



ROBERT COHEN

# ACTING POWER

THE 21ST CENTURY EDITION

# ACTING POWER

“Robert Cohen’s book, *Acting Power*, follows the tradition of his other book, *Acting One*, and has been the veritable bible for acting teachers for the last quarter century.” – *David Krasner, Emerson College*

“This book, above all else, is an attempt to explore the qualities of acting power... to suggest to you, the actor, an approach toward not merely good acting but powerful acting. Great actors display the power to frighten – and the power to seduce – and can shift between the one and the other like a violinist can her notes.” – *From the Preface*

The first edition of *Acting Power* was a groundbreaking work of acting theory that applied sociological and psychological principles to actor training. The book went on to influence a generation of theatre and performance studies students and academics, and was translated into four languages.

This carefully revised twenty-first century edition (re)considers, in the context of today’s field:

- questions such as “should actors act from the inside or the outside?” and “should the actor live the role or present the role?”
- contemporary research into communication theory, cybernetics, and cognitive science
- brilliantly illuminating and witty exercises for solo study and classroom use, and a through-line of useful references to classic plays
- penetrating observations about the actor’s art by more than 75 distinguished professional actors and directors.

Cohen’s elegant and rigorous updates emphasize the continuing relevance of his uniquely integrated and life-affirming approach to this field. The new edition draws on his extraordinarily rich career as teacher, scholar, director, translator, and dramaturg. It is a recipe for thrilling theatre in any genre.

**Robert Cohen** is a prolific playwright, play reviewer, and translator, and directs professionally at American Shakespeare festivals. His 17 books include five on acting, a subject he has taught in over a dozen countries. He is currently the Claire Trevor Professor of Drama at the University of California, Irvine.



# ACTING POWER

The 21st Century Edition

*Robert Cohen*

21st Century edition published 2013  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2013 Robert Cohen

The right of Robert Cohen to be identified as author of the editorial material in this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

First edition published by Mayfield Publishing Co. 1978

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
Cohen, Robert, 1938-  
Acting power : the 21st century edition / by Robert Cohen.  
pages cm  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
1. Acting. I. Title.  
PN2061.C58 2013  
792.02'8--dc23  
2012037409

ISBN: 978-0-415-65846-1 (hbk)  
ISBN: 978-0-415-65847-8 (pbk)  
ISBN: 978-0-203-07599-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Goudy  
by Saxon Graphics Ltd, Derby

FOR LORNA COHEN  
*vivere est cogitare*



# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Notes for this edition</i>	xv
Introduction: the actor's viewpoint	1
1 Out of the self	17
2 Into the other	37
3 Playing character	99
4 Playing style	146
5 Playing the performance	175
6 Acting power: a synthesis	217
<i>Notes</i>	230
<i>Index</i>	236





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to many people who have proved invaluable to the development of this book during the 40 years since its first inception. Chronologically, this began 45 years ago when I crossed paths in a corridor with my colleague Lewis (Creel) Froman, then a Professor of Political Science on my campus, and he suggested I read Paul Watzlawick's *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. The book opened my mind to entirely new ways of conceptualizing human interactions, and spurred me to read the works of Erving Goffman, Eric Berne and other social science specialists. Had he not made the suggestion, this book would never have been written. I then reached out to the National Science Foundation, which gave me a grant to study lie detection and what it might reveal about the acting process (next to nothing, as it turned out), and to the eight brave undergraduate drama students who signed up for what I called an "Acting as Communication" class, and thereby allowed me to experiment with them in creating a "cybernetic acting theory" that privileged future-oriented interactions over actors delving into their own psyches. And then came Lorna Buck, who became Lorna Buck Cohen while I was hammering out the pages of the original text, and who gave me both undeserved confidence and well-deserved criticism as she read my sentences hot from my Smith-Corona, and then Lans Hays, at Mayfield Publishing Company in Palo Alto, who accepted the finished manuscript and published it the following year. After that, I became deeply indebted to Maija-Liisa Marton, who wrote to me from Helsinki asking if she could translate the book into Finnish, and then Andras Marton, who translated it into Hungarian, followed by Mall Klaassen and Jaak Räheseppe who translated it into Estonian and Cipriana Petre who translated it into Romanian; all of these wonderful people have given the book – and more importantly its concepts – an international readership, which has vastly expanded my own ongoing research.

