

ACTING  

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ONE

FOURTH EDITION

ROBERT COHEN

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# ACTING ONE

FOURTH EDITION

Robert Cohen

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE



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## ACTING ONE



## P R E F A C E

This book is expressly intended for the beginning acting student. The twenty-eight lessons comprise basic material for what could be a one-year or two-year course in acting fundamentals. The amount of time needed to cover them will vary to the degree proficiency is sought or expected, for while the material is presented as an introduction to acting, these are the fundamentals that professional actors spend their lives exploring and perfecting. None of these twenty-eight lessons can ever be fully learned, not even in a lifetime.

Except for a comment in the afterword (L'Envoi), matters of characterization and style are not covered because these are not beginning subjects in acting. Young actors may wish to leap into the classics and into the extremes of farce and tragedy well before they have even begun to master the basics of talking, listening, tactical interplay, physicalizing, building scenes, and making good choices. The fundamentals, however, should be set down first. What is in these pages will hold true for Shakespearean acting, for comedy acting, or for television acting; these lessons should serve as a basis for all advanced acting skills. Get a good handle on these twenty-eight lessons—on the fundamentals of acting—and you will be able to move on to more advanced acting problems with confidence.

On several occasions, I have referred to “the young actor,” or “the beginning actor,” with the implication that student actors are necessarily young and awkward. I apologize in advance if I hurt anybody’s feelings in this regard; there are young and beginning actors who can act with great skill and eloquence. On the other hand, most student actors are somewhat at sea when they go out on stage, and the experienced teacher, or director, or audience member can spot this long before the student can. That’s because you can’t see or hear yourself while acting, and student actors rarely have the experience to achieve the kind of objectivity about their performance that veteran professionals do. The student actor may *feel* something and be quite satisfied (if not overjoyed) at the intensity of that feeling while still not coming within miles of the intensity a more experienced professional actor would achieve with the same material. It is actually helpful for the beginning actor to remember that he or she is a beginner. It takes the

pressure off, and you can try to advance one step at a time rather than taking on the entire artistic community every time you step onto the stage. This book is designed to start that process and carry the beginner into some fairly advanced steps.

The last section of this book, on acting technique, involves some topics not always taught in a beginning acting class. Technique is not always taught because it often proves difficult for young actors to understand how acting can involve emotional and psychological reality and controlled acting “technique” at the same time. It can. Indeed, all fine actors are able to integrate the emotions in a role with a technical ability to perform the role. It is true that some actors (usually American) worry more about feelings, and some actors (usually British or French) worry more about technique, but you do not need to make a choice. There is nothing at all inconsistent between deep and honest emotional responsiveness on the one hand and a superior acting technique on the other. In every section of this book, I have tried to indicate the honest relationships between genuine feeling and controlled acting technique, and between human reality and the art of the theatre.

I have tried to use ordinary terminology throughout this text. Acting books, including some of my own, have often wrestled uncomfortably with semantics; acting discussions are often mired in semantic quarrels of bewildering complexity. This confusion is perhaps understandable since acting has given the world its jargon for both psychology (*role playing, acting out*) and philosophy (*tragedy, persona, and the like*). Therefore I have stayed with words long in the theatrical lexicon (words which themselves are not precisely defined in all cases), except that I sometimes use *goal* when others use *intention* and that I sometimes use the acronym GOTE as a memory tool to help you remember the words *Goal, Other, Tactics, and Expectation* in the most useful order.

I have also kept this book as free as possible from considerations of theory. Students looking for a more theoretical basis for the lessons in this text might wish to explore them in my *Acting Power* (Mayfield, 1978), which conceptualizes a comprehensive system of acting. In addition, students wishing to extend the lessons in *Acting One* into the areas of style, characterization, and public performance now have available a sequel, *Advanced Acting: Style, Character, and Performance* (McGraw-Hill, 2002), which is devoted to these questions. The interested reader is also directed to my *Acting in Shakespeare* (Mayfield, 1991) for specific lessons and discussions built on acting in the plays of the world’s greatest—and most produced—dramatist.

Finally, no one is more aware than I that acting cannot be taught by a book. Acting can most certainly be taught—and the change over the past three decades in American acting has largely been the result of an explosion of actor training nationwide—but the key ingredient in actor teaching is the teacher. I have tried to keep this book open-ended and suggestive rather

than narrow and prescriptive so that it might stimulate, not stultify, the crucial work of the classroom. Acting and actor training are individual arts within a collective and collaborative craft process. The actor must find her or his way into the self, as well as into the craft, for the art of the theatre is made out of both ingredients. This book is blind to its readers' individualities; it teaches only as interpreted and implemented by you, the actor, or you, the teacher. I have tried to leave as much room as possible for that interaction, which I value as highly as any in the arts.

I am happy to have had the occasion to once again revise this text. Readers of previous editions will note that I have reorganized the opening of the book, moving to the beginning a fundamental exercise with which I myself begin courses, and that I have added many exercises and discussions throughout the book, particularly in the areas of technique. I have also included, for the first time, some sage acting counsel by distinguished professional actors (and a few directors) that pairs well with the exercises and discussions herein; some of these quotes have been silently condensed a bit, but without altering their sense. These supplement the work by showing that veteran professional actors wrestle with the same questions that beginners do and that "learning to act" is a lifetime process.

I very much appreciate, in the initial preparation of this revision, the individual counsels of Professors Robert Dunkerly at the Community College of Southern Nevada, Mark Radvan at the Queensland (Australia) University of Technology, David Knight at the University of Illinois, Ashley Carr at California State University of Long Beach, Leslie Reidel at the University of Delaware, and C. Tim Quinn at Fresno City College.

I'd also like to thank the reviewers of this edition for their thoughtful comments: Bob Dunkerly, Community College of Southern Nevada; Richard Nichols, Pennsylvania State University; J. Fred Pritt, Ithaca College; Leslie Rivers, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; and Andrew Ryder, Seattle Pacific University.

## Publisher's Note to Instructors

A 35-minute video, "Acting One, Day One, with Robert Cohen" is available. Employing a simple exercise with acting students, Robert Cohen describes and demonstrates the basic principles of goal-directed acting and interacting, as detailed in the text. The video may be purchased from Theatre Arts Video Library at 800-456-8285.



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## I

## Preparation for Acting

## CAN ACTING BE TAUGHT?

Yes, of course acting can be taught. In the United States, acting is taught regularly in literally thousands of colleges, conservatories, workshops, and professional studios. Virtually all young actors coming into the profession in the present era have studied acting in some formal manner, and many professional actors continue their training for years beyond their successful entry into the profession. Thus, acting is not only taught, it is also learned.

Of course, reading any certain list of books, or studying with any particular teacher or teachers, or enrolling in any particular training program will not guarantee that you will become a great actor or even a fair one. Fine acting demands a rare combination of talents: intelligence, imagination, psychological freedom, physical dexterity, vocal strength and flexibility, emotional depth, and an ability to learn from mistakes, criticism, and observation. It also requires certain personal prowess, which might appear from time to time as wit, charm, self-confidence, assuredness, honesty, audacity, charisma,