

Bella Merlin

Acting

the basics

Second Edition

ROUTLEDGE



ACTING

THE BASICS

Now in a vibrantly revised second edition, *Acting: The Basics* remains a practical and theoretical guide to the world of the professional actor, which skilfully combines ideas from a range of practitioners and links the Academy to the industry. Retaining a balance between acting history, a discussion of pioneers and a consideration of the practicalities of acting techniques, the new edition includes a discussion of acting for the screen as well as the practicalities of stage acting, including training, rehearsing and performing. With a glossary of terms and useful website suggestions, this is the ideal introduction for anyone wanting to learn more about the practice and history of acting.

Bella Merlin is Professor of Acting and Directing at the University of California, Riverside, as well as an actor and trainer.

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ACTING THE BASICS

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There are hardly any exceptions to the rule that
a person must pay dearly for the divine gift of creative fire.

Carl Jung (1875–1961)

Acting is the essential lubricant.

Marlon Brando (1924–2004)

For
Miles Anderson,
whose acting is basically brilliant

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In 2009, I was truly honoured to be asked to contribute to Routledge's acclaimed *The Basics* series. That honour was deepened when (a few years later) I was asked to write a second edition. On each occasion, it has been a pleasure and, indeed, a challenge, as there are so many wonderful actors, directors, trainers and thinkers who could have featured – either at all or more prominently. As there simply isn't space to do them justice, I have homed in on the backbone of acting, if occasionally at the expense of some limbs and organs. However, the bibliography guides you towards other interesting *dramatis personae*, whom I hope you will visit. There are also numerous websites to be trawled, some of which I've included at the end of each chapter. In order to keep a narrative flow through the text, I only include the details of extended quotations so do take note of the books in the bibliography.

While all those cited have been vital sources of information, *Acting: The Basics*, second edition, would have been impossible to write without integrating my own practical research (on the stage, in front of the camera, in the studio and in the classroom). In the eight years between editions, that experience has expanded and deepened. I'm not a scholar or a theoretician. I'm a practitioner. And therefore this book is aimed predominantly at the doer – the actor – who uses their voice, body, imagination, feelings and intellect to experience

their embodied learning as a truly transformative process. I encourage all students of acting – both in the Academy and in the industry – to consider themselves ‘practical researchers’, not only into the nature of acting itself but also into the workings of human connectivity.

This second edition was the suggestion of the publishers Routledge, endorsed by responses garnered from four anonymous peer reviewers. I’ve taken into consideration the terrific comments made by the reviewers, to whom I’m immensely grateful. Chapter 1 has been completely rewritten, turning from a brief history of acting to a chapter still embracing some history but refocusing on global perspectives and contemporary concerns with theatre for social change. It shifts from the Euro-American roots that had been the main influences on my own tertiary education and acting experience, and which I had therefore (unconsciously) favoured. The structure of the book has also shifted somewhat in response to the reviewers’ comments, with Chapters 2 and 3 focusing on thirteen contemporary pioneers, shuffled and expanded from the first edition and directly addressing merging methodologies. Throughout the narrative of the book are threaded manifold aesthetic influences; at the same time, I note that much screen and theatre acting today has at its heart a certain **psychological realism**, however culturally diverse the narratives and styles may be.

Elsewhere in the book, I’ve updated the sections on acting for the camera; I’ve added a section on verbatim drama; and I’ve included more text analysis. The reviewers were divided in their responses as to whether or not exercises should be included: since the books in *The Basics* series strive to be manageably short, I’ve focused my wordage on the sharing of insights and information, guiding you instead to some of the many wonderful compilations of games and exercises (included in the bibliography). That said, I’ve scattered some prompts throughout the book, to keep students and readers self-reflective and active. There are inevitable gaps (apologies where due) – and no doubt a third edition will be warranted in the not-too-distant future as the sands of time shift our tastes and influences, and new pioneers of acting come to the fore.

Finally, I would like to thank Meredith Darnell, Clare Owen and Liz Hudson, who have helped so wonderfully with this second edition, along with the people who originally commissioned *Acting: The Basics* at Routledge – David Avital, Rosie Waters and, not least,

Talia Rodgers, who continues to be a source of inspiration and encouragement. All those with whom I've worked – actors, directors, writers, teachers and students (most recently at the University of California, Riverside) – have (wittingly or unwittingly) provided invaluable insights. I particularly thank Tina Packer, Tamara Hickey, Alejandro Ramirez, Phillip B. Zarrilli and Edward Kemp for some great conversations. My most heartfelt thanks go to Miles Anderson for his talent, wisdom, patience and nurturing, not to mention endless rereadings of endless rewritings of both *Acting* editions.

