

Introduction to the Art of Acting

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INTRODUCTION

The majority of theatre artists dream of becoming famous actors on screen. This focus on screen acting does not mean that stage acting is less critical. It recognizes that actors in the 21st century must adapt to the changing landscape of the entertainment industry. Even stage productions now rely heavily on media exposure to attract audiences, and having well-known screen actors can determine their success. Regardless of the medium—stage, screen, or radio drama—the fundamental acting processes remain largely the same, with only minor differences. No medium is inherently more difficult or more accessible than the others.

An actor's physical presence is crucial to the audience's experience in all these mediums. According to Brockett and Ball (2014:358), actors are unique artists whose means of expression are inseparable from themselves, emphasizing the importance of an actor's body and voice. Aspiring actors must learn techniques to portray various characters effectively. This chapter explores the definitions of acting, techniques using the body and voice, characterization, facing the camera, and the ethical considerations for actors.

Different experts and schools of thought have defined acting in various ways. While a standard definition suggests that acting is the imitation of real-life characters on stage, this view needs to be revised and can be misleading. Effiong Johnson (2005:16) argues that defining acting as imitation suggests counterfeiting and implies that the original exists elsewhere. Instead, he describes acting as a well-planned, purposeful phenomenon. Brockett and Ball provide a broader perspective, viewing acting as an extension of everyday human behaviour, where individuals adjust to various daily roles.

Sanford Meisner defines acting as "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances," capturing the essence of transferring everyday traits to the stage to fulfil the audience's suspended disbelief. Renowned American actor John Barrymore offers a comprehensive definition, describing acting as the art of sincerely embodying a character's words and actions as if encountering the situation for the first time. Barrymore emphasizes the need for an actor's voice to be well-trained, flexible, capable of apparent, projected speech and for the body to respond naturally and spontaneously.

The Enemies of Acting

An actor must be aware of potential pitfalls that can undermine their craft. Four primary enemies of acting include:

1. **Self-Consciousness:** When actors are overly aware of their audience, they may overact or become nervous.

2. **Self-Righteousness:** Relying solely on past experiences can hinder growth. Continuous training and new experiences in rehearsals are crucial.
3. **Trying to Get It Right:** Acting requires unique interpretation rather than imitation. Actors should develop their distinct approaches to roles.
4. **Cynicism:** Negative attitudes and ego can harm collaboration and performance quality.

Factors that Constitute Good Acting

Effective acting results from multiple interrelated factors that collectively enhance the overall performance. These elements create a compelling and memorable theatrical or cinematic experience when harmoniously integrated.

1. A Good Script

A well-written script serves as the foundation for any successful production. It provides the narrative structure, character development, dialogue, and thematic elements that guide the actors' performances. Key attributes of a good script include:

- **Strong Plot:** A coherent and engaging storyline that captures the audience's interest.
- **Complex Characters:** Well-defined characters with distinct motivations, backgrounds, and arcs allow actors to explore and portray various emotions and behaviours.
- **Authentic Dialogue:** Realistic and meaningful dialogue that reflects the characters' personalities and relationships.
- **Clear Themes:** Underlying themes and messages that add depth and provoke thought.

2. A Team of Good Actors

A talented ensemble of actors brings the script to life, infusing it with energy, emotion, and authenticity. The chemistry and collaboration among cast members are crucial for creating believable relationships and dynamics on stage or screen. Important aspects include:

- **Diverse Skill Sets:** A range of acting techniques and styles that can adapt to various roles and scenarios.
- **Chemistry:** Natural and believable actors' interactions enhance the story's realism.
- **Commitment:** Dedication to understanding and embodying their characters fully.
- **Flexibility:** The ability to take direction, adapt to changes, and respond to fellow actors in the moment.

3. A Creative and Interpretative Director

A director's vision and interpretation of the script shape the entire production. Their role involves guiding the actors, shaping the narrative, and ensuring a cohesive artistic vision. Key responsibilities include:

- **Visionary Leadership:** Providing a clear and compelling vision for the production.

