

INTRO

"It's never too late to be what you might have been." - George Eliot

It's a lifetime ago. I'm in my 20's, living in a dingy studio apartment off Olympic Boulevard in Los Angeles. My dented Datsun B-210 is parked on the street wheezing fumes and leaking oil like an incontinent drunk. I'm lying on the couch staring at the TV with glazed eyes, trying to forget the humiliation of yet another bad audition but it replays over and over in my head - a waking nightmare on an endless loop.

When I say bad audition, I don't mean cute movie bad, where the ingenue blows a line, giggles and gets the starring role. I mean bad as in a sweaty, twitchy, stuttering ball of goo, blurting out something awkwardly off-putting to the casting director right before taking a perfectly good script and transforming it into a pile of pig vomit. My auditions weren't just bad, they were so epically awful it's a wonder I wasn't chased out of Hollywood by an angry mob of studio executives brandishing torches and mocha lattes.

What the hell did I think I was doing, pursuing this acting thing? I was kind of funny but not otherwise supremely gifted. I was okay-looking but no bombshell. I had no money, crappy clothes and a bad perm. I loved Peanut M&M's more than going to the gym.

In other words, it was extremely unlikely that I would ever be able to call myself a working actor. But that's what came to pass.

I've always believed you can find a way out of every hopeless situation - you just have to stick with it and figure it out. I tried acting classes, and even though I studied with excellent teachers I didn't know how to translate what transpired in class to booking jobs in the real world. I realized I couldn't rely on other people to give me the "magic bullet" - I had to figure out a method that worked for me.

I began a lifelong process of observing how I behaved in certain circumstances, studying muscle memory and bringing that to my work. I found ways to get out of my head and into my gut, ways to relax and be a human being in auditions. I discovered a personal way of looking at scripts that made them come alive for me. Most importantly, I studied good actors in movies and on TV.

Sometimes somebody can say something inspiring that completely changes the course of your life. One night I watched Johnny Carson ask Lee Marvin if he ever got nervous at auditions. His response was in effect, "I fought in World War II, what the hell did I have to be nervous about?" That resonated with me - I needed to do the things that scared me the most. I rented a theater and wrote a one-woman show. I performed improv and stand-up comedy. I had the experience of bombing on stage and also the exhilaration of getting big laughs. All of this was character-building and empowering. I didn't die after I tried something new and failed - I got stronger. Slowly, my auditions improved and the acting jobs began to materialize, starting with a small role on *Dallas*. It was just one line but hey - it was

progress!

Soon I found myself doing just about everything possible one can do in the entertainment industry while fully clothed. I booked roles on TV and film, commercials, plays, voice overs, video games and industrials. I did a stunt show at Universal Studios where I learned to shoot guns and crack a whip. I hosted talk shows for a while - I had four nationally televised shows and filmed over a dozen pilots. I was a regular performer in the live show ComedySportz and had a high-profile ad campaign for Olay. Somewhere during that time I met a screenwriter and we got married. We adopted dogs and cats. This was all less than a decade after I was sprawled on that couch in that horrible apartment. By a combination of the grace of God, a little luck and a lot of pigheadedness I had managed to crawl out of the abyss to create a successful life.

In 2010 we left Los Angeles and moved to St. Petersburg, Florida. In the Tampa Bay area there were (and still are) a lot of actors who had never been on a union set, and even more people who had dreams of becoming an actor, but with no performing experience whatsoever.

I remembered very clearly what it was like to be unskilled, inexperienced, and intimidated by the industry. I knew what it was like to audition, to be in a callback in a roomful of producers, to spend a 12-hour day on a set. If I could achieve what at one time seemed impossible, why couldn't I share my knowledge and help someone else with the same dream? So I opened an acting studio.

Ten years later I've watched hundreds of students pass through my studio, the majority starting with no previous training. Time and again I've seen transformations - not only from inexperienced to working actor, but from low self-esteem to brimming with confidence. There's something about working with my Acting Core Exercises that takes each person on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. You not only learn the keys to real, connected acting - you learn to love and appreciate your most valuable asset - You.

That's the delightful discovery you will make with every chapter in this book. As Glinda said in the *Wizard of Oz*, "You've always had the power, my dear." All of the raw material is already there. Your experiences, your triumphs, your failures, your loves, your losses. The life you've lived up to this point is your gift as an actor, your secret weapon. You just need to learn how to channel these gifts you already possess, and dive into the process of using them with an open mind and heart. So you see, I'm not really teaching you anything. I'm just reminding you of what you already know.

I still remember lying on that couch a lifetime ago, hopeless and discouraged. Now I'm a working actor. Recently as of this writing, I've filmed a supporting lead on the Hallmark movie *True Love Blooms*, a recurring role on *The Resident*, a guest star opposite Phylicia Rashad on *David Makes Man*, a supporting role on the feature *Lady of the Manor* and I've recently filmed a supporting role as Kelsey Grammer's fiancée in the indie feature *High Expectations*. As I say to my students - if I can do it, you can do it too.

