

SUCCESS IS OVERRATED

A Dramatic Monologue

Suggested Ages: 13–17

Approx. Time: 5-7 minutes

Difficulty: Intermediate

Character: Gender-flexible

Genre: Dramatic / Crime Drama

Props: Large stuffed bag; optional stage blood

Skills Practiced: Dramatic storytelling, gradual revelation, characterization, subtext, emotional transitions, physical acting, pacing, purposeful pauses, vocal variety, building suspense, reacting to imagined circumstances, balancing humor and drama, progressive physical deterioration, and playing realization without overacting.

Content Note: References to armed robbery, gun violence, criminal activity, and a potentially fatal gunshot wound. No violence occurs onstage.

Playwright Notes

The gradual reveal is central to the effectiveness of this monologue. The audience should not immediately know that the character participated in a bank robbery, that the hand pressed against the stomach is covering a gunshot wound, or that the bag nearby contains the stolen cash. The robbery and betrayal happened only moments before the monologue begins.

The character begins standing and should initially appear relatively composed, still operating on adrenaline. As the monologue progresses, the physical effects of the wound become more apparent. The character eventually loses the ability to remain standing, lowers to a seated position, and finally lies beside the bag. The physical deterioration should develop alongside the audience's understanding of what happened.

The character should not begin as though delivering a death speech. Early memories of Nora and the children are warm and ordinary. Only near the end does the character begin to understand what the decision to return for one last criminal job may have cost.

The Monologue

Inside a bank late at night. The CHARACTER is standing, one hand pressed firmly against the left side of his stomach. A large, stuffed bag rests on the floor nearby. He is breathing somewhat heavily but appears composed.

CHARACTER: Success is overrated.

Pause.

CHARACTER: You're driven all your life to chase the dream.

Get ahead.

Make something of yourself.

And then, whenever you think you've finally made it...

there's always something else.

One more thing you need.

One more step.

One more job.

He smiles slightly at that last thought.

CHARACTER: I cleaned up my act years ago.

Left the past far behind.

Or I thought I did.

He reminisces.

CHARACTER: Then I met Nora.

My wife.

And then came our three little darlings.

Never-ending balls of energy.

I don't think the youngest has ever stopped moving.

He smiles.

CHARACTER: It's funny.

There was a time when I could stay awake all night and never think twice about it.

Now?

Ten o'clock comes around and I'm falling asleep on the couch while three kids are jumping on me.

Pause.

CHARACTER: Different life.

Good life.

He shifts slightly. His hand remains pressed against his side.

CHARACTER: Then Marty called.

Marty.

Hadn't heard from him in years.

Didn't particularly want to.

But you know how some people are.

They disappear from your life for ten years, then call you up and somehow the conversation starts right where it left off.

Marty was like that.

Grove too.

And Lou.

Pause.

CHARACTER: The old crew.

They said they had something big.

I said I was out.

They said they knew.

I said I had a family.

They said they knew that too.

His expression changes slightly.

CHARACTER: Then they told me what they needed.

They couldn't do it without me.

Not this one.

I had...

specialized skills.

Let's leave it at that.

He glances around the bank.

CHARACTER: Skills don't disappear just because you stop using them.

Pause.

CHARACTER: Marty said this would be the last one.

One last strike.

Enough money that none of us would ever have to worry again.

I told him no.

Beat.

CHARACTER: Twice.

He looks toward the bag.

CHARACTER: Third time...

he told me my share.

Pause.

CHARACTER: You ever start doing math in your head when you know you shouldn't?

Mortgage.

Three college funds.

That addition Nora keeps talking about.

Maybe take the kids somewhere where the hotel doesn't have the word "budget" in the name.

He gives a small laugh.

CHARACTER: All the things you tell yourself you're doing for somebody else.

Pause.

CHARACTER: So here I am.

For the first time, he looks around the bank deliberately.

CHARACTER: Just like old times.

Except we're older.

Slower.

And apparently not any smarter.

He adjusts the hand pressed against his stomach. A flash of discomfort crosses his face, but he quickly dismisses it.

CHARACTER: My dad used to tell me something when I was a kid.

"Never trust a bad guy."

Small smile.

CHARACTER: I didn't.

Pause.

CHARACTER: Marty thought I did.

So did Grove.

Lou...

Lou probably didn't think about it much at all.

That was Lou.

