



ADVANCED
ACTING

*Style,
Character,
and
Performance*

Robert Cohen

ADVANCED ACTING

Style, Character, and Performance

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Preface

Nearly twenty years ago, I wrote a textbook called *Acting One*, which was designed to provide the syllabus for a beginning course in stage acting. Such a course, in my view, is best limited to the performance of basic (that is, realistic) stage interactions between relatively ordinary and present-day human characters. I would hope that the work in such a course would be followed by extended acting experience in realistic scenes and plays, both from dramas of our own day and from the classic realistic repertory of modern American and European theatre.

Such roles, however, do not remotely include everything that actors might be called on to do. During the last three millennia, actors have been asked to play gods, demons, animals, ghosts, machines, kings, queens, fairies, elves. They have been challenged to appear as mutes, amputees, transsexuals; to be twice or half their age or more—and sometimes both within the same play; and to play as if differently gendered, or with a sexual orientation different from their own. Actors must be seen to live in centuries different from their own, and to practice professions different from those for which they have been trained; they must credibly seem to worship deities and spirits different from those they personally believe in, and to adhere to philosophies different from those they personally practice; finally, they must perform acts, and feel emotions, radically different from those they have ever done or felt in their entire “real-world” lives.

Moreover, they have to do this in front of public audiences—and often in front of professional critics. And they have to perform unselfconsciously, all the while aware they will probably be judged on their credibility, clarity, charisma, appearance, and seeming appropriateness for their role.

None of this is easy. Moreover, these “extensions” of the actor’s own personality have, during many ages in the past, often been considered immoral, if not criminally blasphemous: Actors were excommunicated from the medieval church, and regularly banned from public office or religious burial during many periods up to recent times, for performing roles at a distance from themselves, or from accepted forms of moral behavior. Even today, actors are often identified—usually to their detriment—with roles they perform.

Even internal extensions of the actor's own feelings may be considered grounds for attack. Shakespeare's Hamlet muses that actors pretending to feel things they only imagine are in fact monsters:

Is it not monstrous that this Player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect . . . ?

Hamlet is speaking of the Player (actor) who has just managed to grow pale and cry real tears during the performance of a mere dramatic monologue; “faking” tears, Hamlet says, may be considered a monstrous act. And when Nick Bottom, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, offers to play a female part in an upcoming play, he says he will do so in “a monstrous little voice.” Even today, the actor is often considered a monster—as in the French term, *monstre sacré* (sacred monster), used to designate the most celebrated Parisian stage performers.

But even if it is not monstrous or immoral, extending yourself in any of these directions is certainly difficult, at least if you seek to convey the human authenticity and truthfulness that are the foundations of basic acting—as described in *Acting One* and in virtually all other basic acting texts. Yet making these extensions is important, not only for the enlargement of your own art, but for the creation of truly vital theatre: dramatic works that reach beyond the mundane dimensions of daily life, and carry us—participants and audiences alike—into the realms of history, myth, and archetype.

How to approach these tasks is the basic subject of this book, which might have the subtitle “Extensions of Yourself.” And the goal of the book is easily described: to show you how to extend yourself into a different century, a different way of speaking, a different profession, a different age or gender or philosophy or religious belief, *and still be yourself*. Both sides of this “extensions of yourself” challenge are crucial: *extensions* are those aspects of the script that are beyond your current daily behavior and belief, and *yourself* is the core of your being that encompasses your body and soul (or, if you prefer, your physiology and psychology).

When we talk of these extensions, we are really talking of only three things: *style*, *character*, and *performance*. All three words are well known in theatre discourse; none, however, have an entirely settled definition. And since a great many words, including deliberately vague if provocative aphorisms, such as Georges de Buffon's “Style is the man himself” and Jean Giraudoux's “Without style nothing lives, nothing survives: everything is in *le style*,” have been bandied about in efforts to explain them, in this book we will try to use these words in a simple and clear manner; to wit:

Style will refer to the ways a specific *group* of characters—and sometimes *all* the characters—behave and think within a play. The ways they *behave*

could include, for example, that they speak in blank verse, or wear Greek tunics, or wail loudly when they grieve, or eat with chopsticks, or kneel to superiors, or fly like angels, or the men show off their calf muscles to attract women, or the women pad their bosoms to attract men. And the ways they *think* could include, for example, that they worship the moon, prize human sacrifice, reward witticisms, love danger, eat snakes, or fear Satan. A play may contain more than one style within it, of course. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there are three groups of characters: aristocratic lovers, lower-class workingmen, and fantastical fairies. Each of these groups comprises a sort of separate world, whose members generally behave and think in similar ways, so that the aggregation of their behaviors and thoughts constitutes an individual *style*, as reflected in their speech, dress, actions, and expressed desires.