- **Actor Guidance:** Offering constructive feedback and support to help actors refine their performances.
- **Narrative Coherence:** Ensuring all production elements align with the overarching story and themes.
- **Innovation:** Bringing creative solutions to staging, blocking, and scene transitions.

4. Thorough Rehearsals

Rehearsals are the backbone of any successful performance, allowing actors to explore their characters, experiment with different interpretations, and refine their delivery. Effective rehearsals involve:

- **Character Exploration:** Deep dives into the motivations, backstories, and characters' relationships.
- **Scene Work:** Detailed practice of individual scenes to perfect timing, pacing, and emotional beats.
- **Blocking:** Establishing precise movements and positioning on stage or in front of the camera to ensure visual coherence.
- **Feedback:** Continuous evaluation and adjustment based on director and peer feedback.

5. Supporting Elements: Lighting, Props, Costumes, and Set Design

Supporting elements play a crucial role in creating the world of the play or film, enhancing the believability and immersion of the production. These components include:

- **Lighting:** Sets the mood, highlights critical moments, and directs the audience's attention. Good lighting design can transform a scene's atmosphere and support the storytelling.
- **Props:** Provide authenticity and context to the setting, helping actors interact more naturally with their environment.
- **Costumes:** Reflect the character's personality, status, and the historical or cultural context of the story. Well-designed costumes can significantly influence an actor's portrayal.
- **Set Design:** Creates the physical space where the action unfolds, establishing the visual context and supporting the narrative. Detailed and thoughtful set design helps transport the audience into the story's world.

The Actor's Basic Tools: Body and Voice

The Body

Actors rely heavily on their bodies as primary tools for communication, utilizing physicality to convey meaning and emotion even in the absence of dialogue. This requires a deep understanding and mastery of their physical instrument through constant training and awareness. Critical aspects of using the body in acting include:

1. **Flexibility and Range of Motion:** Regular exercises, such as stretching, yoga, and dance, help maintain and improve an actor's flexibility, enabling a wide range of physical expression.
2. **Body Awareness:** Actors must develop a keen sense of body awareness to control their movements deliberately. Techniques such as the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method help actors become more conscious of their physical habits and improve their posture and alignment.
3. **Expressiveness:** The ability to convey complex emotions and narratives through body language, facial expressions, and gestures is crucial. Mime and physical theatre exercises can enhance an actor's expressiveness.
4. **Physical Conditioning:** Stamina and strength are essential, especially for demanding roles. Regular cardiovascular and strength training exercises help actors maintain the physical endurance required for performances.
5. **Physicality in Characterization:** Different characters may require unique physical attributes or movements. Studying movement styles, such as Laban Movement Analysis, can aid actors in developing distinct physical characteristics for each role.

The Voice

The voice is an equally vital tool for actors, as it delivers dialogue, conveys emotion, and enhances character development. An actor's voice must be trained to be strong, versatile, and capable of conveying subtle nuances. Critical elements of voice training include:

1. **Pitch:** The relative highness or lowness of the voice. Actors must know their natural pitch and learn how to vary it to suit different characters and emotions.
2. **Range:** The distance between the highest and lowest tones an actor can produce. A more comprehensive vocal range allows for more significant roles and emotional expression versatility.
3. **Timbre:** The unique quality or colour of the voice distinguishes one voice from another. Understanding and manipulating timbre can help actors create distinct vocal identities for their characters.
4. **Resonance:** The amplification of the vocal cavities produces the voice's richness and fullness. Techniques such as proper breathing, relaxation of the throat, and vowel emphasis can improve resonance.

Cicely Berry (1987), a renowned voice coach, emphasizes several factors that affect the voice:

- **Environment:** The surroundings and acoustics can impact vocal performance. Actors must adapt their voice projection to different spaces, from intimate theatres to large outdoor venues.
- **Perception of Sound:** How actors hear and interpret sounds affects their vocal production. Active listening exercises and vocal mimicry can enhance this perception.
- **Physical Makeup:** An individual's anatomy, including the size and shape of vocal cords and cavities, influences their vocal qualities. Understanding one's physical makeup can guide personalized vocal training.

