

A photograph of a young woman and a young man on a stage, both looking down at scripts they are holding. The woman is on the left, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, a black and white patterned vest, blue jeans, and black boots. The man is on the right, wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and red sneakers. They are standing on a wooden stage floor. In the background, there are rows of empty wooden theater seats and bright stage lights at the top of the frame.

**ROBERT BARTON**

SEVENTH EDITION

# ACTING

**Onstage and Off**

# ACTING

## Onstage and Off



# ACTING

## Onstage and Off

SEVENTH EDITION

**Robert Barton**

University of Oregon



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**Seventh Edition**  
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To my son Andrew,  
whose sense of wonder  
renews my own





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## Acting to Understand

Acting is one of the best ways to learn about being alive. Because in our work we actors get to become other people, we get the chance to understand them and co-exist with them. We stop making instant judgments of others when we get the chance to be them. Only shallow satirists can portray fellow humans, however strange or villainous, without gaining lasting empathy for their pain and comprehending their perspectives. A good acting class does more than impart knowledge; it humanizes. It helps each participant become less narrow and provincial—more a citizen of the world. Each actor can end up knowing more about herself, about others, and about ways the self and others connect. Each actor can learn the arts of compromise and collaboration. Along with these heady, high-sounding lessons, there can also be a lot of laughs.

This book is designed for the beginning acting student, for whom the life-enhancing aspects of actor training are a higher priority than technical skills. Its basic assumptions are (1) offstage performance can be effectively adapted for the theatre; (2) onstage training can be applied toward leading a full life outside the theatre; and (3) the two can feed each other in ways that both illuminate and amuse—a pretty good combination.

*Acting: Onstage and Off* is divided into nine chapters that address the areas of greatest concern to novice actors. The book begins by guiding each student through an exploration of his past and present offstage life to help him find confidence and recognize experience that can be used in class. Once the actor no longer thinks of himself as inexperienced and inept, the text moves on in Chapter 2 into learning to warm up (body, voice, and mind—individually and collectively) and then to understanding the actor's own equipment (Chapter 3). The assumption is that self-awareness is crucial before other-awareness can be accomplished, whether those others are living or fictional persons.

Warmed up and self-aware, the actor pursues basic means for putting together a character, in Chapter 4, as devised by Constantin Stanislavski and as adapted by others in Chapter 5. Once these fundamental principles of performing as someone else are established, Chapter 6 explores the need to balance honesty with precision and considers methods for blending the two. At this stage, the actor is ready to tackle the unique traditions and history of this art. Chapter 7 addresses the actor's

relationship with the script, and Chapter 8 addresses performance etiquette, the basic standards of behavior and support in the theatre. This chapter allows the new actor to quickly settle nagging procedural questions so that he gets the help he needs, and avoids, as one of my students put it, “blowing it without knowing it.” It is also geared toward teaching the student to quickly pick up the survival information needed for entering any new world. The book’s final chapter helps the student decide among various options for more involvement, suggests directions actor training may take in the future, and teaches some ways of applying all that has been learned, even if this course is the student’s last direct contact with the art form.

Each chapter leads to successively more complex levels of understanding. If in completing a chapter, the reader were likely to say, “Okay, this is fine, but what if . . .,” an attempt has been made to answer that question. Above all, this book aims to help each actor find some joy and wonder in herself as a performer. An actor needs many skills eventually, but joy and wonder should come first.

## Using This Text

Acting classes vary from three hours a week for a single term to six hours (plus lab sessions) for a full year. It would be useless for an introductory text to try to serve everyone equally. There are, however, three ways to adapt this text to varying time strictures and changing class enrollments. It is possible to work through the book in sequence for a full year of activity. It is also possible to target a particular subject or skill (such as voice, which is dealt with in a number of sections throughout the book) or by sampling every chapter and doing only the earlier exercises of each. This last alternative is a suggestion for short-term classes so that students get at least a taste of each area that concerns them.

An unusually focused or experienced group of actors may be able to move quickly over the background examination and warm-up activities of the first two chapters. Most students, however, will need the training in relaxation and channeling of energy provided in Chapter 2 before undertaking the relatively sophisticated demands of Chapter 3. The activities in Chapter 1 are largely passive and undemanding. By Chapter 3, each student is asked to accomplish acute, systematic analysis not only of himself but also of others in the class.

In our program at the University of Oregon, we read the entire book in the first quarter and then go back and review for greater depth during the subsequent terms of the school year. So we move swiftly and hit the high points in Acting 1 and then return for greater depth in subsequent courses. This allows the student who will be taking only Acting 1 to

taste each of the basic elements and allows continuing students to more fully assimilate content in later terms.

An extensive list of scene suggestions is given in Chapter 7, and a sample scene, called *The Rehearsal*, appears on the website. This scene may be used to apply all the concepts discussed here.

Ten elements in *Acting: Onstage and Off* distinguish it from most other acting texts:

1. The offstage connection, or learning to act one's own life better; a constant connection between life in the theatre and life removed from it.
2. A conversational, down-to-earth, accessible writing style.
3. No new lingo: Original terms, rather than invented vocabulary, for acting concepts.
4. Ample actor testimony from well-known performers—both proven veterans and successful newcomers near the ages of the students.
5. Clear interpretation of Stanislavski (the father of actor training as we know it) for modern readers.
6. No need to read specific plays because examples are drawn from lives rather than scripts. The book's basic approach focuses on life experience rather than on dramatic literature for examples and background material. Some instructors may wish to supplement this book with a scene anthology or play assignment of their own choosing.
7. Auditioning treated as a basic rather than an advanced skill. Auditioning is what you do to get into another class, to apply what you've just learned in a show, to get a job, to win a scholarship, to make any temporary and tentative condition permanent and definite. Far too often, beginning classes whet the appetite of novice actors without showing them how to get more chances to pursue this art. I believe it is this very postponing of auditioning that makes it so terrifying to the actor.
8. Systematic observation process for analyzing acting habits and personal tendencies. Checklists allow students to focus on the kinds of details that both lead to self-knowledge and provide ingredients for characterization.
9. Strategies for actors to become self-sufficient rather than overly dependent on guidance. An emphasis on the actor's responsibility for in-rehearsal active contribution and out-of-rehearsal exploration.

10. Abundance of choice: enough exercises and approaches to allow flexible selection and adaptation. The book has far more activities and more questions than most readers will wish to attempt, so that teacher and reader may pick, choose, reject, and modify. These exercises may be cut back in scope easily, with written assignments adapted into thought-discussion questions and improvisations in those instances where a minimum of academic work is deemed appropriate.

