

# Contents

<b>Preface</b> .....	1
<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>Approach</b> .....	7
Lesson 1: Acting Is Not Learned from Books Alone .....	9
Lesson 2: You Can Do This .....	11
Lesson 3: Before You Learn, You Must Unlearn .....	13
Lesson 4: Know Your Enemy .....	14
Lesson 5: Don't Try to Get It Right .....	16
Lesson 6: Acting Isn't About Rules .....	18
Lesson 7: The Best Actors Are Dogs .....	19
Lesson 8: Honor the Work, Not the Teacher .....	21
<b>The Fundamentals</b> .....	23
Lesson 9: Be Where You Are .....	25
Lesson 10: Own It .....	26
Lesson 11: Engage .....	28
Lesson 12: The Curse of Acting Is Acting .....	30
Lesson 13: Follow Impulses .....	31
Lesson 14: Want, Want, Want .....	34
Lesson 15: Play Actions .....	38
Lesson 16: Find the Obstacles .....	40
Lesson 17: Discover the Subtext .....	43
Lesson 18: What Do the Other Characters Want? .....	45
Lesson 19: For Heaven's Sake, Do Something .....	47
Lesson 20: Personalize Everything .....	50
Lesson 21: Experience, Don't Show .....	52
Lesson 22: Talk and Listen .....	54
Lesson 23: Take Stage .....	57
<b>Classes and Rehearsals</b> .....	59
Lesson 24: "You Are Only As Good As You Dare Be Bad" .....	61
Lesson 25: Don't Play for the Blue Pen .....	63
Lesson 26: Read the Play, Not Your Part .....	64
Lesson 27: Practice Good Rehearsal Habits .....	65
Lesson 28: First In, Last Out .....	66

Lesson 29: Show Up . . . . .	68
Lesson 30: Be in the Moment . . . . .	69
Lesson 31: The Danger of Being Careful . . . . .	71
Lesson 32: Give Yourself Permission . . . . .	73
Lesson 33: Be Aware . . . . .	74
Lesson 34: Be Specific . . . . .	76
Lesson 35: Learn All Them Lines . . . . .	78
Lesson 36: Thou Shalt Have No Fear of Commitment . . . . .	80
Lesson 37: Be Not Afraid of Silence . . . . .	82
Lesson 38: Less Is More . . . . .	84
Lesson 39: What Just Happened? . . . . .	85
Lesson 40: Step Forward, Not Back . . . . .	87
Lesson 41: Avoid Attitude (Part One) . . . . .	88
Lesson 42: Find Stillness . . . . .	91
Lesson 43: Find Your Zone of Confidence . . . . .	92
Lesson 44: Work on What Needs Working On . . . . .	93
Lesson 45: Imagine . . . . .	94
Lesson 46: Working at Home . . . . .	96
Lesson 47: Play Opposites . . . . .	98
Lesson 48: Take Your Time . . . . .	100
Lesson 49: It's Gotta Be the Shoes . . . . .	101
Lesson 50: The Power of Focus . . . . .	103
Lesson 51: Don't Get Lost in the Mirrors . . . . .	105
Lesson 52: Build a Fourth Wall . . . . .	107
Lesson 53: Create Chemistry Correctly . . . . .	108
Lesson 54: Fill the Pause . . . . .	109
Lesson 55: What Do Line Readings Have to Do with Anything? . . . . .	110
Lesson 56: Eliminate Clunkers . . . . .	112
Lesson 57: Do the Thing . . . . .	114
Lesson 58: Leave the Work at Home . . . . .	115
Lesson 59: Allow Yourself . . . . .	116

<b>Performance . . . . .</b>	<b>119</b>
Lesson 60: Honor Directors/Beware of Directors . . . . .	121
Lesson 61: Don't Save It for Opening Night . . . . .	124
Lesson 62: Make Things Happen for a First Time . . . . .	126
Lesson 63: Relax and Give Yourself a Chance . . . . .	129
Lesson 64: Simpler, Simpler, Simpler . . . . .	131
Lesson 65: Deny the Lie . . . . .	132

Lesson 66: Don't Give Away the Mystery . . . . .	133
Lesson 67: Embrace Failure . . . . .	135
Lesson 68: Raise the Stakes . . . . .	137
Lesson 69: Allow the Emotion, and Then Fight It . . . . .	138
Lesson 70: Re-Experience, Don't Re-Create . . . . .	141
Lesson 71: Be Surprised . . . . .	143
Lesson 72: Don't Break the Furniture . . . . .	144
Lesson 73: Acting Costs . . . . .	146
Lesson 74: Hide the Work . . . . .	147
Lesson 75: Don't Forget to Play . . . . .	149
Lesson 76: Don't Forget the Audience . . . . .	150