- **Desire to Communicate:** The intent and emotional drive behind speech are crucial. Actors must cultivate a strong connection to the material and a genuine desire to convey the story to the audience.

Vocal Training Techniques

To develop and maintain a robust and versatile voice, actors engage in various vocal exercises:

1. **Breathing Exercises:** Proper breath control is fundamental. Techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing help support sustained, powerful vocal production.
2. **Jaw Relaxation:** Tension in the jaw can impede clear speech. Exercises that involve massaging and loosening the jaw muscles can promote relaxation.
3. **Articulation Drills:** Crisp, clear articulation ensures that every word is understood. Tongue twisters and diction exercises improve enunciation.
4. **Pitch and Range Exercises:** Vocal warm-ups that explore different pitches and extend vocal range help maintain flexibility and prevent strain.
5. **Resonance Training:** Humming, chanting, and singing exercises can enhance vocal resonance, adding depth and richness to the voice.
6. **Listening and Imitation:** Practicing along with recordings of skilled actors or engaging in vocal mimicry can help improve vocal variety and adaptability.

Building Character

Building a character is a multifaceted process that requires an actor to delve deep into the role's nuances, ensuring that the distinction between the actor and the character is clearly defined. This involves combining script analysis, understanding the character's background, and leveraging intuitive creative forces. The process can be broken down into several key components:

Understanding the Distinction Between the Actor and the Character

Recognizing the difference between oneself and the character is fundamental. The actor must leave their experiences and perspectives to inhabit their role fully. This involves:

- **Separating Personal Identity:** The actor must detach from their traits, habits, and biases.
- **Adopting Character Traits:** Embracing the character's unique attributes, behaviours, and thought processes.
- **Maintaining Authenticity:** While inhabiting the character, the actor must remain faithful to the role's essence, avoiding superficial portrayals.

Script Analysis

A thorough analysis of the script is essential for understanding the characters and the context in which they exist. This involves:

- **Identifying Key Moments:** Highlighting pivotal scenes and dialogue that reveal significant aspects of the character.

- **Exploring Relationships:** Understanding the character's interactions and relationships with other characters.
- **Uncovering Motivations:** Determining what drives the character's actions and decisions throughout the story.

Understanding the Character's Background

Comprehending the character's history and background provides a solid foundation for building a believable portrayal. This includes:

- **Backstory:** Creating a detailed backstory for the character, even if it is not explicitly stated in the script. This includes family history, education, significant life events, and formative experiences.
- **Physical Characteristics:** Considering the character's physical appearance, health, and any physical mannerisms or quirks.
- **Social Context:** Placing the character within their social, economic, and cultural context to understand their worldview and behaviour.

Intuitive Creative Forces

Relying on intuitive, creative forces helps actors bring depth and authenticity to their characters. These forces include:

- **Empathy:** The ability to genuinely feel and share the emotions of the character. This involves putting oneself in the character's shoes and experiencing their emotional journey.
- **Sympathy:** An understanding and compassionate response to the character's experiences and emotions. This allows the actor to connect with the character on a deeper level.
- **Imitation:** Observing and replicating real-life behaviours, mannerisms, and speech patterns that align with the character. This can involve studying people who share similarities with the character.
- **Identification:** Combining one's personality and experiences with the character's traits creates a believable and relatable portrayal. This involves finding common ground between the actor and the character.