Character is the opposite of style. Character is how each *individual* behaves and thinks, as distinct from the general style of his or her group. If, among the lower-class workingmen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Nick Bottom is louder, fatter, and more explosive than the rest, and Snout is meeker, slighter, and more soft-spoken, that is a function of each man's individual character. If, in Act 1, Scene 2 of *Hamlet*, the title character wears basic black while everyone else is wearing colorful royal garb, and his tone is sarcastic while the others express themselves in courtly phrases (and both of these are indicated by the text), these are functions of Hamlet's individual character. And if, in the world of *Henry IV*, Hotspur is contentious and outspoken in a world otherwise favoring diplomacy and tact, that is a function of his character, as it is a function of the characters of Molière's Alceste (in *The Misanthrope*), Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, Shaw's Jack Tanner (in *Man and Superman*), and Tony Kushner's Roy Cohn (in *Angels in America*).

Style makes for environments, character makes for drama, and both emerge only in regard to (and in contrast with) each other. Character is thus a measure of differentness: how each individual stands apart from the surrounding crowd. And plays are great when, among other things, they create rich worlds of collective behavior—which is to say, styles—and striking characters who stand both in and apart from them.

Performance is the way we act in order to inform, or impress our personality upon, persons outside our immediate field of vision, people whom we expect (or hope) to overhear us. It is also how we sometimes act, in certain stylized plays (by Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, and Bertolt Brecht, among many examples), to directly inform, or impress our personality upon, a theatre audience. A *performative act*, or an act of performing, also describes deliberate “theatricalized” behaviors—such as singing, dancing, miming, or adopting a “theatrical voice”—onstage or in everyday life.

Since style is where a dramatic world begins, creating the context for both character differentiation and performative elaboration, this book begins with the subject of style.

A Word About the Book's Structure

This book is divided into two parts. The first is a series of exercises and discussions that lead to an understanding of the fundamental nature of style and character in acting, without regard to identifying any individual style, historical or otherwise. Where dialogue used in this portion comes from dramatic works, and not all does, the works are mostly from early English drama—medieval and Shakespeare—and a little Chekhov. Such exercises (two of which are brief scenes) are self-contained, and no further knowledge of the scripts or the period is required to engage with them.

Part Two is a series of substantial scenes and discussions of those scenes. The dramatic material here is drawn from different eras of Western theatre history, arranged chronologically and represented by specific authors: Greek tragedy (Sophocles), Italian *commedia* (Machiavelli), English Renaissance drama (Shakespeare), French neoclassic comedy (Molière), English Restoration comedy (Behn), European drama of the Belle Epoque (late nineteenth–early twentieth century: Shaw, Chekhov), and contemporary American drama (Tony Kushner, August Wilson, Margaret Edson). These scenes are presented intact (some with slight editing), and then divided into smaller units with specific acting challenges posed. The scenes are broken down and approached in different ways, some emphasizing poetic structure, some subtext, some stylistic movement, and some rhetorical ploys: All of these approaches, of course, would be combined in the ultimate performance of any role, but singling out what I feel is the dominant approach for each scene is, I believe, an effective strategy for teaching—and learning—a great variety of acting methodologies. My suggested way for handling the material in this part would be for an entire class to work on the scenes presented, and then for students to prepare, under the instructor's guidance, other scenes from the same era or genre. Naturally this could take anywhere from a semester to a year or two, depending on how many eras or genres are attempted.

The scenes in Part Two are self-contained, but naturally it would be useful for students to eventually study the entire plays these brief excerpts come from, and to learn about the corresponding historical/literary periods as well.

Discussion accompanies and follows the practical work in every case, but rarely precedes it. It is my view that acting, at least past the beginning level, is best learned by getting it up first, and then shaping it through coaching, discussion, and direction. Theory plays a role too—it can be very helpful in clarifying and regularizing a process—but the process must be learned, or at least acquired, first; virtually all *useful* dramatic theory, from Aristotle and Shakespeare to Stanislavsky and Grotowski, originates in the *experience* of theatre, not from isolated musings on art. Theory is invaluable in helping an actor intensify and expand on the skills acquired in practice, but neither theory nor criticism alone governs or creates artistic work.

Finally, while *Acting One* had virtually no footnotes, *Advanced Acting* has quite a few. This book, unlike its predecessor, deals with dramas from a wide variety of periods, bringing archaic and unfamiliar words, now-obscure references, literary structures, and a few topics of scholarly dispute or qualification into the picture. To keep the text actor-centered and forward-moving, I relegated most of this historical and literary material to footnotes, which can be passed over—at least on an initial reading—by students not wishing to become distracted by secondary threads or qualifications.

A Word About Gender

While each selected scene was initially written to be performed by one man and one woman, all the roles can be played—in acting class, anyway—by students of any gender. But even in professional theatre, cross-gender casting has been, throughout world history, more a rule than an exception, with men playing all the roles in Greek and Roman theatre, much medieval theatre, and all of Shakespeare's, and with both all-male and all-female companies dominating Asian theatre throughout history and even in the present day. Japanese *kabuki*, for example, which began in the seventeenth century with exclusively women actors, has been all-male now for more than three hundred years; traditional forms of Japanese *noh*, Korean *kamyonguk*, and Thai *khon* are also all-male, while the popular Japanese Takarazuka company is all-female, as is the Xiaobaihua Shaoxing Opera of China. A recent spate of cross-gender casting in professional European and American theatres, particularly in classical plays, which has seen female actors scoring tremendous successes in the roles of Hamlet, King Lear, and Richard II, and male actors earning plaudits as Cleopatra, Rosalind, and Lady Bracknell, only extends this history.

