

South African Drama

Portraying a character

In this lesson we take a look at characterisation. In the video lesson, actors from “The Suitcase” explain how they develop the characters that they play so that we, the audience, believe they are real individuals in the world of the story. Understanding how characters are created will help you to analyse characters when you are reading or watching a play.

Lesson Outcomes

By the end of this lesson you should be able to:

- define the term characterisation
- explain how an actor develops a character
- explain how characterisation techniques make the character seem real to the audience

Curriculum Links

LO2: Reading and Viewing

- recognise how dialogue and action are related to character and theme

Lesson Notes

When you watch a play, it is important to remember that we understand characters and their emotions through things like their movements, gestures, facial expressions and voice quality.

We also need to consider their appearance and the way they interact with other characters and elements, like props. If you are aware of this, you will be able to work out how characters are portrayed on stage and you will be able to comment on the process of characterisation.

Understanding the context of the play

The process of characterisation begins when the actor first reads the text of the play to see what information the playwright has given about the character, for example, when and where he or she lived. The actor also listens to the director’s vision for the play.

Developing movement, gestures and facial expressions

To develop a character’s unique mannerisms, actors may watch people who are similar to their characters to get ideas about the kind of movements, gestures and voices they want to use. Actors may also do research into the cultural or social background of the characters that they play. Actors then use this knowledge and the observations to create their character.



Voice quality

Voice is such a powerful tool when it comes to developing a character that, even on its own, it can transform the character into someone else. To create a distinct voice

for each character, the actor will also observe and listen to how people speak and how they use their voices in different situations, paying special attention to the way people express different emotions.

Interactions with other characters

Through an understanding of their own character’s personality and temperament, actors develop interactions and relationships with other characters. An in-depth understanding of what motivates their character enables actors to react to situations or to respond to another actor as the character they are playing and not as themselves.

Costumes and props

Costumes and props also help an actor bring a character to life and tell the audience the story. They do this by providing a layer of reality, a representation of things that come from the world outside the play, that are familiar to the audience and to which they can relate.

TASK

Write a paragraph in which you describe the personality of each character portrayed in the following two descriptions. Substantiate your answer by explaining how the personality of each character is portrayed.

1. The woman who dances on the bus wears a vibrantly coloured flowing skirt. She dances with joy and moves her body and arms sensually, using a lot of space as she twists, turns and spins around, smiling playfully at the man playing the guitar and making eye contact with the audience and other actors.
2. The woman who leaves the suitcase has a hunched posture. She walks slowly and doesn’t take up much space. She is constantly looking around to see who is watching her and keeps her head down. She is wearing a cream shawl over her head and shoulders and carrying an old brown suitcase.