For this current edition, I am most deeply indebted to Lorna Cohen, once more, and to my former student Tyler Seiple, each of whom took the role of faithful and honest critic while offering valuable edits and suggestions during my extensive revision process. And my profound gratitude extends to publisher Talia Rodgers, at Routledge, for her enthusiastic support and extraordinarily helpful

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

comments, and her equally lively editorial assistant, Sam Kinchin-Smith. To all of these talented and wonderful people, I am permanently grateful. Bless you all.

## PREFACE TO THIS EDITION

This book is the first – and will be the last – revision of my 1978 text, *Acting Power*. That book was initially to be titled: *A Cybernetic Acting Theory*. Fortunately, I changed my mind before it was published.

Since then, I have refined and targeted my work to broader audiences in successive editions of *Acting One*, *Acting Two*, *Acting in Shakespeare*, and *Acting Professionally*, along with acting chapters in my books *Theatre* and *Working Together in Theatre*, and in a variety of essays in several theatre journals. The books, first published by a then-obscure company in Palo Alto, California, have, over the years, captured a broad international readership, which has led to invitations to teach acting in over a dozen countries.

*Acting Power* is quite different from my other acting books, however. It was not originally intended to be a textbook (although it was ultimately published as one), but as a theoretical study of the acting process, with the intention of providing actors and their teachers with an integrated acting approach, or what I call an “alignment,” between the various and seemingly opposite approaches of emotion and control. It sought – and still seeks – to find the link between an actor’s spontaneity and her technique, her imagination and her discipline, and, in most cases, her quest for a measure of “realism” within the performance of a variety of “styles.” It is also aimed at finding the points of connection between the actor’s fullest embodiment of her character on stage or in front of the camera, and her ability to satisfy – indeed to thrill – audiences that come to see her performance. It seeks to create what my late colleague Jerzy Grotowski called a “dialectics of human behavior” as it might exist in a theatrical or film performance, and a satisfactory way of dealing intellectually with the many contradictions and controversies wrestled over by theatre artists and acting theorists – most notably by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Bertolt Brecht – in their various productions and writings.

This new edition does not change any of the ideas in the earlier one, but it certainly augments them. It includes my findings and discoveries during my 35 years of subsequent practical work as an acting teacher and professional director, which provided me with qualifications I did not possess at the time I wrote the original text. It also includes my new research in both acting theory and the

cognitive sciences, which I have continuously conducted since the first edition's appearance, and with sustained attention since the 1980s when I created the bi-annual graduate course in acting theory that I continue to teach today. We have learned a great deal in these intervening years, particularly in the area of brain research, which has led to new understandings of the complex neurological activity in connecting emotions and actions. The discovery of mirror neurons that lie at the heart of interpersonal communication and empathy has been particularly revelatory, as has the mapping of operations and interconnections of the senses – mainly hearing, seeing and touching – along with the other facets of the human thought processes that underlie great performances. These, and my own discoveries about the art of acting after three-plus decades of actually teaching it, have been incorporated on every page of this new edition of *Acting Power*.

What is unchanged between this edition and the previous one, however, are the following points, which were in my first preface, and which I quote verbatim:

There is bad acting, there is good acting, and there is great acting. And we can all tell the difference when we see it, even if we can't exactly define the difference.

Most actors try very hard to become good actors. This is laudable, of course, but it is not enough. One must try to become a great actor. Why? There are two reasons. The first is a professional one. Only great actors can develop, over the course of many years, a suitable and successful professional career. If you are good, very good, you can get cast from time to time, perhaps even regularly if you make yourself continually available. But nobody will be *dying* to cast you, and in a business as competitive as the theatre (or films or television) it is having people dying to cast you that is, over the long run, pretty much what it takes to ensure a permanent career.

It takes directors, producers, and casting directors who will think of you when you're not around, who will take the trouble to hunt you out and negotiate with others for your services. That means that you are more than a good actor; it means you are an exciting actor, one who has the capacity to quicken their pulse and enliven their imagination and, if theirs, an audience's as well. The only alternative to being a great actor is to be selling yourself day by day in what is clearly going to remain what it is today: a buyer's market. And this is a difficult way to have to spend your life.

The second reason is even more important. It is the artistic reason. Most professional actors – most interesting actors anyway – do not perform solely for money, or fame, or exhibitionistic exploitation. They are actors because they have a tremendous need to act; a powerful urge to express themselves creatively and skillfully in a medium of high

artistry – a medium with a twenty-five-hundred-year history and with a brilliantly exciting present. Merely good, competent, “B plus” acting will not satisfy this – either for actors or for their audiences. After all, there does not have to be a theatre. Theatre is not like government service, primary education, or agriculture. People can live perfectly good lives without theatre, and in many parts of the world they do live without it. Theatre only exists, and only continues to exist, because of great plays, great performances, and great actors. “Greatness” is what creates audience demand; “greatness” is in the theatre’s very lifeblood. Without greatness, and the striving toward it, theatre would simply cease to exist.

