



Improvisation in Commercials

by Sandra Merrill

Improvisation is the cornerstone of most commercial auditions. I refer to the commercial audition as the “empty room”, and it’s the actors’ job to fill the room with their imagination. Reacting to an elephant in your office, stacking a pile of imaginary bricks, or in the case of an MOS spot (without recorded sound) creating dialogue, are all components of the commercial audition. In these instances, the actor is expected to think quickly and creatively, in a very short amount of time.

Commercials are usually void of big dramatic moments, relying instead on specific actions: drinking coffee, waiting for a bus, or looking at a computer screen. These are called “slice-of- life” spots, in which the actor needs to breathe life into small, everyday occurrences. Since good acting is based on “doing”, a technique that works well in keeping the actor engaged is called the inner monologue; the thoughts that occupy your mind when you’re fully focused. If you create an inner monologue while you’re drinking coffee, or waiting for the bus, your thinking will inform your actions. If the scene takes place in a movie theater, and the note is you’re watching an action movie, decide which action movie it is your watching. In this way you won’t be acting in a vacuum, as you’ve created something in your mind to watch on the “imaginary screen”. (Certainly, actors are required to do this anytime their acting against a green screen).

What is referred to as “object work” or “space work” will also help an actor’s performance. If you’re action is to push a shopping cart, or vacuum the rug, the ability to create and visualize is extremely important. In looking in the refrigerator for something to eat, you’ll do well to envision the contents of the refrigerator. Maybe you’ll push aside the remaining box of pizza and smell some left-over Chinese food, before lighting upon the desired object. Try to be specific in your choices, as this will keep the scene moving and your attention focused. The use of props, if they’re not provided, is usually an actor’s decision. Rule of thumb however, is the object chosen needs to be the real thing. You can use your cell phone in the audition to talk to a friend, but you can’t use a water bottle as a pretend microphone. Sometimes a prop will act to ground the actor in a scene. If the task is getting the family out of the house, as you rush on your way to work, then putting a jacket, purse, or briefcase in the scene might be your final piece of business. In incorporating a prop, make sure it doesn’t encumber the scene; once you have something in your hand, you’ll have to set it aside, if another action is needed.

When acting in an MOS scene with another actor, where there is no scripted dialogue, remember the adage, less is more. It’s best if you can create an action to drive the scene, using dialogue sparingly. Remember you’re not hired to be the copywriter, and you don’t want the scene to run out of steam once you run out of things to say. In creating naturalistic dialogue, the product shouldn’t be mentioned. If you’re waiting in line at a McDonald’s with your friend, it’s not okay to say “I can’t wait to try the new double bacon deluxe cheeseburger”, but you could talk about your date last night.

Actors who have sharpened their improvisational skills, have a higher success rate in booking commercials.