

FEEL THE PASSION OF YOUR CHARACTERS: MOVE!

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If you find yourself sitting at your keyboard tapping, tapping, tapping—not the keys but your desk because you're trying to conjure up your characters' sensations, stand up. Do what your character is supposed to be doing.

Top actors like Michael Caine develop their characters by moving—just as they believe their characters would. The night before shooting, they often act the same way they expect to on the set—standing, sitting, drinking, eating—moving furniture as they need to accommodate the scene. Sometimes their character's natural movement is on the page, sometimes it's not.

Doesn't matter.

Moving a certain way when you start to push yourself into motion won't "lock" you into any specific action—it only tells your body and mind that you must move. Your character's subtext—her feelings, her attitude—will dictate how she actually moves when you allow yourself to fill up with her.

Many actors prepare for their roles by wearing the type of shoes they believe their character would. Shoes naturally affect the way we walk, a most basic movement.

Are they too small? Too tight? Too large? Snazzy? Plain? Cheap? Expensive? Did the character buy a ritzy pair of used shoes for next to nothing on eBay.com?

More, it's not just the expense, size or style, it's the condition (beat up, highly polished, neat, messy, torn laces), the color—which may or may not compliment

the character's clothes, or each shoe may be a different color. How about the shoestring color and length, and even whether penny loafers actually have pennies embedded in them.

If the loafers have pennies—what is the year and condition of each penny? Do both shoes have pennies? Are they from different years or does one have none at all?

These and many more personal and environmental influences determine how your character reacts to them, and therefore how s/he moves.

Imagine how these things affect the way someone moves: he bites his nails; she keeps pulling her bra strap up under her blouse, his pants are too tight but he keeps trying to inhale to make himself appear thinner, she continually twirls her hair with her first finger.

Do you understand how these "minor" movements give your character depth?

It's not important for you to mention every tic, nose wipe or butt scratch in your script or novel. But it's important for you to do it because these details fill you with a sense of how the character would react physically to everything else, and how s/he feels.

What I mean is best illustrated by a story about Broadway producer Flo Zigfield. His backers wanted him to trim costs. They particularly objected to expensive French slips and underwear the women in the chorus wore.

"No one can even see them. No one even knows they're there," they complained.

"The girls know they're there," replied Zigfield.

OBSTACLES

Imagine the other things that affect anyone's movement. How about a physical disability? Wearing glasses for a vision problem is so common for people in developed nations, they don't usually consider it an impairment.

If you wear glasses however, try making your way through the day without them. Or, remember how they slide down your nose when you sweat? Or, how you need glasses holders to keep them from becoming lost? How they are put in their case? Gently and reverently, or just tossed in the case? Are they dirty, scratched or pristinely clean?

If your character has a manicure, is it something that would dictate carefully shielding the nails or is it such a common occurrence that it doesn't matter if they get scraped or dirty?

In short, you can start by "walking a

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mile” in someone else’s shoes and filling the character with everyday impediments, problems and frustrations created by doing what they do, and being who they are.

Now let’s complicate a character’s movement. If he is emotionally crippled in some way, he may physically reflect that. Perhaps with a limp, an ongoing headache or other body pain, a lower back problem, bad knee, arthritis, or some other obvious but relatively minor disability which may never be referred to in the script.

Think about a character wincing as she takes a step; it makes us painfully aware that her shoes are too tight. How she reacts to that agony tells us a lot about her.

FEELING YOUR CHARACTER MOVE

I’ve found that this technique is better done alone—or with one other person who might represent another character in your scene.

Several years ago I belonged to a local writer’s group. We read pages aloud from our manuscripts or scripts, then received feedback from the other members.

I was a little frustrated because the action in a mystery novel shared by one writer didn’t ring true. Her characters kept forgetting props and restrictions in their movements. She described them moving pretty freely when, in my opinion, they could not.

It’s sort of like an inept mime trying to do the famous “man in a box” routine, as

physically—according to her own description. The sensations I came up with as I put myself through his gyrations would, in my mind, bring all sorts of color, strength and angst to the scene.

I got down on my knees, used a neckerchief to wrap my wrists behind my back and a handkerchief around my mouth.

I then attempted to make each movement described by the writer—showing how each was impossible, considering he was bound and gagged. I was so proud of myself for bringing the missing depth and intensity to the scene because of working through what he had to!

A light applause followed my efforts.

However, several weeks later, when new writers joined us, the “mystery writer” warned the newbies that I was essentially a crazy person because I crawled all over the floor and flailed instead of being a civil writer sitting at a desk.

I’m happy to report that when I’ve shared this with actors and writers I coach, they appreciate the tip and we work through scenes having the characters move as they must. The writer/actor determines how the character reacts—I just provide the restraints or obstacles he or she must overcome in the scene.

MOVING RIGHT ALONG

I strongly advise physical activity to boost your creative energy.

finally realizing that what I had written—the stuff I thought was so great when I wrote it under the influence, was, purely and simply, shit.

And to be totally honest, that is an insult to shit.

I now have two dogs to make sure I have to get up from extended hours at the keyboard and play fetch or take care of them in some way; I joined a gym that I really enjoy working out in regularly. It keeps my creative juices flowing.

I carry a small notebook and pen with me so I can write down my thoughts and ideas as I’m doing other things.

And, of course, I have the sheer energizing joy of coaching actors and writers, which keeps my mind popping.

Allowing your mind to keep working out a problem on your mind’s back burner is called “Zen.” It means that while you’re washing dishes, cleaning the car or performing any activity, your mind still works hard trying to figure out how to solve your predicament.

YOU’RE ON THE MOVE, NOW!

Whether you deal with the confinement of a character who uses a wheelchair, or clean your refrigerator to find out if there really is a light inside, you’ll find that you become far closer to your character through Zen.

Remember, unlike us creative-types who sit at these keyboards, your characters don’t

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he continually puts his hands out at different lengths from his body instead of at the same distance. He makes it impossible for us to envision his invisible box because he has shown us no perceptible boundaries.

In the writer’s book, one guy was supposed to be kneeling on the floor, his hands cuffed behind his back with a gag in his mouth. Somehow he did all sorts of things in the office that did not reflect his restraints. The author seemed to disregard or forget how constrained he was.

The writer was not pleased with my feedback—she thought her story flowed just fine.

So I went through the whole scene the only way her character possibly could—

Get up and move. Not as a character, but to get your own personal juices flowing.

Some bestselling writers start their days with physical activity—swimming, running, walking, stretching, yoga or whatever gives them a personal boost.

It’s difficult to put your poetry in motion if you’re stuck at your keyboard, smoking, drinking, or doing anything that cuts you off from your emotions.

Years ago, when I first started writing, I thought that’s what a writer did! I’d have a beer sitting on my desk, a cigarette dangling out of my mouth—I thought that made me a “real” writer!

I stopped drinking and smoking after getting up too many mornings, hung over,

keep themselves chained to a desk (well, unless they’re supposed to be chained to a desk) as they proceed with their lives.

Writers have a propensity to let our fingers do the walking while we’re at work instead of letting our feet do the work.

People who have lived the lives their characters do—like lawyers who write courtroom stories—can rely on recollections of how things happen in a courtroom, but must still give characters a separate soul.

Get it?

You know your characters exist—but they don’t know **you** exist.

So allow them to move freely—and move with them. Breathe enough life into them to permit them to breathe on their own. ■