

## V. ACTING

Performers, by their presence, set theater apart from films, television, and the visual arts; they serve as the direct, immediate contact which members of the audience have with theater. More than that, performers embody the heart and soul of theater. The words of a script, the characters created by a dramatist, and the scenery and costumes come to life only when an actor or actress steps onto a stage.

Often, acting is seen as glamorous: successful performers are interviewed on television or written up in newspapers or magazines; books are written about them. The publicity, however, is deceptive: it disguises the fact that acting for the stage is a difficult, disciplined profession. In addition to talent and ability, it requires years of arduous training.

### V.1 ~ OFF AND ONSTAGE

#### OFFSTAGE AND IN THE PAST

**“Acting” In Everyday Life.** It may be surprising to realize how much “acting” is a part of our lives, beginning almost the day we are born. Two forms of acting in daily life are *imitation* and *role playing*.

**Imitation.** Imitation occurs when one person mimics or copies someone else’s vocal patterns, gestures, facial expressions, posture, and the like. Children are among the best imitators in the world, and we are frequently amused at a child who imitates a parent or some other grown-up.

As we grow older, imitation continues to be a part of our experience: in every class in school, there is usually one person—a clever mimic—who imitates the teacher. Another type of imitation is an attempt to copy the lifestyle of a hero—a singer, a film actor, or some other well-known personality.

**Role playing.** Much has been written about role playing in recent years, and a currently popular term is *role model*, referring to people whose lives, or “roles,” serve as guides for others. These roles may be *social*, like a father, mother, teacher, police officer, doctor, and so on. Sometimes these roles are so entrenched in culture, that it is difficult to escape them (such as that all women must be mothers and housewives, not politicians).

Roles may also be *personal*—those we develop with our family and friends. We can take on the role of martyr, conspirator, gossip, bully...the list goes on.

There are, however, significant differences between acting in life and acting on stage. For example, stage actors and actresses are always being observed by an audience. Acting onstage also requires a performer to play a role that he or she does not normally play in life. This makes it more difficult, since an actor must take on a role for which they might not in fact have any experience. Lastly, an important distinction between acting onstage and in real life is that a theatrical performance is always *conscious*. Performers and audience are aware that the presentation has been planned ahead of time. The task of the performer in attempting to make the characters onstage *appear* to be real requires not only talent but training and discipline as well.

#### STAGE ACTING

For most people, the primary exposure to acting is on film and television; they see many more performances in movie theaters and on television screens than they see onstage. As a result, both audiences and aspiring performers make some unconscious, mistaken assumptions about acting in the theater.

For example, it is often assumed that acting is essentially a simulation of everyday life, which a camera will record. Because of this, beginning acting student must learn an essential difference between television and stage acting: on television, the camera comes to the actress or actor; onstage, the performer must reach out to the audience. A camera may be only a few feet away from the performers, but in the theater the closest a performer is likely to be to any audience member is 10 feet; in many cases the distance will be 40 feet or more. This requires a different way of looking at performing and at the preparation required for performing.

## V.2 ~ THE ACTING EXPERIENCE

To understand what is involved in the career of a stage actress or actor, let us look at a typical sequence that begins before a performer is cast in a role and continues to his or her opening-night performance before an audience. We'll imagine that our performer is an actress named Jennifer.

The first step for Jennifer is hearing about an upcoming production. This might be by a theater department at school, a community theater, or a professional regional theater. In each case, the procedure will be similar. Jennifer must **audition**. This means that she must appear before the director and others (perhaps the producer, and in the case of a new play, the playwright) to be interviewed and probably to present one or more scenes she has prepared. These may be scenes from the play being presented, or scenes she has prepared from other plays to demonstrate her abilities. After a first audition, Jennifer may be **called back** to read again, by herself or with other performers who are being considered for other parts.

Calling all ACTORS and would-be actors of any and all experience levels! OVERS!  
Performers of language PERFORMERS OF ALL KINDS and of places of the physical form!

# THEATER AUDITIONS

For the Bi-College Theater Program's production:

**THE PLAY OF HOURS**  
a site-specific performance  
inspired by the  
writing of FRANCES MARFA  
BELKE, SAMUEL BECKETT  
and OTHERS

Come anytime to either  
audition!

**@ HAVERFORD:**  
Thursday, January 24th  
6-9pm  
Stokes 102

**@ BRYN MAWR:**  
Friday, January 25th  
2-5pm  
Goodhart Common Room

People who are casual about doing theater or making art. Auditions are open to everyone, regardless of previous experience, language of script, or what year. Come with a spirit of adventure and a readiness to play; there's nothing to prepare. NO EXPERIENCE IS NECESSARY, but come. Anytime during the period hours, in other locations. If you know your class schedule, bring it. If you're interested to be an "actor" then we especially want to meet YOU. There are MANY OPPORTUNITIES and PARTS OF ALL SIZES.

We're looking for folks interested in all kinds of theatrical theater, stage management, set, costume, production manager, any theatrical skills/management roles, and they'll get back to you.

Email the director, Mark Lunt (mlunt@brynmawr.edu)

YOU CAN DO THE PRODUCTION FOR ACADEMIC CREDIT, FOR P.E. CREDIT, OR JUST FOR FUN!

Auditions, like almost every aspect of performing, can be nerve-racking. Each of us wants to be approved of by others and each of us fears rejection, even in the most casual relationships. In an audition—as in performance before an audience—the reaction is public and pronounced. A performer who does not get a part has been openly turned down, just as a performer attacked by a critic in print has been publicly judged. Those who wish to enter theater as a career must learn to deal with the disappointment of being turned down for a role or being criticized publicly.

