

**THE**  
**ACTING**  
**B**  **K**

JOHN ABBOTT

**John Abbott**



# THE ACTING BOOK



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For David  
and Susan  
Gardner

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## Author's Note

I MUST HAVE WORKED WITH THOUSANDS OF ACTORS OVER the years and they are an amazing bunch of people. I would like to mention them all by name, but that's impossible, of course. So here are a few of the actors who have made me sit up, listen and want to be like them:

Philip Voss, who made me understand the difference between amateur and professional acting when he shouted 'Zounds' as the dying Mercutio (Ipswich Arts Theatre, 1963).

Chris Crooks, my drama school (and life-long) buddy whose camel was legendary. As was his Hamlet (Central School of Speech and Drama, 1967–69, and The Century Theatre, 1971).

Ian Richardson, whose passion, voice and commitment to performing enthralled me and audiences alike (Royal Shakespeare Company, 1972).

Lawrence Werber, strong, steadfast and honorable both as a friend and as an actor (Phoebus Cart, 1991).

And Mark Rylance, who has stunned a whole generation of actors and theatregoers (Phoebus Cart and Sonnet Walks, 1990s).

Also, I've got to mention my kids, Nick and Katie, who had to grow up with an actor dad. 'What does your father do for a living?' asked a teacher. 'He goes for interviews,' said Katie. Neither Nick nor Katie ever wanted to go on the stage or anywhere near it! (Although Nick likes to build film sets.)

Finally, never-ending thanks to Nick Hern for his rigorous (but always apposite) editorial comments; Matt Applewhite for conversations and advice, and without whom this book wouldn't exist; Jodi Gray for making the pages look great; and to all the rest of the people at Nick Hern Books for their various book-publishing talents and friendly faces.

*John Abbo*

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## Foreword

**T**HIS BOOK IS FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE INTERESTED IN HOW actors prepare for performances.

**For teachers it is a recipe book of techniques and processes.**

**For directors it could also be an insight into the way that actors think.**

**And for actors it is an introduction to some new techniques and a reminder of techniques they may once have learned but have long since forgotten.**



This book is about the way we teach acting at ArtsEd, the drama school where I've worked for the past twelve years. It started life as a handbook for our students. A checklist of taught techniques. But people outside the school discovered it, found it useful and asked if they could have a copy. At that point it was simply a summary of the training, because the exercises were not described in detail. There was no need to do so because the students had been taught them in class. Then my publisher, Nick Hern, who described the handbook as 'a fast-forward acting course', asked me to retain the outline structure but fill in the detail. The result is this book.

Its main purpose is to describe how to support and strengthen an actor's artistic intentions and build their confidence. It describes various ways to analyse a text, create a character and develop character relationships. It includes a range of rehearsal techniques and improvisations, and it introduces an assortment of exercises to stimulate the actor's imagination.

**But basically it is an outline of some of the things that actors can do to create memorable performances that will captivate their audiences.**

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## Introduction

### ‘All Art is Useless’

GOOD OLD OSCAR WILDE. YOU’VE GOT TO LOVE HIM. SOME of the things he said just hang there in your mind and make you wish you’d said them yourself.

He’s undeniably right, of course: Art is useless because it doesn’t ‘do’ anything. But after smiling at his cheek and admiring his wit, you realise that he’s making a positive statement about Art. He actually loves the uselessness of it. It doesn’t help you gather food. It doesn’t keep you warm and dry. It doesn’t make you healthy and strong. It doesn’t keep body and soul together.

Or does it?

Possibly the earliest form of Art was storytelling. Who knows? It could arguably have been cave painting, but for that you need to have invented some sort of paint and devised a way of applying it to the walls of the cave. For storytelling you don’t need to have invented anything at all. Except language. And perhaps a story. I can imagine these cavemen sitting around the fire after a hunting trip and telling everyone what happened during the hunt. They probably embellished the details and exaggerated the characters just like we do today: ‘So-and-so was really brave. He grabbed the mammoth by his tail and wouldn’t let go’... ‘And then What’s-his-name fell over a tree trunk as usual and we all laughed’... ‘Yes, but Who’s-it was absolutely useless. He’s been in a dreamworld ever since he fell in love with Her-over-there.’ And you know how it is when you tell a good story: you want to show people what happened, so you get up and start acting out various incidents. In all probability the people in the hunt got up and started acting out whole scenes together. And, of course, a really good story could be told again and again, and each time they told it they would have got better and better at acting out the good bits. Then some people listening to the story may have wanted to tell it to a completely different group of people, so they had to tell it in the third person. And as they acted it out maybe they pretended to be the people who were originally in the hunt. Some of those old cave dwellers may have become really good storytellers. And some others probably become expert actors as they acted out the incidents for their cave-dwelling audiences.

You see what I’m getting at, don’t you?