So let's do it.

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THE ACTING CORE EXERCISES

OVERVIEW

A few people have mentioned that I need to get to the meat of the book now and you don't need any more prelude. But I'm ignoring that because I want you to know the backstory of how and why I created these exercises and why I think they're the best and quickest way for any new actor to fully understand the organic nature of TV and film acting.

Unlike New York or Los Angeles, St. Petersburg, Florida is not a town known as an actor's mecca - we have lots of craft breweries but no Broadway or a booming film industry. In my first class of ten students, there was a mix of previous experience. Half had never seen a script before or had any previous acting experience. Terms like "objective," "subtext," "substitution" were an alien language to them and quite often I felt like Annie Sullivan describing water to Helen Keller. Not that these students were deaf and dumb so if you were in that class, don't be offended - I'm just trying to make a point. As a matter of fact, I'm describing me in my earlier acting classes. I didn't get it.

My main problem was I could relate to scripts intellectually but I was viscerally disconnected. I was stiff, self-conscious. I didn't have the slightest idea how to connect to material organically. It was like I had forgotten how to be a human being. And I saw these new students undergoing the same struggles.

When I started teaching, I began to identify types of moments and themes that occurred in certain scenes requiring a *specific kind of* connection or spontaneous behavior from the actor. For example, memory moments or moments of recall, moments of rage and desperate need, moments of command and persuasion, or just ordinary everyday moments to name a few. If an actor was struggling with the truth of the moment, which was usually the case, I would stop the scene and create an exercise on the spot that would get the actor out of their head and viscerally and spontaneously connected. And that's how the Acting Core Exercises were born.

These exercises address these moments in such a way that not only get actors connected to the material they're performing, but also bring their own personality and uniqueness to a given script. They elicit real human behavior which is riveting to watch.

When you perform these exercises, you will also notice they start to build an emotional and physical muscle memory. After a while, when given a script that calls for a specific type of moment, you won't necessarily need to do the exercise beforehand. You will just remember the muscle memory the exercise created and be instantly connected.

This approach is solidly in the Stanislavski/Method camp of acting techniques, in that it uses you - your life, emotions, experiences, memories, traumas, joys. But the Acting Core Exercises also incorporate other techniques to get you connected to a script, like the mode of a character, body language, actions and imagination. My

actors also learn improvisation which is cropping up more and more not only in auditions but on sets, where the director will encourage the actors to throw the script away and let it flow.

I realize some of the concepts and themes of this book have been around for a long time, much longer than I've been teaching. What I believe sets my approach apart is I have made them into tangible exercises that an actor can practice, like a dancer does barre exercises or a musician does scales. This approach is also a way of cutting to the chase - rather than sitting around talking about what you should be feeling or experiencing in any given moment, you experience it on the spot.

This has proved to be such an efficient way of training I've made it a policy that every student, regardless of experience, starts their first several weeks in my studio doing these exercises only. As a result, when the actors start doing scenes, the process of scene work is accelerated because these exercises teach you to identify certain types of elements and moments of a scene and compel you to get to the truth of a moment quickly. In my studio they've become our shorthand of communicating. Rather than a long explanation of how to fix a scene, sometimes all we have to say is, "Find your *I Believe*" and the actor is now on track to do excellent work.

There is a practical application in the real world as well. When you audition for film and TV, you may have less than 24 hours to master a multi-page role. We actors don't have the luxury to wallow in process - we need to get immediately connected to bring the character

to life. The more disciplined you are to working this way, the better your chances are of giving a memorable audition and booking the role.

I encourage the new actor to try these exercises with a group of other dedicated actors. You can even do several of the exercises on your own. Remember to enjoy the process! The art of acting is a lifetime endeavor. Even our greatest actors feel like they've never quite mastered this craft. So for those of you who have been at this for a while - maybe some of these exercises will inspire you to approach a script or an audition in a fresh way.

By the way, some acting classes, or methods, demand that you follow their protocol exactly as taught. Some have a checklist that you must adhere to, or specific steps that you must follow, and if you do not you will fail to deliver your best work as an actor.

My Acting Core Exercises are not designed with that kind of rigidity in mind. This isn't a cult - it's acting - and you, as the artist, have the freedom to use this approach as best serves you. You may find some exercises alone may be all you need to connect to a scene you're working on. Or some other exercises help open a door that takes you down a path of discovery and imagination that is exciting for a character you're playing. Some may not resonate with you at all. At the end of the day - the goal is to make this work for you, so that you can be a working actor. On a set, nobody cares about your "method." They want a pro who shows up on time, is pleasant to work with and can deliver a believable performance.

