Buddhists describe the process of personal growth as the “threefold way.” It begins with preparing the ground, in the way a gardener cultivates the soil to make it ready to accept the seed. Next a path is opened, as when the gardener plants the seed and waters the young plant. Finally, the fruition follows naturally, as when the gardener perfects the plant by pruning and tending, always with respect for its own nature.

We will use this idea of the threefold way of ground, path, and fruition to organize our study of acting. Part 1 of this book will begin with you, your body, your voice, and your sense of purpose as an actor. You are the “ground,” the instrument, of your work as an actor.

Part 2 will open the “path” you can travel on your way to becoming an actor. This is the concept of action, the living experience of entering your character’s world and mind. Here we will explore your ability to experience the needs and thoughts of the character within his or her circumstances, and to experience for yourself the things the character says and does to try to satisfy those needs. From this experience will come a natural transformation as you begin to personalize the character, to discover that new version of yourself which will become the character. The great Russian director Stanislavski once said that every performance is a marriage of actor and character; Part 2 will establish the foundations of that marriage and the techniques whereby it can be achieved.

The “fruition” of this process, the performance and after, will make up Part 3 of the book. Here you will consider the conduct of rehearsals and the staging of the show. Building on what you discovered in Part 2, you will develop an artistically heightened creation that serves the purposes intended by the author within the demands of the staging chosen by your director and designers.

There are exercises in each lesson in this book. They are a program of self-discovery and self-development and are arranged roughly according to a “natural” acquisition of skills and insights. The experiences provided by the exercises are essential to a true understanding (in the muscles as well as in the mind) of what this book is about. These exercises have no “right” outcome, so just follow the instructions and see what happens.
Why Study Acting?

There are many reasons to study acting. You may be considering a professional acting career; you may think the study of acting will help you present yourself more effectively in everyday life; or you may simply wish to increase your enjoyment of plays, films, and TV shows. Whatever your reason, you will discover that the study of acting can also be a process of self-exploration that can expand your spiritual, psychological, and physical potential. Brian Bates, a psychologist who also teaches acting, lists some of the ways in which the study of acting can contribute to personal growth:

Finding our inner identity. Changing ourselves. Realizing and integrating our life experience. Seeing life freshly and with insight into others. Becoming aware of the powers of our mind. Risking and commitment. Learning how to concentrate our lives into the present, and the secrets of presence and charisma. Extending our sense of who we are, and achieving liberation from restricted concepts of what a person is.¹

Even if the study of acting serves no immediate personal purpose, it can give you an enhanced understanding of real-life behavior, especially the way people behave in pursuit of their needs and desires. Drama is the one art that is entirely concerned with the way people think, feel, and interact with one another and with their world. Great plays from all times, places, and cultures reveal to us the underlying patterns and truths of the human condition, including our own.

In all these ways, the study of acting, even if it does not lead to a professional career, is a meaningful journey of personal discovery and self-expansion. Through acting you can explore your own thoughts and feelings, have experiences far beyond what your real life offers you, live in new worlds, and say and do things you would never be able to experience otherwise. What a wonderful adventure!

Understanding the Actor’s Job

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• Distinguish the qualities that produce an effective performance in any medium: audience engagement and attention; truthfulness and believability; the fulfillment of dramatic function.

In the simplest sense, an actor is anyone who performs a role in a play, TV show, or movie. Each of these three media—stage, small screen, and big screen—requires its own techniques, skills, and approaches, and few actors are equally good at all of them. A good TV sitcom actor, for instance, may not do well in a dramatic feature film, while an accomplished feature film actor may fail to deliver a stageworthy performance in a live theater. Moreover, the many different kinds of material performed in each medium, from hilarious comedy to heart-breaking tragedy, make different emotional and technical demands on actors, and again, not every actor is good at all of them. An accomplished comic actor, for instance, may not do well in a serious role, and vice versa.

Regardless of the medium and type of material, however, there are certain basic things that all good actors in all media and with all types of material must be able to do. These fundamental skills, specifically those required by the live theater, will be the aim of our study in this book, as step-by-step we lay a foundation on which future work may be based.

