In improvisational theater, "status" refers to the power difference in the relationship between two characters. A character in a high status behaves dominantly towards a character in a lower status. A character of low status is subordinate to the higher-status character, accommodating his or her actions to the other’s cues. The current status the characters have between one another is recognizable in the body language, actions, and manner of speaking of the actors.

Keith Johnstone understands status as something one does, independent of the social status one has. Social status represents one’s rank in a social order. At the upper end are secular and spiritual leaders (kings, priests), at the bottom end, dependents and outcasts. Social rank is approximately demonstrated through offices, titles, awards, and status symbols. Johnstone’s "status", on the other hand, comes from the behavior of the characters in a specific encounter. He stresses that there is no neutral status; rather, some sort of difference is always present. A good actor is always conscious of the relative status of the portrayed characters and can playfully vary it.

Generally, it is sensible to play characters with different statuses, because this enlivens the action and also offers the chance for changes. Some games place status in the foreground; for example, the classic "status swap", the "status chain", and the "guess the status".

Table of Contents

- Status features
  - Movement
  - Speech
  - Pitch of voice
  - Posture
  - Breathing
  - Touching Others
  - Interacting With One’s Body
Status

- Looking At Others
- Social Adequacy
- Problems
- Calmness
- Questions

- Notes
- Change status

- Social Welfare
- Praise/abuse
- Demand
- Height
- Vicinity
Status

• Comments

Status features

Movement

• High Status: Focused, quiet, graceful, confident, firm, directed; head moves only slightly

• Low Status: Unsure, nervous, jerky, stiff, tight, awkward

Speech

• High Status: "normal" voice pitch. But also: yelling/whispering as appropriate to the situation

• Low Status: Quiet, mumbling, faltering, fast.

Pitch of voice
Status

- High Status: typically deep, relaxed.

- Low Status: typically high, squeaking, forced

Posture

- High Status: Upright, straight But also: free, unforced, loose

- Low Status: Bent, slack But also: knotted, stiff

Breathing

- High Status: Calm and regular.

- Low Status: Hectic, shallow, fast, panting, faltering

Comment: Holding one's breath can be either. Low-status characters hold their breath for fear or shock. High-status characters hold their breath to strengthen a threatening gesture.
Touching Others

• High Status: Every kind of unasked-for touch: laying a hand on a shoulder, picking lint from a sweatshirt, stroking a cheek...

• Low Status: Shy away from touching others. Acquiesce to unwanted contact.

Interacting With One's Body

• High Status: Don't touch. But also: ostentatious self-contact.

• Low Status: Awkward or embarrassed gestures: run your fingers through your hair, rub your face.

Notice: It is important how you interact with your body. Placing your pointer finger on your mouth can express uncertainty (a student who has just been caught: "Hm, what should I say?") or a claim to dominance (teacher to students: "Ssh! Quiet in the hall!", seductress to man: "Look at my lips!")

Looking At Others

• High Status: Look directly, with a duration appropriate to the social situation - not too long, not too short. But also: dominant staredown, hypnotic gaze.
Low Status: Rapidly avert your eyes, and avoid long eye contact. Unsteady gaze. But also: admiring, naive, or socially inappropriate stare.

Comment: Eye contact makes very complex social interactions possible. According to Keith Johnstone, the length of eye contact does not affect status, only the reaction to being stared at.

Social Adequacy

High Status: Always finds the correct words and gestures. Knows what is appropriate to the situation and acts appropriately. "Knows how to behave" Also knows when to say or do nothing. Flexible, principled, decisive, discerning. But also: breaks with social convention as needed.

Low Status: Is always wrong, interrupting with talking, blabbing something. Violates social norms out of fear, insecurity or weakness. But also: know-it-all attitude, arrogance, stubbornness, incorrigibility.

Problems

High Status: Knows no problems. Can go around any situation. Always knows what to do. Always has a good one. Answers and yet an ace up the sleeve. Knows priorities.

Low Status: Sees problems all the time and everywhere. Fails at the smallest daily routines. But also: fails to recognize the actual problems that other players are dealing with.
Status

Calmness

- High Status: Let yourself bring nothing but peace, even in completely hopeless situations. Scream only to show your superiority.

