



# **REFRAMING ACTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

**NIMBLY SCALING ACTOR TRAINING IN THE  
ACADEMY**

Artemis Preeshl



# Reframing Acting in the Digital Age

*Reframing Acting in the Digital Age: Nimble Scaling Actor Training in the Academy* refocuses how actors work in TV, film, and stage. In this refreshing text, Preeshl integrates original interviews with 25 theatre, film, TV, and digital media experts from leading international programs to create an essential contribution to actor training studies. These interviews cover diverse topics such as contemporary training methods, industry standards, and experiential learning, incorporating interdisciplinary recommendations from academics and professionals alike to navigate undergraduate actor training in the digital age.

Digitally native undergraduates arrive at university being well versed in the digital and technological world, but as technologically savvy as these Millennials and Generation Z are, Preeshl and her interviewees show how acting and production degree programs can reframe these competencies to enable students to acquire and transfer digital skills. This phenomenological study bridges actor training methods across media to promote ‘scaling’ to update undergraduate actor training for the digital age. By applying the recommendations of these experts to curricular practices, universities may increase market share, diversity, and graduate employability.

This in-depth field study is a vital read for acting teachers, students, professional actors, and scholars within theatre and film programs.

**Artemis Preeshl** is a Core Theatre Faculty Member at the University of West Georgia, USA. She has worked as a director and choreographer for over 30 years, and she teaches university courses and masterclasses on acting, voice, movement, intimacy design, and directing in the USA and abroad.



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To James E. Henderson (1950–2017), who taught me to how to lead and follow, which set me on the path to leadership in higher education. Dr. Henderson mentored me with clarity and kindness during my internship on diversity in honors programs. On my dissertation committee, he oversaw my dissertation and institutional board of review proposals and advised me on interactions with experts and interviewees for this research study. His calm demeanor and ability to see from the balcony will forever inspire me. Thank you, Jim.



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# Preface

The Digital Age is transforming entertainment daily. As an acting teacher for 15 years, I have seen the industry change from agents and casting directors calling actors into their offices for initial auditions to actors who are expected to self-tape their own auditions with professional production values for theatre, film, TV, and digital media. Today's undergraduates often enter actor training programs with at least some digital skills. As equipped as many of these digital natives are, playing video games and uploading YouTube videos are rarely sufficient qualifications to make studio-quality videos to submit for acting auditions.

*Reframing Acting in the Digital Age: Nimbly Scaling Actor Training in the Academy* grew out a phenomenological qualitative method approved by the Institutional Board of Review to gather data from anonymous experts for my dissertation. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants in this study are central to this study. These professors who continue to work professionally in theatre, film, TV, and digital media generously shared their experiences and offered insights based on their academic and professional expertise. Therefore, the results of this study on undergraduate actor training transcend personality, affiliation, and celebrity to identify and cultivate best practices that increase the likelihood that alumni of theatre, film, TV, and digital media programs will matriculate as industry professionals into the entertainment industry. This approach allowed for an overview in the industry across disciplines, which reveals differences from coast to coast and many points in between. By examining the interaction between undergraduate training in the performing and cinematic arts past and present, this book explores current outputs and curricular outcomes of undergraduate actor training based on the relationship between theatre, film, TV, and digital media courses, high impact pedagogies, and alumni employment in the industry. The candor, insight, and experience of these experts have painted a realistic twenty-first-century picture of undergraduate actor training in entertainment today. I stand on the shoulders of these giants and giants-to-be who envision and encourage telling stories of real people, some of whom could not afford to grow up as digital natives, and celebrate the beauty of diversity in our world today and the world to come.



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# Introduction

Our whole bent is the study of theatre craft with a creative content ... to express ... our interest in the life of our times ... [and] the discovery of those methods that would most truly convey this life through the theatre.

—Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years* (2011/1975, 34)

‘Glacial’ best describes the rate of change in higher education. Since the first university was founded in Bologna, Italy in 1088, according to the Università Di Bologna’s website in 2018, change in academia has progressed more slowly than in other industries. In the twenty-first century, technology evolves more quickly every day. This exponential rate of technological development immeasurably affects theatre, film, television, and digital media. To keep pace with technological trends, universities must frequently adapt to and adopt new technologies in theatre, film, TV, and digital media to ensure that students and alumni nimbly reframe acting and production skills for current and future markets.