And what makes a good storyteller? Well, for a start, it's someone who can make the characters in the story clear, unique and detailed, because everyone is different, and human beings have always been interested in the way that other human beings behave. But a good storyteller is also someone who makes the story come alive for the listeners so their imaginations can become fully engaged. Maybe the best storyteller is someone who performs the acted-out bits as realistically as possible, and who brings truth to the emotional experience of the characters, because that makes the listeners think deeply about what it is to be human. They may even ponder philosophical questions like 'Who are we?' and 'What is the meaning of life?'

As far as I can tell, people who are good at acting things out have always tried to make their acting seem real. Even good joke-tellers in the pub will often start off by making you think they are telling a true story about themselves or about a friend of theirs. A clown spraying fake tears over the first few rows of the audience will get more laughs if he has an inner truth of sadness as he does it. If you look at photographs of Henry Irving, the first actor to be knighted, he used extreme physical gestures when he performed: his hands are stretched sideways, his fingers splayed and his eyes are wild with emotion. But strangely enough, all the reviewers at the time commended him on his naturalism. So what was going on? Well, I think Henry Irving must have had that 'inner truth' as he acted. Don't forget that theatres were lit by gaslight in those days, and it must have been pretty hard for the people in the upper gallery to see the actors' faces. Perhaps Irving used exaggerated gestures in order to project his character's inner life to the people in the gods. And look at Shakespeare, who was making theatre four hundred years ago. In Hamlet's speech to the troupe of players visiting Elsinore, he asks them to hold 'the mirror up to nature' when they act. In other words, to be natural. I suspect that naturalism has always been at the core of great acting. It's instinctive to act with truth because stories always work better that way.

A hundred years ago along came Konstantin Stanislavsky, the godfather of drama training, who spent his life analysing and quantifying the artistic instincts of the best actors, so that all the other actors could do what they do. Since then there have been loads of different 'methods', 'techniques' and 'cults' about actor training, but they all go back to Stanislavsky in the end. And the whole thing is quite simple.

- Analyse the text and examine the details so you know what the writer had in mind.
- Create a character that both the actor and the audience can believe in.
- Then perform the play as truthfully as possible, with all the actors listening and responding to each other.

That's all there is to it. Thanks, Konstantin.

But, of course, that's like saying that all Michelangelo had to do was find a nice piece of marble, chip out the shape he wanted and smooth off the surface!

When I started to teach acting, I read loads of books, from Stanislavsky to Michael Chekhov, through Grotowski, Augusto Boal, Keith Johnstone and others. I even read David Mamet, who thinks that actor training is rubbish and all you have to do is to stand still and say the lines as written. ('Know your lines and don't bump into the furniture,' said Noël Coward. But he was joking!)



In order to create my first classes, I used bits and pieces from all the books I'd read, but as the years passed I began to adapt other people's exercises and invent techniques of my own. Without noticing I had developed my own style of teaching. It was the same with directing. To start with I used all sorts of tried-and-tested rehearsal techniques, anything that might solve a problem. Stanislavsky. Michael Chekhov. Mike Alfreds. It took me ages to get my head around 'units and objectives'. Everyone I met seemed to have a different theory about what they were, so I finally came up with a version that seemed to work for me and I started teaching that. Some people got it and some didn't. And it was especially hard for people who had been taught a different version by previous drama teachers.

Then I started using improvisation in rehearsals to create characters and relationships. Most people loved it, but others just wanted to be told their 'moves' so they could decide how they were going to say their lines.

Also, I discovered that some people loved to research and find out as much as they could about the background of the play and the characters, while others hardly bothered at all. They just used their 'feelings' about these things. Their instincts.

Some people liked to 'act' the text, while others loved the Meisner technique. Some people used the study of animals to create their characters, while others put on their costumes to see how particular clothing affected their character's physicality.

I realised that some things work for some people and other things work for others. And I realised that some things work on some plays and other things work on other plays. Or that some things work with a certain bunch of actors and other things with other bunches. There is no method for acting that is universal and foolproof, despite what some gurus may postulate, because all plays are different. All characters are different. And all actors are different. They are creative artists, so what can you expect? Imagine if everyone painted like Hockney, how boring the art world would be. I mean, I love David Hockney, but imagine how it would be if all artists made pictures like him. No Tracey Emin. No Banksy. No Lucian Freud or Lowry or Francis Bacon...

Most of these people, including David Hockney, went to art school where they learned how to reflect on their artistic vision as well as how to manipulate the tools of their trade. With the proper training artistic possibilities combined with an understanding of practical techniques, they were able to give life to their unique vision.

For me, that's what drama training is all about for actors. As I've just tried to show, acting is pretty straightforward in outline, but in detail it's as complicated and varied as the personalities of all the people who act.

## **Techniques**

In this book I will be talking about both analytical and artistic techniques, and explaining how they are mutually beneficial. Actors are artists, and like all artists they have to combine a technical understanding of their craft with an unbridled, free-flowing, creative instinct.

