

Uta Hagen

Respect for Acting

with Haskel Frankel



"I have attempted to break down all the areas in which you can work and search for realities in yourself which serve the character and the play. . . . Put your instincts and sense of truth, your understanding of human realities to use while probing and grappling with the content and the roots of the material. Be specific and real in your actions, and they will communicate your artistic statement. Bring your universal understanding of the present to the present . . . as a real artist."

—Uta Hagen

At the invitation of Herbert Berghof, Uta Hagen joined the faculty of the HB Studio in 1947. Since then, teaching has always been a challenge for her, as well as for the many prominent actors whom she has helped to develop. For many years, she has been asked to write a book. Now, here it is: an account of her own struggle with the techniques of acting and based on her teachings.

The first part, "The Actor," deals with techniques that set an actor in motion physically, verbally, and emotionally. It deals with the actor's concept of himself and with the art of acting, as well as with the ethics that have made the theater what it is today and what it could be tomorrow. Part Two, "The Object Exercises," offers specific and detailed work for the actor, covering a broad range of his problems. Part Three, "The Play and the Role," concerns itself with the definition of the play and identification with the character the actor will undertake. It also

(Continued on back flap)

RESPECT
FOR
ACTING

RESPECT
FOR
ACTING

UTA
HAGEN

with Haskel Frankel



Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Copyright © 1973 by Uta Hagen. All rights reserved.

Published by Wiley Publishing, Inc., New York, NY

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise, except as permitted under Sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4744. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Legal Department, Wiley Publishing, Inc., 10475 Crosspoint Blvd., Indianapolis, IN 46256, (317) 572-3447, fax (317) 572-4447, E-mail: permcoordinator@wiley.com.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley Publishing logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Wiley Publishing, Inc., in the United States and other countries, and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. Wiley Publishing, Inc., is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or to obtain technical support please contact our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-762-2974, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3993 or fax 317-572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data: 73-2328

ISBN: 0-02-547390-5

Manufactured in the United States of America.

45 44

I want to thank Dr. Jacques Palaci who helped me with his scientist's knowledge in many areas in which I need further enlightenment and understanding about human motivation, behavior and psychological problems.

TO HERBERT
*who revealed and clarified
and has always set me
a soaring example*

CONTENTS

PART ONE: THE ACTOR

INTRODUCTION 3

1 / CONCEPT 11

2 / IDENTITY 22

3 / SUBSTITUTION 34

4 / EMOTIONAL MEMORY 46

5 / SENSE MEMORY 52

6 / THE FIVE SENSES 60

7 / THINKING 65

8 / WALKING AND TALKING 68

9 / IMPROVISATION 72

10 / REALITY 74

PART TWO: THE OBJECT EXERCISES

INTRODUCTION	81
11 / THE BASIC OBJECT EXERCISE	91
12 / THREE ENTRANCES	95
13 / IMMEDIACY	102
14 / THE FOURTH WALL	106
15 / ENDOWMENT	112
16 / TALKING TO YOURSELF	119
17 / OUTDOORS	124
18 / CONDITIONING FORCES	129
19 / HISTORY	134
20 / CHARACTER ACTION	139

PART THREE: THE PLAY AND THE ROLE

INTRODUCTION	145
21 / FIRST CONTACT WITH THE PLAY	147
22 / THE CHARACTER	152
23 / CIRCUMSTANCES	158
24 / RELATIONSHIP	165
25 / THE OBJECTIVE	174
26 / THE OBSTACLE	180
27 / THE ACTION	184
28 / THE REHEARSAL	191
29 / PRACTICAL PROBLEMS	200
30 / COMMUNICATION	212
31 / STYLE	216
EPILOGUE	221
INDEX	223

PART
ONE
THE ACTOR

INTRODUCTION

We all have passionate beliefs and opinions about the art of acting. My own are new only insofar as they have crystallized for me. I have spent most of my life in the theater and know that the learning process in art is never over. The possibilities for growth are limitless.

I used to accept opinions such as: "You're just born to be an actor"; "Actors don't really know what they're doing on stage"; "Acting is just instinct—it can't be taught." During the short period when I, too, believed such statements, like anyone else who thinks that way, I had no respect for acting.

