

# *Free to Act*

*An Integrated Approach to Acting*



MIRA FELNER



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## An Integrated Approach to Acting

**Mira Felner**

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FOR JOSHUA  
who loves the audience

# Preface

The freedom to act is born in the union of feeling, thought, and action. This book presents an integrated approach to acting that links understanding with experiential knowledge. Its system of progressively developed exercises enables students to relate physical, psychological, and analytic techniques. The principles presented in the text are not offered as dogma, but as a guide toward discovering a personal and organic creative process.

The departure point for the book is the importance of a strong physical technique for the actor. Although action and intention are underscored, purposeful action is not inherently theatrical if physical energy is blocked and the body dynamic is flaccid and unfocused. The directed use of physical energy serves as the basis for psychological technique. The work on text emphasizes discovering the action inherent in a play and provides a bridge between analysis and stage energy.

The book is designed for a one-year sequence of course work that acquaints students with the fundamentals of acting. One-semester courses may use the material selectively. Mastery of these techniques, of course, requires years of intensive study, and the text may complement more advanced classes as well. Questions of style are inappropriate for beginning work and are not directly addressed.

The book is divided into four sections designed to provide a carefully

developed system of training. Part I—**Preparing the Body to Act**—frees the body and voice to permit the effective expression of thoughts and feelings. It emphasizes the dynamic use of focused physical energy. Part II—**Internalizing the Dramatic Situation**—teaches the use of that energy to give physical life to the elements of the dramatic situation. The fundamentals of the Stanislavski system are introduced and each concept is explored through exercises. Part III—**Understanding the Script**—establishes a basic understanding of dramatic structure as it informs an actor's choice of action. The guide to scene analysis enables the actor to draw maximum physical energy from dramatic content. Part IV—**The Integrated Process**—explores characterization and the rehearsal process. Its goal is to provide the actor with a working integrated technique.

Although each chapter builds developmentally, the book is designed to be flexible enough to serve a variety of instructional situations. The linear development required of a text does not necessarily reflect the way an actor learns. Physical technique is integrated over a period of time during which the actor is also learning the analytic and psychological base of the work. Because actors develop physical, emotional, and intellectual skills simultaneously, an instructor can easily draw from each section of the text as needed. In a class that emphasizes scene study, the first chapters in Parts I, II, and III could be assigned concurrently. A student would be readying the body while learning the process of action and intention and developing analytic tools for scene study. Teachers who work improvisationally before beginning scene study may prefer to use the book sequentially. Where voice and movement classes are part of the curriculum, Part I can help the actor find the bridge between physical technique and scene work. The material in Part IV integrates earlier skills and requires technical readiness. The text can accommodate various approaches; however, within each chapter, the technical development is progressive and the material is best studied in the order presented.

Each chapter contains a logical system of technical and theoretical information immediately followed by illustrative exercises that relate each new concept to a physical experience. Many of the exercises are original, others are variations on ones I was taught, some are borrowed from colleagues. Feel free to experiment with these. I agree with Bobby Lewis that exercises are meant to be "handed down." Exercises are followed by questions that guide the students toward an understanding of the experience they are exploring. Voice and movement exercises are straightforward in their presentation so that instructors who have not been trained in these areas can easily use and assess them. A constant lookout for inhibiting tension and improper respiration can aid students in this work. Observe all warnings carefully and avoid any risk of injury. The use of an acting journal to record responses facilitates the assimilation of the technical lessons into an integrated process.

Two chapters are devoted to the development of a character, unusual in a beginning acting text. This is based on the conviction that unless char-

acterization is broached early in the training, students fall into the comfortable pattern of personalizing a scene and playing themselves in every role. This becomes a limiting approach to dramatic material and leads to confusion as to who is on the line in the dramatic situation—the actor or the character. Characterization is an important arena for **integrated technique**—the unifying concept of this book.

The final chapter on rehearsal guides students through the process of preparing a scene for acting class. It integrates the techniques of earlier lessons into a workable and practical approach to scene study. Checklists are offered to help beginning actors keep track of the many elements that need to be included as they work. A glossary that contains technical terms is included. These terms appear in bold italics the first time they are used in the text for cross reference. A bibliography is provided for those who wish to pursue further study.

The goal of this book is to provide the student-actor with an understanding and experience of the complex process through which an actor is formed. It dispels the myth that actors are born not taught. While there is no doubt that talent, intuition, and instinct are vital, they enhance technique, they do not replace it. Good actors work to develop their skills over a lifetime. This book strives to make the actor's work intelligible, without detracting from its magic.



# Acknowledgments

No book on acting can be written in isolation. The many exercises and ideas developed in this text were inspired by my teachers and evolved through my students. To both I am indebted. The influence of Kristin Linklater, with whom I studied many years ago, is particularly evident in the chapter on voice. Several of my students made extraordinary contributions to the work—Diana Schmitt, who worked as my acting partner to refine many of the exercises; Margit Edwards and Art Duquette, who posed for the solo photographs; and my students from 1987 to 1988, who tested the exercises and posed for the group photos. A special thank you to Ashley Shepherd for her careful reading of the manuscript and comments from the student's perspective.

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New York City  
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M.F.



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