Where I teach we have struggled to come to terms with how to combine our training in the intellectual analysis of a text with the free-flowing responsive methods of the Meisner technique. And at first

glance they seem to be at odds. But if you look at the diagrammatic representation of the yin and the yang you will find that it is made of two shapes: one is jet black with a white dot in the middle and the other is pure white with a black dot in the middle. They are total opposites.



But each shape, unsatisfactory as it is in isolation, fits snugly against the other to create a perfect circle. And the circle has traditionally been used as the diagrammatic representation of harmony and completeness.

So while we try to understand and develop the artistic intentions of our student actors, we also introduce them to a whole suite of productive methods to help them realise their inner creative vision. Some of the methods we use are tried and tested and will be familiar; a few of them are invented; and others are still in the experimental stage. But all these methods can sometimes be useful, although not for everyone all the time. The best advice I can give to anyone using this book is to try things out and see what happens. I once suggested to a very experienced actor that we ‘hot-seated’ his character, which means the actor has to answer random questions in character, without preparation. ‘Oh, John, I don’t need to do that! That’s drama-school stuff,’ he said. ‘Try it,’ I said. ‘Okaaaay,’ he answered with a resigned sigh.

He began answering my questions with a certain reluctance, but after a while he became more animated, and I could see his character start to come to life. When we finished he was bubbling over with enthusiasm. ‘That was great,’ he said. ‘I really enjoyed it. I never realised that my character...’, etc., etc., and I couldn’t stop him talking for ages.

So my advice is:

**Use the exercises with enthusiasm and you might be surprised by the results.**

## **Subtext**

The subtext is basically the desires, thoughts and emotions that a character might feel, even when they are having an apparently innocuous conversation. Sometimes in real life people find it hard to express what they really feel, either because it would be socially unacceptable for them to do so or because they don’t want anyone else to know too much about them. So they use half-truths and evasions, or talk about other things to disguise their inner feelings. And these inner feelings are the subtext. Writers like Chekhov and Harold Pinter have consciously used subtext when writing dialogue, and the word ‘subtext’ is often used to refer literally to the hidden thoughts behind the text of a play. But I will be using the term in a broader context, meaning the unspoken thoughts behind any spoken words, be they in a play, a film, or in real life.

Of course, an actor has to have a good understanding of their character's subtext, but the biggest danger is to try to 'act out' the subtext so it is clear to the audience. In real life, people usually try to keep their subtext hidden. It's there but you can't perceive it. In fact, people are often desperately trying to conceal their thoughts and emotions. And that is how actors should use subtext. They should understand it, know it, feel it, and then suppress it. You could say, 'Why bother with it in the first place if you are going to keep it hidden?', but that would be underestimating the audience's perceptiveness skills. If an actor feels an emotion, the audience will pick up on it, however deeply the emotion is hidden, and that will make them feel involved. But if you bring the subtext to the surface and spoon-feed it to the audience then you are not allowing them to participate and they will soon lose interest.

The bottom line is:

**Keep the subtext 'sub'.  
Don't act it, or it will just become a new 'text'.**

## **Lonelyhearts**

One of the first things our students at ArtsEd do is to create characters from scratch. They start with very little information and then, through a process of observation and improvisation, they each develop a fully rounded, truthful character. These lonelyhearts sessions were originally devised by Jane Harrison, who based some of the creative process on the techniques of Mike Leigh, but over the years these sessions have developed into the series of exercises described in Chapter 2. Thanks to Jane Harrison for describing this to me, but also, many thanks to Charlie Barker, who is the Head of Acting for the ArtEd BA in Musical Theatre, because she added her own particular flavour to this process and has allowed me to include some additional material which is all her own.

## **Improvisation**

There are many forms of improvisation, from cooking to playing jazz to performing in front of an audience. Improvisation just means that people are making things up on the spot without any preparation or preconception.

The improvisations that I talk about in this book are improvisations to help actors explore various aspects of a script, and as such they should always be played truthfully. They are not about entertaining the other actors, impressing the director or being funny. They are a means of exploiting the actors' ability to 'pretend' in order to help them develop their characters, explore relationships within the script and ultimately present a multilayered version of life in their performances.

At ArtsEd we teach the students how to improvise dialogue both truthfully and creatively. It's not as simple as it seems, because actors can often produce very bland conversations when you take away their instinct to entertain. Their improvisations may be very realistic but they are not learning anything new. So we teach them how to replace that instinct to entertain with something more creative. They learn how to make up stories about their characters and build complex relationships by making on-the-spot decisions without any fear. There is a brief outline of this in Chapter 10, but you will find an in-depth description of our improvisation training in *The Improvisation Book*.

In short, it is important to remember:

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**Keep the improvisations real. They are to help the actors, not to entertain the audience.**

## **Meisner**

Sanford Meisner developed a technique to help actors connect with each other and respond ‘in the moment’. This is the basis of good acting because it tells the story with truth and dynamism, and because the performances are being created as the audience watches.

