

You're Getting Warmer

In *My Life in Art*, Stanislavsky wrote, "Let some one explain to me why the violinist who plays in an orchestra on the tenth violin must daily perform hour-long exercises or lose his power to play? Why does the dancer work daily over every muscle of his body? Why do the painter, the sculptor, the writer practice their art each day and count that day lost when they do not work? And why may the dramatic artist do nothing, spend his day in coffee houses and hope for the gift of Apollo in the evening?"

Stanislavsky here is pointing to two related needs that actors have: to train and to warm-up. My hope is that it's already clear to you that good training is important. In this article I'm going to focus on warming up.

A violinist can easily practice alone at home. Actors often believe they have no options to practice their craft unless they're with others. This isn't true. Doing a warm-up on your own is one important way to develop your craft even when you don't have a job, when you're not in the act of working in a class, or you don't have an audition.

Why should I warm up? Acting is a physical, vocal, conceptual, emotional, relational, and creative art. Let's use just the physical aspect as an example: if you were a professional runner, you wouldn't think of running a race without first warming up your muscles. It's true that if you didn't warm up, sometimes things would work out. But more often than you'd like, you'd have to quit the race with a pulled or cramping muscle, and even if you finished the race you might not have run as fast as you could have. A professional actor can gain a lot by adopting the mindset of a professional athlete.

As an actor you are required to use *so many* elements of your humanity. You also need to access them not on your own timing but when the director says, "Action," or when the curtain goes up, or when the casting director is observing you read your sides. You need to have all of yourself available on cue; that's why you warm up. Ideally, a warm-up prepares you to use all of the different parts of yourself and to have them available when you need them.

What specific parts of my self do I need to warm up? This is an individual process and you need to explore what really helps you. But there are some specific areas that are helpful to most actors.

It's helpful to get your muscles warm, including those of your mouth and face, and to get your blood flowing. It's not just heat that you want to generate, but also flexibility and ease of movement.

Warming up your body in ways that help your breathing to become more free and flexible has several advantages: it oxygenates your body and your brain; it gives more power, connection, and flexibility to your voice; it helps you deal better with nerves; and it connects you more directly to your impulses, including your emotions. Warming up

your breathing involves releasing muscles that inhibit your breathing and efficiently engaging muscles that support your being able to breathe easily and spontaneously.

Your imagination plays a crucial role in acting – so a complete warm-up also gives your imagination room to play, and might bring you into the imagined world of the character you're playing. Depending on what it's for, your warm-up may also bring you to the experience of your character in the moment before the scene starts.

For some roles various aspects of your emotional life might be important. Finding a way in your warm-up to access your emotional life, without pushing, might be helpful.

Acting often involves relating with others. Finding a way to make connection is important, especially if that doesn't come easily to you. Usually this requires someone else to practice with, but it's also possible to do in your imagination.

Occasionally you may also want to incorporate more technical skills into your warm-up such as reading unfamiliar material aloud or practicing an accent. How you do that is important – and it's helpful to get training from a good teacher so that it doesn't become just an exercise in speaking words.

Your voice is intimately connected to all aspects of your self. By warming up the areas mentioned above, you are already working on your voice. But a vocal warm-up should also address the openness, responsiveness, and flexibility of your voice. It's crucial that the sounds you make are connected to what you're experiencing, and that at some point you make the transition to communicating with others.

When do I need to warm-up? Every actor is different. The specific occasions that actors warm up for include auditions, shoots, rehearsals, table reads, scenes in acting class, performances, etc. As I'll address in a moment, actors will get the most benefit from warming up almost every day. You may find it's better to do substantial warm-ups hours before and shorter warm-ups shortly before whatever you're preparing for. Again, explore and discover what works for you.

For how long do I need to warm up? The short answer is between five seconds and two hours. It's individual, and it depends on what you're warming up for. A good fifteen to thirty-minute warm-up can do wonders.

Other than preparing for what I'm about to do, is there any value to my warming up? One of the huge advantages of warming up on a regular basis is that you maintain and develop your creative powers. If you warm up five times a week for fifteen to thirty minutes, you'll find that you're able to have more of yourself available more readily when you act.

To go back to the professional runner analogy, you can't expect to excel with just a single warm-up as the sum total of your training. Regular warm-ups and training are important.

They prepare your body and mind to work at their maximum potential. If you've made warming up a regular practice, the warm-up you do before a race will be more effective.

Actors who neither train nor warm-up often miss the boat when great opportunities come their way. You need to be ready to work. If you're not, and you're not doing anything about it, you're not treating yourself like a professional artist.

So what does a warm-up look like? There are many different traditions and many varying approaches. As part of Fitzmaurice Voicework, I teach warm-ups that cover the areas I mentioned above. Because your voice is so connected to every aspect of your humanity, different voice teaching approaches cover these areas in various ways. Some people thrive with one style; others prefer to combine elements of various traditions. No matter what you do, the specifics of your warm-up need to relate with and serve your approach to acting.

What works for you? That question is worth your time exploring. One piece of advice: warming up should prepare you for what you're about to do, and aspects of it should be pleasurable. Warming up should make your life, as well as your art, more satisfying.