What separates the “great” from the merely “good?” It is not easy to say, perhaps not even possible to define in absolute terms. But I think it can be approached.

Philosopher William James suggests that “the difference between the first- and second-best things in art absolutely seems to escape verbal definition – it is a matter of a hair, a shade, an inward quiver of some kind – yet [it] is miles away in point of preciousness.”<sup>1</sup>

What is greatness in acting? It is not necessarily becoming a “star” or playing lots of leading roles. There are great actors in every medium who specialize in small parts, locally seen, and who offstage are self-effacing to the point of anonymity. But they have power: the power to excite the emotions, the intellect, and the very physiologies of the audiences who see them. They have the power to make audiences want to see them again, and directors want to cast them again – or steal them away from other directors. They have the power to entertain, to move, to dazzle, to fulfill, and to inspire. They are men and women of wide-ranging powers; they are, if you ask someone, “Great!” “Powerful!”

This book, above all else, is an attempt to explore the qualities of acting power; to take aim at that “inward quiver” which James mentions, and to suggest to you, the actor, an approach toward not merely good acting but powerful acting. Great actors display the power to frighten – and the power to seduce – and can shift between the one and the other like a violinist can her notes.

I am aware of a certain presumptuousness in this attempt; a presumptuousness in my writing of it, and in your thinking about it. We live in an age of professed egalitarianism, where “coolness” and “looseness” are publicly preferred to the apparent arrogance of transcendence. But art is not egalitarian. Art demands, or requires, the very best of every aspirant; it accepts only the maximum effort. An actor who wants to be part of the lifeblood of the theatre – the theatre of today and the theatre of the future – must set his or her sights at the highest, at greatness itself. Nothing less will really do.



## NOTES FOR THIS EDITION

- I have “illustrated” this book with what I believe to be pertinent quotations largely by actors (and a few directors) distinguished for their work on the stage or in film, and most often in both of these media. About half of these quotations are from the original edition, a few from actors who have by now seen the fall of their final curtain. The other half are from actors of our current century, and whose careers continue to blossom.
- I have used a few well-known plays – *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Man and Superman*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Hamlet* – as reference points for some of my discussions, since I believe these are works with which most of my readers will be acquainted, or can quickly become so. Similarly I use, as I did in the first edition, Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate* as perhaps the most well-known film of the last fifty years, even among readers born decades after its 1967 release – a conclusion I reached only after polling my undergraduate drama students in 2012.
- Since this book is mainly about generic people (mostly actors) instead of specific ones, it includes a great many pronouns. In the first edition, as customary at the time, I used masculine pronouns when referring to actors in general (e.g. “The actor learns his lines...”). To compensate, I have used feminine pronouns when referring to actors this time, employing male pronouns occasionally when referring to other theatre personnel or, of course, specific male individuals. I have avoided the use of the word “actress” except when, in identifying the authors of the inserted quotations, I have labeled them by sex, nationality, and name (e.g. “American actress Meryl Streep”). I hope the next generation will come up with suitable non-gendered pronouns that will refer to human beings of both sexes, and retire the phrase “his or her” to its deserved demise.
- This book includes a considerable number of exercises. Some are designed for classroom use, and some can be done by the reader alone in her study – or even in her head. A great many of them, however, are really “fantasy exercises,” which I don’t really expect anyone to actually perform, but believe may prove useful for readers to contemplate, and to *imagine* themselves doing. Reading them, in any case, may clarify the practicality of some of my more theoretical statements, or so I would like to think.



## NOTES FOR THIS EDITION

- As my professional background is almost entirely in live theatre, my references in this book are mostly to acting on the stage – but the principles I discuss herein apply equally to acting in film and television, to which I frequently make reference. So when the reader comes across the phrase “on the stage,” this can be equally interpreted as “on the set,” or “on the soundstage” – and the words “play” and “script” can also refer to “film” and “screenplay.” Since the vast majority of professional actors today seek careers in all performance media, I do not believe it necessary to identify them separately at every turn. For those interested in the specific acting techniques useful in film and television, I am happy to recommend two fine books by past and present colleagues of mine at the University of California, Irvine: Ian Bernard’s *Film and Television Acting* (second edition) and Richard Brestoff’s *The Camera-Smart Actor*.