The Meisner technique as outlined in Chapters 11 and 12 would not be considered to be pure Meisner by some practitioners. Our second-year acting tutor, Aileen Gonsalves, has developed and refined the technique in order to make her own explorations and to solve her own rehearsal challenges. So, although her process is based on Meisner, it is, in fact, her own interpretation of the technique. I would like to thank her for the time she spent giving me a detailed description of her work, and to point out that Chapters 11 and 12 were devised and written by both of us.

## **Film and Television**

At ArtsEd we give the students a very thorough training in acting for film and television because we realise the abundance of professional opportunities in this area. More and more British actors are getting work in American films and television series; there are a growing number of low-budget films being made by young directors; and the internet is an open house for new creative ideas for both drama and comedy. Of course, acting is acting, and a lot of the basic training we give applies to both stage and screen, so I have tried to describe the techniques and exercises in this book in a way that is not specific to either theatre or film. Sometimes this may sound a bit heavy-handed and awkward. For instance, rather than talking about ‘plays’ or ‘film scripts’, I use ‘scripts’ or ‘texts’ as cover-all words. On a few occasions the techniques are specific to theatre, particularly since film and television work can often have a rather skimpy rehearsal schedule. But none of the exercises are specific to acting for the camera. That is another book.

## **Shakespeare**

I have included some quotations from Shakespeare as a fun way of introducing each chapter of this book. It’s amazing how he has something to say about almost any subject you can imagine! But I have also used references to popular Shakespeare plays and characters when I need to illustrate particular points. I’ve done this because, of all the playwrights that I could have chosen, Shakespeare is the one that most people will be familiar with.

I have also used Chekhov’s plays to illustrate points, as well as American plays and films from the 1950s, because the writers and actors in both those eras were experimenting with naturalism. This makes them ideal vehicles for exercises in exploration and discovery.

## The Confidence Trick

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I suppose the most important aspect of our training at ArtsEd is positivity. It's a belief that the students we teach already have the right instincts and talent for acting, so all we have to do is to help them believe in themselves and introduce them to various techniques to realise their artistic vision. They know how they want to act: they sometimes just don't know how to go about it. The trouble with acting is that the actor can't see the results of his or her work unless they are making a film, and even then their judgement is clouded because they usually just focus on their own performance. As an actor they are part of a creative team, but it is very difficult for them to have an objective view of their contribution to the play or the film. They are each cogs in the creative wheel and all they can do is to 'feel' how their performance has gone. Perhaps they can judge from the audience reaction, but even that is subjective. Laughter from the audience may convey a certain amount of enjoyment, but what happens when an actor is playing in a tragedy? Best to hope there will be no laughter. No, apart from relying on their own instincts and feelings, actors have to depend on the feedback of trusted professionals. Directors. Teachers. Voice coaches. People with an objective view who can help actors visualise their performances and understand the effect they have on an audience. I don't mean, though, that a director or a teacher should beat an actor into submission by relentlessly criticising their work and overpowering them with their own methodology. On the contrary, at ArtsEd we believe that an actor needs to understand what is *right* about their work, and if they understand that, then the *wrong* will just disappear.

I first met Jane Harrison when she was teaching on a foundation course in acting at the City and Islington College, and I was amazed when she kept telling her students that they were brilliant. I'd never come across such positivity in my life. But the funny thing was, her students just got better and better. Her positivity worked. At first I thought it was a trick and that she didn't really mean it. But she did. She genuinely believed her students were brilliant.

And of course it was true. They were. People are brilliant if they are allowed to be. Unfortunately they lose their sparkle if they are constantly being degraded and abused. Kick a rough diamond around and it stays rough, but if you examine its structure, carefully release its potential, and polish its unique facets, it shines and glitters with a thousand colours.

Of course, there is no point in lying. If an actor is mumbling their lines incoherently, it would be stupid to say, 'That was brilliant, I heard every word.' What good would that do? But if you praise the actor for the insightful depth of character creation (if it's true), and then point out that it works best when the audience can understand the subtleties of dialogue as well as they can understand the subtleties of character, then the actor will automatically want to convey the meaning of every single word. Both Marlon Brando and James Dean were criticised for a certain amount of vocal incoherence in their early work, but if you listen to them from the perspective of the twenty-first century, you realise that, while they were at odds with what was then the accepted method of speaking dialogue, they made sure that the audience understood everything they *wanted* the audience to understand. People accused Marlon Brando of mumbling, but listen again to him in his early films. That's not a mumble: it's his way of investing the written dialogue with the natural rhythms of human speech. If the director Elia Kazan had said to him: 'Marlon, I didn't hear all the words. You're a useless actor. You've got to speak more clearly,' then *On the Waterfront* would have been forgotten long ago.

But he didn't. Kazan gave Brando confidence to explore a new depth of acting while making sure that

he was still telling the story with emotional clarity and truth. Kazan focused on the positives. And that's what we do at ArtsEd. That's our technique. It helps the students to believe in themselves. Call it a trick if you like, but it works. It gives them confidence.

**It's a confidence trick.**

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# I Storytelling

HAMLET.... My lord, you play'd once i' th' university, you say?  
POLONIUS. That I did, my lord, and was accounted a good actor.