Bella Merlin

Los Angeles, 2017

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADR	Automated Dialogue Replacement
ATM	Awareness through Movement
CICT	Centre for International Theatre Creation
DP	Director of Photography
DST	Dynamic Systems Theory
GITIS	Russian Academy of Theatre Arts
MAT	Moscow Art Theatre
POV	Point of View
RADA	Royal Academy of Dramatic Art
S&Co	Shakespeare & Company
TSJI	Theatre for Social Justice Institute
VGIK	Russian State University of Cinematography



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INTRODUCTION

Why do we want to act? What on earth lures us into transforming ourselves into somebody else? Or editing our own personalities into a public performance? What inspires us to execute actions that another person has scripted or we have consciously devised? Is it to take an audience on an adventure of imagination, provocation, education – or is it just plain fun? Over the course of the next 200 pages, we're going to look at this mysterious art called 'acting'. And this *is* a book about acting. Not drama. Not performance art. Not theatre history or performance studies. Nor is it about the business of acting, though there are books in the bibliography that do address that. It's a book about the artistic practice of acting and the people who advance its evolution. The intention is to introduce you to an array of practitioners and thinkers who have shaped our craft, along with some perspectives on the challenges you may encounter on your own creative path whether or not you choose to take your acting further. In many ways, I lead you to the banquet, so that you can try whatever tickles your taste buds.

In other words, this isn't a primer on 'how to act', because it's hard to learn how to act from a book. Acting is an art you discover experientially by getting up and doing it, as it involves your whole personality: voice, body, imagination, emotions and psyche. That

said, there are many ideas which *can* be shared through the written word. Hence *Acting: The Basics*, second edition. Whether you're on a liberal-arts programme (where studio-based acting classes are part of a broader degree) or at a vocational conservatory (where you're explicitly training for the profession), or a discipline-specific BA or BFA programme (involving academic lectures as well as practical classes) – I try to address a broad spectrum of learning environments. The book essentially falls into two halves: the first three chapters provide contextualising perspectives on the art of acting while the latter three chapters provide hands-on strategies for training, rehearsing and performing. We begin our journey with a socio-cultural perspective on acting.

THE CONTEXTUALISING SPRINGBOARD

Chapter 1 offers some insights into why we act and how we explore our acting practice. I focus on four different facets of the actor: magician, storyteller, healer and social-changer. Of course, it would be impossible in one slim volume to cover the entire global vision of acting in its myriad forms and histories. Yet we'll look at some of the fundamental human needs behind why we tell stories for our communities. We'll note how the particular questions that a society has influence the ways in which they share their stories, using actors as the conduits for human discourse. Though our journey will be brief, the notes at the end of the chapter point to some of the terrific resources.

THE PIONEERS OF CONTEMPORARY ACTING

Continuing the contextualising of acting processes in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, I offer an overview of some key, pioneering practitioners from the past 100 years. Coming from across the globe, they've all impacted significantly on acting techniques (predominantly in the West and increasingly in the East), and they feature prominently on drama syllabi. Whole books have been devoted to these people, and their biographies are readily accessible on the Internet. So, with each practitioner, I focus on one of their key texts, drawing out a number of nuggets (which you can apply to your own acting ethos) and a couple of cautions to bear in mind. In an ideal world, we'd all

have the chance to work intensively with each practitioner's training. Since that's rarely possible, the snapshot insights into their ideas are intended to flag up the range of tools available as you develop your unique, **psychophysical** acting. I think you'll find that many of the techniques are applicable to all kinds of roles – from the psychological realism that dominates our screens to **post-dramatic** pieces.

THE CORE NARRATIVE

Drawing on the techniques and principles of these executors – along with elucidating the practices of many others – the meat of *Acting: The Basics*, second edition, follows the practical arc of an actor's creative development, as we get really hands-on with the nuts and bolts of acting.

Chapter 4 investigates certain strategies for evolving your 'instrument'. We'll focus on breath, body, voice, imagination, emotions and spirit, including a number of tools from a team of trainers who have emerged over the past few decades. While many of these techniques have evolved in Europe and the United States, we'll also note how cross-cultural hybrids are developing along the way.

Chapter 5 forms the heart of the work. The chapter charts how you create a role, using Stanislavsky's **inner psychological drives** of thought, feeling and action as the framework. As well as prepping for camera roles, we'll also look at some strategies for rehearsing devised work and fact-based dramas.

