

AUDITIONING ON CAMERA **AN ACTOR'S GUIDE**

JOSEPH HACKER



ROUTLEDGE



Auditioning on Camera

To win a screen role, an actor must learn to contend with an on-camera audition. Understanding how to make the crucial adjustments to one's craft that this kind of audition requires is vital to the career of any screen actor.

Auditioning on Camera sets out the key elements of a successful on-camera audition and explains how to put them into practice. Joseph Hacker draws on 35 years of acting experience to guide the reader through the screen auditioning process with an engaging and undaunting approach. Key elements examined include:

- textual analysis
- knowing where to look
- dealing with nerves
- on-camera interviews
- using the environment
- retaining the camera's focus.

The book also features point-by-point chapter summaries, as well as a glossary of acting and technical terms, and is a comprehensive and enlightening resource for screen actors of all levels.

Joseph Hacker is an associate professor of theatre practice at the University of Southern California. He is also an actor and producer with over 30 years' experience, having appeared in such seminal TV series as *24*, *Quantum Leap* and *The Twilight Zone*.

Auditioning on Camera

An Actor's Guide

Joseph Hacker

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***When I dare to be powerful
to use my strength in the service of my vision,
then it becomes less and less important
whether I am afraid.***

... Audre Lorde

Feb 18, 1934–Nov 17, 1992

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... My most heart-felt gratitude.

Preface

I have never read a preface in my life that didn't make me impatient to get on to the meat of the material. So I am going to keep this short.

For openers: You probably wouldn't be thumbing through this book unless something about auditioning is frustrating you, or you suspect there is something you need to know about auditioning on camera in order to advance your career.

Learning how to audition can be a bear. First off, you never get to see anyone else do it; you're always in the casting office alone. You sit out in the waiting room surrounded by other actors all of whom look pretty much like you ... and through the producer's door you can hear the dull murmur of an actor auditioning, often in a tone unlike what you have prepared. As you question your choices the door swings open and out comes the competition in a cloud of moist heat from inside the room. You try to read his face to get a sense of what is going on in there, but too late ... you're next. In you go.

Secondly, when you do *really* well and are therefore in contention, the casting people just stare at you in a peculiarly quizzical way and dismiss you with a far-off "thank you." (I refer you back to the last

sentence of this book's dedication.) This is because casting the right actor is by far and away their most crucial decision. They are reluctant to lay claim to a possible choice too eagerly. (A lesson they probably learned the hard way.) The pressure to get it right is huge. Conversely, if they jump up and say "good job!" it's a good bet you're *not* getting the job, which can be very confusing. (They just want to get you to leave as politely as possible.) You drive home thinking you nailed it ... but then they just stared at you. Or, you drive home thinking it didn't go very well ... but they said you were terrific. You start fixing things that aren't broken, everything gets all out of balance, the whole process can spiral into a state of self-doubt and second-guessing.

And lastly, there is a world of difference between performing an audience-tested scene from one of modern literature's great works, which is what we rightly do in acting classes, and auditioning for a role in an original screenplay that has never seen the light of day. There is an uncertainty factor, an element of gamble in the latter situation since you never truly know whether your creative interpretation is going to work.

Over my 35 years as an actor I have auditioned for the camera literally thousands of times. When I look back on it all I realize that when things went well, the same things always happened. Not necessarily on purpose and not necessarily in the same order ... but there they were. Whenever any one element was missing or hadn't unfolded as a natural and authentic response to the circumstances of the audition, somehow the encounter fumbled and success didn't materialize.

This book identifies those elements, puts them in a sequence, and offers ways to make them work.