Okay, now let's get going.

SOME HELPFUL TERMS

I lied. We're starting with the next chapter, I promise. I wanted to give you a mini-glossary of terms that will be helpful when you read this book. You'll hear these terms over and over again not only in this book but from other actors, casting directors, movie and TV directors, for the remainder of your acting career until you die. While reading, you would probably glean what these terms mean but I will attempt to define them so we're on the same page going forward.

CONNECTED - When an actor understands on a visceral level how the character behaves, thinks, feels and speaks - that is feeling "Connected." Sometimes this connection is so seamless that the lines are blurred between actor and character and we can't tell the two apart. This is the goal for every performance and is a transcendent experience for the actor. It rarely happens automatically and sometimes not at all. There are degrees of connection - more with some scripts and characters than others - which is to be expected. But the exercises in this book endeavor to get you to that connected place in any script you attempt. Note: Do you always have to be viscerally connected to create a successful performance? Not at all. See TECHNIQUE.

GROUNDING - Can be interchangeable with Connected, in that you may hear the phrase "A grounded performance." It can also mean what you use to achieve a connected performance, i.e. "Using my *I Believe* (Chapter Four) grounded my audition for the social worker." Grounded can also mean bringing reality and grit to a script, so that it feels

like we're watching a human being live their life, rather than a character in a story. This style of acting is the lodestar of our best working actors today.

CHARACTER - is the most commonly used word to mean who you are in a script. "Role" and "Part" are also used. In class I tend to use the word "Human" to remind my students that they're not playing a cartoon or caricature, rather a flesh and blood human being. For the sake of common understanding I do use the word character in this book, but please always think "Human." Unless you're a playing a wizard.

SCRIPT - The sum of characters, action, setting and dialogue that tells a story. The actor's job in a nutshell is to portray one or more characters to fulfill the screenwriter's or playwright's vision. Though most of this book is about connecting truthfully to moments in the script, it's important that the actor have a macro understanding of the overall story being told. That is Job One.

MUSCLE MEMORY - is a phrase I use a lot and is an invaluable tool for actors. Muscle memory is a term that athletes use when they practice certain moves, like a golfer's swing, where by repetition the body automatically remembers how to recreate a movement. Actors are emotional athletes so our muscle memory involves the recreation of behavior or an emotion that we've discovered in the Acting Core Exercises, in rehearsal, or life in general. I believe that emotions from past experiences reside in our body and with practice an actor can learn how to access those emotions with their muscle memory skill.

MODE - There is a "Mode of Being" chapter in the book but I do mention mode in other contexts. You become a better actor by observing the modes of your behavior. You are in a studious mode now reading this book. You are in a flirty mode on a date and desperation mode running late to catch a flight. Start paying attention to all of these modes to ground yourself and connect to a script. See how these terms start to recycle?

TECHNIQUE - The sum of the actor's skills (i.e. voice, diction, movement, body language, script analysis, muscle memory, emotional recall, etc.) An actor's technique, learned through practice and experience, can carry an actor in a performance, even if they are not experiencing emotional or visceral connection. Working on the exercises in this book will help you develop your technique.

CHARACTER OBJECTIVE - What the human being you are playing desperately wants in a script. Quite often it's simply to be loved. Other common objectives are gaining power, survival, saving one's family or loved ones. Or in Harold and Kumar's case, getting a White Castle burger.

STAKES - The urgency and importance of a given situation. High Stakes = Saving the earth from alien invasion. Not So High Stakes = Saving money on your car insurance.

F-BOMBS - Not a technical acting term but they do occasionally pop up in these pages. This is not gratuitous and without consideration.

In the writing of this book I wanted to give you the feeling of what actually transpires in class, and sometimes that's a very raw, unsanitized place from which great acting emerges. The reality is, more of our TV and film scripts for all ages reflect this same rawness. This is acting, not a tea party. However if you were expecting a tea party, I do have one of my mother's favorite finger sandwich recipes in the Appendix. I hope you enjoy it.

CHAPTER ONE
THE PERSONAL SCENE

"One of the things I like about acting is that, in a funny way, I come back to myself." - Bill Murray

"A role has to feel personal, because you do your best when you feel the role in your bones." - Sophia Loren

The script. Even if you're a new actor you know what a script is. Whether from a movie, play or TV show it tells a story by the characters' dialogue and actions. Here's an excerpt of a script, from the movie *Sideways*:

INT. BREAKFAST CAFE - DAY

Jack sucks his teeth for a moment searching for the right words. Then the dam bursts.

JACK

I am going to get my nut on this trip Miles. And you're not going to fuck it up for me with all your depression and anxiety and neg-head downer shit.

MILES

Oooh, now the cards are on the table.

JACK

Yes they are. And I'm serious. Do not fuck with me. I am going to get