The final chapter addresses the point of all your training and rehearsal preparation: Chapter 6 explores the mental multitasking involved in doing your work publicly.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME

There are hundreds of books on acting. Hundreds of teachers, directors, gurus and guides offering 'their' way – even *'the'* way – to act. My particular Anglo-Russian training was steeped in the ideas of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Michael Chekhov and Jerzy Grotowski, and yet I believe a real technique is only as valuable as it is helpful. And so in my own work, I'm a magpie, taking from whomever is useful given a particular character, director, medium or student. A bit of Brecht here, a morsel of Meisner there. Indeed, I constantly interweave

‘realistic’ practices (from, say, Stanislavsky and Adler) with techniques more typically associated with Brechtian aesthetics. As I hope you’ll see throughout this book, vivid human behaviour usually underpins most acting strategies and most performance techniques, whether the final emphasis might be on psychologically believable characters or heightened performance making. We’ll see that Boal and Brecht placed human emotions at the centre of their rehearsal explorations no less vigorously than Strasberg or Chekhov. And that’s because ultimately all paths lead to Rome, Rome being something very simple: ‘dynamic listening’. Dynamic listening is not just about hearing with your ears. It’s about listening to your partner’s body and face, noting the changes in their energy and physical posture. It’s about listening to the audience and the subtle exchanges with them. It’s about listening to yourself – the moment-by-moment changes in your own breathing, the sensations in your own body, the stirring in your own emotional impulses. And those impulses lead to your actions and words. If you can listen to your own words – and how they impact you and your partner ... If you can listen to the words of the other actors (not to mention their moments of silence) ... If you can listen to the audience and the energy they feed you ... If you can listen that closely, then it won’t be hard to know what to *do* in the given circumstances of any particular piece. In fact, by dynamically listening, you’ll pretty much know how to *act*.

But before we look more closely at who says what and how we do it, let’s look at why.

‘WHY DO WE DO IT?’: SOME SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON ACTING

WHY HAVE YOU CHOSEN ACTING?

Is it because it seems like a fun option in your educational experience? That's OK – fun is good in our complicated world. Is it because you want to go further and take up acting as a profession? That's good – acting is a noble art. Is it because you really want to become famous and earn pots of money? That's fine, too – for many young people, that's a powerful motivating force. Yet the acting profession isn't a meritocracy, and it has frustratingly wayward inclinations. So in this chapter, we consider some other perspectives to fuel your aspirations, whether you eventually want to become a professional actor or whether you simply enjoy performing as a part of your human development.

This isn't a history survey chapter. We'll deliberately dart hither and thither through time and space, juxtaposing practitioners and colliding histories to provoke some new thoughts as you consider the art of acting. And we start by asking: 'Why does society *need* actors? What service do actors provide?' There are some surprisingly profound answers, as each civilisation has tried to make sense of our complicated universe.

MAKING SENSE OF THE UNIVERSE

The world in which we live is mysterious and unexpected. Hurricanes and tsunamis, the demise of the bee. Not to mention all our man-made madnesses of Internet hacking and terrorist plots. Across millennia and miles, humankind has struggled to understand the cosmos. And our primary means of doing so have been our imaginations and our bodies.

EMBODYING THE FORCES OF NATURE

Early human beings could only imagine what the controlling forces of the universe might be. And the first way of fathoming those intangible forces was to manifest them in recognisably human form. Take the cave paintings in Trois Frères, south-western France, among the oldest visual artefacts discovered on the planet. Here we see a figure known as 'The Sorcerer', thought to be a man from around 13,000 years BC dressed as a horned animal. Could this be a picture of one of the very first actors? Indeed, anthropologists believe that this Palaeolithic man might have been embodying the animal's spirit in order to magic the next hunt into even greater success. Since the community's survival depended on the animal being killed, this actor was providing a vital social service. And embodiments like this haven't disappeared: in Namibia today, the San People (or bushmen) enact a similar hunt, with one person as the animal and others as the hunters to bring good luck to their expedition.

PERSONIFYING THE FORCES OF NATURE

Another way of making sense of the cosmos was to visualise the forces of nature as physicalised beings in their own rights. So rather than bringing those spirits into our own bodies, we projected our physical forms onto them. The ancient Greeks had Zeus and Diana. The Egyptians had Isis and Osiris. The Norse people had Thor and Freya. And they would give their deities temperaments corresponding to the particular natural phenomena with which they had to contend.

DEVISING RITES AND RITUALS

Our ancient ancestors then made further sense of the world by dialoguing with the deities. To which end, they created structured rituals

to appease and understand them, involving special choreographies, gestures, collective chants and songs. Again, each civilisation had its own way of doing it. For the Meso-Americans, large numbers of the people took part in annual performance days. For the ancient Britons, the seasonal solstices were celebrated, with stone structures or henges being a significant part of the rituals. And these traditions haven't disappeared, either. The Day of the Dead is still an important festival in Mexico, and the summer solstice at Stonehenge attracts many a camper and druid.

You can already begin to see why we act. The basic components of acting lie at the heart of primal existence: impersonation, personification, dramatic dialogue and collective performance. And the human conduits between the forces of the cosmos and the inhabitants of a community were highly valued. Be they priests, chiefs, shamans or performers, their task was to channel, embody and transform. And if they didn't ... the community's survival might flounder. So it's not hard to understand why society *needed* actors.

