

We make objects, objects make us

Handbook for teachers in process of character building and history understanding through an object



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Age of students: 7–15

If you use drama in your work, have you come to the problem of how to build a character for the stage? Have you thought of using objects? Objects are giving us a unique opportunity to learn about a particular time and the people who were using them.

In this text, will be presented how to use material objects in the process of character understanding and building. The aim is to support you and offer you tools to work with students to stag performance and improve text understanding.

This method is also suitable for teaching history, as history is marked by improvement of object production and use.

How about discovering the future and inventing objects, fashion, persons, and events like on the picture?

Keep in mind that process of character building and understanding need time. Any of suggested questions and activities can take up to one class.

*At the heart of the notion of biography are questions about the links between people and things*¹



So how can we build a character based on an object?

You will be surprised how students change themselves and get easily into the character just by holding an object. There is something about thinking of yourself, or your character self, when you are concentrated on the object in your hands. But to start this process, you must find a proper object.

How to find a proper object?

In the theater setting, every object must have justification to be on the stage. What object is it, why it is there, and where is its place on the stage? Of even bigger importance is the correlation of the object and the character.

In theater and for the story, a good object is the one that is recognized by everyone (or most people) in audience. For example, in our culture it may be a spoon, vase, dress, sock, table, window, scarf, chair, glasses, coat, pot. These are all objects that are a recognizable part of someone's identity but also objects that are easy to manipulate on stage and that have cultural values attached to them.

1. Gosden C. and Y. Marshall. 1999. 'The Cultural Biography of Objects' *World Archaeology* vol 31 no 2: 169-178.

Practical steps in the process of building object and character correlation:

1. Selection of object

You are the one who is selecting the object. More importantly, you are the one who knows why you made that decision. You can also ask students to bring objects, but you must explain what object and why. Remember to ALWAYS bring spare objects as not everyone will come ready for the class.

If you are working on a text with your students, look for objects in it. Read in advance and select parts of the text where students can find objects they can use in drama. If you are teaching history, connect characters with object that have been invented/ produced for the first time in their era. Bring texts or pictures that present object and lets students comment them as a character.



The picture's three characters are few of many characters from the performance BLOCK done by DDT company from Belgrade. All characters are wearing BIG wigs which are characteristic for the specific historical time or generation they are part of. BLOCK is a building and playground for elderly who are gathering for coffee. One is old and letting her hair to show it, other is dyeing her hair, following latest fashion and third one is romantic soul who is lost in Jane Austen's stories. As they sit by their window, they look at young

characters with big bold hairstyles of punk era and new age beauties. The bottom of the building is reserved to the mail character of his 60 something years acting as a 20-year-old not noticing his old age. Buildings are like time machine and interesting to observe and be staged.

2. Exploration

Give time to students to meet objects. Humans like objects. We are curios. We invent things and uses of the things; we build relationships with the objects.

Depending on students' age, give proper amount of time to experiment with the object and to fill its texture. Encourage students to find its purpose and a way of using it. For example, we all hold our pencil in a different way, we also have unique hand write style.

There is always underlying technology, economy, and social relations of the community that produced the object, the person who has the object and the object itself. These are all important elements for building your character like the time and place character was living in. Correct identification of these aspects will make your performance more credible and richer.

You can prepare a questionnaire for students to fill:

1. Objects name- if you don't know- write in your own words
2. What is it made from- what material(s) and how does it feel like (sharp, soft)
3. How is it made and by whom (is it from a factory or is it handmade at home)
4. How old is it; from where it is
5. What is its price and value. Also consider how did it change in time
6. What was it made for; how was it used and is it still in use
7. Who was using it (child, only king, someone with clean hands)

You can use what you need from this list for your class or invent your own questions. Let students know before giving them the questioner that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions and that they can invent their own questions.

Maybe you can provide them with “Expert’s pencil” for this. Expert’s pencil knows all the answers. In other words, it can be a special pencil box that you use only for occasions when you want students to write without fear of their opinion.

3. Object and it’s use

How is the object used? Ask your students about their opinion and let them show you. Also ask how their parents or grandparents would answer this question. Or anyone else they know. At a beginning, we want to let them talk about their personal experience. This will later bring us to the development of characters we do not know. Remember that students can be innovative with answers and that is OK. Once I had an answer that a coffee pot is a hat. It turned out that the character behind that answer was a grandma who is suffering from dementia. She was an interesting and strong character to work on. Anyhow, objects may have more than one function, some more obvious than others.

