

The Actor as Storyteller

AN INTRODUCTION TO ACTING

BRUCE J. MILLER





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Bruce J. Miller

University of Miami



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P R E F A C E

What you will find in this text may not be revolutionary or earth-shattering in and of itself. I did not invent the stuff I teach. Stanislavski, the father of all acting craft, must be credited with that. But over the last ten years I have learned to articulate basic acting craft in a way that is simple, direct, and immediate. These techniques are practical and broadly applicable, and they will not need to be jettisoned when the novice actor is ready for a more sophisticated and deeper exploration of dramatic works.

My approach in teaching and in this text is simply this: The actor is responsible to serve any dramatic situation by making choices that create the best possible story of his or her character, while at the same time serving the overall story of the play, the scene, and every moment. This means that acting requires headwork first. Actors must be able to think about how they serve the plays they are in. In short, they must understand what theatre is, how it works, and how to analyze and synthesize the content of a script. Movies and television—along with the development of Method acting—have created for would-be actors the illusion that being believable and spontaneous from moment to moment is all that is required. For many aspiring actors this has translated into self-indulgent emotionalism, often at the expense of a script. It has also led actors away from the belief that acting is a craft with specific tangible, intellectual tools that can and must be developed. These tools include the use of common sense to weigh, choose, and refine one's options in order to serve the playwright's vision and that of the production being rehearsed.

Most high school actors who are serious about careers in acting enroll in college theatre programs to learn about the craft. Yet, ironically, they often come to study theatre having developed their impressions of what acting is all about by watching television and film. Many have little or no knowledge of theatre and how it works. They do not realize that an actor's responsibility is far different in theatre than it is in the other hybrid mediums where most actors end up working—if they are lucky enough to find work at all.

This text, then, is intended for serious beginning actors. The first part consists of an overview: what theatre is and how it works, the differences between theatre and its hybrid mediums, and the part an actor plays in each of those mediums. It also introduces ways that novice acting students can begin to examine the process of acting. The second part of the text focuses on acting craft itself. It introduces the concept of the actor as storyteller and then presents the specific tools an actor works with. The third part details the process an actor can

use to prepare for scene work and rehearsals. It offers an organized working plan for using the tools presented in the second part. The fourth part includes discussion of mental preparation, suggestions for auditioning, a process for rehearsing a play, and an overview of the realities of show business.

A Philosophical Note

Although it is the acting student I address throughout most of this book, do understand that I've kept you, the teacher, in mind as well. In fact, I count on you to balance out what some may at first glance consider to be an unevenly distributed presentation of the process of acting. It is true that my focus leans toward the intellectual side of the acting process—to dramatic analysis and synthesis. This is intentional because I feel that the basics of dealing with a script have not been given enough attention in many other beginning acting texts and in much of the training that beginning actors go through. I do, however, appreciate the importance of inspiration, creative impulse, emotional truth, and simply being in and reacting to the moment. Where I may have underemphasized those aspects of the acting process, I fully expect that you will fill in any gaps with your own expertise and experience. It is my hope that those of you whose philosophy of acting seems to be at odds with my own, as presented in this text, will still be able to see through our differences and take advantage of what is useful to you here.

Features

You will find that this text provides

- A sequential approach to acting craft that compounds principles, concepts, and skills and culminates in a detailed representation of an actor's responsibilities to a script.
- An introduction to what theatre is, how it works, and its connection to the acting process.
- A well-reasoned argument for the study of acting through theatre training.
- An examination of the differences between stage and film acting.
- An examination of the acting process as it relates both to the script and to the audience watching.
- An examination of the rehearsal process both with regard to scene work and to the development of a role in a production.
- A detailed examination of script analysis of the overall play and of individual scenes.
- A sample of an actor's script filled with useful script notations.
- An introduction to the concept of style and its importance to an actor.