- Low Status: Let yourself easily unsettled. Starts to panic easily. Is easy to provoke. Throws a fit when touched upon a raw nerve. Pleads for mercy.

Questions

- High Status: Asks when he feels like it and however he sees fit. Asks out of curiosity. Interrogates, spies, sells, makes one uncertain with well-aimed questions. Who asks, leads.

- Low Status: Asks to appease the high status. Ask from uncertainty and to not decide for yourself. But also: lets opportunities for important questions be missed out of fear. It is simple to come up with clever questions.

Notes

The status of a figure has nothing to do with whether they are sympathetic or unsympathetic. Likewise, under certain circumstances, the status may be the exact opposite than what "is socially expected" - this is the usually the audience's particular favorite. For example, if an employee/student (low social status) reacts particularly impertinent against or superior than the chief/teacher (high social status).
Status

Usually people with high status and people with low status have a high and low self-confidence, respectively. The characteristics of high and low status described above relate primarily to low/high self-confidence. A person with low social status can absolutely have a normal or high self-confidence (literary example: Soldier Schweik) or the opposite.

It is a common mistake to confuse the high status with arrogance. A genuine high status does not necessarily imply arrogance. :-) In the other hand, highly respected and powerful personalities react often very politely, diplomatically, and kindly. Queen Elizabeth II would never rumble around loudly. But when she said she was "not amused" she froze the blood of people around her.

Keith Johnstone observed that every person prefers a certain status. Many actors are specialized in either high or low status. He also observes that many actors estimate the effect of their acting wrongly. They mean to behave friendly, when others see them as hostile.

Status cannot only play against people, but also to things or rooms. Therefore, you can feel approximately like the fool in the throne room at home, while the king moves anxiously and unsafe there. A chewing gun can be spit casually by Paula (high status), and then taken and put in a vitrine by Paul, who is, unluckily, in love with her (low status).

Change status

It is important for games like combat status or classic status change that the state is always defined relative to someone or something else. Keith Johnstone used the image of a state change, which can be moved in two ways. Either I diminish the status of the other ("you stink"), or I exalt my own ("I smell good"). By the fight for the low status, I either lower my own status ("I'm a worthless worm") or raise the status of the other ("You shining hero"). Johnstone recommends to alternate between the two methods in every sentence.

Social Welfare

- Strengthening high status: To "mother" the others, to help, to protect, to look after, to be the host

- Strengthening low status: To patronize and incapacitate yourself.

Remarks: Typical dialogue: "pull your cap, it's cold outside" - "Yes, mom". "Have no fear, I will protect you!" "Oh, my hero!"
Status

Praise/abuse

• Strengthening high status: Abuse the others. Praise yourself. But also: make accurate compliments.

• Strengthening low status: Abuse of yourself. Praise, venerate, glorify, admire the others.

Remarks: That is the most applied stylistic device in comedies of all kinds.

Demand

• Strengthening high status: Prominent gestures. Occupy space. Take the center.

• Strengthening low status: Make small gestures. Shrink the radius of movement. Draw back to the sides of the stage. Give the stage to the characters of high status. Keep distance from the characters of high status and their space.

Height

•
Status

Strengthening high status: To stand up. Straighten the body. Put yourself in a pedestal.

•

Strengthening low status: Bend, buck, cower. Knee to the others, throw yourself on the ground.

•

Remarks: The relative height of the head between the two actors is decisive. The high status towers over the low status. But: to sit uninvitedly can also raise the status, because you take more space.

Vicinity

•

Strengthening high status: Approach the others. Invade the personal are of others. Touch. But also: invite the others to get closer.

•

Strengthening low status: Get out of the way of others. But also: tolerate contact.

•

Remarks: The significance from the vicinity/distance interactions are very complex. For status changes, the important question is: who initiated the change in distance and how to react to the other? Distinguish between personal protection range (up to about 0.5 m), the social sector (about 0.5 to 3m) and the long-range (over 3m).

Comments

The rule of thumb "high status can't be taken, its alluded" emphasizes that the relative status in a real meeting is important. When two typical actors step on the stage, let the status between the two establish easily, as the lower status character clearly subordinate to the other.

Through exaggeration or irony, the effect of many agents also reverse! Who erects in comparison to another, raises his status, but who climbs the wardrobe because the other is over the table makes himself ridiculous and lowers his status.