# INTRODUCTION

## THE ACTOR'S VIEWPOINT

---

“You’re really driving four horses, as it were, first going through in great detail the exact movements which have been decided upon. You’re also listening to the audience, as I say, keeping if you can very great control over them. You’re also slightly creating the part, insofar as you’re consciously refining the movements and perhaps inventing tiny other experiments with new ones. At the same time you are really living, in one part of your mind, what is happening. Acting is to some extent a controlled dream. In one part of your consciousness it really and truly is happening... To make it true to the audience ... the actor must, at any rate some of the time, believe himself that it really is true ... Therefore three or four layers of consciousness are at work during the time an actor is giving a performance.”

*British actor Sir Ralph Richardson*<sup>1</sup>

---

### Alignment

Power comes from alignment. You can easily hold twenty plates in your hands, but you cannot hold twenty ping-pong balls, even though the ping-pong balls are far smaller and lighter than the plates. That is because the plates can be aligned, and the ping-pong balls cannot.

If you want to hold twenty plates in your hands, all you have to do is stack them. Then you simply pick up the bottom plate and the rest will follow. You

need only concentrate on the bottom plate – provided you have stacked the plates correctly to begin with.

It is the same with acting. An actor cannot concentrate on her situation, characterization, style and theatricality individually, one-at-a-time, as though these elements of her craft were so many individual ping-pong balls. She must stack them so that one rests upon another, so that by handling one of them correctly she can carry all of them at the same time.

The bottom plate is the character's pursuit of a *goal* (or *objective*, or *intention*, or *want*, depending on the actor's terminology) within her immediate *situation*. This demands the actor's total concentration, and all of her conscious, controlled energy, which is tightly focused on winning that goal.

The elements of characterization, style, and theatricality are critical, but they must all be “stacked” on that bottom plate in perfect alignment for her performance to be seen as whole. Then they can be handled with confidence. The actor is propelled by her situation; by her pursuit of one or more goals. In focusing on her situational goals, she can play character, style, and theatricality simultaneously and automatically. Stacking them atop her situational objectives gives her total and undivided attention during her performance. It is by thus *structuring her consciousnesses* that the actor can drive Ralph Richardson's multiple horses without falling off – or falling apart.

### A structuring of consciousness

Goal, situation, character, style, and performance must therefore be aligned at the moment of performance. The actor cannot be expected to think in a rotating alternation of each of these five “consciousnesses,” nor can she divide her overall consciousness, like a pie, into five separate slices. She must, on the contrary, coalesce these multiple consciousnesses into a single, highly focused, concentration. If her separate consciousnesses can be made to feed into each other, they will multiply rather than fragment the actor's concentration, and allow her to perform with five times rather than one-fifth her strength and power. Finding a structural alignment for the actor's thinking must therefore have the highest priority in an actor's training.

To this end, a five-leveled model of acting consciousness is pursued throughout this book.

Playing the character's *goal*, i.e. playing to *improve your character's situation*, is the first level. It is the foundation of acting. At this level, the behavior of the actor is “pulled” entirely by the goal she wants to win, the ideal future she seeks, and the victories she actively pursues. This is the life level of acting, whereby the actor creates a human being with human aspirations. It is the *aspiration* of the character – what she hopes for, dreams for, works for and sacrifices for – that propels the character beyond her present self and towards her imagined future, which she may or may not reach. This is playing “out of the self,” which is the title of [Chapter 1](#), or, in Stanislavsky's famous term, “living the part.”

Playing the character's *interactions* is the second level. Acting is something you do with *other* people – usually other characters in the play, often characters that inhabit your own character's mind, and eventually before an audience. These interactions differ greatly, but only if they are interwoven into alignment will the actor succeed in being seen as both “truthful” and “brilliant.” Playing interactions means playing “into the other,” which is the title of [Chapter 2](#). It is every bit as important as playing out of yourself – indeed, it is far more important.

Playing the author's *character* and playing the production's *style* are at the third and fourth levels. Here the actor's behavior is drawn from scripted and directed sources; from the playtext, from the director's blocking and coaching, and from the actor's own research. These are at the *dramatic* level of acting, whereby the actor creates a dramatized human being whose intensities are dramatically interesting. These subjects are the topics of [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#).

Playing the *performance* is the fifth and final level. Here the behavior is drawn from the real or anticipated audience. This is the *theatrical* level of acting, whereby the actor creates and *projects* a dramatized human being. This is the subject of [Chapter 5](#), and it is summarized, in conjunction with the preceding chapters, in [Chapter 6](#).