The most common perception of the actor’s job is that he or she creates a character. A good actor does this with a completeness and intensity that not only embodies the character but also invites us to experience the character directly through our participation in the character’s behavior and the thoughts behind that behavior. Thus the creation of an effective characterization involves not only physical and vocal aspects but also thoughts, emotions, values, beliefs, needs, and all the qualities that distinguish a complete and unique personality.

Moreover, the character is created not only to express the truth of human behavior and personality but also to fulfill the purpose for which the character
was created in the telling of the play’s story. A character never lives unto himself or herself, separate from the story of which he or she is a functioning part, and the good actor is never concerned with the creation of a character that stands apart from the world of the play and the function of the character within that world. In this sense, the actor is a kind of storyteller.

Having said that an actor’s job is fundamentally the creation of a characterization that serves the demands of the story being told, with all the thoughts and emotions required to render the characterization complete and believable, let’s look at other, deeper qualities that distinguish good acting.

**Engagement**

Every good actor strives to create a performance that is engaging, that draws the spectators in, invites them to participate in the life of the character, and compels their attention in whatever way is required by the material. This engagement is what makes all the other components of the actor’s work—emotion, character, and storytelling—possible. Let’s begin, then, by considering what makes a performance engaging.

In 350 BCE, Aristotle became the first Western philosopher to describe the qualities of a good play, and one of the qualities he believed to be necessary was sympathetha, or “fellow-feeling,” the ability of the audience to recognize the characters as fellow human beings. This is what we commonly call “believability.” Notice, however, that believability is relative to the style, content, and intent of the material being performed. Naturalistic plays, fantasies, slapstick comedies, classical tragedies, sitcoms, political satires, and the wide range of other performance forms all create their own worlds, each with its own sense of believability, some far removed from the appearances of everyday life. In all media and types of material, it is the world of the story that establishes what is “real,” and the actor's performance must be believable and therefore engaging within that world.

Whatever the demands of the specific material, an engaging performance always connects with us in a personal way; it draws us in and makes us feel as if we are “in” the characters and their world. This sense of engagement on a personal level is called empathy, which literally means “in-feeling.” Empathy is not the same as sympathy; we can feel “in” a character even if the character is unsympathetic (indeed, some of the most vivid characters in the history of drama are villains). Given a good performance by the actor, we can empathize with a character even if his or her values, behavior, and world are very different, even contrary, to our own.

This, in fact, is one of the great values of the dramatic experience: We can learn much about ourselves by feeling what it is like to do things, hold values, and live in worlds that are foreign to us. A leading American director likened doing a play to an archeological dig, since the acting and directing processes enable both makers and spectators to venture into different times, places, values, and behaviors and experience them firsthand. This is especially true of older plays and plays from other cultures, but even a contemporary play can offer new insights into our own world and behavior, helping us to see our familiar world in new ways.
In fact, most actors especially enjoy playing roles that require them to reach out into new experiences and to explore new, dormant, or hidden aspects of themselves. One of the greatest rewards of being an actor is this unending opportunity for self-discovery and self-expansion. The actor is, in a way, an explorer of the human psyche and condition; he or she journeys into the life of the character and the character’s world and then reports back to us by embodying the essence of what has been discovered, expressed in a heightened and purified form.

When the actor accomplishes this, the spectator is invited to go along on the journey of exploration and become personally engaged, experiencing the character and the character’s world and the events that occur there “as if they are before our eyes,” as Aristotle put it. This immediacy, he felt, was the essential quality of great drama and distinguished it from all other forms of literature and performance. A great play well performed is not about an event; it is the living event itself “as if before our eyes.” For this reason we will, in the first steps, emphasize the need for the actor to work in the here and now. The immediacy of the dramatic performance is potentially memorable and life changing; at its best, theater creates something truthful that will enrich and perhaps even change the audience’s lives. This is the ultimate result of engagement.