Many people, including some working actors, who express such beliefs may admire the fact that an actor has a trained voice and body, but they believe that any further training can come only from actually performing before an audience. I find this akin to the sink-or-swim method of introducing a child to water. Children do drown and not all actors develop by their mere physical presence on a stage. A talented young pianist, skillful at improvisation or playing by ear, might be a temporary sensation in a night club or on television, but he knows better than to attempt a Beethoven piano concerto.

THE ACTOR

The pianist's fingers just won't make it. A "pop" singer with an untrained voice may have a similar success, but not with a Bach cantata. The singer would rip his vocal chords. An untrained dancer has no hope of performing in Giselle. The dancer would tear tendons. In their attempt they will also ruin the concerto, the cantata, and Giselle for themselves because, if they eventually are ready, they will only remember their early mistakes. But a young actor will unthinkingly plunge into Hamlet if he has the chance. He must learn that, until he's ready, he is doing the same destructive thing to himself and the role.

More than in the other performing arts the lack of respect for acting seems to spring from the fact that every layman considers himself a valid critic. While no lay audience discusses the bowing arm or stroke of the violinist or the palette or brush technique of the painter, or the tension which may create a poor entre-chat, they will all be willing to give formulas to the actor. The aunts and agents of the actor drop in backstage and offer advice: "I think you didn't cry enough." "I think your 'Camille' should use more rouge." "Don't you think you should gasp a little more?" And the actor listens to them, compounding the felonious notion that no craft or skill or art is needed in acting.

A few geniuses have made their way in this sink-or-swim world, but they were geniuses. They intuitively found a way of work which they themselves were possibly at a loss to define. But even though we can't all be so endowed, we can develop a higher level of performing than the one which has resulted from the hit-or-miss customs of the past.

Laurette Taylor became a kind of ideal for me when I saw her play Mrs. Midget in Outward Bound. Her work seemed to defy analysis. I went to see her again and again as Mrs. Midget and later as Amanda in The Glass Menagerie. Each time, I went to study and to learn, and each time I felt I had

Introduction

learned nothing because she simply caught me up in her spontaneity to the point of eliminating my own objectivity. Years later, I was excited to read the biography Laurette by her daughter Marguerite Courtney, and to learn that already at the turn of the century, her mother had found a way of breaking down her roles in a way which closely paralleled the principles in which I had come to believe. Laurette Taylor began her work by constructing the background of the character she was going to play. She worked for identification with this background until she believed herself to be the character, in the given circumstances, with the given relationships. Her work didn't stop until, in her own words, she was "wearing the pants" of the character! She spent rehearsals in exploring place, watching the other actors like a hawk, allowing relationships to grow, considering all possibilities for her behavior. She refused to memorize her lines until they were an integral part of her stage life. She refused to deliver fast results. She revolted against stage convention and imitation. And after all of this, she still insisted she had no technique or method of work.

It is said that the Lunts reject "method" acting, and yet I had an experience with them that went beyond the method of most "method" actors. In the last act of Chekhov's The Sea Gull, during the big scene between Nina and Konstantin, the rest of the household is supposed to be eating supper in the adjoining room. Mr. Lunt and Miss Fontanne worked tirelessly on this offstage supper scene, improvising dialogue, deciding what food they would be eating, searching for their behavior during this meal. In performance, when the Lunts left the stage, they actually sat down at a dinner table in the wings, ate food, chatted, and reentered with the reality of having had a meal. No one in the audience caught a glimpse of it, but they did get the clink of china and glass and silverware, and the muted offstage dialogue as a brilliant counter-

THE ACTOR

point to the tragic onstage life. And the actors got a continuity of their existence.

Paul Muni also denied a "method" of work in developing a character. Yet in actual practice he sometimes went to live for weeks at a time in a neighborhood where his character might have lived or been born. Mr. Muni went through a process of research and work which was so deep, so subjective, that it was sometimes torturous to watch.

We may forget that Stanislavsky went to the finest actors of his day and observed them and questioned them about their approach to their work, and from these findings he built his precepts. (He didn't invent them!)

