

Essential Acting

A Practical Handbook for Actors,
Teachers and Directors

Brigid Panet



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Brigid Panet

with Fiona McHardy

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Essential Acting

How do actors fuse thought, emotion and action within their creative process?

Essential Acting is an inspired and reliable toolbox for actors and teachers in the classroom, the rehearsal room and the workshop. RADA's Brigid Panet has distilled 50 years of acting, directing and actor training into a unique recipe which brilliantly combines the teachings of Stanislavski and Laban into an invaluable practical resource.

These exercises are built around the need for simple, achievable techniques that can be applied by actors, teachers and directors to answer the myriad requirements of actor training. The goal is to produce a continuous level of achievement, addressing:

- How to rehearse
- How to work with a text
- How to audition for drama school
- How to access the *truth* of feelings and actions

Essential Acting will be a must-have purchase for anyone looking for a comprehensive study guide to the necessary work of the actor.

Brigid Panet's teaching and directing career includes productions for the Royal National Theatre, Rio de Janeiro, Montreal, Boston and major English drama schools including LAMDA and RADA.

I first heard about Brigid Panet's work when, as a young director about to do my first teaching job, I was handed some notes by a friend who had attended one of Brigid's 'how to run a workshop' workshops at the National Theatre Studio. Ideas and exercises from those (now rather dog-eared) notes have remained with me ever since and are as essential a part of my teaching today as they were then. The title of the book is spot on, because there is something 'essential' about Brigid's work; it gets to the essence of things, and the number of students and young actors who have benefited from that essential rigour over the years is legion. I was delighted when I took over at RADA to find that she was one of the regular teachers at the Academy and I am every bit as thrilled and every bit as delighted that this treasure trove of teaching is now available to those of us who have only ever benefitted from her work second-hand, through the skill and attitude of actors she has taught. Some of these exercises I knew well, but so many others are new to me that reading this book leaves me eager to get back into a rehearsal room to try them out.

Ed Kemp, Artistic Director, RADA

Brigid Panet manages to bring together a dancer's understanding of movement and body language, with an actor's sensitivity to text and the spoken word. The result is enlightening, fun and liberating. I think this book should be compulsory reading for every Drama teacher in the country: it is a simple, concise, no-nonsense approach to learning the complicated art of acting.

Adrian Lester

This book is for my son and daughter, Dominic and Lucy, and their children: Reuben, Benjamin and Alice, with my love, and for Teresa Cristina Fournier and all the dear actors who have been my best teachers and friends, encouraging me to write this book at last.

Remembering with love my parents Brigadier Henri de Lotbinière Panet and Truda Panet, Sylvia Barter, Alex Hall, John Gulliver, John Foxen and Michael Joyce.

The art of theatre is the art of acting, first, last and every time.
(Harley Granville-Barker)

Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe; by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect

(Joseph Conrad)¹

There is a vitality
a life force
an energy
a quickening that is translated by you into action,
and because there is only one of you in all time
this expression is unique
and if you block it
it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost;
the world will not have it.

It is not your business to determine how good it is,
nor how valuable,
nor how it compares with other expressions.
It is your business to keep it yours
clearly and directly,
to keep the channel open.

You do not even have to believe
in yourself or your work.
You have to keep
open
and
aware directly
to the urges that motivate you.
Keep the channel open.

(Martha Graham to Agnes de Mille)²

Introduction

This book offers simple, practical and effective teaching in the basics of acting and rehearsing a play. I wrote it in response to the requests – demands, even – of the many students and actors I have worked with over the years who have wanted to enjoy our rehearsals and classes without the bother of taking notes and trying to remember the details of an exercise or technique. I developed the ideas and the exercises that illustrate them in the energy of class and rehearsal, to solve problems in acting as they arose. They have proven consistently useful, facilitating the learning of basic theory through direct, active experience.

The teaching uses as its base the Method of Physical Action developed by the Russian actor, director and teacher Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938). My approach joins this, his final and most useful approach to acting, with the practical analysis of rhythm and movement developed by Rudolf von Laban (1879–1958), the Hungarian dancer and teacher whose theories of choreography and movement helped to create the central foundations of modern European dance.

You cannot master the method of physical action if you do not master rhythm. Each physical action is inseparably linked to the rhythm that characterises it.¹

Stanislavski's previous 'systems' relied on the rigorous planning of each character's emotions and on the actor using willpower and imaginative force to summon belief in his character and the Given Circumstances of a scene. But in the last five years of his life, when he was too ill to act or direct, he turned instead to a simple, practical method where truth of expression is found in the through-line of a role's physical actions. Stanislavski put physical action *before* emotion as a technical

strategy, because, as he said, 'You cannot set feeling, you can only set action.'

In practice, every action has its unique emotional twin – maybe if we could express the effect of this strategy in two words at once, we would say action/emotion: action comes first, then spontaneous feeling arises effortlessly. The word 'feeling' combines the physical sensation perceived by the five senses with the emotional response that ripples through the body, changing breathing, muscle tone, heartbeat and even the flow of blood (causing the actor to blush or grow pale). This is acting as direct experience. This approach frees the actor from searching for feelings within himself and directs his attention outwards towards the task of the character and his partners in the scene.

In developing his Method of Physical Action, Stanislavski searched in vain for a reliable, systematic breakdown of behavioural movement and rhythm; I think he would have found what he was looking for in Laban's analysis of action – the combination of the two provides, in my experience, all that the actor needs to be confident, to have a sustained feeling of truth in his acting, and to increase his ability to practise and improve his craft.