**Truthfulness**

Aristotle wondered why we eagerly watch a play that presents a painful spectacle, such as the tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, in which a man discovers that he has unknowingly murdered his father and then married his mother. How can such an awful experience attract us? Aristotle’s answer was that we can enjoy a painful play because we learn something truthful from it, and learning the truth, Aristotle believed, is “our greatest joy.” Therefore, we can say that the best kind of actor engages the audience in order to communicate truth. Even material meant to be a pleasant escape, such as a TV sitcom, is more valuable and enjoyable if it offers some measure of truthfulness and insight. Indeed, the greatest sitcoms—such as *M.A.S.H.*, *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, *Modern Family*, *Will & Grace*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, and others—all contained some measure of truth. One in particular, *All in the Family*, with its character of Archie Bunker, made real changes in American society by using humor to defuse serious issues like racial prejudice.

It is difficult to express precisely what we mean by the idea of “truth” in art, perhaps hardest of all in theater, film, and television, which function as both commerce and art. The commercial demands of the media are often at odds with the desire to present truth, and much commercially successful entertainment contains no truth at all—some even reinforces false and destructive stereotypes. It is left to the ethical commitment and skill of each artist to ensure that truth somehow survives commercial pressures. We often speak of the actor’s physical and vocal skills as his or her *craft*, and it is interesting that the word “craft” comes from the German word for “power.” Through his or her skill, the actor has the potential power to affect the lives of the spectators, and it is the ethical responsibility of the good actor to use this power for a meaningful and truthful purpose. Like the doctor, the actor should “first do no harm.”
It is easier to say what theatrical truth is not: It is not an obsequious appeal for the audience’s favor at any cost; it is not the reinforcement of stereotypes that deny the uniqueness of individual human beings; it is not propaganda that distorts reality in favor of a particular point of view; it is not mere impersonation that mimics the appearances of everyday life, however believable that may be, without expressing some deeper insight; it is not the creation of an emotional state for its own sake, no matter how moving it may be; it is not an actor’s selfish display that distracts from one’s fellow actors or the meaning of the story.

Truth is a personal matter driven by the life experience of each artist, and part of a serious professional actor’s job is to discover what he or she recognizes as truthful in a performance and what he or she has to say about the human condition through that performance. The work of all the great theater makers throughout history has been based on their search for truth, and their techniques were attempts to find the best ways to express that truth: The naturalism of Stanislavski, the presentationalism of Meyerhold, the demonstrative epic style of Brecht, the heightened physicality of Grotowski, the use of non-Western masks and puppets by Julie Taymor, and the many other ways of making theater were all an effort to find and express theatrical truth.

Skill

When Aristotle wondered how we can enjoy watching a painful tragedy, he said that besides the truth the experience offers, we can also enjoy the skill of the performer. The qualities that attract us to great actors are the same things that make us appreciate great athletes: their seemingly effortless skill, their total concentration on the job at hand, and their tremendous sense of aliveness. Notice that like the great athlete, the actor’s skill should never draw attention to itself in the sense of “grand standing” or trying to get the audience’s attention in inappropriate ways. We marvel at the “artlessness,” the transparency of the actor who can transport us completely into the world of the story and make us forget that we are watching a rehearsed performance. Actors who are able to work in this way become compelling; we sometimes say that we “can’t take our eyes off them.”

In a basic way, actors do things we all do: They speak, move, and have thoughts and emotions. What makes actors special is not so much what they do, but the special way in which they do it. You already have many of the basic skills you need to be an actor; what you need to learn are the actor’s special ways of using those skills in a heightened and purified way. A sociologist noticed this fact fifty years ago, when he said:

> It does take deep skill, long training, and psychological capacity to become a good stage actor. But...almost anyone can quickly learn a script well enough to give a charitable audience some sense of realness.... Scripts even in the hands of unpracticed players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing.... In short, we all act better than we know how.²

Nonetheless, performing for the stage or camera requires that these everyday abilities be heightened, purified, and brought within the control of a purposeful discipline. As the psychologist and acting teacher Brian Bates, whom we quoted earlier, put it:

Almost everything that actors do can be identified with things we do in less dramatic form in everyday life. But in order to express the concentrated truths which are the life-stuff of drama, and to project convincing performances before large audiences, and the piercing eye of the film and television camera, the actor must develop depths of self-knowledge and powers of expression far beyond those with which most of us are familiar.³

This book will help you begin to develop your everyday acting skills into the greater power of artistic technique. Your job is to recognize, focus, and strengthen the natural actor you already are. Only you can do this, but the ideas and exercises in this book provide insights and experiences to help you fulfill and develop your natural talents.