Analyzing Characters on Multiple Levels

To fully comprehend and portray a character, actors analyze them on various levels:

1. **Biological Level:**
 - **Gender and Age:** The character's gender and age significantly influence their behaviour, perspectives, and interactions.
 - **Physical Appearance:** Characteristics such as height, weight, and physical condition.
 - **Health:** Any medical conditions or disabilities that affect the character's actions and interactions.
2. **Sociological Level:**

- **Profession:** The character's job or occupation, which can influence their behaviour, speech, and interactions.
 - **Social Class:** Economic status and social standing shape the character's worldview and relationships.
 - **Family Background:** The character's family dynamics, upbringing, and significant familial relationships.
 - **Community Standing:** The character's reputation and role within their community.
3. **Psychological Level:**
- **Attitudes and Beliefs:** The character's personal beliefs, values, and attitudes towards various aspects of life.
 - **Emotional Makeup:** The character's typical emotional responses, temperament, and psychological state.
 - **Motivations and Goals:** What drives the character's actions and decisions, including their desires, fears, and aspirations?
4. **Ethical Level:**
- **Values and Morals:** The character's ethical principles and moral compass.
 - **Choices and Conflicts:** How the character makes decisions, especially in moments of crisis or conflict, revealing their true nature.

Creative Imagination and Observation

To bring a character to life, actors must use their creative imagination and keen observational skills:

- **Creative Imagination:** Actors project themselves into the world of the play or film, imagining how their characters would think, feel, and act in various situations.
- **Creative Observation:** By observing the real world, actors gather insights into human behaviour, emotions, and interactions. They then apply these observations to their character, making their portrayal more authentic and relatable.

Basics of Acting for the Screen

Acting for the screen is distinct from stage acting due to the unique demands of the film medium. The camera's ability to capture minute details requires actors to adapt their techniques to make their performances compelling and believable. Here are the essential components of screen acting:

Understanding Camera Work

- **Close-ups:** Unlike stage acting, where more significant movements and expressions are necessary to reach the back of the theatre, screen acting often relies on close-ups. In close-up shots, the camera captures subtle facial expressions and small gestures, so actors must master conveying emotion with minimal movements.
 - **Eye Movement:** The eyes can express a wide range of emotions. Subtle shifts in eye direction, blinking patterns, and pupil dilation can convey internal thoughts and feelings.
 - **Microexpressions:** These brief, involuntary facial expressions reveal genuine emotions and can add depth to a performance when captured up close.

- **Continuity:** Maintaining continuity is crucial in film acting because scenes are often shot out of sequence. Actors must ensure that their physicality, positioning, and emotional state remain consistent across takes and scenes.
 - **Marks:** Actors must know their marks (pre-determined positions) to ensure consistent framing and focus.
 - **Props and Costumes:** Handling props and wearing costumes consistently across different takes helps maintain continuity.

Subtleties of Facial Expressions and Body Language

- **Facial Expressions:** The camera magnifies facial expressions, so actors must learn to control and refine their expressions to convey emotions authentically without appearing exaggerated or theatrical.
 - **Neutral Face:** Starting with a neutral face and then layering emotions can create more believable reactions.
 - **Inner Monologue:** Engaging in an inner monologue can help actors generate genuine facial expressions reflecting their characters' thoughts and feelings.
- **Body Language:** Even small gestures and movements can be significant on screen. Actors should be mindful of their body language to ensure it aligns with their character's emotions and intentions.
 - **Economy of Movement:** Minimizing unnecessary movements can make an actor's performance more focused and effective.
 - **Physical Stillness:** Sometimes, stillness can be powerful, drawing the audience's attention to subtle facial expressions or a single, deliberate gesture.

Precision in Performance

- **Subdued Approach:** Screen acting often requires a more restrained approach than stage acting. Overly dramatic gestures and expressions can appear exaggerated on camera, so subtlety and nuance are key.
 - **Naturalism:** Aim for a naturalistic style that feels authentic and believable. This often involves underplaying emotions rather than amplifying them.
 - **Internalization:** Emphasize internalization of the character's emotions and thoughts, subtly allowing these to manifest in physical expressions and gestures.