## Adaptations

Acting 1 includes both shopping novices (many of whom move swiftly on to other shops) and serious students who already are (or quickly become) fully committed to actor training. Two features are of particular interest to the latter. Chapter 5 deals with all the ways Stanislavski has been altered by others, and the section “New Directions” (in Chapter 9) covers innovative approaches that have begun to change the face of actor training. These give more depth and juice to students eager to move forward. For those programs, such as our own, that choose to return to the book over the course of several years, the new material will offer deeper dipping. For non-major classes, both these additions can easily be skipped over with no loss in either reading flow or discovery. For classes with both kinds of students, I suggest additional extra-credit reports or projects for the movers and shakers. A third alternative for some teachers is to assign only those post-Stanislavski contributors that appeal particularly to them or are appropriate to their circumstances. An instructor with some Meisner (Chapter 5) background, for example, may choose to cover him and skip the other American adapters. Someone teaching in a setting experiencing powerful social issues and wishing to give her students problem-solving strategies may choose to focus on Boal (Chapter 9) while omitting other contemporary innovators.

Though it should be of interest to all students, the Offstage Action (introduced in Chapter 1 and continued throughout the text) will be particularly useful to those who intend to use this training in venues outside the theatre. Often an acting class has a more profound and widespread impact on one’s life than is at first evident. The ten Offstage Actions should provide a framework that enhances both the noticing of such impact and the planning of future choices. Offstage Action is also offered as a summary of the importance of our work for teachers dealing with college administrators and for students confronting parents who feel their study of performance may be inconsequential and frivolous. In its totality, this material now includes professional skills to supplement personal ones.



## New to This Edition

For the seventh edition, new features include:

1. **AN UPDATED SCENE LIST** offers over 60 additional suggestions for scenes involving two or three actors, and those featuring multicultural characters.
2. **THE POWER OF BREATH** offers exercises focused on altering the actor's mental, physical, and emotional state through respiration. Examples: breath for energy, for cooling down, for craving control, for reducing stress.
3. **NEW QUOTES** from Jennifer Lawrence, Matthew McConaughey, Lupita Nyong'o, Maggie Smith, and others.
4. **UPDATED FILM ACTING** information on preparing to perform for the camera, including vocabulary and techniques.

New to the sixth edition were:

1. **INTERVIEWS** with pragmatic advice on preparing for and excelling at interviewing.
2. **UPDATED STANISLAVSKI**, providing recent resources for students wishing to know more about the master and his system.
3. **ALTERNATIVE WARM-UPS**, providing variety and an exciting exercise progression.
4. **REFORMATTING** resulted in the text being streamlined, the majority of group exercises moved to the appendices, and forms for acting reports transferred to the website.
5. **INTERACTIVE FEATURES** were added to the website, providing demonstrations of concepts for listening and enjoyable ways of mastering material.

The online Instructor's Resource Manual provides both teacher guidelines and readily available forms for all observations and reports. It will be expanded during the life of this edition to provide continued and upgraded support.

## Recorded Excerpts

Recordings of the following are available on the website:

- The Physical Warm-Up (Ch. 2, pp. 38–50)
- The Vocal Warm-Up (Ch. 2, pp. 52–57)
- An Alternative Warm-Up (Appendix B, pp. 315–327)

For a reader working independently, playing these while doing the warm-ups will free you from needing to check the manuscript at each transition. For classes, the recordings will free the teacher to circulate among students, assisting them in executing maneuvers effectively.

Additional recordings include Resonators (both location and classic voice types, Ch. 3, pp. 84–85), showing how vocal quality can completely change the sound of one's voice, and a demonstration of Coining, which is discussed in Ch. 6 (pp. 175–178). A monolog is presented with no attention to coining and then with coining added to vividly reveal how the depth and complexity of a speech can improve.

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## About the Author

Robert Barton is Professor Emeritus of Acting at the University of Oregon. He has directed over half of Shakespeare's plays and performed in most of them, including playing the title role in a PBS production of *Hamlet*. A prolific author, Robert has published seven books and numerous scholarly articles on acting. *Style for Actors* was the recipient of the Theatre Association's Best Book Award. Other texts include *Voice: Onstage and Off* (with Rocco Dal Vera), *Theatre in Your Life* and *Life Themes* (both with Annie McGregor), and *Acting Reframes*. His most recent book is a newly revised edition of the classic text *The Craft of Comedy*, for which he served as editor and adaptor. Robert has been honored as Outstanding Acting Coach by the American College Theatre Festival.



# Acting Acknowledged

Already an experienced actor  
and almost always acting

*I did not succeed at anything in school—  
until I discovered acting.*

—Jennifer Lawrence

*Acting is play, sometimes quite heavily disguised as work.*

—Judi Dench

*I'd basically have trouble with any job that doesn't require me to  
wear silly clothes and talk in funny voices. So I'm an actor.*

—Natalie Portman

*As we act our lives, we have to make up our dialogue  
and create ourselves as we go along.*

—Michael Caine

Everyone acts almost all the time. You are an experienced actor even if you've never taken a class or been in a show. You may not be a skilled actor, but you *are* experienced. Acting is what we do with groups: to survive in an old group, to gain membership in a new group, or even to be left alone by a group we do not wish to join. We learn to act throughout our lives, always trying to figure out how they (the current group members) want us to behave, what qualities to punch up or play down, which feelings to show or hide, what will be rewarded or punished. We try to give our audience what it wants and still stay as much ourselves as possible—to avoid feeling cheap and compromised. This is called *acting*. This is what we do to survive.

## All the World's a Stage

People are always trying to tell you how to act. Consider these familiar lines:

“That’s no way to act.”

“Stay in your room until you learn to act like a young lady.”

“He’s been acting so strange lately.”

“You don’t need to act as if you own the place.”

“I can’t go there. I’m afraid I just wouldn’t know how to act.”

“Stop acting as if the whole thing was my fault.”

“Oh, yeah, she acts innocent, but I know better.”

“OK, so how would you have acted if you’d been there?”

“Do you think maybe this is all some kind of act?”

“He acts like he hasn’t got a care in the world.”

“When are you going to start acting like yourself again?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just act natural.”

And, of course, this all-time favorite, heard any time between birth and death:

“Act your age.”

The world is full of actors. No one has said it better than William Shakespeare:

All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in his nurse’s arms.  
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in Honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,

Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the Cannon's mouth. And then the justice,  
In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

We recognize ourselves and others in each age. In contemporary, non-poetic terms, this speech might read:

The whole world is just a stage and everyone is just an actor, entering and exiting. We all play roles during our lives. Seven major ones include:

1. Baby crying and throwing up while being held
2. Whining child, dragging your backpack slowly to school, complaining about having to go
3. Lover, groaning as loud as any furnace and writing sad songs to any part of your girlfriend's body
4. Tough guy, swearing, growing a beard that makes you look like a leopard, wanting to win all the time, ready to fight over anything, trying to get famous. Not noticing that fame lasts no longer than a bubble, you're willing even to stick your head inside a cannon to get it
5. Veteran politician, fat from eating so much fried chicken, looking serious, trimming the beard to look respectable, always dropping words of wisdom, even when nobody asked, acting all the time
6. Skinny old-timer, glasses sliding down your nose, your old trousers in perfect condition but miles too big for you. What used to be a strong voice now cracks and breaks just like a child's
7. Second childhood and senile emptiness, no more teeth, no more taste, no more anything

## The Seven Ages

### 1. Mewling Infant

Every baby learns to cry to get picked up, loved, changed, or fed—later learning to enhance the feeling of need and even to create the impression of need, whether need exists or not. My infant son sat blissfully with me while I wrote the first edition of this book. But if my wife passed through the room, he suddenly focused on her breasts and broke into a fairly convincing imitation of all the starving children of three, maybe four African countries. Since my wife and I both knew he had eaten within the hour, she would continue on her way. He would sigh and gurgle happily again, as if to say there was no harm trying. This age is never really left behind. Any of us may resort to mewling when we aren't getting enough (or the right kind of) attention.

