

John Abbott



THE ACTING BOOK

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Foreword

THIS BOOK IS FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE INTERESTED IN HOW actors prepare for performances.

For teachers it is a recipe book of techniques and processes.

For directors it could also be an insight into the way that actors think.

And for actors it is an introduction to some new techniques and a reminder of techniques they may once have learned but have long since forgotten.



This book is about the way we teach acting at ArtsEd, the drama school where I've worked for the past twelve years. It started life as a handbook for our students. A checklist of taught techniques. But people outside the school discovered it, found it useful and asked if they could have a copy. At that point it was simply a summary of the training, because the exercises were not described in detail. There was no need to do so because the students had been taught them in class. Then my publisher, Nick Hern, who described the handbook as 'a fast-forward acting course', asked me to retain the outline structure but fill in the detail. The result is this book.

Its main purpose is to describe how to support and strengthen an actor's artistic intentions and build their confidence. It

describes various ways to analyse a text, create a character and develop character relationships. It includes a range of rehearsal techniques and improvisations, and it introduces an assortment of exercises to stimulate the actor's imagination.

**But basically it is an outline of some of the things
that actors can do to create memorable
performances that will captivate their audiences.**

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Rehearsing
a Scene

BOTTOM. We will meet, and there we may rehearse
most obscenely and courageously.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1.2)

WHEN I STARTED ACTING, EACH THEATRE HAD A PERMANENT company of actors, engaged for the whole season, who would do a new play every two weeks – ‘fortnightly rep’ it was called – and as a result, rehearsals were quite frantic because you were rehearsing a new play during the day and performing the current play in the evenings. After opening a play on Monday evening, the company would gather on Tuesday morning to read through the next new play together and on Tuesday afternoon the director would start working through it, scene by scene, telling the actors what to do, line by line. Amazingly enough this was called ‘blocking’. Think about it. A block is something that gets in the way. ‘Move downstage-left when you say that line,’ the director would say. Woe betide anyone who suggested that a particular move wasn’t appropriate. Everything had been worked out beforehand to save time, and time was of the essence. All the actors had to do was to write these moves down and learn them along with their lines over the next few days. During this first stage of rehearsals, actors would read from their scripts as they tried the moves out. Old-school professionals would be heard to say, ‘I can’t learn my lines until I know my moves.’

Basically the rehearsal period was spent trying to remember the lines and the moves, and if you could get through the first night without making a mistake it was considered a great success.

Over the years, things have changed considerably!

The rehearsal process is now about research, analysis, exploration and creative artistry. The funny thing is, there is still a hangover from the old days and that is the desire that actors have to organise the shape of the play as soon as possible, and keep practising it until it runs smoothly. If there is a creative, inspirational moment during one of the rehearsals, everyone tries to hang on to it so they can do it exactly the same way next time they rehearse the scene. The trouble is, it's never quite as interesting in subsequent rehearsals, because it's not the creative moment itself. It's just a copy. Acting is exciting to watch because the audience is seeing a work of art being created before their very eyes, and if actors try to copy what they did yesterday, then the audience is only getting a reproduction of a work of art, not the original.

When actors make inspirational discoveries during the rehearsal of a scene, they shouldn't try to recreate what they did, they should try to recreate *how they felt at the moment of inspiration*. The loss of an ingenious bit of business or an unusual way of saying a line will be more than compensated for by the creative life that sparks with electricity when actors are being 'in the moment' during a performance.

**Rehearsals should not be an attempt to
'get things right' and make scenes run smoothly.
And performances should not be about trying to
repeat things exactly the same way each night.
All rehearsals and performances should be voyages
of creative discovery.**

Advice to Directors

Actors learn the most by being allowed to act. It's something that a lot of directors, particularly those who have never been actors, don't understand. During the early stages of rehearsal, actors are struggling with quite a few unresolved investigations, so there is a lot on their minds. Talk about multitasking! They are trying to get to grips with the creation of a character; they are getting used to the other actors; they are becoming accustomed to the overall shape of the play; they are trying to remember their lines; they are taking on board suggestions that the director might have made. Maybe they've got an unfamiliar accent to come to terms with, or a difficult fight sequence. Maybe they are trying to get their fingers around a few basic chords on a guitar or the finger-stops of a recorder. There's a lot on their minds. Directors should let them fathom it out. The biggest danger is for the director to try to get the actors to the end of the journey before they've had a chance to pack their bags. Give them time and they will work it out.

Learning the Lines

Actors can't rehearse properly until all the lines have been thoroughly learned, because they can't make the right connection with each other when they are reading from a script. So line-learning should be accomplished as soon as possible. Some actors seem to find it easier than others, but there is no trick to line-learning – it's basically just a hard slog. Having a friend or another actor reading out the other lines can make it easier. And there is an app you can get for an iPhone called Line-Learner that could be helpful. If I can give any advice, I would say that actors should always learn their lines as a response to something. That makes them easy to remember.

However quickly actors learn their lines, it is essential that they learn them accurately. Sometimes an actor will end up using their own words instead of those in the script, but this is simply diluting the personality of the character as created by the writer. There is no excuse. The lines should be accurate. It's important. As I said earlier on, writers think long and hard about which words to use. Give them the respect they deserve.

