The Absence of Speech

Pauses, beats, silences and the concept of compression

Many actors have trouble with the idea of absence on stage. Actors act; by definition, their notion of life on stage is *activity*. That's why it can be difficult for an actor to stay still, to listen rather than overtly react, or to let a silence take its required time. Actors like to be busy. But sometimes the play requires an absence of busy-ness.

When actors do allow absence (and here we'll talk about verbal absence), often it's for the wrong reasons, or at the wrong time. One of the hallmarks of Canadian acting is the *meaningful pause*. We've all seen it, the one where the actor is letting us know how much she is feeling by not letting the text get in the way of her emoting. It's why acting coaches and directors stress acting *on the line*; the rhythm of a play depends upon it, and the life of a line of text requires it. Delivering a line (or hearing a line), and *then* demonstrating emotion, is indulgent. It's like saying something twice because you like the sound of your own voice. Actors love to feel. This is critical to the acting process, of course; but just as critical is the ability to express. Professional actors *compress* feeling and expression into the same beat, delivered on the line, or during their loop partner's line, not in the moments in between.

Not all plays, however, run in one long line without a break. Natural human dialogue contains breaks, stutters, repetitions – and absences. Choosing where a pause or beat takes place, and for how long, is a skill often overlooked in the acting process.

The actor first, as always, should take her cue from the text. Playwrights are helpful at varying levels with this. Just as there are indulgent actors, there are indulgent playwrights. An indulgent playwright sees deep meaning behind virtually every line they write. They insert a lot of pauses, because they want to make sure the spectator acquires this deep meaning. They neither trust the spectator to get it the first time round, the actor to deliver it properly, or their own writing to communicate it effectively.

Leaving behind these indulgent playwrights (their work is usually quite identifiable, if only because great playwrights are distinct in having so few pauses, comparatively), we move to the lexicon of absence in playwriting. Actors are understandably perplexed by the similarity of the terms *pause*, *beat*, and *silence*.

The first thing to understand is that there is no mathematical breakdown for these terms, contrary to the unintentionally humorous diktats of some acting teachers. Pauses, beats, and silences must be *felt*, and their duration is a matter of the actor's artistic judgment. How much does the moment require? How long is too long? It's not too difficult to tell.
But first let's discuss the terms themselves.

Generally, a playwright will use *silence* for a lengthy break in speech. *Pause* is not as long, but it is longer than a *beat*. So when a good playwright (and the actor exercises her initial judgment in making that determination) uses one of these terms, the basic *hierarchy of duration* of these terms should be followed.

When an actor follows the playwright's direction for absence, her next artistic judgment is *how long.* All absences are governed by the same principle. They must be *forced* by the action. What that means is that a character is forced to stop speaking, because of what has occurred onstage – an action, a thought, a discovery through listening. They *can't* speak. Maybe they are speechless with rage, or incomprehension, or laughter, or confusion. Maybe there is, really, nothing to say. The actor must choose. Most importantly, the actor needs to know what has forced the absence. A playwright gives you an idea of the length of the absence without being prescriptive (usually: some playwrights will write : "four beats" or "a pause of five seconds". These are writers with a strong sense of the specific music of their piece). But *something has forced the character to stop speaking.*

The second half of this equation of absence is equally important. The character is then *forced to resume* speaking, or to break the silence. This time, it is the absence itself that puts the pressure on the character. It becomes unbearable; and she speaks.

This is not difficult to understand when we look at the dialogic rhythms of everyday life. Someone has given you new information, too much to make sense of quickly; so you stop. You must have an absence of speech in order to give yourself time to digest the information. Sometimes you'll even stop *someone else* from speaking because their words would break your concentration. Another example: you are with someone, and you know they're on the wrong track and that you have the right answer, but you don't know how to say it without hurting or offending them. The thought, the image of their hurt forces you to pause. A further example; you break up with your partner. Maybe you scream, shout, curse, filling the silence because it is so terrifying; but maybe you stand there, the pain washing over you, the pain forcing you to be silent. You see a beloved friend after a long absence; what is there to say that could sum up all your feelings? You want to speak, but you can't; no words can convey all of your feelings in that moment.

Similarly, we've all been in situations where the silence is too much, too awkward, too humiliating, where silence is viewed as consent and you are forced to speak. You think you're being viewed in a way that is wrong, and you're forced to speak. You disagree so strongly, agree so passionately, that you're forced to break a silence.

All speech is about proving one's identity. It's about validating our existence. We speak to prove to others that we are valuable; sometimes, in its reductive form, to simply prove that we are there, not to be overlooked. (How many times have you caught yourself saying a bunch of nothing, filling the air because you need to be accounted "present"?) Absence, then, is essentially the flip side of presence, in terms of text. All characters onstage *compete* to speak, because they are competing to live. The flip side is that they are forced, at times, to be silent, either to safeguard their identity/survival, or because they have lost their identity in that moment. All dialogue is *forced*, in this sense. Absences, because they are so much less common than textual presence onstage, must all be forced for specific reasons, chosen by the actor from their research on the text.

So far this is straightforward enough. The absence is forced; breaking the absence is also forced. Good. What happens, then, when the playwright has written no such instruction? When an actor feels an overwhelming need for absence?

The actor is not always indulgent in feeling this, but the first question she must ask herself is: am I being indulgent? The easiest way to find out is to try the lines without the absence. To compress the moment into feeling and expression on the same line. It must be attempted more than once and with the full emotional commitment of the actor. Actors sometimes try a rhythm half-heartedly before abandoning it for their "instincts", which are not in this case instincts but ego.

Many times actors with whom I've worked have told me a sequence doesn't work for them because they feel "rushed". They really want to "feel the emotions". (I suspect they're more interested in bathing in them.) Stage dialogue generally runs faster than real-life in any case; the thought processes are certainly much faster. An actor simply must get used to that. One doesn't slow down a play, or a character's thought process, because the actor is trying to take things at her own pace. That's not acting; that's just being obstinate. I know actors who work very, very slowly, speeding up as they progress through the rehearsal process. This is fine as long as everyone knows there is an end result in view – although it can drive other actors crazy, because the rhythm of the play is completely ignored. I much prefer, as a process, an actor who tries to accommodate the pace from the beginning, having faith in themselves and the director that meaning will continue to come. Both approaches, however, can be effective.

Having said all that, high-level, experienced actors pause at times where there is no written pause in the text. They break up a line in an unexpected way. Again, this is most effective when it's done in the body of a line, rather than simply waiting to respond. What I mean is, the character begins their line in direct response to another, and *then* chooses to break it up. This way it doesn't look like a line glitch and doesn't disrupt the play's internal rhythm; it's strictly a matter of a different interpretation of the line.

This takes experience. Younger actors should approach this kind of skill carefully. The short answer is that, yes, it's even possible to have an unscripted absence between lines, if both actors in a scene agree that it is important, if they can be specific as to what forces it, and then, what ends it.

Thus, in discussing silences, pauses, and beats, the approach should be to follow the playwright's instructions first, and the governing principles of duration for these terms; and to add extra absences only if they are crucial, specific, and selective in number.