- An examination of positive ways to give and receive artistic criticism.
- A detailed examination of the audition process from selection of material to its presentation.
- An examination of ways to view theatre and the acting process intelligently from an actor's point of view.
- An examination of the skills and personality traits necessary for success in the world of theatre, including skills not necessarily taught in acting classes.
- A glossary of terms that reflect important theatrical concepts as well as acting tools that, in combination, can help actors meld their technique with the demands of a script and a theatrical performance.
- A detailed listing of other books to augment what is offered here.
- Numerous exercises that I have found to be effective in teaching acting concepts or as demonstrations of those concepts. In many cases, I have purposely avoided going into great detail about what will happen during the exercises or what will or should be learned from them. My intention has been to provide a framework for discovery and eventual mastery, not a step-by-step prescription.
- A short play at the end of the text. The play is meant to provide a common source for class discussion. However, one short play cannot possibly meet all the demands of an acting class, so in several places you will also find what I hope prove to be useful and diversified lists of plays and playwrights that can serve as sources for work in your class.
- Many references to movies and television. This is not really a contradiction. Because many of the readers of this text will be beginners, it stands to reason that they will be more familiar with the body of work in film than in theatre. Therefore, it seems reasonable to offer examples that are familiar and universal wherever necessary.

I have focused on the craft of acting—that which is learnable and can be mastered. I have made no effort to address the artist directly. Believe me, I realize that acting is also an art form, but I have *no illusions* about creating artists or training the artistic abilities of our most talented students. I wouldn't know how to do so. Craft, in the hands of those with such talent, can help reveal that talent in an efficient, reliable manner. For those of us who rely primarily on our craft, its mastery can go a long way toward making up for our artistic deficiencies. And in the beginning of their journey, what better gift can we give our novice actors than a bright, shiny set of tools that will help them find their way.

Acknowledgments

For me, the process of learning to teach acting has been very much like the process of learning to act itself. The biggest difference is that teachers must be

able to articulate everything they see, think, and feel about the work before them, unlike actors, who can sometimes get away with simply pretending to do so. For that reason, I would like to thank every student I have had the good fortune to work with over the last eleven years or so. Each of them has helped keep me honest and taught me more about acting—and the teaching of it—than I could have ever learned from a book. My heartfelt thanks to Joel Friedman for the invaluable guidance he has provided me (and countless others) over the years. His inspiration and generosity as a teacher and the wisdom he has willingly shared about every facet of theatre cannot be measured.

Next, a special thanks to all those who supported and encouraged me in the writing of this book. Particular thanks to Jim Palmarini and Don Corathers, my editors at *Dramatics Magazine*, who told me I had something to offer and encouraged me to keep writing, and to Julie York, who helped me get my writiting clean and simple. Thanks also to Richard Glockner, my lifelong friend, who responded positively to my work (something he almost never does) and offered me many fine practical suggestions; to Stephen Trovillion, who helped keep me honest, specific, and clear; to Kate Besterman, who gave me positive and helpful feedback from the student's point of view; to Margot Moreland, who did the same from the professional viewpoint; to my colleagues at Walnut Hill and the University of Miami, who have consistently supported and believed in me; to Andrew and Jack Weiner, who held my hand through new territory; to David Mamet and his followers for provoking me and reminding me that "acting is simple, but not easy"; a special thanks, as well, to my wife, Amy, who lent me her eyes and was able to catch what I never could have alone; and to everyone else whom I have come in contact with during my years in theatre. Consciously or not, I know that I have learned from all of them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I began my career in theatre as a secondary school English teacher, where I used to consider each class a unique performance—even when I taught five different sections of the same subject. During my first year of teaching, without any training whatsoever, I directed the junior high school play. Not surprisingly, it was *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I'm sure it was both terrible and wonderful, and, even if it did little else, that production whetted my appetite for theatre and, although I didn't quite know it then, hooked me. From this first experience I quickly learned that theatre was about making good choices and learning to collaborate.

After four years of teaching, I returned to graduate school to pursue a career in journalism. Yet, a year later, as a result of a picaresque series of coincidences, I found myself in an MFA program in acting. Three years after that, scars notwithstanding, I earned my degree and slowly made my way to New York. For the next ten years, I could call myself a working actor, and sometimes I actually even worked as one. I did theatre in New York and in the provinces for love, and I did commercials, soaps, television, and film work for money. Sometimes I actually made a living.