If the actor's situation is properly coalesced – if it is dramatically and theatrically aligned before the actual “acting” begins – then that situation will demand the most unique, appropriate, and theatrical forms of interaction, characterization, style, and performance. By finding the mechanisms for aligning the dramatic and theatrical levels with the human one, acting becomes organically integrated; and character, style, and performance become mutually aligned spines of the action rather than add-ons or detractions.

This alignment is therefore a mental one; a way of looking at things, a structuring of the actor's consciousness. Whether the actor makes her alignment consciously or spontaneously, of course, depends on the actor, and it may depend on the play as well. When talking about their craft, many actors of previous generations acknowledged that they simply acted spontaneously – as the mood struck them. Film actor John Wayne described his acting theory as “I read what's in the script and then I go out there and deliver my lines.” But he did manage to align his targets and interact reciprocally with them. “I don't call myself an actor,” Wayne concluded, “I'm a reactor.”<sup>2</sup> Actors working on the stage, and tackling more subtle roles, however, or attempting to attain more difficult styles or characterizations, will probably wish to pursue these acting alignments more consciously and purposefully.

## The acting controversy

For a great many years, acting has been discussed as some sort of battle between two contradictory notions: the actor's “internal belief in her role,” and her “external performance technique.” Schools have arisen to claim that acting is predominantly one or the other. Different schools have tried to combine the two

in some sort of package, often an awkward one, calling for a lot of Scotch tape. "You must live the life of your character, but you must also be heard in the back row," is the familiar packaging, with numerous variations. Clearly, belief in one's character and proficient technique on the stage are both involved in successful acting, but if actors can approach these as complementary rather than contradictory forces, the package need not be so awkward, and a synthesized and integrated art of acting may develop. This, indeed, is the goal of this book.

For the fact is that both "internal belief" and "external technique" are fundamental and interwoven aspects not merely of stage acting, but of the basic processes of living and communicating. They can, of course, be separated for reasons of analysis, and it is clearly to the advantage of the behavioral scientist or the dramatic theoretician to do so, given their protocols of dissection, designation, and theoretical investigation. But the actor's goals are quite different from these. The actor's ultimate task is neither to dissect nor analyze, but rather to put together, to enliven, and to create a sense of life in a whole and fulfilling theatrical experience. To the actor, it is not the separation of belief and technique that is at issue, but their marriage.

In this book we will not, therefore, be concerned with dividing the actor's separate tasks into their various components, but with integrating these components into their most perfect possible alignment. In doing this, we will take, not the critical or theoretical perspective of the objective observer, but rather the perspective of the actor herself. We will take, that is, a subjective approach. We will approach acting from the inside, not the outside, but in so doing we will try to suggest ways in which the actor can direct her inner consciousness into a highly useful, productive, creative, artistic, and, above all, performative instrument. A real instrument, that can be used in a real world.

Let us begin.

## Acting is real

---

"The beginning and end of the business [of acting] from the author's point of view is the art of making the audience believe that real things are happening to real people."

*Irish/British playwright George Bernard Shaw*<sup>3</sup>

---

Acting takes place in “plays,” and is called “playing.” These words connote deception and non-seriousness, and usually lead beginners to think that acting is wholly different from “real” behavior. It is not. There are, of course, many differences between acting on stage and behaving in life, but the differences are not exactly those between “reality” and “unreality” or between “honesty” and “dishonesty.”

In the first place, reality is not a very simple concept to define. Certainly we can agree that reality includes trees, birds, rocks, the human skeleton, and the sky; but what place in reality do dreams, feelings, numbers, love, or despair occupy? They are real if only because we feel they are real; their realness, though subjective, is as influential in our “real” decisions as hard and fast tangible reality.

One of the basic questions about acting, however, has to do with whether or not an actor’s feelings are or should be “real,” or “honest.” When looked at from the subjective aspect of reality, this question only gives rise to thousands more. “Real to whom?” “Honest to whom?” “To the actor?” “To the audience?” And even these questions are undermined when we start to question the “reality” or “honesty” of some of our own feelings. While, to be sure, we are often overcome by wholly spontaneous waves of emotion, there are also many times when we are vague and unsure about our feelings. We go to a funeral and wonder if we are weeping because we are sad, or because other people expect us to. We laugh at a comedy, and wonder if we are laughing at the joke, or to encourage the actors, or to convince others in the audience that we understand the point of the humor. We smile at someone and wonder if we “really” mean that we’re happy, or simply wishing to make a show of fondness, or are even getting out of a sticky situation gracefully. To say that an actor should be “real” or “honest” is all well and good, but it is not clear that by saying it we are in fact saying anything of substance.