**Usefulness**

All the various approaches to theater and acting throughout our history have tried to communicate experiences that would relate directly to the lives of the spectators in a meaningful way. The great Russian director Stanislavski, the source of much of our modern theater practice, put it this way early in the twentieth century:

You must love your chosen profession because it gives you the opportunity to communicate ideas that are important and necessary to your audience...to educate your audience and to make them better, finer, wiser, and more useful members of society.⁴

A good actor, then, strives to create a performance that is not only engaging and truthful but also relevant and useful to the lives of the spectators and thereby to the world, within the demands of the particular material being performed.

There is one way that all great acting can be relevant to our lives. Although a play may teach us something about who we are, the actor’s ability to be transformed teaches us something about who we may become. Watching an actor creating a new personal reality, a new self, can remind us that we, too, have that same capacity for self-definition and that change and personal growth is possible even in difficult circumstances. In this way, our theater can again be a celebration of our personal potential and of the ongoing flow of life, just as it was in its beginnings in ancient Greece as an offering to Dionysus, the god of transformation and the life force. An actor who works in this spirit finds his


or her horizons being continually broadened by a sense of ethical and spiritual purpose.

**Dramatic Function**

It is not enough for an actor to be engaging, truthful, skillful, and useful. As we said earlier, a good performance must also contribute to the particular story being told. Every character in a play has been created by the writer to do a certain job within the world of that play. There are many things characters may be created to do: They may move the plot forward, provide an obstacle to some other character, provide information, represent some value or idea, provide comic relief, and so on. Whatever the character was created to do, the actor must above all else create a performance that successfully does that particular job. We will call this the **dramatic function** of the role. Fulfilling this dramatic function is the most important responsibility of a good actor.

To sum up, all good actors strive to fulfill the dramatic function of their role in an engaging, truthful, and skillful way that is relevant and useful to the lives of the spectators within the demands of the particular performance. That's a tall order to be sure, and not even the best actors achieve it in every performance, but these are the qualities that all good actors strive for in their work.

**EXERCISE 1.1: WRITING A REVIEW**

Pick a performance you have seen recently in the theater; if you have not had such an experience, you may select a film or TV performance; in any case, it should be a performance that made a strong impression on you. Write a review of the performance that examines the qualities discussed thus far.

1. In what ways was the actor *engaging*?
2. Did you feel yourself to be *in the character’s place* and in his or her world?
3. Was the performance *skillful* without calling attention to itself?
4. Was it *truthful* within the world and manner of the story?
5. Did it serve the *dramatic function* of the character within the story?
6. What did you learn about your own life or your own world from this performance?
7. How was it useful to you?

**Finding Your Own Sense of Purpose**

For those who have made acting not just a career but a way of life (and this includes all our greatest actors), it is clear that acting addresses needs and motivations far deeper than the desire for attention or material success. There can be many such personal needs; some actors speak of the release that playing a role gives them, from what Alec Guinness called “my dreary old life”; for them,
acting gives them permission to have experiences they would never dare have in real life. Patrick Stewart, best known as Captain Picard on *Star Trek* and who is also a great Shakespearean actor, once told me: “What first attracted me to acting was the fantasy world of the theater into which I could escape from the much less pleasant world of my childhood.” For others, acting may provide compensation for a sense of personal unworthiness, allowing them to receive attention and approval within the guise of the roles they play. Yet others are driven to act by some ethical, political, or social passion, using their art to help change society in some beneficial way. Whatever the motivation may be, those with such deep sources of energy often have the best chance for a professional life; the life of an actor is difficult at best, and only very deep motivations can sustain a career.

It will be useful for you to discover if you have any such needs or desires that can help to motivate and sustain you in your study; even if you do not intend an acting career, identifying some deeper purpose can enhance your learning process and make you a more effective student. Begin by doing this simple exercise.

**EXERCISE 1.2: GOING BACK TO THE BEGINNING**

Relax and close your eyes. Let yourself travel back in your memories to the earliest experience you can remember of an acting performance that made an impression on you.