Explorative Exercises

The following exercises are useful soon after the lines have been learned. They will give the actors a chance to get used to working with each other without the pressure of trying to perform a scene.



Back to Back

The actors sit on the floor back to back with their eyes closed. They speak the words of the scene slowly, listening very carefully to each other.

This is to ensure, right from the start, that each actor is really listening to every word the other actor says. It's so easy, with all the pressure of trying to remember their own lines, for an actor to miss the subtlety and detail of what the other actor is saying. This exercise really focuses the mind so the actors listen to each other without any distractions.



Hands on the Floor

The actors sit on the floor facing each other. They each place one hand, palm down, on the floor with their fingertips touching. As they play the scene they use their hands to express their emotions: touching, caressing, drawing away, etc.

With no other distraction except the movement of their hands, the actors are able to explore the shifting emotions of their characters during a scene. They have to be responsive to each other's hand movements, and that helps them discover how they will each respond to the other actor's emotional journey.



Balancing the Stage

The actors stand facing each other as if the acting area were a large disc, balanced on a point at its centre. As the actors speak the words of the scene, they are allowed to move anywhere they like: towards each other, to the left or to the right, and away from each other. But if one actor moves forward, the other actor has to move forward as well in order to 'balance' the stage; if one moves away, the other has to move away; and if one moves to the left, the other also has to move to the left, etc.

This is to explore the shifting balance of status between the two characters. If one actor moves forward to make the scene more intimate, the other has to join in the intimacy. If the characters are quarrelling and one wants to reject the other, then they will both move apart. Each actor has to be responsive to the other actor, so neither is working in isolation. This is similar to the Hands on the Floor exercise but it takes it further. By focusing on the movements of each other, the actors are continually negotiating their positions and in that way they are able to tune in to each other. Each character has to be responsive to the other character's objectives, without losing sight of their own objectives. It's the essence of how to play a scene.



Reading In

The actors playing the scene each have a helper standing behind them with a copy of the script. The helpers read each line separately, followed by a pause as the actor thinks about how to play it. The actor then speaks the line. The helper then reads the next line, and the actor thinks of a new and interesting way to say this second line. They can say it any way they like. It shouldn't be influenced by the mood of the previous line. The helpers and the actors continue from line to line.

This exercise gives the actors time to think about what they are going to say and helps them explore different ways of communicating without the pressure of making a scene flow. They are able to take the time to give each line its own weight and importance.

In this context, a 'line' is a phrase that has a completeness of meaning. It is not necessarily a whole sentence. 'Hello, how are you? Will you be free for a meal this evening or are you doing something else?' has four phrases: 'Hello', 'how are you?', 'Will you be free for a meal tonight?', and 'or are you doing something else?' Each of these phrases should be explored in isolation.



Pause for Thought

The actors play each complete phrase separately, but before they speak it out loud, they should take a pause in order to have time to think about how they would like to express the phrase. The manner in which they choose to speak the phrase does not have to bear any relationship to the manner in which they expressed the previous phrase.

This is an extremely laborious process and it will take a long time to work through a scene, but it stops the actors from generalising the dialogue. It's like actioning the text on the hoof, but unlike that technique, where the actions are analysed and decided in isolation, the actors have to make their decisions on the spot in response to the way the other actors say their lines.



Vocalising the Subtext

The actors play the scene, but after each line they improvise the subtext out loud.

Improvising the subtext out loud will ensure that the actors are exploring their character's inner thoughts, desires and emotions. These will be changing line by line as their character engages in a conversation with another character:



Speaking the Subtext

The actors play the scene, but instead of speaking the lines in the script they just improvise the subtext.

When two actors use this exercise it enables each of them to recognise the subliminal thoughts that the other character is having. In real life, we can often sense someone else's underlying

emotions and motivations when they speak to us, and obviously we respond to these subliminal messages.



Physicalising the Subtext

The actors play the scene, but, as they say the lines, they improvise physical gestures to express the subtext.

This exercise allows the text to be played at the proper speed while allowing the actors to demonstrate the subtext to each other, while continuing to explore it for themselves.



Acting the Subtext

The actors play the scene naturalistically, but allow the subtext to rise to the surface as they speak.

This is like laying the subtext on with a trowel. For instance, in Act Four of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, Yelena is about to leave and is saying goodbye to Astrov, with whom she has fallen in love. Just before she goes, she takes his pencil from the table and puts it in her pocket saying, 'I'm taking this pencil as a keepsake.' Now, it's entirely reasonable for the actress playing Yelena to decide that the subtext of that line is 'I love you. I hate to leave you. And I'm taking this pencil as a lover's token which I will treasure for the rest of my life.' So when she is asked to do this exercise, she may speak the line with all the passion of a lover, kissing the pencil and holding it to her breast, as she sighs and looks lovingly into Astrov's eyes. This is allowing the subtext to rise to the surface and it is entirely non-realistic, but it helps the actors to understand the depth of thought or emotion that their character is trying to hide.

Actors often think that subtext should be used like this – or perhaps a diluted version of my example – but by definition subtext is the unexpressed thoughts and emotions beneath the surface of the dialogue, and it should be kept that way.

The previous four exercises allow the actor to think about the subtext; explore the subtext; demonstrate the subtext; and play the subtext, but they are all leading to this final exercise.