He looks off to one side.

CHARACTER: Sorry, Lou!

Waits.

CHARACTER: Sorry, Grove!

Quieter, almost to himself.

CHARACTER: Not really.

Pause.

CHARACTER: They weren't going to split it four ways.

That was never the plan.

I knew that before we came through the door.

Didn't know exactly what they were planning.

Maybe leave me here to take the heat.

Maybe disappear with my share.

Maybe—

He stops. His eyes drop briefly toward the hand pressed against his stomach.

CHARACTER: Well.

Turns out they had a simpler plan.

He looks at his hand more carefully. There is blood. He stares at it for a moment, then looks away.

CHARACTER: I thought it was supposed to hurt.

Getting shot.

You hear people talk about it and you imagine...

I don't know.

Fire.

Something.

Pause.

CHARACTER: It did at first.

I think.

Everything happened pretty fast.

Lou pulled.

I pulled.

Grove—

He glances offstage.

CHARACTER: Grove should've stayed out of it.

Pause.

CHARACTER: They thought I'd come in here unprepared.

After all these years.

After all the jobs we did together.

They really thought I'd forgotten who they were.

Almost proudly.

CHARACTER: I came prepared.

They were going to leave me taking the heat.

But I was packing the heat.

He smiles at his own line, then winces.

CHARACTER: Can't have your cake and eat all the ice cream too.

Pause.

CHARACTER: That's not right.

He thinks.

CHARACTER: Cake and...

He loses it.

CHARACTER: Whatever.

You know what I mean.

He takes a step, but his balance is beginning to fail. He steadies himself against something nearby.

CHARACTER: It's over now.

Lou's not going anywhere.

Grove's not going anywhere.

Marty...

He looks toward the bank entrance.

CHARACTER: Marty ran.

Of course Marty ran.

Marty was always good at running.

Calls toward the entrance.

CHARACTER: I've still got the last laugh, Marty!

He tries to laugh. It becomes strained. He presses harder against his wound.

CHARACTER: Should've seen him.

Grabbed that bag and took off.

Didn't even look inside.

He shakes his head.

CHARACTER: All these years and he still never learned.

His legs are becoming less steady.

CHARACTER: Dad was right.

Never trust a bad guy.

Pause.

CHARACTER: And Marty...

you really shouldn't trust one who already knows you don't trust him.

He can no longer comfortably remain standing. He slowly lowers himself into a seated position on the floor, still holding his stomach.

CHARACTER: There.

That's better.

Pause.

CHARACTER: Not really.

He notices the bag beside him.

CHARACTER: You know what the best part is?

He pulls the bag a little closer.

CHARACTER: I swapped them.

Pause.

CHARACTER: Marty thinks he has the money.

Every dollar.

He probably thinks he's halfway out of town by now with enough cash to disappear forever.

He smiles.

CHARACTER: Wait until he opens it.

Paper.

Nothing but shredded paper.

A whole bag of it.

He pats or grips the bag beside him.

CHARACTER: I've got the cash.

All of it.

He struggles to laugh again.

CHARACTER: I won.

Pause.

CHARACTER: I actually—

He stops. For the first time, he looks at the bag without satisfaction.

CHARACTER: Nora's going to kill me.

Small smile.

CHARACTER: She doesn't even know.

Told her I was helping some old friends with something.

Be home late.

Don't wait up.

Pause.

CHARACTER: She'll wait up.
She always does.

His voice becomes quieter.

CHARACTER: Kids'll be asleep.
Well...
two of them.
The little one will probably be in our bed.
Again.

He smiles faintly at the thought.

CHARACTER: Never-ending ball of energy.

Pause.

CHARACTER: He promised me this morning he'd stay in his own bed tonight.
Made a big deal about it.
Shook my hand and everything.

His eyes drift toward the bag.

CHARACTER: Three college funds.
Mortgage.
The addition.

Pause.

CHARACTER: All right here.

He rests his hand on the bag.

CHARACTER: Everything I came back for.

Longer pause.

CHARACTER: Everything.

He looks at the hand covering his wound.

CHARACTER: Funny.

He slowly begins lowering himself from the seated position toward the floor.

CHARACTER: You spend your whole life chasing something.
Then you finally catch it...

He settles onto the floor beside the bag.

CHARACTER: and all you can think about...
is what you left behind.

Pause.