A Word About Race

All exercises and scenes may be performed by students of any race. But of course students performing across racial lines must immerse themselves in the culture of the role they are portraying, so that their efforts do not rest on crude stereotyping or caricature. And students coming from the majority culture (in the United States, this basically means Eurocentric, Christian, white cultures) normally have to work harder at this, since persons from minority cultures are usually well informed, from their earliest school years, in the history and values of the cultural majority. But this immersion in another culture is a challenge to embrace, not avoid: Theatre in general, and acting in particular, are exceptionally socializing arts, providing a living,

breathing access—one that is not merely intellectual, but emotional and physical as well—to persons across a cultural divide. Acting that crosses these boundaries can bridge the gaps between ourselves and those we think of as “others,” and can make the strange familiar. The actor’s challenge, then, is to investigate and experience, as deeply as possible, what it would be like to live in the cultures he or she portrays.

This is not easy, of course, and efforts in this direction are often controversial: August Wilson, among others, argues persuasively that his plays should be staged only by African American directors, and presumably would so argue for the actors in black roles to be African Americans as well, but he has so far indicated this only for professional productions, not classroom activities. Naturally African Americans will, in general, have a stronger immediate familiarity with the themes, expressions, and language tropes in an August Wilson play than will others (just as Russians may have a deeper instinct for the subtleties of Anton Chekhov, and gay men the complexities of Tony Kushner), but this book, after all, is about seeking extensions of ourselves—and discovering ourselves—through the process of acting in plays written by people with widely varying histories and cultures. Every exercise and scene in this book, therefore, should be considered a worthy challenge for every student who reads it, as long as the students rigorously investigate the cultural worlds—including such common aspirations, histories, beliefs, and inclinations as may be understood—of the characters they seek to portray.

A Word About Class Procedure

Most of the exercises and all of the scenes in this book require lines to be learned in advance of class. Generally, this means exercise and scene assignments for each lesson should be given at least two days before the lesson takes place, and, for scenes, preferably four to seven days. And since precision of language characterizes all of the dramatic material herein, it is absolutely essential for all lines to be learned *exactly* as they appear on the page. While the actor should be free to improvise movement, gesture, vocal and facial expression, tone of voice, tactics, goals, inner actions, and timing within the moments of performance, the author’s words must be delivered as written (or translated). To paraphrase the text, no matter how innocuously, is not merely to diminish (if not destroy) the dramatic impact of the work, it is to avoid the very challenge of this book, which is to channel the actor’s own energy and personal sense of truth into an environment unlike our own. To make the present and the immediate real for an audience is a big challenge, but to make the past and the unfamiliar real is an even larger one—and that’s the task I want to put to you on these occasions.

A Word About the Drawings and Photographs

This book includes a number of historical drawings and engravings, plus modern costume sketches and production photographs that illustrate visual aspects of plays from different periods. None of these visual materials should be considered “definitive” illustrations of historical production styles, however. The engravings and drawings reflect the styles of their various illustrators and can be presumed to be only impressions of their subjects, particularly the famous *commedia* engravings by Callot and Fossart. Some were clearly executed from imperfect memory (the *Titus Andronicus* drawing of 1594, for example, differs from the script in details of the scene, showing two sons rather than one). Thomas Hope’s drawings of Greek and Roman costumes were copied from classic statuary, not from life, and therefore reflect the style of the sculptors; they were first published in 1812. Other historical drawings are at least partly incomplete in at least some details (the Swan Theatre drawing shows spectators on one side of the theatre, and none on the other), or were done by unskilled draftsmen. And, of the modern work, the expert drawings by Iris Brooke are composites of period dress, drawn from her lifetime of research on this subject, rather than specific illustrations of actual garments, while the photographs reflect, as they must, individual productions that present period plays and styles within the artistic conceptions of their modern designers and directors.

Nonetheless, the historical drawings and engravings are the best, and in some cases the only, visual representations we have of earlier eras; most of them are famous among theatre historians. And the more modern drawings and photographs are persuasively suggestive of costumes, stagings, and acting styles that reflect the original theatre aesthetics of the dramatists represented in this book.

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P A R T



The Exercises

IN PART I, A NUMBER OF EXERCISES AND, TOWARD THE END, THREE short scenes introduce fundamental principles in nine acting lessons that pay increasing attention to style, then character, and finally performance before an audience.

The exercises and short scenes in this section should be considered as simple *études*, or practice pieces. There is no attempt in Part I (though there is in Part II) to seriously describe, much less analyze, individual plays, historical periods, or styles of individual dramatists.

Consequently, the *études* in this section can be fully explored simply as what they are and without reference to play or period. In Part I, basic principles of acting in style and character are the entire subject, and discussions of verse structure, period deportment, and the author's larger intent are presented only to the extent they serve to encourage the student to learn these principles from a guided practicing of the *étude*.

Where dramatic material is used in Part I, it is drawn from two main sources. Medieval theatre is the principal one, chosen because it