Technical Aspects

- **Hitting Marks:** Actors must be adept at hitting their marks accurately to ensure they are in the correct position for the camera, lighting, and other technical elements.
 - **Blocking:** Understanding and rehearsing the blocking (movement and positioning) is crucial for maintaining continuity and ensuring effective shot composition.
- **Microphones and Sound:** Be aware of the placement of microphones and maintain consistent volume and clarity in speech without projecting as one would on stage.
 - **Voice Control:** Develop the ability to modulate the voice to suit different scenes, from intimate whispers to more intense dialogue, while maintaining clarity and emotional authenticity.

Interaction with the Camera and Crew

- **Awareness of Camera Angles:** Knowing the camera angles and how they affect the portrayal of the character helps actors adjust their performance accordingly.
 - **Cheating:** Slightly adjusting body position or gaze direction to ensure the best possible shot without breaking the natural flow of the scene.
- **Collaboration with Crew:** Effective communication and collaboration with the director, cinematographer, and other crew members are essential to understanding their vision and technical requirements.
 - **Taking Direction:** Being open to feedback and direction and adjusting performances to meet the director's vision and technical constraints.

Emotional Authenticity

- **Consistency in Emotions:** Ensuring that emotional intensity and nuances are consistent across multiple takes and angles is critical for creating a cohesive performance.
 - **Emotional Memory:** Using personal experiences and emotional memory can help actors generate genuine emotional responses consistent across takes.
- **Rehearsing for Camera:** Practice and rehearse scenes with the awareness of the camera's presence. This helps actors become comfortable with the technical aspects while maintaining emotional authenticity.

Basic Acting Techniques

Mastering the craft of acting requires a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Here are some fundamental techniques that actors use to bring characters to life on stage and screen:

1. Relaxation

- **Purpose:** To reduce physical and mental tension, enabling natural and fluid movements and reactions.
- **Exercises:** Breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, and stretching routines help actors achieve a state of readiness and ease.

2. Concentration and Focus

- **Purpose:** To maintain attention to the task, ensuring consistent and authentic performance.
- **Exercises:** Visualization techniques, focusing on specific objects or sounds, and practising mindfulness can improve concentration.

3. Observation

- **Purpose:** To develop a keen awareness of the world around them, which actors can draw upon to create believable characters.
- **Exercises:** People-watching, noting physical behaviours, and studying accents, gestures, and mannerisms.

4. Imagination

- **Purpose:** To creatively envision scenarios, characters, and emotions that may not be part of the actor's experience.
- **Exercises:** Improvisation games, storytelling, and visualization exercises that encourage imaginative thinking.

5. Emotional Memory

- **Purpose:** To use personal past experiences to evoke genuine emotions that align with the character's situation.
- **Exercises:** Reflect on personal memories that evoke emotions similar to those of the characters and practice recalling these feelings during the performance.

6. Sense Memory

- **Purpose:** To recall and recreate sensory experiences to enhance the realism of a performance.
- **Exercises:** Focusing on remembering the details of a specific sensory experience, such as the smell of rain or the feel of sand.

7. Given Circumstances

- **Purpose:** To understand the specific conditions of the character's world, including time, place, social context, and relationships.
- **Exercises:** Script analysis and research to gather all relevant information about the character's environment and background.

8. Objectives and Super-Objectives

- **Purpose:** To determine what the character wants to achieve (objectives) in each scene and throughout the entire play or film (super-objective).
- **Exercises:** Identifying and articulating the character's goals and practising scenes with these objectives in mind to drive action and motivation.

9. Actions and Tactics

- **Purpose:** To decide on specific actions and strategies (tactics) the character uses to achieve their objectives.
- **Exercises:** Breaking down scenes to identify actions, practising different tactics to achieve the same objective, and experimenting with physical and vocal choices.

10. Subtext

- **Purpose:** To understand and convey the underlying meaning or emotions behind the character's words and actions.

- **Exercises:** Analyzing the script to identify subtext and practising delivering lines with an awareness of the hidden meanings and motivations.

11. Physicality

- **Purpose:** To use the body effectively to express the character's emotions, status, and personality.
- **Exercises:** Movement exercises, dance, and physical theatre techniques to explore how different physical choices affect characterization.