In the opening meeting of my class, "Auditioning for the Camera" through the USC Theater Department where I have been teaching for over 15 years, I typically refer to this sequence of audition elements and then illustrate a crucial point by holding up a fold-out from *Sports Illustrated* magazine ... the classic teaching tool, namely a pixelated

sequence of photos breaking down a good golf swing instant by instant. You've all seen what I am talking about. Each side-by-side photo shows in small increments the sequence of positions a golfer goes through when he hits a ball well. And that is how I break down the process an actor faces when auditioning for the camera ... a sequence made up of specific events, event by event. That's the only way I know how to teach it, by breaking it down. But I emphasize with great theatricality that: You ... Can ... Not ... Hit ... A ... Golf ... Ball ... Like ... That! You have to swing the club. *Swing it!* You have to release yourself from the idea that you do this and then you do that and then that. You must let go of the sequence, trust your body, your training and your practice, and let 'er rip. Just so with auditioning: you have to be aware, know what it is you want to do, practice and see how it goes and how it feels; you have to make it your own in your own way and your own style ... and then you have to let it go and "swing the club."

YOU WON'T WORK IF YOU CAN'T "READ."

... Craig T. Nelson, actor

An actor doesn't go for very long in his career without realizing that the way an actor makes a living is by auditioning. The remuneration you receive when you finally do land a job is recompense for all the unrequited auditions that came before. These days an actor must master techniques tailored to the specific requirements of auditioning in front of a camera as opposed to those required for work on stage. As you pursue your career, you will witness in your workshop and scene study many actors who are terrific in class but they never get an agent, or if they do, they never land a role. The only answer to this contradiction must be because they are doing something in their on-camera auditions that isn't effective.

If you can get the job, you can do the job. The problem is getting the job.

An audition is not a suggestion. It is a full-out performance. Any director will tell you that 90% of directing is casting. As I said before, casting is the most crucial decision they face in putting a project together. If they select the right combination of actors there won't be a whole lot to talk about on the set. It is your audition that communicates to the director the full breadth of what you will bring to the role. It also confirms in your own mind that you and the director are "on the same page." Otherwise he wouldn't have cast you.

I hope to inspire you to realize that the audition is not a booby trap; rather it is the one unalloyed opportunity for you to show the powers that be how the part should be played.

Never lose sight of the fact that whenever you see a performance on the screen you admire, it's a good bet *it was performed **better** in the audition*. And when you finally do get cast in a part, you will see that what you achieved in the audition will compare very favorably to whatever you manifest the day of the shoot.

To get the job you will have to fit the physical and emotional circumstances of the script to the physical realities of the on-camera audition situation. You will most likely be auditioning in a strange office with a casting assistant operating the camera; you will likely be reading the scene without benefit of having read the entire script; and you will often be reading with a casting director who is both "acting" and watching you at the same time. There are no rehearsals and no re-takes. But even with these constraints, whether you read seated in a chair or move about in the room, you won't get the part unless you create a reality on camera that "makes it work."

Here's what will happen

Luck: preparedness in the face of opportunity

As your career unfolds you will see that success or progress most often comes from responding to an opportunity that comes from an

unexpected direction. One thing leads to another. When you talk to actors whose careers you admire you will see that they each have a different story. There is no one way to make a career happen ... But this is how it always goes:

You will have some kind of a job or financial support that enables you to pursue your career. You are going to be studying acting. This is a must: you must be actively and persistently studying with a teacher you respect and with a group of fellow actors whose talent inspires your own. You will be involved in a theater group that produces plays regularly. And you will be making yourself available to act in student and low budget films.

Early or late, somewhere along the line you are going to get a meeting with an agent, a casting director or a producer. This is going to happen in one of four ways (in no particular order of likelihood):

- You are going to know somebody who knows somebody who, as a favor to them, will be willing to see you; or:
- You are going to have a chance encounter in a social gathering that leads to a meeting; or:
- You will be in a play or film that an agent sees who will, by virtue of your performance, be interested in meeting you; or:
- Either by way of the internet or by sending out a ton of 8 10s with a brief cover letter, some agent will see your picture and want to meet you.

So you are going to get this meeting ... we'll need to talk about that.

The meeting goes well; the agent or manager arranges for you to meet others, or audition for others ... we'll need to talk about that.

Those auditions, and sometimes those meetings, will very often take place on camera ... and that is what this book is principally about.

A friend of mine who read the first draft of this book asked me, "Who is your audience: experienced or inexperienced actors?" My answer to him is both, since I wish I had known all this from the very

beginning, but also I was a very experienced actor before many of the ideas in this book were evident to me.