*Hamlet (3.2)*

A FEW YEARS AGO I GOT A JOB DIRECTING SECOND-YEAR acting students at the Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts. I had to direct a play and teach the students how to be actors at the same time. The play I chose was *The Vortex* by Noël Coward. It was written in 1924 when Coward was a young man, and it concerns the problems of taking drugs and how your relationship with your parents changes when you leave home. All in all I thought it was a subject that acting students could easily relate to.

At the time I was living in Chiswick, which is in West London. Mountview is in North London, so each day I drove round the North Circular Road on my motorbike to get to work. In his book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig describes a journey he made both physically, on his motorbike, and philosophically – into his consciousness. He uses a Native American word to describe this journey. He calls it a *Chautauqua*. There appear to be many definitions of the word ‘Chautauqua’ but I’ve taken it to mean: ‘Philosophical thoughts you have while travelling’. It’s a great word.

So anyway, as I was travelling round the North Circular Road I was puzzling over how I could teach these Mountview students to become actors, and I came up with these two thoughts:

‘Work like a Trojan.  
Play like a child.’

The words kept ringing in my ears.

And as I travelled on between the lanes of crawling cars, other ideas came into my head, so when I got to Mountview I quickly wrote everything down. Later I refined it and reworked it, but essentially the thoughts I had on that journey – my Chautauqua – eventually became what I now call ‘The Ego Paradox’. It looks like a poem, but it’s not. It’s just a set of instructions on how to be an actor.

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**The Ego Paradox**

Work like a ***Trojan***

Play like a ***child***

Have the imagination of a ***poet***

The gusto of an ***abstract expressionist***

And the courage of a ***gambler***

Research like a ***detective***

Experiment like a ***mad scientist***

Think like a ***philosopher***

And practise like a ***magician***

Focus your concentration like an ***athlete in the Olympic Games***

Believe in yourself as completely as ***the President of the United States***

And always perform with the passionate commitment of a ***sanctified mystic***.

Let me explain.

First of all the title. 'The Ego Paradox'. What's that all about?

It describes the paradox that an actor faces. In order to be able to stand up in front of hundreds of people and have them watch you pretend to be someone else, you have to have a pretty strong sense of who you are. You have to have a strong ego. But on the other hand, when you are playing a role, you have to suppress your own ego and take on the ego of the character you are playing. Therein lies the paradox.

***Work like a Trojan***

***Play like a child***

Being an actor is hard work, both physically and mentally, but actors should never lose sight of how childish it is and how much fun it can be. Children take their play very seriously, and so should actors. Work like Trojans? Well, I'd heard the expression before and assumed it meant to work very hard indeed. Anyway, that's what I meant it to mean.

***Have the imagination of a poet***

Poets let their imaginations float above the common toil of everyday life. Nothing is barred. They keep their minds open so that all sorts of ideas and thoughts can drift in and be enjoyed. They are not afraid to examine their imaginative fantasies and write them down. They daydream creatively and that's something that actors should do. Actors should open their imaginations just like poets.

***The gusto of an abstract expressionist***

One of the most famous abstract expressionists was the American painter Jackson Pollock. Sometimes they called his pictures 'action paintings', and I'm not surprised. I once saw a film of him working,



using all these big tins of liquid paint, which looked like brightly coloured house paint. He laid his canvas flat on the floor and ran around splashing different colours on the canvas straight from the tin. It was like a sort of ballet. His physical movements were part of the action. He dipped and dribbled and swooped and spun with tremendous gusto. The picture sprang into life. Actors should splash their ideas around just like Jackson Pollock splashed his paint around. A bit of red here! Splash! Spin! How about some yellow? Splatter! Swirl! Take big chances. Try out ideas and see what happens. Create with gusto.

### ***The courage of a gambler***

Courage comes in many guises. We think of courage being needed in life-or-death situations. Going into battle. Skydiving off a mountain. Confronting an armed criminal. That sort of thing. But although acting is important, I don't think anyone should risk their lives for it. But money? That's different. I read this story in the papers about a man who sold everything he owned – his house, his car, his furniture, his clothes probably – gathered up all his money and took it to Las Vegas. One evening he went down to the roulette table and put all his cash on the black. This would mean he would either lose everything or he would double it. Whatever happened, it would change his life. As I read about this guy I thought about the moment he put his money down. What courage he must have had. He didn't have to do it. The money was his. He could take it back to England and buy another house. But no! Here goes nothing. Put the money on the black and sweat. Watch the ball whizz around the edge of the roulette wheel. Spin. Whizz. Bounce. Circle. Bounce and bounce. And... Time must have stood still. Where will it rest...? Plop! What a great story, but what *courage*. To risk everything. That is the sort of courage that an actor needs in rehearsal. The courage to lose everything. The courage to fail. (I know you want to know what happened at that roulette wheel. Well... he won!)