Findings in what has become known as cognitive dissonance – which could be interpreted as “fooling one’s own brain” – have changed our understanding of psychological reality sufficiently during the past fifty years to make these studies of significant importance to understanding the “act of acting.”

The basic principle of cognitive dissonance is that we come to believe in what we find ourselves doing, regardless of the reasons we first started doing it. In the most critical first experiment, conducted by Leon Festinger in 1957, Festinger administered a very tedious examination to a group of volunteers, and then requested the volunteers “help” him by telling new volunteers that the test had been “fun to take.” As compensation, Festinger had paid some of the original volunteers a fee of \$20 (a large sum of money at the time); others, however, he paid only \$1. At a later date, he asked the original volunteers if they had enjoyed taking the exam. Most of those who had received the \$20 fee told the truth and said “No,” but most of those who had received \$1 said “Yes.” They simply could not believe they could have lied for a mere dollar, and so had come to believe in their lie. This is cognitive dissonance. It leads debaters who are randomly assigned a position to come to believe that the position is their own. It leads randomly hired lawyers, speechwriters, and advertisers to believe in their clients’ claims.

A person who joins a political or religious group simply in order to meet people will usually come to believe in its cause. Thus what we “really” believe depends, in part, on what we find ourselves doing.

Actors, of course, have been asked by teachers and directors – notably Konstantin Stanislavsky, to “live the life of their characters on the stage.” And often they certainly do come to “believe in” their parts. We are all familiar with this from newspapers and celebrity magazines. Romance on the set frequently leads to entanglements off. The celebrated affairs – and subsequent divorces and remarriages – of Richard Burton (Antony) and Elizabeth Taylor (Cleopatra), and of Brad Pitt (Mr. Smith) and Angelina Jolie (Mrs. Smith) are only the best known examples of situations not uncommon on film locations or the theatrical “roads” around the world. Likewise, history records brutish offstage behavior – including murders – by actors who often played villains, including the assassination of President Lincoln by actor John Wilkes Booth – who was the leading Richard III of his era.

But there is concrete scientific evidence for ordinary persons “living the lives of their characters” and thereby fooling their own brains as well. This was provided by Philip Zimbardo in his Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971. Professor Zimbardo had invited a random group of male students to participate in a mock prison exercise, for which he had constructed a full-scale model penitentiary in a campus laboratory building. Some of the students he arbitrarily designated as “guards,” and others as “prisoners.” Appropriate costumes were provided to each participant, “rules” were posted, and Zimbardo and his colleagues withdrew behind one-way windows. Two days into the projected week-long experiment, however, Zimbardo had to call the whole thing off. The “guards,” it turned out, had started berating, assaulting, and even torturing their “prisoners.” Their “prisoners,” consequently, were falling into deep states of depression and nervous exhaustion. They were finding and exploiting scapegoats in their midst, and developing anxieties and psychosomatic twitches; one had a complete nervous breakdown while others forfeited their stipends and left the project. The interaction between “play” and psychological and physiological “reality” had simply become too intense. The “playing” of Zimbardo’s “actors” had produced utterly “real” results. Professor Zimbardo concluded that “illusion had merged inextricably with reality,” and that the “play” had become indistinguishable from the “real.”

Seen from the outside, it is hard to understand the experiment’s hypnotic effect on the participants’ emotions. Why didn’t the prisoners in Zimbardo’s experiment simply lie on their cots? Why didn’t they just remind themselves that “this is only a scientific experiment, and we’ll be out of here in three days?” Within a “playing” context, however, one sees and thinks differently. A real, but different, universe exists. It is the universe of “play.”

Consider a more common example of this universe of play: the “playing field” of sports or games. Like the theatre, the sporting competition is also a context for tightly structured performing, with fixed rules and regulations (its script), a

dimensioned playing field (its set), carefully selected teams of opponents (its cast), and goals for each participant (its objectives). The rules of sport, like the scripts of drama, are totally arbitrary. There is nothing intrinsic about three strikes that makes them constitute an “out” – it is only that the rule book so designates them – but the context becomes an insistent and definitive set of strictures. And the teams provide a further context: the San Francisco Giants are most likely not from San Francisco and are certainly not giants, but their home town crowds worship them as if they were both, passionately cheering their victories and grieving their losses. Within the context of “play,” aficionados will believe in – and identify with – their heroes on the field. And these combats, played in artificially created, commercially presented, and intellectually meaningless sports, are seen as “real” human interactions – and are passionately followed all over the world.