4. Who is your character

Now that we know few things about the object, it is time to put it in the hands of our character.

To start with, we want to define who is the character? Gender, age, weight, height, education, historical time they are coming from. What is their name, nickname? How are they walking, sleeping, eating and what is their favorite music? Will they be left or right-handed?

You can let your students invent these answers, after all, they are the character now. Nonetheless, you can always find them from text and let students search for the answers by carefully reading selected pages.

5. Object and character

Ask question about the object from the character’s point of view:

- Where did they get it from and how much did they pay for it?
- Do they like it or not?
- Are they forced to use it, or do they enjoy it?
- Would your character borrow this object to someone? To whom and why?
- Are they keeping it for themselves in a safe place?
- If your object is a piece of clothing - is it comfortable to wear?
- Is the object a secret or something that your character is well known for?

6. Revisiting what we did so far

Ask students if it all sounds realistic. Would this character really have this object as you describe it, or should we change something? Should we change the object? Or is it so good that we should put it in the center of our stage action?

This exercise should be done in pairs or small groups. Usually, students themselves cannot objectively look at their own answers. Acknowledge that everyone in the group did good, but that theater is made by a group of people who work together by observing and correcting each other. The director is consulting designer to produce a costume, and actors, or in this case characters, are giving life and movement to that costume on the stage.

7. Stage movement and manipulation of object

Once we know more about the object and the character, we can experiment how the character would use it on stage.

For example, if our character paid good money for the object, they will most likely take good care of it. What hand does our character use for that object?

Also, object's original function may become irrelevant during the performance. Maybe our character has no use for it, or they no longer know how and for what the object was originally used.

8. Then and now, character and me

What would other characters do with this same object? This is interesting from a historical point and stage dynamic. It is the base of characters' relationship and interaction. It can be a source of conflict or the heart of the story. We should be able to see what characters are thinking of each other based on the way they are treating the same object.

Example in practice

Possessing an object and using it makes us ourselves. Let's say you are building a character and you choose to base it on their reading glasses: glasses are nice and easy object to work with. I recommend glasses for beginners, both teachers and students. But they are also good for teens as one can hide behind sunglasses.

In the right, is a picture of the performance POINT, which I did with students between age of 9 and 15 years for the Youth Theater PATOS. We were using sunglasses and medieval fortress as scenography.

Characters we were discovering were young people and the subject was their struggles, relationships, rights, and environment. I decided to use sunglasses as for me it was something students can use to hide behind. They were coming on stage as themselves and seating on chairs that were in a



typical classroom arrangement one behind other. At a moment when they pulled out sunglasses and placed them on, they became a character that was a youth advocacy who talked strongly about and against peer violence.

First, I asked the students how they use sunglasses, what they think about their own pair of sunglasses and to show me that. Then we talked about who is wearing sunglasses, what is different between people who wear sunglasses and themselves and can they show me that on stage. During the conversations, we got a list of characters, places and actions or behaviors that became material and body of our performance.

Fortress as a stenography was chosen to give a strength to their voices. Fortress is an important cultural monument to their city. Fortress does not only belong in the past; it is also a part of student's identity and their city. And that's where the name of performance came from. We wanted to make POINT out of children's rights, and we wanted to put point to end up peer violence. We used fortress as a strong point in the city.

Here are a few things to think about when using glasses:

- What glasses will you bring to the class? Old ones, new, or several for the students to choose from? It is up to you, and your budget.
- What is the usage of glasses? Would your character use glasses to hide or to show off? Or would they use glasses for holding their hair back?
- Think about how important glasses are for your character, maybe they will have them secure with neckline and will never put them on hair in order not to stretch them. On the other side, if they borrowed or inherited glasses, will they lose them all the time, put them in their pocket etc.
- Build unique body movements for the character based on the use of the object. An 80 years old will not hold glasses like 5 years old. This is something we must think of and show on the stage.

For the end

Don't forget to look at what happened to the objects when they came to the end of their 'use-lives'? Marie Kondo writes about objects that 'spark joy', encouraging us to get rid of things.² This is an important question to ask students as it may change their relationship with objects they have or what they wish to have. We are living in a time of mass production. It is our responsibility to teach students how to respect objects and their culture.