### ***Research like a detective***

Look for clues. In the script, on the internet, in conversations with other people; they can be anywhere and everywhere. Detectives love to collect clues. They know that the tiniest thing could be important. A strand of hair. A bus ticket to Ruislip. Anything and everything is worth considering. Actors should collect together all the clues they can find, just like a detective. Examine them. Evaluate them. And draw conclusions. Every detail is another part of the jigsaw. The script is full of clues. Look carefully. Some are easy to miss.

### ***Experiment like a mad scientist***

'A little of zis blue liquid mixed over a flame viz some phosphorus and a dash of charcoal.' Pop and fizz. It starts to bubble. 'I'll add zis mysterious concoction I made yesterday.' Bubble, bubble, bubble. 'How about putting in some more...?' BANG!!!\*\*\*!!! Explosion. Hair on end. Blackened face. Insane laughter. 'Ha! Ha! Ha! Zat vas interestink!' The mad scientist creates the elixir of life and drinks it, even though it might turn him into a monster. But at least he tried to make something happen. And his next concoction could make him live for ever, with X-ray eyes and superhuman strength. The mad scientist takes a chance, tries something new and comes up with unexpected results. That's what actors need to do. Experiment.

## ***Think like a philosopher***

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Philosophers calmly weigh all the facts and theories. They look for connections. They balance one idea against another and come up with innovative conclusions. They attempt to answer impossible questions about existence, truth and art. In their search to bring the bigger picture into focus they ponder every detail. Philosophy is a love of knowledge. A love of wisdom. Philosophers use their intellect in a systematic and reasoned manner, collating and comparing the wisdom of others. That's what actors should do.

## ***Practise like a magician***

Magicians will practise a trick over and over again so the audience won't see how it's done. They put a lot of effort into making things look effortless. Like ballet dancers or jugglers, they spend hours and hours in preparation in order to perfect their art and create a few minutes of unforced, confident entertainment. And, let's face it, actors themselves are magicians. They play tricks with the audience's imagination. They make fictitious characters come to life. They conjure up other eras. Other worlds. The audience sits comfortably in a darkened room while the actors take them on exciting journeys. But in order to do all this successfully, actors have to rehearse. They have to practise so the audience doesn't see the mechanics of their conjuring tricks.

## ***Focus your concentration like an athlete in the Olympic Games***

Wholehearted concentration produces better results. Athletes focus on the job in hand. They stand at the start of the hundred-metre dash with every ounce of their concentration focused on the finishing line. In their mind's eye they have already won the race. All the surrounding distractions are eliminated in their desire to be at their best for approximately ten seconds. In some events, like the high jump, when every muscle must work perfectly the minute they leave the ground, you often see the athlete physically acting through their movements before they make an attempt. They are imagining success. They are focused. They are concentrating. That's the sort of concentration that actors need when they are rehearsing or performing a scene. It can't be half-hearted. It has to be total. And they need to get into that zone before they start to work.

## ***Believe in yourself as completely as the President of the United States***

It doesn't matter who the President is, or in what decade, every single President during my lifetime has had a massively positive sense of self-belief. I suppose they have to or they would never get any votes. The funny thing is, self-belief works. 'To thine own self be true,' says Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. And he wasn't wrong. If you believe in yourself and your way of doing things then other people will often believe in you and admire what you do. We know about creative artists who defied the existing rules and broke new ground with their art. They are the ones who resolutely swam against the tide with a total belief in themselves. And they are the people we remember today. Van Gogh. Bob Dylan. Stravinsky. Ernest Hemingway. Marlon Brando. Innovators all. The people that changed things. Created a new version of their art. If actors can learn to believe in themselves and what they are doing, then everyone else will believe in them too.

## ***Always perform with the passionate commitment of a sanctified mystic***

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Hah! What does that mean? What's a sanctified mystic when it's at home? Well, I don't know – I made it up. A friend of mine once described himself as an 'astral dervish' and I loved that. Someone whirling through the cosmos, happy and out of control. So during my Chautauqua I was searching for a phrase that was something like an 'astral dervish' and I came up with a 'sanctified mystic'. Sanctified means to make holy, and a mystic is a person who seeks the truth of life. All I know is that people who are involved in these things always speak with a passionate gleam in their eyes. They love their own version of the truth and want to share it with the rest of us. They are committed to their beliefs in such a way that they seem to have a steel-blue electric aura. That's the sort of commitment an actor needs. The passionate commitment of a sanctified mystic! What can I say? Go for it!

## **Trust**

A bunch of actors get together to rehearse a play. Several weeks later the fruits of their collaboration are presented to an audience without a safety net. That's scary.

Often the actors don't know each other before they start rehearsals, and yet they have to explore their own emotional life as part of the creative process. Sometimes during rehearsals an actor will need to be emotionally naked in front of the rest of the cast. Nothing hidden. No privacy. Most people would be unable to do that, but actors do it because they have learned to trust each other.