1. Where were you?
2. How old were you?
3. Who were with you?
4. What was it about the performance that struck you?
5. How did it make you feel?
6. As you relive this experience, are there even earlier memories of any kind that come up?
7. Thinking back to this experience, is there anything about it that eventually brought you to the study of acting?
8. Can you see in this experience anything that you might want from acting, or something you might want to achieve through acting?

A sense of purpose can be a powerful source of energy and commitment, especially if it is something you care about deeply, something that is bigger and more important to you than your own success. It may take many forms: It may be psychological or personal, such as wanting a sense of belonging, or a chance to express yourself in a way you can’t in everyday life, or a chance to feel worthy of attention and even love. Or, it may be ethical or political, such as a love of justice; a hatred of bigotry; a desire for a more kind, peaceful, and loving world. It may even be religious in nature. Whatever it may be, recognizing it can help guide you toward the kind of theater that will be most satisfying for you and in which you are likely to be most effective because you are working from your deepest energy source. This spirit of service will overcome self-consciousness.
Part One ▸ Preparing Yourself

and carry you beyond yourself, giving you a transcendent purpose from which will come strength, courage, dignity, fulfillment, and ongoing artistic vitality.

EXERCISE 1.3: YOUR MANIFESTO

A manifesto is a written public declaration of belief and intention. In politics there have been many famous manifestos, such as our own Declaration of Independence; in art, there have been manifestos declared by many movements, such as the Dadaists and the Surrealists. What all manifestos have in common is that they lay out a set of goals and indicate the means whereby those goals may be reached.

1. Write your own manifesto as an actor. Give considerable thought to what you might want to achieve through your acting, and therefore the kind of actor you intend to become. Express this as a short (less than one page), strongly felt written statement.

2. Stand up in front of your group and read your manifesto with full conviction. Make it a strong and memorable statement. Drive it home to your listeners.

Discipline

Finally, we must consider the quality that is most necessary to an actor’s long-term growth and development in mastering the art of acting—discipline.

Real discipline is not a matter of following someone else’s rules. In the best sense, it is your acceptance of responsibility for your own development through systematic effort. You accept this responsibility not to please someone else, not to earn a grade or a good review or a job, but because you choose to become all that you can be.

Discipline is rooted in your respect for yourself, as well as your respect for your fellow workers, for your work, and for the world you serve through that work. Poor discipline is really a way of saying, “I’m not worth it” or “What I do doesn’t matter.” Discipline will come naturally if you can acknowledge your own value, the importance and seriousness of your work, and the great need for your work in the world.

Discipline requires regularity. Your work, especially on technical skills of body and voice, must be a prolonged and systematic effort. Stanislavski, looking back late in his life, had this to say:

Let someone explain to me why the violinist who plays in an orchestra on the tenth violin must daily perform hour-long exercises or lose his power to play? Why does the dancer work daily over every muscle in his body?...And why may the dramatic artist do nothing, spend his day in coffee houses and hope for the gift [of inspiration] in the evening?  

Working steadily and for the long term, with patience and a sense of striving together, with our fellow theater artists, and being willing to risk the momentary failure for the sake of the long-term success—these are the attitudes you must nurture. The pressures of our educational system and of performance itself work against these attitudes, as does the normal desire we all have to succeed. Resist these pressures. As a student, you are in the unique position of working in a relatively safe environment, one in which you are encouraged to take risks and to stretch yourself beyond your established limits. Hopefully, you will be supported even in failure if that failure results from an honest effort to expand and perfect your skills. Enjoy your freedom as a student to explore a variety of approaches and experiences; enjoy the journey, the exploration itself.

**Summary of Step 1**

All good actors strive to create characters that fulfill the dramatic function for which they were created, and they strive to do so in an engaging, truthful, and skillful way in order to provide experiences that are relevant and useful to the spectator and the world. They are often driven and sustained in their work by deeply felt needs and desires of a personal, social, or political kind, and from their sense of purpose comes courage and tenacity. The work of the actor also requires discipline, which is rooted in respect for self and seriousness of purpose, and the acceptance of responsibility for personal development through systematic effort.

**Note:** For a brief history of acting, see Appendix A.