---

“Acting is a lot like sports, and a lot of people don’t get that. My focus is really acting, but jiu-jitsu is a passion of mine. And there’s a certain level of concentration in it that makes me a better actor.”

*American actor-athlete Jonathan Lipnicki<sup>4</sup>*

---

To the sports player and to his “fans,” as to the Zimbardo “prisoner” and his “guard,” the context is an absolute. During competition, the reality of the context is total; it is the whole universe. If a ballplayer strikes out, you can offer him no comfort by saying “It’s only a game,” for his look in response will be only astonishment: as if to say, “What world are you in?” Nor can you comfort him by suggesting, “Three strikes are an unreasonably unfair limitation: five at least should be allowed.” To the ballplayer within the game, such remarks are nonsense: within his context the rules are absolute, and outsiders are suffered rudely, if at all. And since the rules are absolute, the energy within the context is wholly deployed in winning the game; it is not wasted on trying to change its regulations.

We can see from these examples that a fixed context surrounding an action does not fragment the passions, feelings, and intensity within it, it only heightens them. This is the brilliance of theatre. A highly structured context – and a play is one of the most highly structured there is, whether an improvised skit or a fully staged and scripted drama – acts as a crucible which intensifies everything within it, and which makes the reality of every moment, from the viewpoints of both the



participant and the engaged observer, vivid and often overwhelming. Indeed, play experiences, whether in child's play, sports play, or theatrical play and film, are often the most remembered and most treasured moments of our lives. They become as "real" as life itself – they *are* life itself. They establish for us the models for what we think life's "peak experiences" should be but rarely are, and become the reference points upon which we measure our real-life feelings and behaviors.

Contemporary research has solidly augmented the significance of cognitive dissonance and the reality of the connection between our real and pretended behaviors. In 1992, psychologists Randy Larsen and Ed Diener found that mechanically making a sad face could be demonstrated to make a person actually sad, and that simply raising the corners of her lips could make a person happy – and could even, if done often enough, relieve her clinical depression. I myself have discovered that smiling mechanically while testing my blood pressure will give me a lower BP reading.

Shakespeare, of course, believed this – or at least had his character of Hamlet believe it, since Hamlet tells his mother to go to her husband's bed but not to have sex with him ever again. And how should she do this?

[HAMLET:] Assume a virtue, if you have it not...  
 Refrain tonight,  
 And that shall lend a kind of easiness  
 To the next abstinence: the next more easy,  
 For use can almost change the stamp of nature.

Thus, in actors' terms, Hamlet proposes that his mother work "from the outside in" – pretend to be virtuous (in this case, celibate) and you will "almost" become so in "nature."

To suggest, therefore, that the actions (or acting) within a play are unreal or unnatural is to miss, quite entirely, the most striking aspect of the theatre, which is that insofar as acting is different from everyday reality, it is mostly different in the direction of being "more real" rather than "less real." Great theatre is, in fact, an investigation of what, in life, is intense, revealing, enlightening, evocative, joyous, and often hysterically funny. The theatrical context, whether it is composed of stage and scenery, street and trestles, or videotape and camera, is an arena for goals intensely pursued, battles vibrantly engaged, loves eagerly sought, and lives brilliantly lived. To separate acting from reality, therefore, is to diminish both.

### Acting is action

It is axiomatic that acting is action. After all, these words – plus the word "act" as in "Act One" – all have the same root: the Latin *actus*, "to do." But we almost always first encounter a play by reading it. And therefore we may initially think of the play as a collection of words rather than a series of actions, of things

characters say, not what characters do. Even in a play's production, the first rehearsal – though it may be preceded with warm-up exercises or improvisations – will ordinarily be a reading of the text. Of the words. There is nothing inherently wrong with this – indeed, it is generally unavoidable – but it does place an immediate emphasis on the play's language rather than its actions. And all too often that emphasis bleeds through to the actual performance.

Speech act theory, however, explains that words are themselves actions. The theory, given that name by J. L. Austin, in his 1962 book *How To Do Things With Words*, was considered radical in its time but is commonly accepted today, and taught and debated in academic departments of literature, if not in theatre schools. But its core notion is one of significant theatrical consequence, as it asserts that human speech is not primarily a matter of transmitting meanings but of provoking actions and behaviors.