Drawing principally from the lessons I learned the hard way as an actor through countless auditions, I have taught more than a thousand students in my years at USC. Truthfully, my greatest thrill is when my students come back after an on-camera audition and tell me it all went exactly as I said it would – just how we practiced – exactly as we discussed – and that what they learned from me worked. Here's what I teach them.

SECTION I

What the Camera Requires

CHAPTER 1

Who you are shouts
so loudly I can't hear
what you're saying

... Ralph Waldo Emerson

YOU AND THE CAMERA

The introduction of the video camera to the audition or interview process some 30 years ago frustrated me terribly. I had grown confident with the old-fashioned way of dealing with the casting people and/or the producers as they sat on a couch and watched what I had to offer. I liked that the warm bodies – the decision-makers – were right there in front of me. I could “read” them, their reactions to me, and adjust. But all that changed with the invention of the easy-to-use, instant exposure, autofocus, instant playback video-cam. Suddenly I was auditioning or interviewing in an empty room in front of some third-echelon casting assistant who was more worried about keeping his/her own job than helping me get mine; who was telling me to stand or sit in a certain place and not do anything that would screw up the camera work. It was altogether different ... very cold, very unresponsive, and most of all very quiet. Whoever was judging me might as well have been on another planet, watching my tape with a fast forward button in his/her hand. I didn't know what to do, or how to control the situation. I wanted it to be like it was before.

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And in my resentment and frustration I got angry and burned a lot of bridges. Stupid. Slowly, through painful trial and error I learned what was required, how to prepare and what to anticipate. The following are observations and techniques that apply specifically to *on-camera interviews*.

The Camera

Spencer Tracy was once asked, what was the secret of acting. His answer was, "Don't let anybody ever catch you doing it."

Here is the most essential thing to realize about the camera: *It can pretty much read your mind!* I will allude to this many times for numerous reasons in this and coming chapters. The camera knows what is going on with you. It always does, it always will. It can see right through you. If you don't align yourself with your true state of being; if you try to pretend to be something that you aren't or avoid acknowledging what is true about yourself, the camera picks up on it. The camera is more sensitive to this than a live audience. It senses any disparity, if there is one, between your true state of being and that which you are presenting.

Especially in the beginning of your career, before you are a known entity, this basic fact about the camera comes into play big time when you go in to meet an agent or casting director who is just "trying to get to know you." These meetings are often videotaped. This type of meeting is called "a general" ... meaning a general meeting. A "general" has no particular shape to it or objective other than to get a look at you and try to get a feel for who you are and what you're like on camera. You will run into this situation in "preliminary meetings" with casting directors for specific projects where there is no script and therefore no scene to perform. In this situation there is no way you can figure what "they" are looking for. Similarly, this type of interview comes up for commercials with no speaking lines, where the action is so simple anyone could do it ...

where, for instance, you simply sip a cup of coffee or happily take a product off a shelf.

Under these circumstances you will be “interviewed” on camera. They’ll ask you a question or two as a way of giving you a chance to present yourself. It is because of the unique power of the camera to know exactly what is going on with you that I have chosen the following two exercises/approaches as the subject of this book’s first chapter. I call them **“Twenty-Year Friend”** and **“The Free Association Technique.”** Their applications come actively into play in the above-mentioned circumstances.

We will deal with the nuts and bolts of on-camera technique soon enough. I know you’re anxious to get to it. But these two approaches have so much to do with performing effectively for the camera that the other technical stuff won’t matter until you “get” the essence of these two concepts first. You could call them square one in achieving success with your on-camera interviews and performances.

Twenty-Year Friend and The Free Association Technique

I will say it many times in many different ways: Your most essential job on-camera is:

*To communicate your emotional relationship to
whatever you are talking about through body language,
gesture and tone of voice.*

I want to make something clear. This does not mean you talk about your feelings. It means the viewer can perceive your feelings, not through what you say, but by how you say it ... your tone of voice, body language, and gestures. The camera is particularly good at this. Therefore, for example, if you ask me where I was raised, I might answer factually – flatly and remotely: “Cleveland.” You learn very little about me this way. Or I can slump my shoulders, cast my gaze

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downward, smile slightly at the irony, then look at you as if seeking sympathy and answer, "Cleveland." Through this you learn a ton. There's a world of difference. And this latter is what the camera likes. *Who and what we are is communicated primarily through our body language, gestures and tone of voice.*

Numerous human behavior studies confirm this.