## **Final Lessons . . . . .** 151

Lesson 77: Learn from the Masters . . . . .	153
Lesson 78: Don't Compare . . . . .	155
Lesson 79: Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged . . . . .	157
Lesson 80: Avoid Attitude (Part Two) . . . . .	158
Lesson 81: Work on Your Body . . . . .	160
Lesson 82: Speak the Speech . . . . .	161
Lesson 83: Don't Make Excuses . . . . .	163
Lesson 84: Avoid Green Rooms . . . . .	165
Lesson 85: Take What You're Given . . . . .	167
Lesson 86: Bloom Where You're Planted . . . . .	169
Lesson 87: Make Your Own Luck . . . . .	171
Lesson 88: Beware of Talk . . . . .	172
Lesson 89: Check Your Egos at the Door . . . . .	173
Lesson 90: Relieve Pressure . . . . .	175
Lesson 91: Acting Isn't Therapy . . . . .	177
Lesson 92: Honor the Three Rules of Improv . . . . .	178
Lesson 93: Ask for the Teacup . . . . .	180
Lesson 94: Fear Not Shakespeare . . . . .	181
Lesson 95: Get Rid of the Voice . . . . .	185
Lesson 96: Suffer for Your Art . . . . .	186
Lesson 97: The Fab Five . . . . .	187
Lesson 98: If You Want It, Work For It . . . . .	191
Lesson 99: Don't Get Too Comfortable . . . . .	193
Lesson 100: Do the Work, Enjoy the Victories . . . . .	194

<b>Epilogue: A Call to Arms</b> .....	195
<b>Recommended Reading</b> .....	197
<b>About the Author</b> .....	199

## **A Definition of Acting**

“Acting is the art of saying a thing on the stage as if you believed every word you utter to be as true as the eternal verities of life; it is the art of doing a thing on the stage as if the logic of the event demanded that precise act and no other; and of doing and saying the thing as spontaneously as if you were confronted with the situation in which you were acting, for the first time.”

— John Barrymore

# Preface

Before you purchase this book you need to know something: This is not a how-to book. If that's what you were in the market for, I strongly suggest you put the book down, step back, and walk away. I mean it. Don't waste your money. If you're looking for a how-to book on acting, *this is not it*. I'm sorry to disappoint you, and I do hate to lose a sale, but it's better if you know up front what this book is and what it isn't. It is meant to improve your acting skills; it is meant to develop your awareness as an actor — awareness both of yourself and those around you. It is meant to enlighten, to provoke, to inspire, to challenge. It is not meant to “teach you how to act.”

This is not a how-to book. I abhor how-to books in the arts, especially for the theatre. Not only do they not work, but they create distance between truth and falsehood. If theatre — or any of the arts, for that matter — could be taught like paint-by-numbers, then it wouldn't be an art, would it?

Acting, especially, is one of the arts most resistant to codification. It is full of intangibles. It (seemingly) lacks the systematic exercises designed to improve one's skills. Unlike a pianist with her scales, for example, there is no true equivalent for actors. It is an ephemeral craft, with one rehearsal being completely separate from the next, one performance wildly different than the following.

Given that context, a true acting book — one geared to the emerging artist — should avoid anything resembling “how-to.” Instead, such a book should focus on allowing the natural artist to evolve, grow, and mature. It should encourage the actor to find his or her own voice.

Yes, tricks can get you work every once in a while. But being an artist makes you a true actor, and true actors have a better chance of working consistently.

Don't get me wrong. How-to books do exist on some subjects: Sewing. Building birdhouses. Filing a patent. But such books don't exist for acting. They can't. Acting is learned on one's feet, either in performance or in the classroom. It is not learned through reading alone.

However.

You can greatly *enhance* your acting ability by understanding what is worth pursuing, what is worth remembering, and what is worth letting go. By reading a book such as the one you're currently holding in your hands, you can acquire *knowledge* about acting, which in itself won't land you jobs, but can strongly increase your possibilities of finding employment. By understanding and incorporating the lessons in this book you give yourself a fighting chance to work consistently as an actor, and that's all you can ask for in a business with far too many actors and far too few jobs: A fighting chance to succeed.

While it's true that books concerned with tricks on so-called "technique" can improve your chances of working as an actor, it is no coincidence that the great actors, who have no need to rely on tricks, work the most often and with the best material. I hate to burst your bubble, but despite the outlandishly high unemployment rate for actors, anyone can get work as an actor. As proof, just turn on your television any given night and flip through the channels. You're bound to see any number of actors at work.

But are they artists?

Are they creating works of any substance?

And will they last?

You and you alone know where you are as an actor. If you haven't had any acting experience but want to "make it big," this is definitely not the book for you. If you've had any actor training at all — from just an introductory level to a degree's worth of classes — and want to improve your skills, this is probably a good fit. But my feelings won't be hurt if you put this book back on the shelf and walk away. And no one need ever know you even picked it up.

