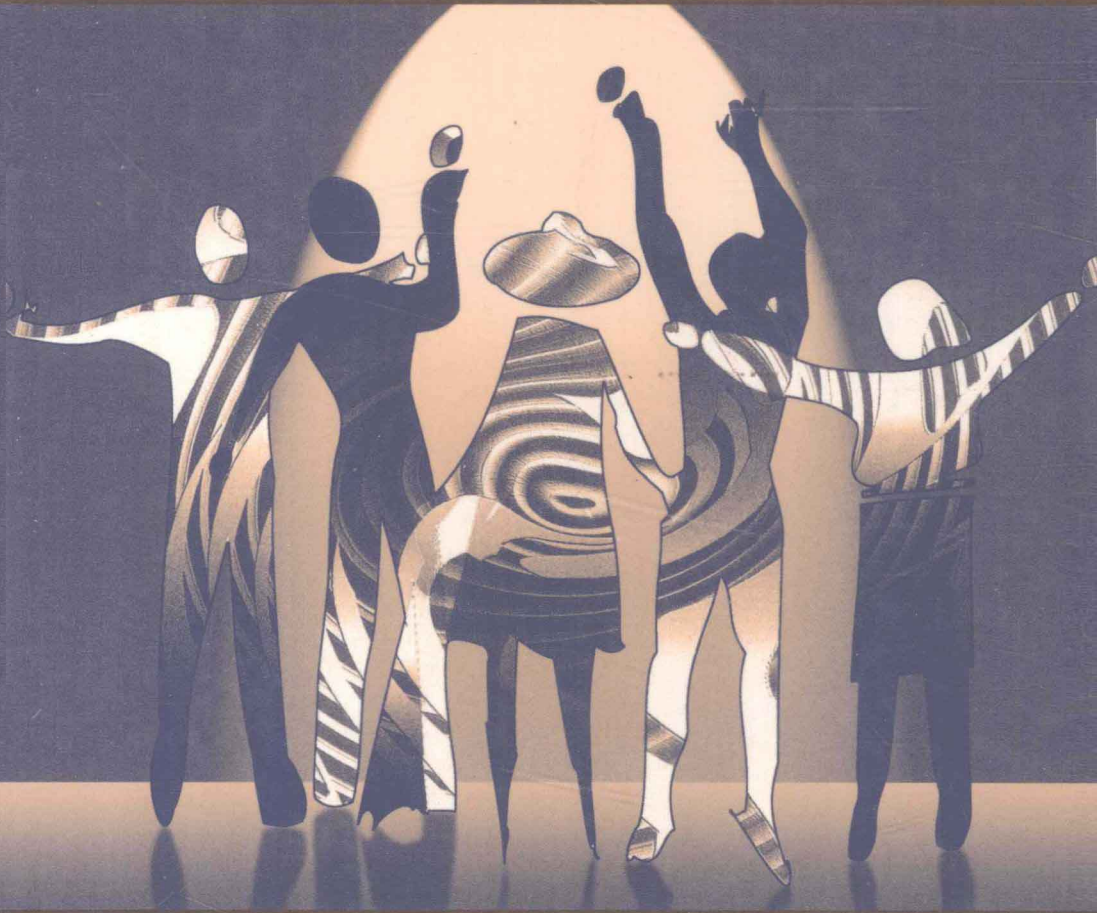


*Seventh Edition*

# THE *Actor* — AT WORK —



ROBERT BENEDETTI

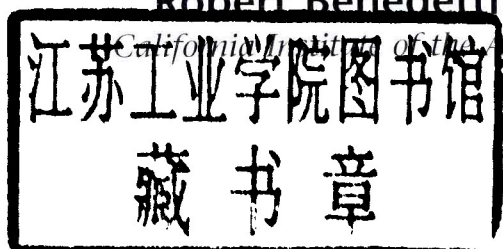
SEVENTH EDITION



# THE ACTOR AT WORK

Robert Benedetti

*California Institute of the Arts*



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# FOREWORD

BY TED DANSON

I met Bob Benedetti twenty-seven years ago, when I was in his second-year acting class at Carnegie Tech. As long as I have known him, he has been exploring, discovering, and sharing what it means to act.

His classes filled me with the kind of excitement athletes must feel when they are in full stride. He taught me how to get acting out of my mind, out of theory, and into my body, into action; he gave me a point of concentration, so that my mind would not be censoring every impulse.

He was also fun to be around, and he planted in me the thought that acting, performing, could be joyous. I will cherish him always for that, because as far as I'm concerned acting, if it is nothing else, had best be joyous, both in the childlike spirit of play and as a profound celebration of life. For me, acting is a wonderful excuse to live life as fully as possible.

My mother had a prayer that has always stayed with me: "Dear Lord," she would say, "please help me to become fully human." The job of all of us in life is to experience the human condition and our own humanity fully; your job as an actor is to reflect what you have experienced in a way that clarifies and enhances people's lives.