The way most people learn to trust others is by talking about themselves, listening to each other and trying to find some common ground. As someone begins to reveal details about their life to another person, then the other person feels confident to disclose details of their own life. It becomes a game of mutual acceptance. If you know that your companion cries at emotional stories, then you don't feel embarrassed when your own tears start to flow. Sharing personal experiences leads to a deeper mutual understanding, and that eventually develops into a reciprocal trust. We've all done it. We all want it. But for actors, trust is an essential commodity. It's part of their job.

Right at the start of our training at ArtsEd we embark on a storytelling project. This culminates in a devised performance piece created from stories that the actors have told each other about their own lives. Each actor has the opportunity to tell one or more stories. When several actors have had similar experiences they work together on a collaborative section within the presentation. Stories that have a more sensitive or emotional content are sometimes presented in a more abstract manner through movement, sound or poetry. The results are always fascinating. Often artistic. Sometimes incomprehensible. And, for the actors involved, deeply moving.

But the purpose is not to put on a show. The true purpose lies in what's revealed during the process. The exploration of emotions and the 'self' is a vital part of an actor's resources. As each student tells the others about incidents in their lives, the group begins to understand the variety of human experience. They all have a common ambition. They want to be actors. But that doesn't mean they are all the same by any means. They come from vastly different backgrounds, and their life experiences are varied and diverse. Some of the stories are really unexpected, leaving the other students gobsmacked. At first there is a reluctance to share the personal details of their lives, but once the floodgates start to open, the stories pour out and the group trust begins to build.

But, of course, you can't just ask people to talk about themselves without giving them the right sort of supportive environment; otherwise many of them will just clam up.

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## Storytelling

There are several storytelling games that can ease the actors into this process, and help them to start talking and recognising shared experiences. The first is an adaptation of an Augusto Boal game.

### Conform or Die

**Several actors walk around the room together, and as they walk they march in step. Military fashion. At the same time, another actor dances around the room, expressing happiness and freedom. As the exercise progresses the marchers become more aggressive in the way they move, even to the extent of making it hard for the dancer to move freely. They can corner the dancer, push her aside or even surround her in a hostile, antagonistic manner. They can then force her to the ground with apparent aggression (no one must get hurt). The dancer can try to get up and dance again, and the same thing happens. Her freedom is restricted. Again she is forced to the ground. And again. Until the dancer stops trying to dance and has no option but to join in with the marchers. At this point another actor gets up and starts to dance, and the whole exercise is repeated.**

When this exercise has finished, the actors discuss what has happened. What did they think meant? What would they do if it happened to them? Does gender make any difference? What did the participants feel like?

This discussion is wide-ranging, and as it progresses the actors are encouraged to talk about their own personal experiences of individualism, oppression and isolation.

### The Drama Triangle – *Part One*

**The actors get into groups of three and cast themselves as members of a family. This can be any combination they like. Father, mother and teenager. Teenage boy, teenage girl and grandparent. Husband, wife and brother-in-law. The permutations are endless but there must be family connections within each group, and each person must have a specific position in the family. Having cast themselves in these roles, each actor has to decide on a particular mode of behaviour. One has to be a persecutor, another the victim and the third a rescuer. When they have done this, they improvise a family scene.**

In many family situations there is a triangular relationship, where one person persecutes another and a third tries to come to the rescue. For instance, an older brother could persecute a younger brother, and their mother could try to come to the rescue. Or in another

situation, the father could be persecuting the mother and it's the child who could try to intervene. There are many variations. Some of which will already be familiar to the actors.

When they do the improvisation it is important that the actors stay true to their designated mode of behaviour. The victim should never try to retaliate, however much they may feel inclined. The victim should remain a victim. The rescuer must try to rescue the situation and not start to persecute the persecutor. And, of course, the persecutor should persecute at all times.

This exercise feels amazingly true to life, and it helps the actors understand that this drama triangle is at the heart of many family situations.

### ***Part Two***

**After they have done the first improvisation, the actors stay as the same family member, but swap around their modes of behaviour. For instance, it could have been that an older brother was the persecutor, but he now becomes the victim. The mother was the rescuer, but she is now the persecutor, and the younger brother who was the victim the first time round now becomes the rescuer. They then improvise another version of the scene.**

When they do this they find that this second improvisation also rings true. The modes of behaviour in a family group are not determined by the specific relationships in the family.

### ***Part Three***

**The actors still stay as the same family member but they take on the mode of behaviour that they haven't yet tried. This would mean that the mother now becomes the victim, the older brother is the rescuer, and the younger brother has to persecute his mother. Then they improvise another version of the scene.**

This third improvisation will demonstrate that this drama triangle is a recognisable scenario whatever the permutation of modes of behaviour.

### **Discussion**

**The actors discuss family relationships and the things that were revealed during the improvisations.**

The discussion is often quite lively, as the actors recognise aspects of their own lives. This exercise is invaluable in helping the actors start to share their personal experiences of family life with each other. Gradually the walls of inhibition start to crumble.



