ACTING

THIRD EDITION

ROBERT COHEN

ACTING ONE

THIRD EDITION

Robert Cohen

University of California, Irvine



Mayfield Publishing Company

Mountain View, California

London • Toronto

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cohen, Robert

Acting one / Robert Cohen. — 3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-55934-940-9

1. Acting.

PN2061.C579 1997

792'.028-dc21

Manufactured in the United States of America 10 9 8 7

Mayfield Publishing Company 1280 Villa Street Mountain View, California 94041

Sponsoring editor, Janet M. Beatty; production editor, Carla L. White; manuscript editor, Anne Montague; design manager and cover designer, Susan Breitband; text designer, Paula Shuhert. This text was set in 10/12 Sabon by ExecuStaff Composition Services and printed on 50# Text White Opaque by The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group.

Credits

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P R E F A C E

This book is expressly intended for the beginning acting student. The twenty-six 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-six 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-six lessons—on the fundamentals of acting—and you will be able to move into more advanced acting problems with confidence.

There are many exercises in the first half of the book; there are fewer in the latter half, where it is expected that the student will be working on scenes from plays. Suggestions for choosing those scenes and for choosing roles are given in Part Two. In general, you are advised to find dramatic material from your own time and culture, and characters close to you in age and essential experience.

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). That book (which does deal with characterization and style) conceptualizes a comprehensive system of acting, which

might serve as a sequel to this volume. The interested reader is also directed to my *Acting in Shakespeare* (Mayfield, 1991) for lessons, built directly upon those in the present volume, on acting in the works of that 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 two 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 his or her 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 very happy to have had the occasion to again revise this text. Readers of the previous editions will note that I've augmented the section on movement, employing and adapting some of the brilliant observations of Rudolf Laban, and added a glossary of acting terms, including many words not used in this book, but which an actor or acting student is likely to come across. I've also added a new chapter, on emotion in acting, which surveys—albeit quite briefly—the long-standing debate on this subject extending from Plato to Stanislavsky and Strasberg. There can be no thought of resolving this debate, but I do hope to make clear the main lines of the arguments, and how they can prove useful to a beginning acting student. I have also replaced a few play excerpts, in the exercises, with more contemporary dramatic material.

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. Tom Quinn at Fresno City College.

I'd also like thank the reviewers of this edition for their thoughtful comments: Dale C. McFadden, Indiana University; Tom Mitchell, University of Illinois; Ray Paolino, University of Oklahoma; Sue Parks-Hilden, Portland Community College; and J. Fred Pritt, Ithaca College.

Publisher's Note to Instructors

A new, 35-minute video, "Acting One, Day One, with Robert Cohen" is available free to qualifying adopters. 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.

This \$79 value is free to instructors who place a minimum order for classroom use of 50 copies of *Acting One*, Third Edition. For further details, please call our Marketing Department at 800-433-1279 or e-mail us at ykashima@mayfieldpub.com. (The video may also be purchased from Theatre Arts Video Library at 800-456-8285).



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Jana Jana

Introduction: 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, passionate intensity, and compelling candor. These cannot be taught, directly, in anything resembling their entirety: They are acquired, if at all, as much through life experience as by training for the stage.

What can be taught, therefore, is a beginning to the art of acting. This is something more than merely pointing you at the stage and something less than giving you a fully codified set of rules and regulations. It is a method of helping you to get the most out of yourself and to train your acting instrument—primarily your voice and body—into a more workable,

2 Introduction

more exciting, apparatus. And it is a method that will help you learn from life and apply what you learn to the art of translating life into art: the art of the theatre. Providing this beginning is the goal of this book.

In the first lesson,* you will begin acting; in the second lesson, you will be acting with an acting partner in a scene. You do not need previous stage experience to accomplish the tasks set forth in either those or the subsequent exercises, which are designed to proceed by steps toward a specified goal. There are, however, some preliminary things you might want to know before the first lesson.

Relaxation

Every actor knows the importance of relaxation, for it is the necessary starting place for acting. Relaxation is both physical and mental; it allows the body to respond freshly and the mind to create spontaneously. A relaxed actor can do anything; a tense actor is always constrained.

Relaxation cannot be forced, but it can be induced or self-induced. Simple stretching exercises—rolling the head in large circles left and right; bending the body forward and back; and moving the fingers, hands, arms, and legs in figure-eight patterns—are excellent warm-up techniques that both tone body muscles and release physical tensions. Bouncing lightly on the balls of the feet; vigorously shaking the arms, hands, face, and torso; and rapidly shadowboxing or rope-jumping also limber and relax the body. Virtually all actors develop physical regimens of exercises like these to use before rehearsals and performances, and you should too. Many acting classes begin with such warm-ups; if yours doesn't, you can do your own warm-up beforehand.

Mental relaxation is a matter of putting out of mind the day-to-day affairs of life so that you can concentrate more directly and fully on the problems of acting and on the situation of the characters you will play. Inasmuch as acting is, among other things, a complex mental activity, the more freedom you have from your own daily preoccupations, the more deeply you will be able to involve yourself with your acting situation, even during periods of extreme stress in your

^{*} Chapters in this book are organized as individual lessons, although a class may wish to stay with one lesson for several sessions.