Let us assume, though, that this time Jennifer is one of the fortunate ones: she is selected for the production. The next step will be several weeks of intensive rehearsal. If Jennifer has had previous experience in performing, she will know that there is a difference between the work of an actress at an audition and in rehearsal for a production. In

an audition, she must work for **results**: that is, in a short period of time she must project her personality and the skills that she hopes will get her the part. In the rehearsal period, however, she will be **exploring** a character, searching for specifics and an overall curve to her performance; she will be interacting with other performers. The emphasis will be on process, rather than immediate results.

During this period, she must memorize her part in the script, which could be difficult. Her role may be long, or her lines may be poetry, or she may have to speak in dialect—a British or southern accent, for example. During the rehearsal period, Jennifer must work closely with the director, learning where, when, and how to move onstage. Her movements might come from a combination of ideas from the director and her own ideas—such as an impulse she may have to sit, stand, or cross the stage at a certain moment.

Also, Jennifer must work closely with the other performers; learning to adjust to their rhythms, reacting to the dynamics of their characterizations, and the like. Inevitably there will be difficult moments: she and another performer might not be clicking; she might not be able to summon up an emotion that is called for. She might have to bend every effort to find and portray the required emotion. After working first on individual scenes and sections of the script, she will discover when the play is put together that she must make further adjustments. She may be too emotional in an early segment, leaving herself no room to reach

a higher pitch later on; or perhaps the pace is too slow and the play drags, so that she and the other performers must find ways to accelerate the action without losing sincerity and conviction.

Just before the public performances, at the time of the first technical rehearsals, new ingredients are added. The performers are in costume for the first time; the lights are changing; scenery is shifted; and the actresses and actors are temporarily in a foreign land. Away from the safe, protected rehearsal hall with which they have become comfortable, they must now contend with stagehands, lighting technicians, real furniture, doors that open differently—in short, a host of new conditions.



After overcoming the initial shock of these new elements, the production will settle into the level of a complete, full presentation, but soon another component is added: the audience. For the first time, usually at a preview or dress rehearsal, strange people are sitting out front watching and listening. Does a scene that must be emotionally gripping actually hold the audience's attention? Does a comic scene evoke laughter? For Jennifer and her fellow performers, such uncertainties can be terrifying.

One objective of a performance is to look natural and easy—to suggest to the audience that playing the role is effortless, just as a juggler attempts to look as casual and carefree as possible. One reason why it is important for acting to look effortless is to relax the audience members and let them believe in the character rather than concentrate on the performer's lengthy arduous preparation.

During the first few performances before an audience, adjustments are made in the acting and in other elements such as lighting and sound. Rough spots are made smoother; the pace is speeded up or slowed down; awkward production is ready to be seen and judged by audiences and critics. This is another potentially traumatic moment for Jennifer and her fellow performers. Will they forget their lines? Will a lighting miscue leave them in the dark?



A thousand and one fears come to the surface, but once Jennifer is onstage, she is carried along with the moment; all her preparation has given her enough knowledge, experience, and command of the stage to instill security and confidence. When she hears laughter in the audience, or when a hush falls, she knows that she and her colleagues have succeeded, and their many hours of hard work, uncertainty, and fear of failure are washed away in a sense of accomplishment and in the satisfaction of

bringing to reality their dream of performing onstage.

Before reaching the point of being prepared to undertake a role, however, a performer like Jennifer must undergo extensive training. The following sections discuss techniques that must be acquired, skills that must be honed, and studies that must be undertaken in preparing to become a performer.

## V.3 ~ PERFORMERS' TRAINING TODAY

Before the realistic drama of the late 1800s, no one had devised a method for achieving the kind of believability modern plays required. Through their own talent and genius, individual actresses and actors had achieved it, but no one had developed a system whereby it could be taught others passed on to future generations. The person who did eventually do this was the Russian actor and director Constantin Stanislavski, and much of his methodology is still widely popular today.

Stanislavski said, to be truly great, “the actor must first of all believe in everything that takes place onstage, and most of all, he must believe what he himself is doing. And one can only believe in the truth.” To give substance to his ideas, Stanislavski studied how people acted in everyday life and how they communicated feelings and emotions; and then he found ways to accomplish the same things onstage. These observations resulted in a series of exercises and techniques for the actor, which had the following broad goals:

1. To make the outward behavior of the performer—gestures, voice, and rhythm of movements—natural and convincing.
2. To have the actor or actress convey the goals and objectives—the inner needs—of a character. Even if all the visible characterization is mastered, a performance will appear superficial and mechanical without a deep sense of conviction and belief.
3. To make the life of the character onstage not only dynamic but continuous. Some performers tend to emphasize only the high points of a part; in between, the life of the character stops. In real life, however, people do not stop living.
4. To develop a strong sense of *ensemble*: playing with other performers as a single group in a scene.

One aspect of contemporary training is developing skills in areas that Stanislavski spoke of to reach the goals above: relaxation, concentration, inner truth, attention to specifics and details, goals and objectives, and more. In order to meet other requirements, though, modern actors also train in the following ways:

**Body and voice training.** A primary requirement for performers is to make certain that the lines they speak are heard clearly by the audience. To be heard, a performer must *project*, that is, throw their voice into the audience so that it reaches the farthest points in the theater. The task is made more difficult by trying to also maintain believability. For example, they must learn to project and be heard even while delivering the whispered words of a love scene.