**Working as a whole group, the actors tell each other stories about their own life experiences.**

This can take five or six sessions, depending on the size of the group, and it's important that everybody tells a story. Some of the stories will resonate with other members of the group who have shared similar experiences, while other stories will reveal the unique and varied journeys that each person has made through life up until this point. Of course, it's not easy to open up to relative strangers, but there are a number of support mechanisms to help the actors talk about themselves. Here are some suggestions:

### ***Music***

**The actors play a piece of music that has a particular significance in their lives. As it plays in the background, they tell the rest of the group why it is important to them.**

Music will often stimulate an emotional response and bring half-forgotten memories to the surface. But not only that, music is a great way to bring a group together and create a specific mood.

As you can imagine, this music often becomes part of the final devised piece.

### ***Crossroads***

**The actors talk about a time when they were at a crossroads in their lives.**

This is a time of change. A time when they had to make a decision or a time when a decision was made for them. Often this is as simple as moving house or starting at a new school, but there are other changes that can be more difficult to talk about. Like the change that happens when their parents split up or a close relative dies. Other actors in the group have often had to deal with similar problems, and when these stories are told, people realise that their own experiences and emotional responses are not uncommon.

### ***Objects***

**The actors bring in an object that means something to them or has a particular significance in their lives. Then they tell the other actors why the object is important to them.**

The reason that the object is so helpful is that the actors don't feel pressured to talk about themselves. They feel that they are talking about the object. It becomes the focus of their concentration and helps to remove their inhibitions. Talking about objects can often reveal difficult emotional life experiences.



## Devising

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**The group creates a devised piece of theatre based on the things they have talked about.**

The actors' stories have been told without any pressure whatsoever. Sometimes the stories have been quite funny. Sometimes the actors have talked about their best friend or a favourite teacher. Sometimes they have talked about their family life or growing up in a small village or their gap year. They have often talked about bullying or rites of passage. But once life-changing stories are shared, fears and anxieties are made public, or the experience of grief and loss is brought out into the open, then the atmosphere changes. The actors feel as if they are in a safe environment, and they can start to trust each other.

The important part of this whole project lies in telling the stories, because it is vital for actors to have the ability to tap in to their own emotional experiences. The actors can then learn how emotional experiences can be a source of power for them as creative artists.



## Wallpaper

**A roll of wallpaper is stretched out on the floor and the actors use coloured felt-tip pens to write or draw anything they like about themselves or what they have heard during the storytelling process.**

It is important that the actors feel they can express themselves freely on the roll of wallpaper. They can respond to things that other people have written, and they can move around and write anywhere there is a blank space. This process goes on until the roll of wallpaper is full up. It then becomes a reference point for devising a piece of theatre, as certain themes and ideas emerge that are important to people in the group.



## Themed Sections

**The actors get into several small groups and each group chooses a theme they feel connected with in order to devise three or four minutes of theatre.**

After having shared some very powerful stories during the previous sessions, the creative part of the project can now flourish, as the actors use their instincts to make innovative and entertaining theatre.

Working without supervision, the groups have to make their own decisions on how to present their particular chosen theme. For instance, they may choose to work on the theme of bullying at school, so perhaps they decide to act out short bullying scenarios. Or they may decide to use bullying phrases in a more abstract manner, or use physical movement to express their emotional reaction to bullying. The actors should be encouraged to find unexpected and

interesting ways to present their theme.

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All the small groups should work at the same time, and have about twenty to thirty minutes on a particular theme before they present their work to everyone else. These are like sketches. Half-formed ideas that may or may not be used later on. After each presentation there is a short group discussion about it.

The actors then divide themselves into different small groups and work on some more themes or ideas inspired by the roll of wallpaper. Sometimes the whole group can take a shared theme, like playground games or sexism, and at other times only a couple of people can work on a story that is particularly important to them. Sometimes a sensitive story can be expressed as a piece of abstract movement. Music can be used. Sometimes poetry. Dialogue can be written and performed. Dance. Moments of silence. Images. The actors create different sections that will each become part of the final presentation.

The group discuss each section and make notes about what they have seen, and gradually a complete piece of theatre begins to emerge in the group consciousness. This part of the process will take several sessions, depending on the size of the group.

## **Creating the Piece**

**The actors create a devised piece of theatre based on the stories that have been shared with the group.**

Working as a whole group, the actors choose which of the devised sections will become part of the final presentation. They examine the work they have done so far and decide how to refine and improve the chosen sections and put them together in a coherent order. There are no rules for this kind of work. The group have to make their own decisions. The final piece can be themed or it can be a loosely connected series of incidents. It can be amusing at times, and poignant at others. It can be dramatic, artistic and entertaining.

This is the rehearsal part of the process and will usually take three or four sessions.

## **Presenting the Piece**

**The actors perform a piece of theatre based on their work.**

Comprised of actors, the group is perfectly placed to use these stories as a piece of effective theatre. They can create a performance that will not only be entertaining, but will make members of the audience reflect on their own lives. It can be an emotional experience for both actors and audience alike.

It's usually best to do this work with a new group of actors who don't know each other very well. No



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