### 2. Whining Child

We all give performances surrounding school. By this book's second edition, my son sometimes pretended to be sick (or sicker than he really was) to avoid going to school. And then later pretended to be well (or better than he really was) so he could go to some function he really wanted to attend. Haven't we all? We whine and pout through some responsibility that's forced on us, letting everyone around know how much we're suffering, what a great sacrifice this is, how noble we are for plugging on. Martyr routines are very popular performances.

School is also where one learns that even with group avoidance, some acting is required. If you are a bookish, artistic wimp who does not want to join the jock bullies at recess, you still need to figure out how to act so they will not make your jocklessness the focus of their bullying.

### 3. Sighing Lover

When smitten with somebody, many of our actions are guided by what we feel a lover should act like—by our observations of other, more experienced lovers from movies and books. Then there are the performances given for the object of your affection. You're trying to act in such a way that the adored one is never disappointed—always pleasantly surprised (“Maybe if I write her an eyebrow poem. I’ll bet nobody else has done that ...”)—trying to be wittier, smoother, stronger, or wilder than you’ve ever been in your life—whatever your beloved seems to admire.

### 4. Reputation-Seeking Soldier

As I prepared the third edition, my son was a teenager who had recently passed through a “soldier stage,” where, in the presence of other young



males, his main objective and primary performance was to appear unafraid, in control, tough, and possibly threatening. Sometimes we act the toughest when we really want to cry and run home for a hug. During adolescence, a time when we can be easily hurt, it seems important to pretend that nothing can hurt us.

This is a crucial rite of passage into adulthood, but not everyone makes it through the pass. Some get caught up in this phase forever, lingering long in the land of swagger. Some are lucky enough to find an outlet.

Like many young actors, my son discovered, as I worked on the fourth edition of this book, that his more extreme performance impulses could be channeled onstage, making life easier for everyone offstage. As I was writing, he said to me one day, “Dad, I think I need to act in another play, before I start acting out.”

Like many of us, he did not necessarily go through his ages in Shakespeare’s exact order. By the fifth edition, he had only recently recovered from being totally smitten with a young woman. I will not embarrass him by recounting the more extreme ways he found to demonstrate his love for her, but let’s just say that an eyebrow poem would be conservative compared with some of them.

## 5. Saw-Spouting Justice

These well-fed authority figures are always speaking as if what they say will be carved in granite somewhere. Everything out of their mouths has quotes around it. It’s very easy to believe, for the moment, when someone gives you authority, that Moses wasn’t the only one to climb the mountain and chat with God. Those accustomed to being listened to, without fighting for an audience, can pontificate to the point of parody. A student returning home as a member of the winning debate team or the winner of a local beauty pageant may suddenly assume an exalted position as he or she passes on advice to mere mortals aspiring to the same glory.

At this seventh edition, my son, while too young to become a saw-spouting justice, can sometimes allow his superior knowledge of technology to make him become, when called in as my technical consultant, patronizing and superior. He may sigh and pontificate when dealing with my profound ignorance, passing along the information with eye-rolling superiority. This is OK, since he so often has to come to me for life advice, and he deserves some satisfaction in return for being wise where I am not. It is turnaround and payback time, as I need to bow to his knowledge for a continued relationship with all the machines that run our home.

## 6. Lean and Slipper’d Pantaloon

Some seniors shrivel and are surprised at how small their impact suddenly is after a lifetime of vigor. In this confused moment, some cling

desperately to old casting and past power, exploding with rage when everything is no longer in place. Others begin to enjoy the freedom from responsibility, the lightness that comes with no longer being at the center of everything.

## 7. Second Childishness and Mere Oblivion

Shakespeare's final image is sad and desolate. Some old people die long before their last breath. Others have a great final season. The universal image is "second childishness." Some seniors return to childlike wonder and discovery, to dealing with issues no more complicated than being caught being naughty by others or not discovering enough things to do today to have fun. Small children and old people sometimes discover themselves as kindred spirits as they casually reach past all the generations between them.

Shakespeare wrote of seven roles in the play of life. We don't all go through them in this order, but we never really leave an "age" behind. We store it in our repertoire. Mature statesmen may suddenly mewl and puke, tired old men may suddenly become brave soldiers again, and bona fide cynics can suddenly sigh like furnaces and write eyebrow poems, completely in love. As you review your own ages, have you already found yourself returning to some for a visit?

## Imitating Ages

You may enjoy doing the voice and attitude of one or more of the ages below.

### 1. Infant

(Ad-lib baby noises.) "Goo-goo, gah, gah (giggle, gasp)." (Include gurgling, burping, mewling, and puking.)

### 2. Whining Child

"I can't go. I just *caaaaaan't!* My tummy is all achy, and I forgot to do my math homework.... I mean I forgot to tell you that ... that ... that's not all! I feel hot and tired and slow and heavy and ... icky!"

### 3. Lover

"I think your eyebrows are completely awesome  
I'll never forget when I first saw some  
Of your eyebrows moving on your face  
More awesome by far than precious lace.  
Your eyebrows make me completely hot.  
Will this poem give me at least a shot?"

#### 4. Soldier

“Freeze, G, you think you bad, but you mess w’ me, I take you out, you dig? Oh, you got a cannon there? W’ big cannon balls? Listen, Dawg, my balls is bigger than anything in yo’ whole big-ass cannon so shoot you stupid sonabitch!! Shoot!”

#### 5. Seasoned Politician

“I’ve traveled far and wide across this beautiful country of ours and people always ask me, they say, ‘What is the most important thing about being an American?’ and I always answer, ‘Freedom!’ The freedom, for example, to let people who believe in you contribute to your tax-sheltered annuities, your contingency funds, and your rolling market accounts. So, my friends, if someone suggests to you that I have done wrong, may I proudly reply that here in America, this so-called ‘wrong’ is one of our most important rights!”

#### 6. Lean and Slipper’d Pantaloon

“So I got up and thought I’d take a little walk but, phew, those stairs just slowed me down.... So then I thought I’d just read the paper, but I swear to God the print has gotten so tiny that no one could do that, so I tried to find the magnifying glass and I was sure I had put it down by the radio, but by golly it had totally disappeared. I suspect Mrs. Simpson down the hall. She’s always said how much she liked that thing.... Oh, well.”

#### 7. Sans Everything

“I don’t want it.... What pill? ... No, I haven’t.... I’ve never taken one of these. ... I don’t want anything.... I want to rest.... I want something to do.... I just don’t ... know.”