CHARACTER: Success is overrated.

He lies still beside the bag.

Blackout.

Teacher Notes & Acting Exercises

Overview

Success Is Overrated is a dramatic monologue built around gradual revelation. A wounded former criminal stands inside a bank moments after a robbery and betrayal. As he speaks, the audience gradually learns that he left crime years ago, built a family life, returned for one high-paying job, anticipated that his former partners might betray him, and switched the money into a different bag. He outsmarted the surviving partner, but his apparent victory becomes increasingly hollow as he realizes the seriousness of his wound and thinks about the family waiting at home.

Skills Students Can Practice

- Gradual revelation and storytelling
- Subtext and withholding information
- Physical acting and progressive physical deterioration
- Emotional transitions
- Pacing and purposeful pauses
- Vocal changes as the character weakens
- Balancing dark humor with dramatic stakes
- Maintaining character while addressing imagined people offstage
- Playing a realization without overacting it

The Central Acting Challenge: Let the Audience Discover the Story

The actor already knows the entire backstory, but the audience does not. Avoid performing the opening as though every important fact has already been revealed. Early references to the past, the old crew, the bag, and the character's physical discomfort should create questions rather than immediately answer them. Each new piece of information should slightly change what the audience thinks is happening.

A useful rehearsal question is: What does the audience know at this exact moment? Students can mark the script at each major reveal and practice allowing that information to land before moving to the next discovery.

Physical Progression

The character begins standing. This is important. The robbery and shooting happened only moments ago, and adrenaline is helping the character remain functional. The actor should resist appearing critically wounded from the first line.

- Opening: Standing, composed enough to talk, one hand held against the side.
- Early middle: Small flashes of discomfort are dismissed.
- Gunshot reveal: The character finally examines the blood and acknowledges being shot.
- Later middle: Balance begins to fail; the character needs support.

- Near the end: The character can no longer remain standing and lowers to the floor.
- Ending: Strength continues to fade until the character lies still beside the bag.

Don't Play the Ending Too Soon

The character should not begin the monologue believing death is imminent. Early memories of Nora and the children should be affectionate and ordinary rather than mournful. The character still believes the robbery has largely worked out in his favor. This makes the later shift more powerful when the money stops feeling like a victory.

Using the Humor

Several lines provide dark comic relief, including the references to Lou, the budget hotel, “packing the heat,” and the mangled expression about cake and ice cream. The actor should not chase laughs. The humor works best when it comes naturally from the character's personality and circumstances.

The mistaken expression can also signal that something is changing physically. The character notices that the saying is wrong but cannot quite retrieve the correct words. Play the moment lightly enough that the audience can initially laugh, while allowing it to become another clue that the character is weakening.

The Turning Point: “I Won”

The line “I won” is the emotional hinge of the monologue. Up to this point, the character can still view the outcome as a victory: Marty escaped with shredded paper while the real money remains behind. Immediately afterward, thoughts of Nora and the children begin changing the meaning of that victory. Give this transition room. The actor does not need to force sadness; the realization can arrive gradually.

Acting Exercise: Map the Reveals

Have the student identify each moment when the audience learns something important: the character left a criminal past, has a family, reunited with an old crew, possesses specialized skills, participated in the bank job, expected betrayal, was shot, fought back, Marty escaped, the bags were switched, and the character may not make it home. Number the reveals and rehearse the monologue so each one feels newly meaningful.

Acting Exercise: Three Versions of the Wound

Rehearse the first half three times. In the first version, make the wound too obvious. In the second, hide the injury almost completely. In the third, find a middle ground where the hand position and occasional discomfort are visible but do not immediately explain themselves. Discuss which version creates the strongest suspense.

Acting Exercise: The Bag

The bag is visible from the beginning but should not dominate the performance. Experiment with how often the character looks at it. Too much attention can reveal its importance too early; too

little can make the eventual reveal feel disconnected. The goal is to let the bag remain part of the visual mystery until the character finally explains the switch.

Discussion Questions

- At what point did you first understand that the character had participated in the robbery?
- When did you realize the character had been shot?
- Why did the character agree to one more job after building a new life?
- Does the character believe the money is for the family, or is that partly a justification?
- Why is “I won” an important line?
- What does “Success is overrated” mean at the beginning compared with the end?
- Do you think the character survives after the blackout? Does the performance need to answer that question?

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