But let's go deeper ... Let's look at four socio-cultural identities that we adopt as actors, as we serve as 'sense makers' in a complicated world. Those identities are magician, storyteller, healer and social-changer.

ACTOR-AS-MAGICIAN

'You all bow down before an actress', Polina teases her lover Doctor Dorn in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1897) – because, from the moment the famed Arkadina arrived back home, the doctor's attentions shifted. There's often a frisson of excitement when people discover there's an actor in their midst. 'What have I seen you in?' they ask, hoping it's a major movie or a TV series. And their unspoken subtext is, 'You're special: how might your magic rub off on me?'

WHAT IS THE MAGIC OF THE ACTOR?

Essentially, it's twofold: it's what we do and it's how we do it. If a close-up magician makes something that's visible (like a coin or a card) *invisible*, the actor does the opposite: we make the invisible (such as feelings and inner connections) *visible* and *tangible*. And how do we do that? We use our bodies, voices, emotions, imaginations and spirits to vacate our own personalities for a while and

let some other quality of being ‘use’ us. That’s a powerful, altering experience.

Altered states of consciousness

The feeling of being altered is partly why we act: it’s intoxicating. And through performance, we have the opportunity to alter our audience’s consciousness – and maybe make the world a better place. That’s another big reason why we act.

Which takes us right back to the ancient rituals, in which altered states of being were the performers’ contribution to their society’s well-being. Often those rituals involved masks and physical movement. So let’s take a look at two examples of ancient rituals (still enacted today) where music, mask and movement alter the performers’ consciousness for the magical benefit of the community.

The magic of the mask

The Barong Dance of Bali is a masked fight between good and evil, accompanied by intensive drumming. And although this ritual predates the fifth century, you can still see it performed today. (You can even google it right now.) The Barong is the king of good spirits, and he’s a mythical animal, whose shaggy costume and striking, lion-like, mask is worn by two actors. Rangda is the demon queen, and she’s a mythical monster, whose witchlike mask and costume (with eighteen-inch fingernails) are worn by another actor. The ritual performance usually takes place outside so that the whole community can share it, and it begins with two monkeys gently teasing the Barong. Then Rangda appears and begins to wreak havoc. The embattled, magical powers of Rangda and the Barong hold out for a while until they reach a stalemate. Suddenly a number of men appear from the crowd and try to kill Rangda with their long *kris* knives. However, Rangda’s power overwhelms them and she orders them to commit suicide. In a state of deep trance, the men turn their weapons on their own naked chests and yet – try as they might – they can’t pierce their flesh with the razor-sharp blades. The spell isn’t broken until priests sprinkle the men’s bodies with holy water and the long, magical beard of the Barong restores them to consciousness. Once

this victory of the life force has been asserted, the community disperses and their day goes on as usual.

The magic of movement

For our second mystical ritual, we travel to Turkey for the dances of the whirling dervishes. In a spiritual heritage descending from the thirteenth-century Persian poet and Islamic scholar Rumi (1207–73), the whirling dervishes perform the Sama ritual by spinning on their left feet as they circle round their *sheikh*. Sama can be translated as ‘listening’ or ‘hearing’. And the intense quality of dynamic listening enables the dervishes to enter a spiritual state, in which the whirling movement induces a mystical trance. The Sama ritual itself is full of symbolism. The dervishes represent the moon orbiting around the sheikh, who represents the sun. Their white, swirling gowns represent the shrouds of the ego (the death of which they’ll experience during the whirling). Their black cloaks (which they cast off before the whirling begins) symbolise the worldly tomb, and their tall brown hats are the tombstones of their worldly selves. As they dance, they totally surrender to the ecstatic experience, with their right palms facing up to receive divine blessings and their left palms facing down to send those blessings back to the earth. In other words, the dervishes are the conduits for these blessings, which they channel to personkind.

The rituals of the Balinese Barong and the whirling dervishes have become major tourist attractions. Their performances are so fascinating because the kris dancers and the dervishes change their states in front of our eyes, and in so doing they perform physical feats that are almost impossible to fathom. They turn the *invisible* (i.e. a kind of mystical energy) into the *visible* (i.e. skins that don’t bleed or whirling that should render them dizzy). Both rituals seem magical in their physical aspects, and both rituals are enacted for the blessing of the community.

So what’s the link between these trance-based, spiritual traditions and our task as twenty-first-century actors performing on stage and screen? I’d suggest there are three links: training, discipline and hard work – the three of which combine to create ‘technique’. Any magic-maker – from the dancers and dervishes to contemporary illusionists and close-up magicians – put in hours of practice