How many of these performance ages, described by those who went on to become famous actors, remind you of some you went through?

**HALLE BERRY:** I was always dramatic. If I cut myself, I was bleeding to death, you know?

**LEONARDO DiCAPRIO:** My dad taught me not to be shy. I’d imitate people we’d just met for him. I liked to become someone else.

**JULIA STILES:** By the time I was ten, I could walk around the city by myself and no one would bother me because I had on my killer look.

**JOHN LITHGOW:** As much as my family moved, I was always the new kid on the block. I became accustomed to acting—by trying to fit in at each school. I found I could convince people that I really belonged.

**WESLEY SNIPES:** Early on I’d use my acting abilities to pick up girls. If I didn’t get that phone number, I’d weep.

MARK WAHLBERG: My actor training wasn't at Julliard. It was in front of judges and cops, trying to get out of trouble.

ANTHONY HOPKINS: When I was drafted, I pretended to be deaf during my medical exam. It worked.

## Seven Acts

In addition to passing through ages, we all perform “acts” or specialized performances in our lives outside the theatre. Most have their roots in the simple childhood game Let's Pretend. Here are seven varieties:

### 1. Pageants

Munchkin in a grade school *Oz*? Third Wiseperson, carrying myrrh, in a church Nativity? Part of a Living Totem Pole in a Scout Jamboree? Ring Bearer at a wedding? Toastmaster at an anniversary party? Homecoming Queen's Court?

You're dressed up, it's a very big occasion, the place is packed—many of the essential ingredients for theatre are present. You may be cast in a definite role, even though it might be an inanimate object, such as a rock. Or, in public rituals, you may be cast as yourself, without convenient camouflage. But this is a *transformed* you, amazingly cleaned up, polished and sanitized. The stakes here are very high and you usually feel very proud.

*I was so small that I was asked to be in a high school production of The Wizard of Oz. As Toto. Apparently you can be too small to play a Munchkin.*

—Neil Patrick Harris

*I made my stage debut as an altar boy or more aptly a falter boy. I used to trip over my cassock or light myself on fire.*

—Mel Gibson

*I was “The Amazing Adrien,” an eleven year old with a magic act. That was my introduction to acting and to pulling the wool over adults' eyes.*

—Adrien Brody

### 2. Disguises

A progression of ghosts and monsters for Halloween? A Disney or *Star Wars* character for a costume party? A sophisticated world traveler at some bistro where you hope not to get carded?

These performances are looser and more improvisational. Your intent is *not* to be recognized. You experiment endlessly with your costume pieces, your walk, your gestures, your line readings. Then you enter the world. Sometimes you only make it downstairs before returning to your room for a few adjustments based on some early family reviews. But you get better and better as the evening progresses.

### 3. Alter Egos

The Super Jock You who enters the playing field? The Oxford Scholar  
You who stands up to debate First Affirmative? The *Vogue* Cover Girl  
You who glides onto the prom dance floor?

Alter egos are second selves, often with improvements: You with Cheek Bones and a Ph.D. Some of us click into the alter ego as a way of upping courage. Seeing yourself slightly enhanced has a startling effect on observers, who may see you that way too. Some go so far as to name their other selves, who tend to be more assertive and colorful than the main you. Many use these other selves as a means of *rising to the occasion*. Sometimes alter egos compete for your attention, even taking on a life of their own.

*My first successful characterization is what I devised for myself in high school. I played the blond homecoming queen for several years. I laid out my clothes for the week every Sunday so that I wouldn't repeat.*

—Meryl Streep

*So eventually the big brassy broad beat the crap out of the little torch singer and took over.*

—Bette Midler (discussing two of her alter egos)

*Acting is just a matter of farting about in disguises.*

—Peter O'Toole

### 4. Role Models

You decide to lower your voice when angry, just like your father? To walk like a certain rock star? To emulate the unshakeable dignity of your favorite teacher?

Both human beings and literary figures can feed the basic characterization you would like to present to the world. You may just want to shake your hair to the side like a certain actress, not necessarily to *be* her. You

try on qualities like pieces of clothing, discarding one if it doesn't seem to fit. Borrowing may involve anything from a small mannerism to an entire outlook. Much borrowing may happen before you're satisfied with your whole package.

## 5. Understudying

Your folks aren't home and someone tries to deliver a gross of electric can openers—what do you do? Your boss is gone and a customer is getting unruly—what do you do? You're left entertaining your Great Aunt Helga, who only speaks Swedish—what do you do?

Standing in for someone who usually handles a situation and attempting to troubleshoot involves more than just trying to figure out how the other person would handle the situation. It may also involve trying to get their actions, their manner of authority, their way of ending a sentence firmly. It's harder than copying a role model, where you willingly pick whom you want to emulate. In understudying, you may not even like or understand the person for whom you're standing in, and you have no time to practice. You know the other (missing) person should be starring in this scene and that you're merely an understudy. Like most understudies, you try to give a pretty good imitation of the star.

*When I auditioned for my first TV job at nineteen, I had no idea what to do, so I pretended to be Barbara Walters. I'd sit like Barbara and I'd look down at the script and up at the camera because I thought that's how you act—all from what I had seen Barbara do. On the job, I started to forget to be Barbara sometimes and Oprah would start slipping through. But in the beginning, being Barbara was what saved me.*

—Oprah Winfrey

*I gradually created someone I wanted to be and finally I became that person.*

—Cary Grant

## 6. Suppression

Mortified beyond human endurance but determined not to appear upset? Flattered but striving to appear as if compliments like this come to you hourly? Ecstatic about winning but afraid the other competitors will not respond well to your leaping and shrieking?

Cooling down your first response to something more manageable, less foolish, or overbearing is an acting challenge that may go on for hours before you can finally let it rip. If you win, you want to appear happy, even thrilled, just not obnoxious. If you lose, you want to appear transcendent, not devastated. Huge acting energy is invested in stifling emotional display and avoiding humiliation.

## 7. Deception

“It wasn’t really you who emptied out the cookie jar, was it?” “And the reason your jeans are torn and muddy is that you were attacked by a band of Pygmies?” “You’ve never tried smoking that awful stuff, have you?”

We all act, to some degree, less guilty than we are. It can run from harmless fibs to profoundly immoral lies. Feigned innocence is classic offstage acting. If the deception helped bring off a surprise party or visit, we feel triumphant and skillful when the amazed recipient gets the joyous news.

While serving jury duty during the writing of this book, I was stunned one day to hear the judge instruct us that it would be our duty to figure out who was acting and who wasn’t. He later said to me, “If there weren’t so many actors in the world, I’d be out of a job.” Some cases and some careers are based on lies, but most of our suppression and deception performances are humane, caring, even loving.

If you got up on any given day and followed only gut impulses, the damage could be enormous. Daily acting involves sparing other people’s feelings. You perform so you appear quite so bored, so offended, so amazed at their lack of sensitivity or tact, so appalled at the fact that they missed the point or the appointment. If a friend is hurting, you and I try to figure out how to act so that our friend will feel supported and nurtured. We do not just figure out what to do—we figure out how to act. Our finest performances are often given offstage.