The twentieth-century cinematic transformation emerged from the experiments in the moving image. In 2018, the University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records Center described on its website how Eadweard Muybridge projected a sequence of frames of *The Horse in Motion* from 1872 with the ‘zoopraxiscope’ at Chicago’s 1893 World Exposition. Louis Le Prince built on Muybridge’s success by directing Sarah and Joseph Whitley in a 2.11-second ‘Roundhay Garden Scene’ according to the University of Idaho’s ‘History of the Moving Image’ website in 2018. Protégés’ William Kennedy and Laurie Dickson created the Kinetoscope in Thomas Edison’s laboratory between 1889 and 1892. Plantel Communications noted on the Precinema website in 2010 how Auguste and Louis La Lumière had presented *L’Arroseur Arrosé* (*The Waterer Watered*) on their panoramic Photorama Lumière to the public in 1895. Whitford shot the early film, *Annabelle Serpentine Dance* (2), choreographed after La Loïe Fuller’s *Folies Bergères* show, with the Edison Kinetoscope in 1895 (Yumibe 2012, 49). As moving images set photography into motion, nineteenth-century theatrical Realism set the stage for twentieth-century acting.

## 2 Introduction

Konstantin Stanislavski modernized acting by transforming characters who represented the playwright's ideas into characters who realistically interacted with other characters as individuals. His acting technique explored relaxation, concentration, and imagination in a series of well-crafted exercises to prepare actors for their roles. Relaxation and concentration redirected and channeled the actor's attention from daily life into artistic interpretation of character. Stanislavski's script analysis allowed actors to understand a character's psychological motivation and develop stage business through his method of physical action. When the actor imagines what it is like to experience all aspects of the character's life, the actor imagines and lives believably under given circumstances. The actor crafts a series of tactics designed to achieve the character's objective scene by scene throughout the play. Even if the character fails to reach the goal, the character's physical and mental actions create a realistic approach to acting.

When the Moscow Art Theatre first performed in New York in 1922, this truthful approach to acting set the theatrical world on fire. In the 1920s, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya taught lessons based on Stanislavski's technique at the American Laboratory Theatre in New York. Out of Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya's approach, the Group Theatre made great theatrical discoveries during the Great Depression. Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner developed actor training from their interpretation of Stanislavski's methods. Clurman described the Group's initial actor training as improvisation and ad-lib based on character dialogue and Strasberg's 'affective memory' exercise (2011, 44–5), which integrates an actor's personal experience into characterization. In Strasberg's interpretation of Stanislavski's method, an actor relives real-life experience through affective memory to better understand the character's motivation and create the character's imaginary life. After Stella Adler met Konstantin Stanislavski in Paris in 1934, she rehearsed a scene from John Howard Lawson's *Gentlewoman* with him for five weeks (Clurman 2011, 138). In *The Art of Acting*, Adler detailed what Stanislavski had taught her in Paris:

Where you are is what you are and how you are and what you can be.  
... All the emotion required of you can be found through your imagination and ... circumstances of the play. ... [O]ne can demand of an actor that he *do* something.

(2000, 139)

Following Adler's experience, she eschewed affective memory. Inasmuch as the Group Theatre agreed on Stanislavski's teachings, such as relaxation and concentration, Adler and Strasberg disagreed on how to apply imagination to character creation. Subsequently, Strasberg left the Group Theatre in the mid-1930s. Yet, the reality of doing continues to inform American actor training, which led to The Group Theatre's groundbreaking productions such Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing* in the 1930s.

Marlin Brando, who studied with Adler, was one of the most famous actors who used this new acting method. According to the IMDb website in 2018, Brando starred in Elia Kazan's (1951) film of Tennessee Williams' Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Kazan's (1952) film, *On the Waterfront*. Even as advances in American actor training and its integration into film created a watershed moment in theatre and cinematic history, the online digital transformation has irrevocably altered the means by which live and digital audiences view acting across media.

In *The Fervent Years*, Harold Clurman recalled seeing Jacob Adler in *Uriel Acosta* at the Grand Street Theatre in 1907. In Stella Adler's (1982) introduction to his book, she described Clurman's impression of the acting of Jacob Adler, her father:

Harold ... saw that super-size was necessary and found it in ... Jacob Adler, who could hypnotize an audience with his colossal quality. This was the essence of theatre Harold sought monumental stature and universality ..., larger than life.

(Clurman 2011, vi-vii)

When Clurman saw The Yiddish Theatre's productions in the 1920s, its scope and impact on the audience drew him in. During the early twentieth century, theater attracted audiences who could hear about, share, sympathize, and empathize with current and past problems that had influenced their lives. Director Kenneth Macgowan inspired Harold Clurman to deepen American acting during Macgowan's collaboration with actor Robert Edmond Jones and playwright Eugene O'Neill at the Provincetown Players and New York's Greenwich Village Theatre in the 1920s (Clurman 2011, 7). Clurman and Adler envisioned and enacted characters whose physical behavior revealed psychological aspects that resonated with audience members in the theatre. Kenneth Macgowan integrated theatre with film, radio, and television in a collaborative program at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA). The size and scope that Clurman found in Jacob Adler were writ large on the big screen.