What else about the camera? In her insightful book *Acting in Commercials* (Back Stage Books, page 48) Joan See observes:

***The camera wants you to express exactly what is
going on with you. The more you share with it,
the more it will take care of you.***

This is precisely why so many of our politicians seem so smarmy on TV; the camera magnifies the disconnection between their true nature and their public personae ... i.e. the way they think they should behave in public in their effort to control what we think about them. It is not attractive. In fact it puts us off. The same will be true for you on camera if you try the same thing.

Michael Caine encourages us to think of the camera as the perfect lover, who loves us completely just exactly as we are, and who indulges and craves our every thought, our every impulse; we can do no wrong (*Acting in Film*, Applause Books, page 3). What this means for your on-camera interviews is: If you are an actor who has an itch you are not scratching, the camera sees a person who has an itch they are refusing to scratch. If you are an actor who is bored but thinks you should be peppy, the camera sees a bored person trying to be peppy. On the other hand, if you are bored and you communicate your boredom, the camera finds you fascinating.

The camera sees exactly what is going on with you. There is no escape. Or there is utter freedom ... depending on how you want to look at it.

Twenty-Year Friend

So what to do? The answer is you must find a way to stop worrying about “saying the right thing” and start focusing on communicating your *emotional connection* to whatever it is you *are* saying.

If you think about it, this is actually how you behave with your best friends. When you are with them you have no particular agenda. You’re not trying to control the direction of the conversation. Basically you compare notes about life. You talk about whatever comes to mind at the moment. You communicate your true feelings about it through body and gesture. You are as interested in them as you are in yourself. You ask about them. You react to what you perceive in them. You don’t put on airs. There is no formality about it. You know you will be forgiven if you somehow say something “wrong.” They are in your corner. They are on your side. They like you.

***The camera wants you to behave the same way you do
with your very best friends. So do the rest of us.***

You need to start allowing yourself ... practicing ... the freedom of talking to strangers as if you have known them for 20 years. Start now. You will need this skill big time sooner than you think in these specific (and crucial) instances:

- Whenever you meet a person in the business, including big stars or famous producers.
- When you meet an agent for the first time ... right from the first instant you encounter each other.
- Whenever you are on camera for a “general.”
- Whenever you are being interviewed on-camera for a part that has no script yet or requires something very simple, as often happens for commercials.
- Whenever you are paired up with another actor (with whom you have had little or no rehearsal time) to go in and do a scene where the characters have a specific relationship ... as if you were best

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friends or newlyweds or work partners, etc. (We will talk about this important situation later.)

This skill is so important I tell my students they will not work until they master it. Or another way of looking at it is, when they finally do get work (or attract the interest of an agent or manager) part of the reason will be because they will have done the following: They will have allowed themselves to talk to casting directors, directors, agents, other actors, movie stars, bigwigs, even studio chieftains ... all as co-workers, right from the first moment, just as with good friends they enjoy being with regularly; as people who are on their side; who work together; enjoy each other, and collaborate with each other; each confident that they contribute vitally to the whole; each being needed, each being valued, each good at what they do.

Be forewarned. I learned this lesson the hard way years ago. The second job I ever had called for me to play with Dean Martin. Dean Martin! I wasn't a big fan of his but it was ... Dean Martin! I was introduced to him one minute and the next I was supposed to be his assistant in his law firm. I didn't play that first scene very well. I was intimidated and formal ... because I didn't have control of "Twenty-Year Friend."