*People are incredible actors. We’re masters at hiding what’s really going on most of the time.*

—Glenn Close

One of the main differences between acting in a play and in life is that in life you are also the playwright, with the chance—in fact, the necessity—to come up with your own dialogue. So offstage acting has no script, and onstage acting does. Right? Not entirely. Those who

crave constancy will nearly script themselves, with only the slightest variation in day-to-day dialogue. Everyone scripts and rehearses certain crucial life encounters (a seduction scene, a telling-off-the-boss scene, a finally-persuading-the-folks scene) carefully, hoping the other persons will pick up the right cues.

## Observing Yourself Act

What happens at the exact moment that an actor acts? Ten ingredients are present in any life encounter. Take a look at your life. Any moment including you and someone else will involve:

1. Some way of defining what you and this other person mean to each other (*relationship*)
2. Something you want (*objective*)
3. Something in the way (*obstacle*)
4. Your plan to get what you want (*strategy*)
5. Specific maneuvers within your overall plan (*tactics*)
6. Things said by you and the other person (*text*)
7. Things implied but not really said (*subtext*)
8. Times when you do not speak but are actively thinking, so a speech is going on in your head (*interior monolog*)
9. Moments when the other person says or does something that makes you pause, consider, and reject several different answers before choosing a reply (*evaluation*)
10. Small units in the scene that can be isolated asactable events unto themselves in which a single transaction is taking place (*beats*) and shifts within the scene (*beat changes*) signal that this transaction has been completed and a new one is starting because the topic of conversation is changing, another attack is being tried, a new person is changing the direction of the conversation, or a new objective is being pursued

The terms appearing in italics are actor language for scene ingredients. There is no simpler or more difficult lesson in acting than learning these ten items. They provide the basis of the Stanislavski System, which will be covered later in this book, but they are really the basis of all human interaction.

Imagine that you want to finish reading this chapter, but your roommate's CD player is blaring. You decide to get rid of her. You try mentioning her promise to call her folks tonight. You inquire if she shares



your hunger for a pizza. She's not interested. She wants to sing along with the music and to talk about how music has changed her life. Finally, you level with her that you can't concentrate and ask her for 15 minutes of silence. She agrees. Curtain.

## Active Ingredients

1. *Relationship*: Newly assigned roommate; don't know each other well, seem to have differing tastes and lifestyles
2. *Objective*: To finish homework (Chapter 1, Acting Acknowledged)
3. *Obstacle*: Roommate's blaring stereo
4. *Strategy*: Remove roommate
5. *Tactics*: Distractions (phone call, pizza), frankness (asking favor)
6. *Text*, and
7. *Subtext* (in the following example, text is in regular type, subtext in *italics*)

YOU: (*OK, here goes*) Say, didn't you ... (*God, I hope this isn't too pushy*) promise your folks to call home tonight? (*Good, sounded pretty casual*)

HER: (*What do you care?*) Uh ... yeah. (*None of your business, bitch.*) So? (*Change the subject. Aha!*) I love this song. (*Let it go.*) Shake your body, your body, your BAHDEEEEE!!!! (*Can I shake it or what? I got the moves!*)

YOU: (*I hope this doesn't sound too pushy*) Well, shouldn't you call them then?  
(*It was. I'm such a jerk.*)

HER: (*One mother is enough, thanks.*) I already tried. (*Buzz off. ... Oh, I guess she means well.*) They aren't home. (*Christ!*) They never carry their cells. I left a message on their machine. (*Satisfied????!!!!!!*) Ooh, I REALLY love this NEXT song! (*So back off.*)

8. *Interior Monolog* (takes place before the previous exchange):

That machine of hers is driving me crazy. Alright now, what is this? Observe myself act? What is this guy talking about? How many more pages? "I wanna bang, I wanna clang... I can't get the stupid lyric out of my head. Please God, make the power go off... I have to write out all this private stuff?! I wonder who's gonna see this. "Clanga, banga, uh HUH!!!! Clanga, banga youWOO!!!!" You-woo? What does that mean?

Damn it. I need quiet. I gotta get her outta here. What could I...  
Hey wait, what about that phone call she's supposed to make?

Was some of this hard to follow? Re-read it. Almost everyone's interior monolog will confuse someone else.

9. *Evaluation:* Here's one possible continuation of the previous scene, in which you evaluate potential responses to her attitude. (Text is in regular text, subtext in *italics*.)

HER: "Music makes me feel good."

YOU consider saying:

1. "Shut that thing off or I'll kill you!" (*No, that's a little too confrontational...*)
2. "Well, I guess I'll go to the library and study now." (*Hey! Why should I give up my living space? What if this becomes a habit....*)
3. "Look, this room is half mine, and I have some rights, some rights to peace and ... and quiet..." (*No, that's whiny....*)
4. "This book is too hard to deal with over all that music." (*Well, that's the right idea. How about ...*)

YOU finally decide to say:

5. "Listen, I like that CD so much that it's distracting me, and I have got to get this reading done. Could you do me a favor and let me have fifteen minutes of quiet? I'll owe you." (*Much better. Now, shut that thing off or I'll kill you.*)

HER: "OK."

## 6. Titles of Beats

1. Fuming Over Book Until Breaking Point
2. Making Failed Pizza Pitch
3. Making Failed Phone-Home Pitch
4. Ode to Music Followed by Pause
5. Request for Silence and Acceptance

People who fail to get what they want are often failing to play their *objectives* strongly enough or failing to switch *tactics* from one that is not going to work to another.

## Actor Guidelines

To keep choices active, clear, and strong, use the following reminders:

1. Objectives should be stated with the preposition *to* followed by an active verb. Never use the word *be* because it is too passive. Objectives such as “to be happy” or “to be loved” are *both* so non-assertive that they cannot be actively acted. They give you nothing to pursue. “To find joy” and “to get a lover” are somewhat more actable. “To win the trip to Maui” and “to boff Lois” are even more actable. To goad, defy, needle, force, or tease are more actable than to tell, suggest, inform, wonder, or get angry because the former demand results.
2. Keep language simple. Keep words to a minimum. Use down-to-earth, unambiguous words that click quickly into consciousness. Your analysis of a scene should read like traffic signals, guiding you through the part.
3. Subtext may support the text, modify it, or qualify it. It may add dimensions that the text did not seem to imply by itself. It may actually contradict or work against the text, as in the old vaudeville routine:

STRAIGHT MAN: Nervous?

COMIC: NOOOPE!!!! (*second line given with so much terror and anxiety that the subtext wipes out text*)

Subtext is an actor’s food and air. Finding, changing, and shading subtext is what actors most love to do and what audiences most love to watch. Stanislavski says that *subtext* is what the audience comes to the theatre to see, that if all they wanted was the *text*, they could have stayed home and read the script. A firm, hard remark is modified with a gentle, warm tone, and the most polite, civil response (words) can be filled with dangerous warning (delivery) not to tread further. Subtext is a phenomenal source of power. It may totally alter text.

