

# Acting



**ONSTAGE AND OFF**

SECOND EDITION

Robert Barton

# Acting: Onstage and Off

**SECOND EDITION**

Robert Barton  
University of Oregon

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*To my son Andrew,  
whose sense of wonder  
renews my own*

# PREFACE

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## Acting to Understand

Acting is one of the best ways to learn about being alive. Because we actors get to become other people, we have stronger opportunities than most to understand more and co-exist better. We stop making instant judgments of others, given the chance to play those others. Only the shallowest of satirists can portray fellow humans, however strange or villainous, without gaining some lasting empathy for their pain and feeling for their perspective. A worthwhile performance class does more than impart knowledge; it humanizes. An acting class can help each participant become less narrow and provincial, more a citizen of the world. Each actor can end up knowing more about herself, about others, and about how the self and others connect. Each actor can learn the arts of compromise and collaboration. Throughout these heady, high-sounding lessons, there can also be a lot of laughs.

This book is designed for the beginning acting student, for whom the life-enhancing aspects of actor training are a higher priority than technical skills. Its basic assumptions are: (1) offstage performance can be effectively adapted for the theatre; (2) onstage training can be applied toward leading a full life outside the theatre; and (3) the two can feed each other in ways that both illuminate and amuse, which is a pretty good combination. The study of acting can encourage dealing with important issues in a way that is neither smug nor pompous, but playful.

*Acting: Onstage and Off* is divided into eight chapters that address those areas of greatest concern to novice actors. The book begins by exploring each student's past and present offstage life, to help him find confidence, experience, and texture, all of which can be used in class. Once the actor no longer thinks of himself as inexperienced and inept, the text moves on in chapter 2 into learning to warm up (body, voice, and mind; individually and collectively), then to understanding the actor's own equipment, and the ways in which adjustments can be made by mastering that equipment (chapter 3). The assumption is that *self*-awareness is crucial before *other*-awareness can be accomplished, whether those others are living or fictional persons.

Warmed up and self-aware, the actor pursues in chapter 4 the basic means for putting together a character, as devised by Stanislavski and extended by the behavioral sciences. Once these fundamental principles of performing as someone else are established, chapter 5 explores the need to balance honesty with precision, and considers methods for blending the two. At this stage, the actor is ready to tackle the unique traditions and history of this art. Chapter 6 addresses the actor's relationship with the script and with basic textual and character analysis. Chapter 7 sets forth rehearsal and performance etiquette and unwritten standards of behavior and support in the theatre. This chapter allows the new actor to quickly settle nagging procedural questions, so that he gets the help he needs, and avoids, as one of my students put it, "blowing it without knowing it." It is also geared toward quickly picking up the survival information needed when entering *any* new world. The book's final chapter helps the student decide among various options for more involvement, and teaches some ways of applying all that has been learned, even if this course is the student's last direct contact with the art form.

Each chapter leads to successively more complex levels of understanding. If in completing a chapter, the reader were likely to say, "Okay, this is fine, but what if . . .," an attempt has been made to answer that impending question. Above all, this book aims to help each actor find some joy and wonder in herself as a performer. An actor needs many skills *eventually*, but joy and wonder should come first.

## Using This Text

Acting classes vary from three hours a week for a single term to six hours (plus lab sessions) for a full year. It would be useless for an introductory text to try to serve everyone equally. There are, however, three ways to adapt this text to varying time strictures and changing class enrollments. It is possible to work through the book in sequence for a full year of activity. It is also possible to move by targeting a particular subject or skill (such as voice, which is dealt with in separate sections of each chapter)—or by sampling every chapter, and doing only the earlier exercises of each. This last alternative is suggested for short-term (e.g., summer) classes, so that students get at least a taste of each area that concerns them.

Most acting students enroll with a desire to do scene study work—that is, for the chance to work with scripts. I sympathize with those students who find themselves in a one-term class that accomplishes nothing but warm-ups and improvisations before, suddenly, the term is over. These

students didn't get what they came for. They have not really acted. In our program at the University of Oregon, we read the entire book in the first quarter, then go back and review for greater depth during the subsequent two terms of the school year.

This book has far more exercises, and more questions within those exercises, than most readers will wish to attempt. An excess of choice is offered deliberately, so that teacher and/or reader may pick, choose, reject, and modify. These exercises may be cut back in scope easily, and written assignments adapted into thought–discussion questions and improvisations, in those instances where a minimum of academic work is deemed appropriate.

An unusually focused group of actors may be able to move quickly over the background examination and warm-up activities of the first two chapters. Most students, however, will need the training in relaxation and channeling of energy provided in chapter 2 before undertaking the relatively sophisticated demands of chapter 3. The activities in chapter 1 are largely passive and undemanding. By chapter 3, each student is asked to accomplish acute, systematic analysis of not only himself but others in the class.

An extensive list of scene suggestions is given in chapter 5, and a sample scene, called *The Rehearsal*, appears in Appendix K. This scene may be used to apply all the concepts discussed here. However, the book's basic approach focuses on life experience, rather than dramatic literature, for instances and background material. All other examples and exercises in the book are therefore drawn entirely from the actor's own life rather than plays. Some instructors may thus wish to supplement this book with a scene anthology.

This text aims for a sound and traditional, rather than revolutionary, approach to the principles of acting. Five elements treated here, are, however, uncommon to other basic texts:

1. The constant connection between life in the theatre and life removed from it.
2. The personal examination of one's self and one's classmates as an initial pathway to characterization.
3. An extended treatment of the actor's responsibility for in-rehearsal active contribution and out-of-rehearsal exploration.
4. Auditions as a basic, rather than advanced, concern.
5. An emphasis on the actor's need to become self-sufficient.

Auditions are considered by many to be a subject for only advanced or pre-professional programs, and outside the appropriate scope of a beginning acting class. I strongly disagree. Auditioning is what you do to get into another class, to apply what you've just learned in a show, to get a job, to win a scholarship, to make any temporary and tentative condition permanent and definite. Far too often, beginning classes whet the appetite of novice actors without showing them how to get more chances to pursue this art. I believe it is this very postponing of auditioning that makes it so terrifying to the actor.

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I thank Wandalee Henshaw for permission to use Open Scene materials, and Kathleen George for Open Scene concepts. Reviewers of this edition included Wil Denson of the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire; Rozsa Horvath of Los Angeles Pierce College, Woodland Hills; and Porter S. Woods of Colorado State University, Fort Collins. I am also grateful to the following graduate teaching fellows in the acting program at the University of Oregon: John Schmor, Amy Sarno, Marion Rossi, Jay Pyette, David Mason, Jim Queens, Karen Bain, Don Naggiar, and Andrew Langoria. Their experiences in the classroom helped to shape this new edition. Finally, my thanks to Carrol Barton, for her assistance in locating sources, and for her abiding support.



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