Theatre is alive and well in the twenty-first century. Social media offer a kind of virtual theatre lobby through sharing about film, TV, and digital media online. Modern audiences continue to crave intimate connection through hyper-real lives. Diverse stories on screen create a virtual community that invites empathy as everyday storytellers share real life experiences online. Yet what we mean by 'theatre' and the means by which theatre comes alive is transitioning. Twenty-first-century students and professionals often create, record, and post footage on their tiny screens. Is recorded performance on the palm-sized screen theatre? If theatre professionals accept video auditions for live theatrical productions, then maybe it is. Actors carry their reels in their pockets and send reels to would-be employers with the touch of a button. Most students come to actor training and production programs with experience shooting short films on iPhones for and with their friends,



#### 4 *Introduction*

families, or schools. Higher education must adapt theatre and film curricula to keep up with the industry.

Interviews with industry experts from Australia, Canada, England, and the United States inform observations in this book. In 2017, the top American film markets, in order of the number of film and TV productions, included Atlanta, New York, Austin, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Albuquerque, Chicago, Seattle, Boston, and Memphis. In 2018, Pennsylvania joined the top ranking and Louisiana regained its place in the rankings. Interviews with professors in theatre and film, television, and digital media who continue to work professionally in theatre and/or recorded media provided valuable insight into best practices. Today, the majority of university theatre programs often delay elective acting for the camera and auditioning skills in third or fourth year classes. Few theatre programs integrate acting for the screen from Day 1. Fewer still are university programs that offer a major in screen acting. Film and/or media production programs primarily offer technical skills in film, TV, and digital media for work behind the camera, which rarely includes acting for the camera class. Inasmuch as the United States of America reputedly offers a vocational approach to higher education, separate and distinct acting and production degrees rarely replicate essential experience in front of and behind the camera. When students, faculty, and professionals collaborate on set to build the requisite skills for film, TV, and digital media, students apply theory through experiential learning.

Theatre and film, TV, and digital media programs can unite to share personnel, equipment, space, and curricula proactively. The time has come to emerge from the disciplinary pools and immerse shared resources in an interdisciplinary sea. Yes, each discipline is unique with specific and specialized skills, but the industry has already blended and morphed into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Money is the usual block over which departments, schools, and colleges stumble. Data collected show how rare it is for universities to financially back and administratively support professors who collaborate across disciplines. Some professors invite directing and film production students to work with acting students in formal or informal courses that mirror work on set. Some professors go above and beyond contracted and assigned course loads without compensation to integrate theatre and film programs for the benefit of students. To create the best artists possible in the industry, the academy needs to adopt theatre, film, TV, and digital media as collaborative art forms that infuse modern society with storytelling.

Every observable act in any medium, live or recorded, is art. Reframing adapts acting skills to transfer seamlessly from theatre to the recorded image, and back again, fluidly and proportionally. Many experts interviewed said that theatre students in actor training programs easily and even automatically adapt stage acting skills to film, TV, and digital media. Without theatre training, most experts agreed that it is difficult for students and actors trained exclusively in film, TV, and digital media to scale their performance to meet the strenuous demands of stage acting efficiently and effectively.

What if universities were to support professors of acting and film, TV, and digital media production and share personnel, equipment, space, and curricula to meet the needs of our twenty-first-century students? When team members offer ideas in a group setting, collaborators can co-create a project to meet a mutually agreed-upon goal by working together in small groups and sharing the fruits of their labors to reach that common goal. When administrators and professors create curricula to prepare students to fill the technological jobs of today and tomorrow in a timely, relevant, and interesting way, everybody wins. Further, recruitment, retention, graduation rates, and alumni employment may well increase. Administrators, professors, and industry professionals can work together to enhance delivery of theatre, film, TV, and digital media to prepare students for the careers they want, even for jobs that do not yet exist, and exceed industry expectations. Reframing allows students to adjust flexibly to the given circumstances, including the size of the stage on which they are performing or the screen on which their images are projected. As theatre and film, TV, and digital media programs emerge from structural silos, their students can nimbly scale their performances for the medium in which they are performing from Day One through graduation. As programmatic silos let in the digital light, academicians, administrators, and industry professionals can share theatrical and digital human and technological resources within and across disciplines to prepare alumni to work in the present and future live and recorded markets.