*I like the challenge of conveying an emotion or idea that isn't right there in the dialogue. I like to be able to say “I think I'll have a drink” and let the audience know that what I mean is “I love you.”*

—Mel Gibson

## Alternatives

Your *evaluation* period may have some random and desperate thoughts that do not lead anywhere because you are momentarily thrown off guard. However, sooner or later, your evaluation will include a subcategory called *alternatives*. These are answers you consider but reject. If you're feeling ill and surly, your alternatives may include some insults and at least one obscene howl. Most, however, include the following:

### Response

### Sample Lines

Complete rejection

"No way. Not in your lifetime, not in this century. Eat s\_ \_t and die."

Complete acceptance

"Whatever you say."

Stalling

"I don't get it. Could you run that by me again?"

Guarded, ambiguous response

"Thanks for your frankness. I hear what you're saying."

Logical, reasonable answer

"Let's go over each one of your points."

Emotional, passionate answer

"Oh God! I love it!!!" or  
"X#&@!!! You piece of \*#^!!!"

Something menacing

"Go ahead. Make my day."

Something endearing

"You sure have a way with words."

Any combination of the above

In the classic film *The Terminator*, alternatives are even considered (and shown electronically) by the nonhuman title character. In one scene, he is wounded and gives off an unpleasant odor. A guy comes to the apartment where he is hiding and shouts through the door: "Hey, Buddy, you got a dead cat in there or what?" On Arnold's internal computer screen, six possible answers appear:

1. "Yes/No."
2. "Or what?"
3. "Go away."
4. "Please come back later."
5. "F\_ \_ \_ you, asshole."
6. "F\_ \_ \_ you."

He chooses 5, and the man goes away and leaves him alone.

Actors often leave out evaluations people would use in real life. Actors' words pop out too easily. The result is bad acting. It's easy to

omit evaluating because the lines are already there and the actor doesn't have to search for words. This search, however, is compelling to watch. Great actors fill *evaluations* with original, powerful *alternatives*. Whenever they are handed a difficult cue, we watch, intrigued by what they consider but choose not to unveil, enthralled, as they prepare to respond.

Tactics can be characterized as *charm* (“I win, you win, we all win”) or *threat* (“I win, you lose, so give up”). During an evaluation, we may hover and then move in one direction or the other. Here are some tactics most often chosen:

## Charm Tactics

1. *Validate*: Make the other person feel important. Nod, smile, laugh appreciatively, flatter, pay tribute, bow, shrug, bend, impressed, give them an identity to live up to.
2. *Soothe*: Calm them down, lull, hum, hush, use a bedside manner, salve, quell, caress, croon, offer reassuring sounds and comforting words.
3. *Open up*: Use candor. Claim to be open and frank. Honor their intelligence and character. Speak plain, shoot from the hip, be direct, be vulnerable, go for the bottom line. The idea is that some people might be hoodwinked, but not the listener.
4. *Play*: Amuse them, flirt, beguile, delight, find shared jokes, wink, whisper, captivate, convulse, get them to be silly with you and to drop their guard.
5. *Stir*: Inspire them, call them to wonder, challenge their ideals, turn them on to ideas or to you, get them hot, overwhelm them with fire of thought, deed, or action, whip them into a frenzy, whip up their patriotism, idealism, or gonads.

## Threat Tactics

1. *Command*: Jump in and take charge, dominate, bulldoze, interrupt, seize the moment, grab leadership and authority. Take over.
2. *Intimidate*: Overwhelm with your height, size, physical strength, projection/volume, any ingredient bigger than theirs. Flex, clench, menace, bluff, appear dangerous. Overpower.
3. *Outspeak*: Speak with greater crispness, clarity, and assertiveness. Find more vivid word choices than theirs, dart with consonants, twist with endings of phrases, finish statements like curtain lines or by demanding a response. Use words as weapons.
4. *Scrutinize*: Stare at them as if you have the goods on them and know all their secrets. Study, undress them with your eyes, glare,

or look through them. Answer questions with questions. Imagine you have a hidden weapon, dossier, evidence, photos (the shots with the donkey in Tijuana), a surprise witness, or a secret arsenal.

5. *Yell*: Throw a tantrum, scream, appear irrational, nonnegotiable, at the edge of violence and past reason. (Use this one only selectively.)

Tactics raise ethical questions. For now, skip what is right or wrong and instead note what people do.

## Why Study Acting?

If all the world is acting, why study it? Acting often does not necessarily mean acting well! Something this important to living fully is something we can all get better at.

A strong motive for acting is *l'Esprit de l'Escalier*, a French phrase that literally translates as “the Spirit of the Stairs.” Imagine yourself at a party where someone says something astonishingly rude to you. You are stunned and struck speechless. The evening goes on. You are leaving the party, descending the *stairs*, and suddenly the *spirit* comes to you. You think of the most devastating, witty comeback line in the world, a perfect retort, very civilized but sure to end all such rudeness forever. Unfortunately, the party is over, you are outside, your rude assailant is nowhere to be seen, and too much time has gone by for an effective retort anyway. You would love to rewind the tape of your life. No such luck. But the line was perfect.

You arrive home and are sorely tempted to tell the story as if you did execute the key line at the key moment. Your ethics are strongly tested. If enough time goes by, you might start telling the story that way. You might even start believing it happened the way it should have, if there were real justice in the world. There is real justice in the theatre. Characters often do think of the perfect comeback. Life is more the way it ought to be.

*Acting is where I get to yell at people the way I'd like to.  
And to be funny the way I'd like to be funny. And to be alive  
the way I'd like to be alive.*

—Ethan Hawke

*Theatre is life with the dull parts cut out.*

—Alfred Hitchcock

And sometimes it rubs off. The more time you spend speaking the great lines of others, the better chance you have to think of them yourself. There is a poster/postcard/bumper sticker that reads, “If All the World’s a Stage, I Need Better Lines.” Proximity to better lines can help. You may develop into someone who gets the spirit long before descending the stairs.

## A Richer Life

Acting is life-enhancing. Even if you never enter the door of a theatre after the last day of class, you can develop vivid personal awareness, higher communication skills, and a strong dose of compassion for others. Most disciplines study human behavior from a distance, looking at large groups with far more theory than experience. There may be no better, more involving way to learn about yourself and the phenomenon of being alive than by studying acting.

You learn how to relax and focus. You find out how your body, voice, and personality affect other people—a stronger sense of the kind of figure you cut in the world. You get tools for change if you do not like what you find out. You free dormant creative impulses, unchanneled emotional expression, and suppressed playfulness.

You gain insight regarding others, as individuals and as groups. You observe more carefully and you interact with greater sensitivity. You may start out as an atheist, a pacifist, and a political liberal. Before your study of acting is over, you may get to play a fundamentalist preacher, a soldier, or a Birch Society member. You may even be in class with such people and bond with them. You will never be able to casually judge them or generalize about them again. You will never be able to think of them merely as members of their groups.