Look, I am not talking about doing a lot of cursing or expressing taboo subjects. But ask yourself: Why do you think the behavior you use with your best friends would not be winning with strangers? Your friends aren't crazy for liking you, are they? I am suggesting that you are not a crazy weirdo, your friends like you and they are not crazy for liking you ... you should trust this. They like you for being who you are ... so will an agent or a producer as well as the camera if you let yourself behave this way.

The first time this will likely come into play will be when some agent or manager calls you in because he saw your 8 × 10, or saw you in a local production, and would like to meet you. (See Chapter 4: "Agents, Monologues and Headshots.") What is misleading about these

interviews, on-camera or otherwise, is they feel like formal social situations. You are in a strange place, you're meeting new people, you dress carefully, you want to make a good impression ... so you feel like you should be on what your parents would call your best behavior. "Appropriate." Everything they ever told you about making a good impression kicks in: grooming, manners, comportment. Our elders rightfully condition us as children to do this. We learn what it means; we learn how to do it; and we think it is the appropriate strategy for an acting interview. *Wrong*. Don't misunderstand me. This behavior is most definitely the best approach if you are applying for a job at a local bank or as a salesperson at a department store or in purely social situations. But in our business, as *actors*, this is not the best orientation to an interview. Because an audition or meeting with a casting director, or a conversation with a director is not a social situation ... it is work: you are at *work* as an actor. You must not go in hat-in-hand as if they are the cheeses and you are the lowly mouse looking for a morsel; or as if your version of sincere good manners and ardor are the key to being taken seriously. The interview situation requires you, the real you ... not the formal, mannerly you that is actually designed to control what people think about you. Believe it or not, the person you are is much more interesting and engaging than the person you think you should be.

A few years ago while addressing this issue with my students I exhorted the class: "Even if it is Warren Beatty, I am telling you, talk to him as if you've known him for 20 years!" Well, coincidentally, Warren Beatty and Annette Bening were guests at the cinema school across campus that weekend. One of my students went to the symposium and said to himself: "Okay, Hacker said to go talk to him like I knew him." And he did and they ended up having a 20-minute conversation. By the way, Matt started the conversation with the casual comment, "Nice sport coat!" I can tell you if Matt had gone up and genuflected and humbly said, "Oh, Mr. Beatty, I am so honored to meet you, etc.," that conversation would have been over in ten seconds. Guaranteed.

I remember a Brian Epstein interview on public television, recalling when he first met the Beatles; he said he didn't decide to be their manager in the beginning because he recognized some major talent in them; the fact was he just liked them. He thought they were funny.

Another one of my students, whose father was a big mucky-muck financier, reported that she decided to try out my Twenty-Year Friend approach on some of her father's biggest international potentates. Her father had asked her to play host to them while he finished up some calls. Later the word came back: "That was the most confident, impressive, self-assured young woman they had ever met."

Years ago toward the beginning of my career I went in to meet with Mike Fenton, a well-known casting director who was meeting actors to fill one of the smaller parts in a feature called *Damnation Alley* (1977, directed by Jack Smight). As I walked in all pumped up bright and smiley I saw him slumped at his desk, clearly weary, girding himself for yet another interviewee. The impression he made in that microsecond was very strong. I don't know what possessed me but I dropped my façade, stopped in my tracks and said something like: "Man, it must wear you out to deal with all the peppy people who come charging through this door." We talked a little bit about that. Within three minutes he reached for the phone and said to the director: "Jack, I got a guy up here I want you to meet." Yes, I got the job. Looking back on it that was one of the first clues I got about the importance of Twenty-Year Friend. I cannot tell you how many of my students come back saying Twenty-Year Friend is one of the most important contributors to their success.

Okay, enough of the testimonials: how do we deal with this issue? What follows is an approach that my students find both effective and enlightening.

The guide is: Treat all people the same. Learn to talk to strangers as if you have been friends for 20 years. Almost every student I talk to reflexively bolts at this idea. It seems dangerous. "They will run from

us in abject terror because they will think we are crazy weirdos!” or presumptuous or disrespectful. But if you follow this guide you will be surprised by how positively people will react to you. I know this might seem counter-intuitive but I’ve got a million anecdotes to verify this.