12. Voice

- **Purpose:** To develop a strong, flexible, and expressive voice that conveys the character's emotions and intentions.
- **Exercises:** Vocal warm-ups, breath control, articulation drills, and practising different vocal qualities such as pitch, tone, and volume.

13. Improvisation

- **Purpose:** To enhance spontaneity, creativity, and the ability to think quickly and adapt to new situations.
- **Exercises:** Improvisational games and exercises that encourage actors to create scenes and characters on the spot.

14. Characterization

- **Purpose:** To build a fully realized and believable character by integrating all the above techniques.
- **Exercises:** Detailed character studies, hot-seating (where actors answer questions in character), and rehearsing scenes focusing on developing specific character traits.

15. Listening and Reacting

- **Purpose:** Engaging fully with scene partners creates a dynamic and truthful interaction.
- **Exercises:** Paired exercises focusing on active listening, repeating exercises (like Meisner's repetition technique), and practising scenes focusing on genuine reactions.

Acting: Beyond Reciting Lines

Acting transcends the mere recitation of lines from a script; it is the intricate art of bringing characters to life in a manner that resonates with the audience. This complex process requires a blend of emotional depth, psychological insight, and physical expressiveness, making it a demanding and multifaceted craft.

Commitment to the Craft

Effective acting demands unwavering dedication. An actor must fully commit to understanding and embodying their character, delving deep into the character's psyche, motivations, and background. This often involves extensive research and methodical preparation to portray the character's essence accurately.

Professionalism in Performance

Professionalism is crucial in acting. This includes punctuality, reliability, and a collaborative attitude towards fellow cast members and the production team. An actor must be adaptable, able to take direction, and willing to continually revise and improve their performance.

Continuous Practice and Improvement

The art of acting is one of perpetual growth. Continuous practice is essential to refine skills and stay sharp. This involves participating in regular rehearsals, taking acting classes, and engaging in exercises that enhance voice, movement, and emotional range.

Practical Experience Over Theoretical Knowledge

While theoretical knowledge provides a foundational understanding of acting principles, absolute mastery comes from practical experience. Acting workshops, live performances, and on-camera work provide invaluable opportunities to apply techniques, receive feedback, and make real-time adjustments.

Relentless Training and Discipline

Relentless training is a hallmark of a dedicated actor. This includes vocal exercises to strengthen and control the voice, physical workouts to maintain and enhance body flexibility, and mental exercises to improve focus and emotional access. Discipline in maintaining a consistent practice routine is critical to developing and sustaining a high level of performance.

Conclusion

Acting remains one of the most intricate and intellectually demanding art forms, requiring the performer to unite body, voice, mind, and imagination into a single expressive instrument. As this paper has shown, the craft goes far beyond memorizing lines or mimicking behaviour; it is a disciplined process grounded in psychological insight, physical control, emotional authenticity, and creative interpretation. Drawing from influential thinkers such as Brckett and Ball, Sanford Meisner, and Cicely Berry, the discussion emphasizes that effective acting is an extension of everyday human behaviour, yet refined through rigorous training and purposeful artistic choices.

The exploration of the enemies of acting, the essential factors that contribute to strong performances, and the foundational techniques used across both stage and screen highlights the depth and complexity of the actor's journey. Whether working before a live audience or performing for the camera, the actor must cultivate flexibility, presence, and emotional truth. Screen acting, in particular, demands an acute awareness of subtlety, continuity, and technical

precision, while stage performance relies on vocal power, physical expressiveness, and moment-to-moment spontaneity.

Ultimately, the art of acting thrives on continuous learning, persistent practice, and an enduring commitment to the craft. The actor becomes a storyteller, communicator, and interpreter of the human experience. As the global entertainment landscape continues to evolve—especially with the growing intersections between theatre, film, and digital media—actors must remain adaptable, open-minded, and grounded in strong artistic principles. This chapter therefore affirms that acting is both a science and an art: a disciplined pursuit that demands intelligence, imagination, and a relentless desire to communicate truthfully under all circumstances.

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