around. That looks painfully artificial. React to what others say and do with facial expressions, or occupy yourself in the corner with realistic solitary tasks suitable for the stage setting.
- 5) Don't be afraid to use facial expressions. It paid off for Jim Carrey. Let it pay off for you.
- 6) Be safe, but don't be afraid to be physical. If other actors are forewarned, you can throw objects on stage. Wrestle a little when you fight. If you use props that are reasonably soft and safe, you can be reasonably vigorous in stage fights. Just take reasonable precautions to avoid gouging out each other's eyes.