You understand connections between yourself and others: how to make connections, avoid them, solidify them, and break them. You sense hidden agendas, nuances, layers of interaction. There is a good chance of being able to “play” your own life better.

*I come from a tight knit, conservative family. What kind of girl would go for that? They were looking for exotic, hotblooded Cuban boys with skintight pants and forbidden, dark-eyed lust. So I presented myself as that kind of guy. I was acting, even at that age.*

—Andy Garcia

The study of acting allows you to return to Let's Pretend. Most of us were much better at that in days of yore than we are now. Acting class can get you back in touch with the child in yourself, unlocking the you that was there before the locks were put on your imagination, your capacity for delight, your sense of wonder. It can unlock your dormant ability to transform yourself and the world around you.

*As much as actors like to pretend that we're these serious intellectuals you only get into acting if you're a kid who likes to dress up and play pretend.*

—Billy Bob Thornton

*Actors are people who were good at playing "Let's Pretend" as kids and now we're getting money to play house.*

—Michael J. Fox

## Actors versus Others

Human beings all act, but what about the actor as a recognized artist, a professional, someone known as an actor? What makes some get up and perform, even show off, where others fear to tread? The story of Oog, the Caveperson, freely adapted here, is a possible explanation:

Imagine a society of prehistoric types where strength and courage are admired above all. Imagine a small male Caveperson, named Oog, who lives in this group and doesn't quite fit in. Most males like to hunt, and all take their turns killing dinosaurs. [I told you this was freely adapted.] Oog likes to carve on walls, eat, talk, and mate. He is scared of hunting. But his day comes along like everyone else's.

Oog spends the whole day observing dinosaurs and other powerful creatures, having neither the heart nor the courage to kill anything. He drags his club home at sundown, only to encounter all the powerful brutes standing around the cave entrance. "Hey, Oog, where's dinner?" one asks menacingly. Oog pauses nervously and considers trying to run away.

Suddenly, he is inspired. "Wait 'til I tell you about it," he says. "There I was on the plain, the sun beating mercilessly down on my neck, when suddenly this enormous green creature roars (he stops and roars) and rolls his head (he rolls) so fiercely that I got chills (his listeners get chills) and then ..." (The details of his story can be omitted since, with some embellishment, he takes them through his day so vividly that they almost feel as if they were there in his place.) Oog has his audience mesmerized. He imitates the dinosaur to perfection, he gets the sound of



dinofeet on the sandy plain, all the details. Cheers follow the end of his story.

All is forgiven. There is ample leftover dinosaur around anyway. The group quickly agrees that Oog should be excused from hunting from now on. Instead, he should follow the hunters and observe the hunt, recreating it for everyone at supper each evening, acting out all the parts. Well, most of the parts. Others are already volunteering to help out. He is happy to be excused and glad to have a function. As Oog and his mate head off to their corner of the cave, she says to him, “Oog, you’ve got it all over those dumb brutes. You’re a real artist.”

As another couple moves to their corner, she says, “That Oog. Isn’t he amazing? The way he got just how the dinosaur’s head swings back and forth. It was perfect.” Her mate replies, “Well, it was pretty good. Personally, I wouldn’t have swung my head so far. It’s more of circle than a swing, actually.” And so the first actor is born. And, minutes later, the first critic.

In every culture, someone finds she is better at showing society how it lives than at living at its center. Her gifts are for recreating human experience. She can literally give life back to an event from the past or give form to something in the mind. One of the questions you are probably exploring in taking an acting class is whether or not that sort of person is you.

*When I got to do my first play it was like somebody dropped me in the water for the first time. My God! To know who you are, to know how you’re supposed to earn the breath you draw. It’s such a release.*

—Alfre Woodard

*I think I first turned to acting out of a desire for love. Isn’t that what we all want? And then I fell in love with acting itself.*

—Matt Damon

Nearly everyone fantasizes about an acting career, and acting teachers are plagued by first-term students wanting to know if they have what it takes. This question is premature. No decent teacher will answer it until a student has studied the art for a few years. A teacher will tell you where your strong suits appear to lie, where you’ve made progress, what kinds of goals you should set, and what training you should pursue next. But no one should give you thumbs up or down but you. If you

decide ultimately, down the road, to pursue the profession, it will be because you know you *must*. It will be because the art has chosen and possessed you and you have no choice. You may or may not be Oog.

*When I found acting I discovered a piece of me that had been missing all my life. It's almost like you miss a couple chapters in a book, but you keep reading confused. Then suddenly there are the missing chapters and it all makes sense.*

—Lucy Liu

*Everything else in my life receded, once I discovered theatre.*

—Bette Midler

*I knew I wanted to be an actor as soon as I knew what one was. At age 3, I asked my parents to get me an agent and finally when I was 6, they did.*

—Keira Knightley

## Offstage Action

An actor also has access to many life skills that elude other people. Studying acting (both in class and in shows) can help you become skilled and resourceful in countless offstage encounters. What follows is a *long* list. At this point, just scan it for parts of your life you really want to improve. Let these be regular reference points throughout the term. Then return to the list as your awareness of how this class could affect you expands. Each subsequent chapter will ask you to reconnect with the list as a checkpoint in your growth.

### 1. Negating Newness

You want to make a good impression, but you don't know the other people or circumstances, so you're unsure how to "act":

- *First dates:* What does this person want, and do I want to spend more time with this person? If you can get comfortable performing in front of groups of strangers, you allow yourself to get loose and playful around one new person whom you think you like.
- *Handling interviews:* Even the toughest questions can be rehearsed; you can actually practice and prepare rather than just getting nervous.

- *Fitting in as a newcomer:* Theatre requires instant intimacy. Those who have never laid eyes on each other suddenly must trust each other and work closely. Carry this over into other contexts where you are the new kid on the block.
- *Visiting potential in-laws:* This is an audition and involves acting skills, even if you don't necessarily want the part for which you are trying out.
- *Making small talk with strangers:* Working with dialogue and improvisation gives you lots of lines and more ways to respond freshly when you might otherwise be coming up blank.
- *Hosting/chairing for the first time:* Actors need to learn new routines fast, swiftly figure out protocol, and get things moving. You learn to act like a leader.
- *Giving impromptu speeches:* Again, these don't have to be *altogether* new. Acting allows you to learn stories, lines, and jokes and file them away for when they are suddenly needed.

## **2. Pleasant as Possible**

You're in a situation that could get extremely unpleasant unless you develop an acting strategy to smooth out the encounter:

- *Creating, maintaining boundaries:* Acting classes establish guidelines for appropriate behavior. Actors get skilled at telling others what they will and will not accept.
- *Getting rid of pests:* If you pursue acting, you really will be too busy to give them much time, but you will also learn specific strategies for being left alone.
- *Taking rejection gracefully:* There are always so many more actors wanting roles, nominations, places in class, and so on, than there are openings that getting comfortable with hearing "No" is simply an actor's way of life.
- *Handling criticism well:* Your work is constantly evaluated publicly with an emphasis on how it could change for the better. You learn to accept critical "gifts" without being devastated.
- *Airing grievances effectively:* Characters in plays do this better than most of us, and we can borrow from them. You develop the ability to complain succinctly, often with humor, in the way that works best.
- *Resolving conflicts swiftly:* Because there is always a looming deadline and a common goal—the show must go on—actors learn

to get right to the problem, solve it, and move on to be ready for opening night. This skill transfers to other circumstances.