In Austin's terminology, the vast majority of spoken language is "illocutionary," by which he means it is a "performative act," an "utterance with force, such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking." It is not simply the transmission of facts that might be proven right or wrong, but efforts, however tiny, to change some part of the world. "Most utterances," Austin concludes, "at their base, are performative in nature. That is, the speaker is nearly always doing something by saying something."

Austin went on in detail to define several varieties of illocutionary acts with which we needn't concern ourselves here. The point is that he discovered what actors have known since the beginning of the theatre's history: that most talking in real life is not merely exercising our vocal folds, or explaining facts, or describing the universe. It is rather our effort to make a favorable impact on various people, both real and imaginary, who surround us. It is an action, not a recitation of memorized material. And the same must be true of talking on stage.

This may seem so obvious as to be meaningless, but let me use an example. One of the exercises I give actors, often in the first class or workshop I have with them, employs this sentence from a speech of Lady Macbeth after she receives the letter from her husband that makes her begin plotting the murder of King Duncan: "Come thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell." Lady Macbeth is asking "Night" to come down and cover itself in the blackest of all cloaks – figuratively, a "pall," the sort of black velour cloth that is placed over a corpse, or over a chalice in Catholic liturgy which will indicate that it has been desanctified. After the actors practice the sentence once or twice, I ask them why Lady Macbeth says the word "thick" in the phrase, "Come thick night..." Their answers are usually, "because night is dark, because night is unthinking, because you can't see through night, or because, coming after seven syllables in an iambic pentameter line, Shakespeare needed more three syllables to finish it. But these are all attempts at explaining the *semantic meaning* or *poetic scansion* of the line. They may explain why Shakespeare might have written it, but not why Lady Macbeth would say it. The reason she uses the word "thick" must be because she thinks this will somehow seduce "Night" into "coming." Lady Macbeth is

therefore *doing* something, not just *saying* something. She is trying to attract “Night” (perhaps the actual “Spirit of Night” – as ten lines earlier she says, “Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts...”) to come down to her. Or perhaps it is the God or Goddess of Night that she speaks to. But in any case, she is speaking to what she at least hopes is a sentient – i.e. potentially hearing and reacting – “night.” Thus her line is performative, not explicative. It seeks a very real result from an actual – or at least spiritual – “being.”

And, we in the audience, while not particularly interested in the precise meaning of the word “thick” in this context, are passionately interested in why Lady Macbeth says it. We are watching a play, not merely listening to a playwright’s language. If the acting is successful – and the line meaningful – it will only be so because we can see Lady Macbeth (and the actor playing her) in *action*. How can she convince Night to come? Does she seduce it? (him? her?) Does she sensually stick her tongue all the way between her teeth as she starts the *th* in thick at the beginning of the word, or boldly cut off the vowel in the *ck* that ends it? Does she try to make the word sound “icky” (i.e. repulsive), so that Night will know that she’s evil enough to perpetrate the deed she is contemplating. Whatever tactics she uses, Lady Macbeth must try her hardest to invoke the spirit of “Night” to come down and cover her foul deeds. Indeed this could be a life or death issue, for if night doesn’t cover them, she and her husband will probably get caught in their murderous act.

Lady Macbeth does not in fact succeed in hiding the crime she commits. Nor, for that matter does Macbeth, though he later begs, “Stars, hide your fires, let not night see my black and deep desires.” But we in the audience want to see, and find believable, both of these characters trying desperately to drape their castle in total darkness with these words that come out of their mouths.

And this is the core of speech act theory. Begun by Austin in the 1960s, it was taken up by the highest level of literary theory when adopted (in a revised manner) by deconstructionist Jacques Derrida in the 1990s. But of course theatre people have known about it for 3,000 years. It’s only a shame that they haven’t used it more often.

### Acting is interaction

“Acting” is a word we use to refer both to stage acting and to offstage behavior (as in “acting strangely,” or “a heroic act”). As we have seen, there is no solid line of demarcation between stage acting and offstage acting.

And almost all of our waking actions are interactions. They are communications with the world around us. From rising in the morning to falling asleep at night, our wakeful life is filled with millions of subtle and not-so-subtle attempts to communicate with our fellow beings – and sometimes our pets or even wild animals. When we are in public, we often smile at others when they catch our eye, or shift our eyes quickly away if we want to avoid them. We walk and dress in certain ways, exchange words, frowns, and raised eyebrows; we snort, chuckle,