One of the finest lessons I ever learned was from the great German actor Albert Basserman. I worked with him as Hilde in *The Master Builder* by Ibsen. He was already past eighty but was as "modern" in his conception of the role of Solness and in his techniques as anyone I've ever seen or played with. In rehearsals he felt his way with the new cast. (The role had been in his repertoire for almost forty years.) He watched us, listened to us, adjusted to us, meanwhile executing his actions with only a small part of his playing energy. At the first dress rehearsal, he started to play fully. There was such a vibrant reality to the rhythm of his speech and behavior that I was swept away by it. I kept waiting for him to come to an end with his intentions so that I could take my "turn." As a result, I either made a big hole in the dialogue or desperately cut in on him in order to avoid another hole. I was expecting the usual "It's your turn; then it's my turn." At the end of the first act I went to his dressing room and said, "Mr. Basserman, I can't apologize enough, but I never know when you're through!" He looked at me in amazement and said, "I'm never through! And neither should you be."

The influences on my development, aside from the master artists I observed or worked with, have been numerous. In

Introduction

my parents' home, creative instincts and expression were considered worthy and noble. Talent went along with a responsibility to it. I was taught that concentrated work was a thing of joy in itself. Both my parents lived such a life and set this example for me. They also showed me that a love of work is not dependent on outward success.

I am grateful to Eva Le Gallienne for first believing in my talent, for putting me on the professional stage, for upholding a reverence for the theater, for helping me to believe that the theater should contribute to the spiritual life of a nation. I am grateful to the Lunts for endowing me with a rigorous theater discipline which is still in the marrow of my bones.

I had a strange transition from amateur to professional. The word "amateur" in its origin was a lover or someone pursuing something for love. Now it is synonymous with a dilettante, an unskilled performer, or someone pursuing a hobby or pastime. When I was very young and then when, still young, I was employed in the theater, I was an amateur in its original sense. I pursued my work for love. Then, the fact that I was paid was incidental to the love. At best, being paid meant that I was taken seriously in this love of my work. Undoubtedly I was unskilled. My strength as an actor rested in the unshakable faith I had in make-believe. I made myself believe the characters I was allowed to play and the circumstances of the characters' lives in the events of the play.

Inevitably, in the learning and turning process from amateur to professional, I lost some of the love and found my way by adopting the methods and attitudes of the "pro." I learned what I now call "tricks" and was even proud of myself. I soon learned that if I made my last exit as Nina in *The Sea Gull* with full attention on the whys and wherefores of my leave-taking, with no attention to the effect on the audience, there were tears and a hush in the auditorium. If,

THE ACTOR

however, I threw back my head bravely just as I got to the door, I received a round of applause. I settled for the trick which brought the applause. I could list pages of examples of acquiring "clean entrance" techniques, manufactured tears and laughter, lyric "qualities," etc.—all the things to do for calculated outer effects. I thought of myself as a genuine professional who had nothing more to learn, just other parts to make effective. I began to dislike acting. Going to work at the theater became a chore and a routine way of collecting my money and my reviews. I had lost the love of make-believe. I had lost the faith in the character, and the world the character lived in.

In 1947, I worked in a play under the direction of Harold Clurman. He opened a new world in the professional theater for me. He took away my "tricks." He imposed no line readings, no gestures, no positions on the actors. At first I floundered badly because for many years I had become accustomed to using specific outer directions as the material from which to construct the mask for my character, the mask behind which I would hide throughout the performance. Mr. Clurman refused to accept a mask. He demanded me in the role. My love of acting was slowly reawakened as I began to deal with a strange new technique of evolving in the character. I was not allowed to begin with, or concern myself at any time with, a preconceived form. I was assured that a form would result from the work we were doing.

During the performance of the play, I discovered a new relationship to the audience which was so close, so intimate, that I thanked Harold Clurman for breaking down the wall which had so often separated me from the audience.

I went on to explore more deeply with Herbert Berghof what I had begun to learn from Harold. Herbert gave me painstaking help in how to develop and make use of these

Introduction

discoveries, how to find a true technique of acting, how to make a character flow through me.

The American theater poses endless problems for any actor who wants to call himself an artist, who wants to be part of an art form. From the very beginnings of "doing the rounds" of agents, producers and directors; through the terrifying audition procedures; to the agonies of attempting to prove yourself, in early rehearsals; to the sense of compromise you feel in yourself, your fellow actors, the playwright, from the first rehearsal through the out-of-town tryouts to the opening night in New York; to the acceptance of the public and the critics; to the element of speculating about whether you will close on Saturday or work for years, or possibly never work again—these things make for conditions which periodically have disillusioned me about the Broadway theater, about my own work, about directors, about playwrights, about management, about every phase of my chosen profession. The only place where I have known a degree of fulfillment is at the HB Studio, where I am both teacher and learn from others.

