Memorize it!
(Some tips for improving your memorization skills)
by Nils Osmar

I've met actors, and acting teachers, who have a lackadaisical approach toward memorizing. Some feel that memorizing word-for-word isn't important. The important thing, according to them, is to go for the meaning of what your character is saying, even if you don't get the words exactly right.

As a playwright, film producer, and acting instructor, I disagree. It's true that the heart of what's being communicated is in the emotions, not the words. And sometimes a choice may be made to paraphrase or rephrase the dialogue, in a rehearsal or performance. But for an actor, it's important to have the ability to learn the words exactly as they were written - to memorize them accurately before exploring their context or investing them with meaning or emotion. If you can do this, you'll stand out in a crowd of actors. Accurate, word for word memorization isn't the only important skill to develop, but it's an important one.

1. REPEITION
Some actors find memorizing easy, and can learn lines just by reading them through once or twice. For others, a great deal of repetition (reading the lines aloud, repeating them, running lines with family members or other actors), is essential.

2. SPEED-THROUGHS
Most actors are familiar with speed-throughs: speaking the lines very fast, much faster than a person would usually say them. This helps lock the words into our memories, and also highlights any areas in which we don't have the words down - as when a stream or rapid dialogue comes to a screeching or stumbling halt.

3. WRITING DOWN THE DIALOGUE
When you're not in a position where you can speak the dialogue (as when you're riding on a bus, or sitting in a public place), try writing it down. Write it again and again, checking it now and then for accuracy, starting over at the beginning of a block of dialogue if you make a mistake.

4. USING A TAPE RECORDER
One method is to record ALL of the dialogue in a scene on tape (yours and the other character's). Then play it in the background when you're working, driving, etc. Try playing it as if it were background music, over and over. It's like hearing a song on the radio repeatedly; eventually you'll know the lyrics, whether you worked at learning them or not.

A more active variation is to record the other character's lines, leaving a blank space on the tape for your lines. Then play back the tape, speaking your lines during the pauses.

Or try recording the other character's lines, leave a blank space where your own lines would be - then, right after the blank space, record your own lines, so you can compare them with the ones you just spoke, and hit "pause" and re-say your lines if you got them wrong.

5. SINGING THE LINES
Songs can be easier to remember than dialogue. Many of us remember commercial jingles from our childhoods, because we heard them repeatedly and they were put to music. If you're having trouble remembering a block of dialogue, try putting it to music and singing it a few times - then speaking it normally - then singing it again. The combination of singing, speaking and sheer repetition can help lock it into your brain. (Don't worry, you won't burst out singing inappropriately on stage!)

6. MEMORY TRAINING
Most memory training is based on developing associations (sometimes absurd ones), to help link one word or phrase with another. It can help particularly when you are able to remember most of your lines, but have trouble with some of them.

The trick is to associate the last word in one line of dialogue (which you do remember), with the first word, or a key word, in the line you're having trouble with.