Exercise: Twenty-Year Friend

Write out precisely and thoroughly, as if you were a novelist with yourself as the subject, how you behave (what you *do*, your gestures, posture, eye contact, facial expressions, tone, subject matter, how you begin, how you end, and, very importantly, your assumptions, etc.) when you talk to a friend you have known for a long time. In two columns, for as many pages as it takes, compare and contrast this to how you behave in all these categories with strangers. This is your “best friends” list.

Read your “best friends” list carefully. Pick a category and incorporate it into your conversations with strangers. Use your “best friends” list as your guide. Practice this. Each of us has to find our own path. Basically, it seems to me, this is a process of being willing to compare notes about life as it is unfolding that very day at that very moment, commenting on what’s really going on with you, and being interested in what is really going on with them. It is not a process of rehashing or exploring the past, nor is it a process of explaining yourself, since your best friends have already long ago been through all this with you and you with them. They accept you and like you for exactly how you are. You know they are on your side and you know you are on theirs. Make this assumption with strangers. It will pay dividends.

As for myself, what works is to start the exchange commenting on whatever is or has been truly on my mind no further back than within the last ten minutes. I call this my “ten minute” rule. I trust what is really going on with me, just as I do with my best friends.

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If you are having trouble, try working with the following:

- Stand next to a stranger without talking; imagine that the two of you are friends. See what that feels like.
- Do not begin your encounters with a question. *Make a statement about yourself and what is really going through your mind at that moment.*
- Declarative sentences like:
 - “I just got these new shoes. My feet feel great!”
 - “I wonder why they always put green olives in glass bottles but put black olives in cans.”
 - “If I have to stand in another line today I think I’ll explode.”
 - “I saw the greatest concert last night.”
- It is commonly easier for an actor to imagine an “outer” reality is true rather than an “inner” one. By this I mean, for example, it is usually easier for you to make believe that I am your brother than it is for you to make believe that you are my brother (or sister). Get it? Therefore: *try talking to a stranger as if they have known **you** for 20 years rather than the reverse.*
- Choose situations (a checkout line, sitting in a new class, waiting for a bus, etc.) where you are both on equal footing. Waiters, policemen, librarians have a role to play ... the exercise with them will not serve you. Elevators are no good, generally, because the stranger feels trapped.

Remember: your friends *like* you. From now on this is how you will talk to directors, casting directors, agents and other actors when you meet them ... as if you have known them for 20 years. Even Warren Beatty.

Important note:

This is the easiest exercise in the world not to do, or to shine it on in a half-hearted attempt. It is not something you will learn over the weekend. It is like being trustworthy or polite or thoughtful or

disciplined ... you have to remind yourself each day and continue to encourage it in yourself.

My students call me, all excited and nervous, when they have a meeting with an agent. I settle them down and we go back to this important precept. Nothing is always true, but it is a good bet that this orientation to these professional encounters will set you on the right track. Try to imagine the first time you go in to meet with an agent or director. He is going to call you into his office and you are going to sit down and there will be some exchanges between the two of you, small talk, which will go on for a few minutes, maybe longer. What do you think is happening during this seemingly innocuous portion of the interview? Everything! This is where "Twenty-Year Friend" comes into play. (This is, by the way, where I apply my "ten minute" rule ... offering up spontaneously a declarative comment about something that has happened to me no longer ago than in the last ten minutes. I get this going before we even have a chance to settle into our seats.) Then after the two of you talk for a while the agent is either going to advance the relationship by suggesting he see some film on you, or meet his partner, or come back next week for a monologue ... like that. Or: He is going to shut down the meeting by saying something like: "Well, thank you for coming in. Just to let you know, what we are doing now is getting a sense of who is out there. We are not signing anyone at the moment, but in the spring we are thinking we might expand our client list. I will call you then. Goodbye." So you see this initial interlude is very important. "Twenty-Year Friend" is a capacity you need to encourage in yourself.

Free Association Technique

When I first started out I was very active. Many of my auditions were for commercials, many for TV roles; a couple were for film roles. I went on lots of general meetings. I ran into the question "Tell me about yourself" or "What have you been up to?" over and over again.