I am lucky to have found this place where I can put a degree of my struggle for growth, my search for the miracle of reality in acting into practice. The HB Studio was founded by my husband, Herbert Berghof. We both teach there. We act there with our students and other fellow actors. We direct there. We work on plays and scenes which the commercial theater cannot afford or will not foster.

As a teacher, in view of the pages that follow, let me state what to me is not modest, but obvious. I am not an authority on behaviorism or semantics, not a scholar, a philosopher, nor a psychiatrist, and I am frankly fearful of those who profess to teach acting while plunging into areas of actors' lives that do not belong on a stage or in a classroom. I teach acting as I approach it—from the human and technical prob-

THE ACTOR

lems which I have experienced through living and practice.

I believe in my work and in what we are doing at the HB Studio. I pray that with patience and foresight a first-rate acting company will develop out of the Studio, a company guided by first-rate young directors, and, hopefully, young playwrights. When this happens, it will be a company of people who have grown together, who are united by common aims and by a way of work which has a common language and results in a homogeneous form of expression. The four walls to house such a group will follow, and then perhaps we will be able to make a real contribution to the American theater. But should it never happen, it will still be a goal worth working for!

1

CONCEPT

IF YOU HAVE the opportunity to visit the Museum of Modern Art in New York City when they are showing the film series "Great Actresses," you will see performances by Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse among others. Both actresses lived and acted at the same time; both were considered great. Yet their approach to acting differed. Sarah Bernhardt was a flamboyant, external, formalistic actress, reflecting the fashion of her time. Duse was a human being on stage. Today, Bernhardt's mannerisms make you laugh. Duse moves you; she is more modern than tomorrow.

I mention these two ladies from the past in a book meant for the actor of today because they represent two approaches to acting that have been debated in the theater through the centuries. The two approaches have names that annoy and confuse me, but since you will hear them again and again, let me name them now, and hopefully get rid of them. One is the Representational (Bernhardt), the other the Presentational (Duse).

The Representational actor deliberately chooses to imitate or illustrate the character's behavior. The Presentational actor attempts to reveal human behavior through a use of

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

"This fascinating and detailed book about acting is Miss Hagen's credo, the accumulated wisdom of her years spent in intimate communion with her art. It is at once the voicing of her exacting standards for herself and those she teaches, and an explanation of the means to the end. For those unable to avail themselves of her personal tutelage, her book is the best substitute."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* is not only pitched on a high artistic level but it is full of homely, practical information by a superb crafts-woman. An illuminating discussion of the standards and techniques of enlightened stage acting."

—*Brooks Atkinson*

"Hagen adds to the large corpus of titles on acting with vivid dicta drawn from experience, skill, and a sense of personal and professional worth. Her principal asset in this treatment is her truly significant imagination. Her 'object exercises' display a wealth of detail with which to stimulate the student preparing a scene for presentation."

—*Library Journal*

"*Respect for Acting* is a simple, lucid and sympathetic statement of actors' problems in the theatre and basic tenets for their training wrought from the personal experience of a fine actress and teacher of acting."

—*Harold Clurman*

"Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* ... is a relatively small book. But within it Miss Hagen tells the young actor about as much as can be conveyed in print of his craft."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"Uta Hagen is our greatest living actor; she is, moreover, interested and mystified by the presence of talent and its workings; her third gift is a passion to communicate the mysteries of the craft to which she has given her life. There are almost no American actors uninfluenced by her."

—*Fritz Weaver*

"This is a textbook for aspiring actors, but working thespians can profit much by it. Anyone with just a casual interest in the theater should also enjoy its behind-the-scenes flavor. *Respect for Acting* is certainly a special book, perhaps for a limited readership, but of its

"How-To" kind I'd give it four curtain calls, and two hollers of "Author, Author!"

—*King Features Syndicate*

ISBN 0-02-547390-5



9 780025 473904



5 1995 > EAN

Wiley Publishing, Inc.