But after a decade in the business, I counted the \$400 I had in the bank and called it quits. A life in theatre had become too scary for me, and I returned to education—this time as an acting teacher and director. I accepted a position as chairman of the theatre department at a private arts high school near Boston. During the years I was there, my students came to have a reputation for craft and clarity that matched most well-trained college students. Many of my graduates—who, by the way, did not all possess huge natural talent—matriculated into the finest BFA programs in the country. It was during those years that I developed the approach and vocabulary that has become the cornerstone of this book.

I received an MFA in acting from Temple University and am currently Head of Performance for the BFA Theatre Conservatory at the University of Miami. I have been a recipient of the E. E. Ford Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence and have been recognized by Who's Who Among America's Teachers. My articles on acting and theatre appear frequently in *Dramatics Magazine* and *Teaching Theatre*.

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CHAPTER 1

Why the Theatre to Study Acting?

With each passing generation, fewer and fewer Americans are exposed to theatre. First of all, there may be less of it. Professional theatre is often prohibitively expensive to produce. Second, because of these costs, ticket prices—even for amateur productions—are often twice as much for theatre performances as for movies, if not more. Younger audiences, in particular, may be less able or willing to spend the money. Third, audiences find theatre more difficult than movies and television. Theatre requires more imagination and concentration than do film and TV. It has less action. It is slower moving. It challenges the intellect more than a contemporary audience may want on an evening out. In short, the viewing and listening habits that our society has developed since the advent of TV do not make for a fertile theatre climate. Yet, ironically, the number of college students who are deciding to major in theatre is on the rise.

Acting Students Today

In today's celebrity-oriented society, an acting career seems like a very glamorous way to spend a lifetime. It beckons with the allure of fame and fortune. Its appeal operates on many of us in the same way that the prince's ball did on Cinderella and her stepsisters. A single dance with the prince could change a woman's entire lifetime. On television especially, we have seen unknowns become stars practically overnight. The power of television is such that in no time at all, one actress's hairdo can become the hairdo of a nation. Consciously or not, many students decide to pursue acting in college for this reason. If this is your reason, it is not a good one. As you probably know, your chances of success are just a little better than the chances of one of Cinderella's stepsisters marrying the prince. But even for those of you who are thinking about majoring in theatre

because you love acting and performing, there are several things you need to think about.

This is probably a good time to ask yourself about your own theatrical background and experience.

EXERCISE 1-1

Answer the following questions as completely and honestly as possible. You may want to discuss your findings with other students in your class.

1. Has your theatrical experience been limited to performing in high school plays or musicals?
2. What professional shows have you seen?
3. Does your familiarity with professional theatre extend beyond the national tour of that famous musical that passed through town?
4. Have you ever seen a professional production of a dramatic play? If so, what did you like about it? What moved you? What was unique about it? Were you challenged in a new way? Explain.
5. Do you like sitting through a non-musical?
6. Are you able to stay focused while watching limited action and listening to lots of words?
7. Do you like to read plays? How many have you read?
8. Can you read a play and understand the action and the story without having a teacher take you through it? Are you stimulated intellectually or emotionally? Explain.
9. Have you read any of the works of Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Caryl Churchill, Marsha Norman, or Harold Pinter? If not, are you familiar with their work? Do you know who they are?
10. Have you thought about the difference between acting for the stage and acting for the camera?

I don't intend these questions to be patronizing. The fact is that more and more talented young actors are entering theatre training programs with only the most rudimentary understanding of what theatre is and how it works. To be perfectly honest, this is appalling. In a survey conducted not long ago by *American Theatre*, a cross section of university theatre teachers were asked about their current students.

Here's a summary of their responses about today's entering freshmen in theatre programs:

- They lack an ability to understand and use language.
- They lack a knowledge of what theatre is.

- They lack a knowledge about history and culture.
- They lack role models in theatre.
- They lack the ability to analyze and synthesize.*

Some of you might be thinking, "So what? I'm a TV or movie actor, or at least I plan to be. What do I need to know all that junk about theatre for anyway? If I wanted to be a scholar, I would major in English or history or philosophy! The screen is the place I'm heading. I know how to be 'real' for the camera." I could probably fill ten chapters with solid rebuttals to that kind of thinking, but for brevity's sake, I will focus on just a few practical ones. First, whether you are planning for a career in films or in theatre, chances are you are studying acting through courses offered by your college's theatre department. Even if you study privately in New York or L.A., much of the scene work you will do in classes probably comes from play scripts. That means the focus and approach to your acting training will, at least in part, be theatre oriented.