As an actor, you are a pleader of causes. The characters you play have a cause, a purpose, and it is up to you to plead it with utmost integrity and commitment, as if a life depended on it—for in fact, it does.

To be able to do this, you must master the techniques of acting. You stretch your body, your voice, your thoughts and feelings so as to encompass as much of the human condition as possible; you must develop the

capacity to reflect it all, not just that small portion with which you feel comfortable.

You must also live the same way: You must push past the comfortable, easy answers and explore the scary side of life and of yourself, for finally you have nothing to offer but yourself, your insights, your truth, your slice of the human condition. As you grow and expand, remember that at any moment in your personal journey as an actor, you have only yourself to offer: who you are at that moment is enough.

As you work to master technique, then, keep your attention focused outward. Don't worry about yourself, think about everybody else; don't worry about being interesting, just be interested in everybody else, in life itself. All the technique in the world will be meaningless unless you have something worth sharing through it; technique is the tool you will use to communicate whatever you have to say, through the characters you choose to play, about the human condition.

To me, acting has itself become a life process. Whatever is next in my development as a human being will happen either through my everyday life or through my acting; they are completely intertwined. This blending of acting and living is never more obvious to me than when I am working on a film (or a play or any other creative group effort); when everyone is aligned toward the common purpose, then there are no more "accidents"; everything that happens at home, on the way to work, in front of the camera, all contributes to your creative purpose. Only when you hold your acting separate from your life do they interfere with one another; when they are aligned, they feed each other. You can become a better actor by becoming a more complete human being, and you can become a more complete human being by becoming a better actor.

Back to technique!



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## PREFACE

It is hard for me to believe that *The Actor at Work* has been in print for twenty-six years, and that seven editions have gone by, each reflecting some substantive change in my understanding of the acting process.

This edition is more direct, simpler, and contains several new ideas which I think are helpful. It addresses the needs of the camera a bit more than previous editions, because it is obvious that a working actor must deal with the camera as well as the live stage if he or she is to make a living.

It is obvious that this edition, like the sixth, is much influenced by my present career as a producer–writer for film and television. Though I still teach part-time at the California Institute of the Arts, my relationship with actors has changed considerably. I understand better how hard a working actor must fight to maintain a career that has an artistic and ethical basis, and how hard it is to find pride and satisfaction in the kind of work that puts food on the table.

At the same time, I see that there is nothing stopping working actors from doing their best in every moment of every performance, from continuing to challenge themselves, and even from taking time off to do work that excites them.

I hope that the approach to acting embodied in this book will assist the beginning actor, and even established actors wishing to renew their skills, to develop the sense of purpose and self-esteem that will bring them both artistic satisfaction and career success.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

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. The first part of this book will begin with *you*, your body, voice, thoughts and feelings. You are the “ground,” the instrument, of your work as an actor.

The second part will open the “path,” which is the concept of *action*. 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 does to try to satisfy those needs.

The “fruition” of this process will make up the third part of the book, the *characterization*. Building on what you discovered in action, you develop an artistically heightened creation which serves the purposes intended by the author.

**The Exercises and Readings.** 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!

In addition to the exercises, later lessons will contain examples taken from five popular plays, and a sample scene from each is included in Appendix A at the back of this book. However, if you will take time to read the entire play from which these scenes come, you will benefit much more from the examples themselves. The plays are Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, and Albee’s *The Zoo Story*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’m grateful that I have had the chance to clarify my evolving understanding of the acting process by producing a new edition of this book every four years or so over the more than twenty years that it has been

in print. In turn, I thank the editorial and production team at Allyn and Bacon for publishing this seventh edition. I thank all of the teachers and students who have given me their reactions to the book over the years, and I thank the reviewers of this edition, J. Laurence Lowenstein, *Brookdale Community College*; George W. Sorenson, *Texas Tech University*; and Dr. Bill Hutson, *Creighton University*.

My thanks also to my friend Ted Danson, who made my new career possible, and above all, to my parents Lola and Dino, for all they have given me in my life. I dedicate this book to them.



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# Lesson 1

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## THE ACTOR IN YOU

You are already an actor. You “play a role” every time you present yourself in a social situation. In various circumstances, in various relationships, you pursue your needs by behaving in certain ways, doing things to other people and reacting to the things they do to you. It is this interaction with your world, this give and take of acting and reacting, that shapes and expresses your personality, your *character*, in everyday life.

In a popular book of the fifties, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, social psychologist Erving Goffman analyzed social behavior as if it were a stage performance. He found that most of us have a highly developed capacity to play our social roles successfully:

*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. . . . This is so because ordinary social intercourse is put together as a scene (in a play) is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. 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.<sup>1</sup>*

The fact that you are “acting” most of the time does not mean that you are insincere: behaving in ways that achieve your objectives in given circumstances is a natural and necessary way of coping with life. You adapt your social behavior to the demands of your situation automatically and unconsciously. In fact, you play several characters every day—student, son or daughter, friend, employee—each with its own appro-