This book is a series of lessons, many of which are based on a saying, an aphorism, a famous quote, sometimes even a cliché. If you like, you can think of them as mantras. Whatever. In all cases, they represent the big and little truths of acting. Learn these lessons, absorb them into your soul, *test them out on-stage*, and you will find improvement and success. Only give lip service to them and you may not be so lucky. If you're new to acting, they should provide a foundation on which you can build your acting life. If you've been acting awhile, I hope these lessons will confirm what you already know deep within you, but perhaps haven't yet voiced. The attempt here is to articulate the intangible — to capture lightning in a jar. That's what being an actor is, and that's what being an artist is.

There. You know where I'm coming from. The choice is yours.

# Introduction

One more thing before we begin.

You will notice I keep things simple in this book, and that's intentional. Although it requires plenty of thinking, acting is not strictly an intellectual endeavor, so it makes no sense to confound the matter and make it harder than it is. That's why I've organized this book the way I have — to make it simple. The lessons are short (as they should be); the concepts understandable (also as they should be). It would be easy to make this book far longer than it is, but that would only complicate the issue, which, quite frankly, has gotten complicated enough, as evidenced by all the different kinds of acting books in print.

We've heard it said about other facts of life, and it's true for acting as well: keep it simple. This isn't rocket science, after all. We're not dealing with microchips or metaphysics or operating TiVo. We're talking about creating truthful human behavior onstage. What could be more straightforward than that? The road to great acting is the road to simplicity, and I encourage you to keep your approach to acting as simple as possible. After all, this is what the great actors and actresses have discovered over time — the need to keep it simple — so why shouldn't you? If the great Spencer Tracy claimed that the key to acting was to just “know your lines and don't bump into the furniture,” he must have known something about simplicity.

(By the way, because I use the word “simple” on occasion, I should point out that there is a significant difference between simple acting and simplistic acting. “Simple” is the stripping away to the essence of the thing, getting rid of the unnecessary, finding the core of the matter. “Simplistic,” on the other hand, is oversimplifying the issue. It's ignoring the wonderful complexities of the issue. Taking that definition into consideration, acting should be simple, as should the *study* of acting.)

As you go through this book, you will notice a number of lessons that overlap with other lessons and that there is a certain amount of repetition. Good. That's as it should be. It would be virtually impossible to compartmentalize and pigeonhole every single aspect of acting so there would be no overlap. Besides, as an actor (and a student), I tend to pay attention when the same concepts make multiple appearances in various contexts. The great

lessons bear repeating and are a fundamental part of *other* lessons, and it only makes sense that a lesson that first appears in **The Fundamentals**, for example, should re-appear (in another form) in **Classes and Rehearsals** or **Performance**. In other words, not only do I not apologize for the repetitions, I embrace them.

Lastly, before we go any further, I need to explain my definition of success, since I'll be using that word a lot. Remember, success is entirely subjective. What is successful for one person may be a disappointment for another. When I mention success in this book, I'm talking about two things and two things only: (1) being the best actor you can be, and (2) working as an actor on some kind of consistent basis. I'm not talking about income; I'm not talking about fame; I'm not talking about the cover of *People* magazine. Not that I'm discouraging any of those things if they happen to work out for you, but they don't figure into the primary definition. Improve yourself so you're the best — and most marketable — actor you can be. Create acting of unsurpassed quality. That's success. The rest will follow.

In other words, don't compare.

This is, perhaps, the biggest and most dangerous trap actors can fall into, and that's why it's imperative that your only comparisons are against yourself. The question to ask is, are you a better actor than you were in the past (last week? last month? last year?)? If so, great. If not, why not? What's holding you back? Then you can ask yourself, are you getting cast as much as you'd like to be cast? As you *should* be cast? Those, to me, are the important criteria. Not whether you've won an Academy Award (only a very small minority of actors have), nor even if you're a household name. You're a successful actor if you're the best you can be and you're working on some kind of consistent basis, whether that's in New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Chicago, Wichita, Disney World, or on a cruise ship. Don't let anyone tell you differently.

Remember: Success is completely individual. It's not for us to judge someone else. We should be concerned only with our own personal success, and that's what this book strives to do. Learn the lessons, put them into practice, and succeed. Focus first and foremost on the craft. Any great artist — whether Michelangelo working as an apprentice fresco artisan or Ernest Hemingway filling his journals with writing before even attempting a novel — knows that you must first master the craft. The great artists start out as craftsmen and then continue to draw on those fundamental skills in their approach to art. To be a successful artist is to be a successful

craftsman. Once you have truly mastered the craft, then you can call yourself an artist. Not until then.

A caution: There is a difference between paying lip service to your craft and mastering it. The former can be done by skimming these pages or lounging in a green room. The latter comes with age, an accumulation of life experiences, and practice. Be diligent, but also be patient. The journey is long, but when you reach the destination — the right to call yourself an artist — it will be well worth it.

There's an old saying, "All glory comes from daring to begin."

That said, are you ready to begin? Are you ready for the lessons themselves?