If, on the other hand, you decide to learn the craft of acting through a school of communication and film or as a "working" actor, you'll face other problems. You may get practical experience acting in front of the camera (if you're lucky), but specific training in craft will probably be limited—a few courses at most if you're in the former category, and some random bits of advice if you're in the latter. Regardless of the category, you will probably end up spending considerable time trying to figure out for yourself an acting system that you can depend on. This may be a valid way to learn, but it is certainly not an efficient use of your time. It could also be frustrating—certainly more frustrating than having an experienced acting teacher or faculty member with a specific teaching plan bringing you along. In general, if you learn your craft through a theatre program, you will take more acting courses, get more acting instruction, and learn more tangible things about craft that can quickly help you as an actor, even as a screen actor. Even if you're out there working already, thinking about what theatre is and how it works can certainly help you develop your craft.

If you are not yet convinced that the theatre is the place to study acting, consider this: Most professional stage actors are able to make the jump to film and television. They don't necessarily have equal success (there are many reasons for this, none essential for this discussion), but they can make the jump. Far fewer actors who start out in film are able to work onstage. For some film actors, this is simply a matter of preference, but for most, the mere thought of doing stage work is as frightening as starring in the sequel to *Cutthroat Island* or *The Postman*. Many film actors realize that they do not possess the craft necessary to sustain a role onstage, so they stay as far away as possible. Other film and television actors known primarily for lightweight roles choose to train and then do stage work to enhance their professional image. The tactic has often worked.

*John Istel, "Under the Influence: A Survey," *American Theatre* Jan. 1996.

Cher, for example, was known almost exclusively as a singer and television variety performer until she appeared in the New York production of *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*. This led to her being cast in the film version of the play and, subsequently, to a highly successful movie career—including an Academy Award as Best Actress for *Moonlighting*. The differences between stage acting and film acting will be discussed in Chapter 3, but for now I hope I have convinced you that learning to act for the stage is a sensible decision.

Finally, and perhaps most important, even if your career ultimately takes you into film and television, your theatre training will provide you with skills that you will bring to the set from your first day, necessary skills concerning acting choices and script interpretation. No one in the exorbitantly costly world of today's filmmaking wants or can afford to train you to think as an actor while you're standing on the set. Producers and directors expect you to come prepared. If you cost them money, they will quickly look elsewhere.

Assuming that you are going to pursue your acting training through theatre, let's examine our earlier list of deficiencies to determine what you can do to eliminate any currently in your way. Obviously, you cannot cure yourself overnight of every "lack" cited. You can, however, discover what theatre is and how it works, and you can certainly begin to get a sense of what you will need to learn over the next several years if you are going to master the craft of acting.

The Ravages of Mass Media

Many of the problems I have mentioned can be traced to the kind of culture we inhabit as a result of the media revolution. The influence of television and film on the way we perceive the world and even on the way we as a culture think is profound. The generation now entering college is a product of this reality. You have grown up on the visual and kinetic images provided by TV, movies, video games, and computers. The language and auditory skills once cultivated through reading books and listening to radio are all disappearing, as is the expectation that educated people use language with wit and sophistication. Yet the principal enterprise of theatre remains the articulation of words, first read from the printed page and then spoken for an audience. If you are going to train in theatre, you must not forget this fact, and you must not take for granted the skill required in reading and speaking effectively. In other words, starting right now you should begin reexamining your relation to words and how you use them.

Many student actors entering college think that good acting is simply a matter of being "believable": If you memorize the lines and can say them like a real person would, everything else takes care of itself. This is simply false. How you use the language to effectively tell the story is as important as being believable. This is especially true onstage, where *you*, not the film director, are responsible for making the story clear. If you currently do not have a strong affinity with words on a printed page, begin reading aloud to yourself and listen to how you use those carefully selected words. Practice adding colors and connotations to