* * *

Recently, I gave a short workshop to young would-be actors with the title 'What is acting and how do you do it?' I gave the actors some big sheets of paper and asked them, in small groups, to write down the answers to the first question, 'What is acting?' The papers came back filled with big statements such as, 'it is being somebody else'; 'it gives me the chance to become another person'; 'it is leaving myself and being someone new', and so on. And what worried me was the verb 'to be': you can't be another person and if that was what people thought acting was they were trying for the impossible, and wasting their efforts and dreams. But if we eliminate the infinitive 'to be' and add the magic 'if', followed by the subjunctive (which expresses a wish or a possibility), then the job description of acting becomes reasonable and attainable. So now we have 'Acting is behaving as if . . .' The word 'behaving' gives us the physical action and the 'as if' gives the imagined situation, including the character.

If it is not being somebody else, what is it?
It is as if somebody else is being you.

It is the direct experience that you are having as the imagined character in the imagined situation. Your job is to allow that situation, in those Given Circumstances, to matter as much to you at that moment as it would to the character.

Faced with any play, your job as an actor is to answer and then convey the Three Essential Questions about your character's situation in the world of the play. The first question is: what is your character's Aim? What is it that he seeks to achieve? The second is what Obstacles must your character overcome if he is to achieve his Aim? The third is what series of Strategies does your character use to overcome those Obstacles? Through a series of improvisation techniques and exercises, this book encourages you to experience these three essential questions and then to transfer this knowledge to the more difficult task of behaving naturally in public as an imagined character in an imagined situation.

* * *

Looking back at my own acting training at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, between 1954 and 1957, I can't remember having any lessons in acting; after the first term of mime we started to work on plays and were expected to learn through doing. This was fine in some ways, but I'm not sure how we were expected to improve, if the only coaching we got were the (excellent) voice classes with Cicely Berry, some practice in the technicalities of rehearsal and our few performances in front of staff and our peers.²

Some of our small group, such as Judi Dench and Vanessa Redgrave, were exceptionally talented and had had some experience, but I was only 16 when I joined the school, coming straight from a ballet training. (I didn't even want to be there! My anxious parents had suggested an acting career as I was not physically strong enough to continue as a dancer.) Each individual talent has its own rhythm; I think that mine is largely instinctive and that in rehearsal I tended to muddle and fudge the useful 'first response', because I did not have a firm understanding of what the jobs of rehearsing and the actor's homework were.³ This is a key reason for my urge to offer any help I can to younger artists.

Leaving Central to go into weekly rep – the system of the time where regional theatre companies presented a different play each week – suited me well and I was very happy working in those years before every home had a TV and people would go regularly to their local

theatre to see the latest West End hits or plays that reflected their own society. When you have to learn up to 30 pages of dialogue overnight and are rehearsing one play each morning while performing another at night there is no time to worry about 'what acting is' and I was lucky in that many older, experienced actors led those companies and I could learn by example from them. (It is a pity that young actors now have no chance of working with the 'mother elephants' who carry on the traditions of good theatre and support and teach in the best way, by unobtrusive example.)

Some years later, when my children were growing up and I had stopped acting in order to take care of them, I started to teach and direct plays in drama schools, and that was when my real training in 'how you do acting' began. Teaching is the best way of learning, which is why I love doing it and never get bored! For the first time, I had to clarify and structure what I thought acting was and to find practical ways to teach it. This was where the exercises and approaches to rehearsal in this book started: they were all invented in the urgency of the moment, to solve particular problems through action.

From my ballet training I had grown up with firm, trustworthy physical groundwork that I could rely on practice to improve; there were exercises that extended the stretch of the legs, or enabled me to turn twice round in pirouettes, etc.; if I practised them correctly I could then achieve a specific result. Acting, however, seemed to have no such logic; it was all misty and relative – one person could say you had been truthful and expressive while another called your performance wooden and unconvincing. When you felt that you had done well, you could be scolded for bad work, and when you felt that you had failed, a director or teacher would suddenly congratulate you, 'At last, you have got it!' This could be painful and frustrating and, as I taught, I wanted so much to save other young actors from confusion like this.

* * *

As a distillation of my 50 years' work acting and training actors, the book contains 'recipes' and ideas for the actor, teacher and director: exercises in the basics of acting; work on status, eye-gaze and poise; a guide for a creative rehearsal process; a collection of useful techniques for the actor and director; an introduction to playing Shakespeare; and my adaptation for actors of Laban's analysis of physical and emotional

action. I have found that actors experience difficulty in practising their craft on their own, out of class or rehearsal. Individual practice in the Laban exercises allows the actor to develop and refine his work on rhythm. This gives him a vocabulary of action, which he can use to record his observations, so as to be able to incorporate them into his work on text and character.

My aim is for actors, teachers and directors to enjoy a continuous feeling of achievement, the experience that Stanislavski described as the sensation of successful actors: that feeling of ‘I am solving this problem.’ The actor sustains his positive outlook as a worker and, as the imagined character he is playing, he sustains it in the imagined situation of the scene, enjoying the two levels of consciousness.

Brecht, who saw actors as ‘scientists’ of human behaviour, quoted with approval Charles Laughton’s reply to the question of why he wanted to be an actor: ‘Because people don’t know what they’re like and I think I can show them.’⁴

* * *

Author’s note: Acting, unlike dance and music, has a limited vocabulary to help study; so I have used capital letters to denote technical terms, such as Given Circumstances, Aims, Obstacles and so on.

Editions of Shakespeare can vary greatly: not only words, spellings and punctuation but also line numbers, so I have given only the Act and Scene numbers when discussing Shakespeare’s language. In Part Five I have changed capital letters at the beginning of lines to lower case, because it is important to look at the text in terms of sentences and sense rather than cutting it up at the line endings.

* * *

I am the vessel through which ‘the Rite’ passes.

(Igor Stravinsky)⁵

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