- *Ending relationships gracefully:* Theatre is a constant series of close relationships suddenly ended when the show closes or the course ends, almost like having temporary families that then dissolve. You get very good at enjoying it while it lasts and then being able to say goodbye and walk away.
- *Negotiating skillfully:* Every rehearsal is a series of negotiations. Before you know it, you have mastered compromise and initiative.
- *Self-assertiveness in the face of opposition:* Unless you want to be a doormat, you learn to face up to all the strong personalities and make your voice heard. Actor training is in many ways about learning when and how to speak up.

### 3. Keeping Cool

Major acting effort goes into not blowing up, breaking down, or freaking out. In fact, the most frequent form of offstage acting is dialing yourself down:

- *Not overreacting, subduing emotional excess:* Contrary to the stereotype of actors emoting excessively, a primary lesson we learn is how to subdue displays when excess is inappropriate. Actors become adept at masking or revealing feelings in increments. Acting gives you power and choice. It teaches you to do just enough and no more.
- *Conquering destructive impulses:* Even the simple study of evaluations and alternatives (see pages 16–18) helps you recognize when you need to ponder an action before fully taking it. The self-analysis of actor training helps you recognize early your own symptoms and tendencies to impulsiveness.
- *Handling stress, pressure gracefully:* There are so many sources of tension in performance that skills related to being ready, steady, and going easily with the flow are among the most important learned.
- *Anger management:* Because you study emotions across the board, you have much better chances to subdue those that do not serve you.
- *Quick recovery from tough encounters:* Switching gears from one scene to the next, getting ready for “show time” whether you are in the mood or not, getting over criticism, and bouncing back are all part of the acting process.

- *Maintaining perspective:* Actors examine plays from many points of view, must comprehend behavior they would never choose, and constantly need to look at the big picture.
- *Knowing when to substitute emotion:* Sometimes the situation is not going to change, and the only way to make it better is changing the way you feel about it. Actors know how to do this.
- *Knowing when to exaggerate emotion:* You may act as if a mildly pleasant (or even disappointing) gift is the best thing that ever happened to you if the giver seems to need this kind of reassurance. You may also “enlarge” a negative response to something you wish never to happen again. Believably heightening response is a vital daily acting skill.

#### 4. Sensing Signals

Actors study behavior closely and get much sharper than others are at recognizing what is really going on *behind* what is said:

- *Reading nonverbal behavior in others:* We study the look in the eyes, body language, pauses, all the signals that many miss.
- *Sensing people’s feelings accurately:* After learning the various masks used by those trying to cover a feeling, you become adept at seeing through those masks.
- *Responding appropriately:* Acting gives you more choices and the capacity to read signals to tell you how to proceed.
- *Tuning in to subtle social signals:* Many people are so full of themselves that they fail to recognize a current running through a group. Actors learn to get their antennae out for shifts in the room. A code exists even in the most seemingly casual groups. Acting gives you protocol radar.
- *Interactive synchronicity:* Actors develop powerful empathy and connection with others and are more likely to get on someone else’s wavelength with less effort.

#### 5. Winning Ways

Whether you are selling an idea, project, plan, or yourself, for a season or a night, acting is a crucial part of persuasion:

- *Pitching an idea:* Performance skills are needed for an effective pitch, but most civilians lack these as backups to the ideas themselves.

- *Convincing parents/authority figures:* Actors recognize the parts of themselves that those in charge respond positively to and where their most effective arguments have been. Then they build on these for the next encounter.
- *Romance:* Wooing people is about figuring out what they like, how they want you to act around them, and when to surprise them. Actors are naturals at this, and some scripts offer impressive models of successful lovers.
- *Seduction:* If you want others to drop their guard, whether the reasons are sexual or simply to persuade, the art of acting gives you a seductive edge.
- *Winning trust and confidence:* Class teaches you where your own behavior seems least truthful and helps you hone what others respond to as real.
- *Getting yourself hired, chosen, or awarded:* Actors' audition skills give them a significant edge in competitive settings where being able to act confident is essential.
- *Getting off light when you've gotten busted:* Though these skills should be used selectively, actors have countless stories of getting out of traffic tickets, detention—you name it—through skillful and subtle performances.

## 6. Improving Your Image

Many people don't like the way they come across to others but feel trapped. Many don't even know how they come across. Acting students learn what they send out and how to make changes:

- *Breaking out of limiting behavior:* Acting training helps you recognize what you are doing that is not working and gives you other options.
- *Changing your personal image:* Because you learn to change yourself to play a character, you also pick up hints about refining what you project to the world.
- *Leaving an impression of both confidence and humility:* Civilians often think they need to come across as one or the other. Actors learn to blend.
- *Balancing being true to yourself with social skills:* Acting can teach you which battles are worth fighting. You learn how to lubricate some social occasions so you feel freer to speak your mind in others—when it is needed.

## 7. Richer Relationships

Some of us get almost too good at number 3, “Keeping Cool.” Opening up involves knowing not just how to feel like a friend but how to act like one:

- *Demonstrating concern for those you care about:* Actors learn about demonstrations that actually *show* people how they feel. Friendships don’t just fall apart. They take some regular attention, a collection of the smallest gestures.
- *Providing consolation or solace:* The fear of appearing sentimental or clumsy stops many from demonstrating real concern, but actors are less likely to be frozen by that degree of self-consciousness.
- *Encouraging, honoring others’ accomplishments:* Nonactors are also often embarrassed that they will come off as fawning or inauthentic, whereas actors learn how essential praise is to growth and give it.
- *Effective self-disclosure:* Because we learn to conceal who we are, we also often feel more comfortable sharing what’s inside when the time is right. The fact that we are asked to go deep into the skins and hearts of others as we play them gives us an opening to do the same with our companions.
- *Developing support systems:* Acting requires us to learn quickly whom we can trust, learn from, and feel nurtured by. We have more clues to pick a better posse.

## 8. Social Savvy

Acting is interacting, knowing how to connect with, listen to, and relate to others:

- *Networking skillfully:* Most productions have 50 or more people working on them. Pay attention, and every one of them will be on your team by the time the show is over. Or not. Same for other groups later.
- *Interactive competence:* Models for getting directly to the point with vivid examples and results are offered to us in scripts where most of the hemming and hawing of life has been cut out.
- *Mastering social exchanges:* If you aren’t naturally good at life’s improvisations, you can observe and rehearse these surprisingly predictable interactions. They don’t have to be spontaneous; you just need to act them that way.
- *Easing tension, creating harmony:* Study the energy you bring into a room (especially a rehearsal hall or acting class), and model those who always seem to improve the mood and break the tension before