

uta hagen

with haskel frankel

forewords by katie finneran and david hyde pierce

respect for acting

featuring a
chapter from
Uta Hagen's
memoir,
SOURCES

expanded
edition



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Praise for *Respect for Acting*

“Uta Hagen changed my life. She changed the lives of thousands and thousands of other people as well. To have Uta’s books, and to be able to look through them at the drop of a hat, keeps me going and keeps me inspired to keep going.”

—AUSTIN PENDLETON

“I read Respect for Acting frequently. As a remembrance of my time with Uta and to keep myself challenged and humble. It should be utilized by every acting student and professional.”

—VICTOR SLEZAK

“I was extraordinarily privileged to work with Uta Hagen in the Circle in the Square’s production of George Bernard Shaw’s play You Never Can Tell. Her book, Respect for Acting, is a must-read for any actor at any age. She was committed to revealing the truth, and we are the beneficiaries of her brilliant observations.”

—VICTOR GARBER

“Uta Hagen and Respect for Acting have profoundly influenced nearly every actor alive today and yet to come in film, television and stage with this unmatched, impeccably specific process developed from her life’s work as the definitive ‘actor’s actor’ and is timeless and invaluable for all beginning and working actors truly interested in the highest level of acting.”

—TED BRUNETTI

“Uta Hagen’s Respect for Acting is simply the bible for any acting student serious about their craft. Even as a professional, I refer to it time and again for the basics. It is a touchstone.”

—LAILA ROBINS

“I held onto this book for dear life throughout my twenties, and still thumb through it when I need a tune up. If I lose my car keys and I’m frantically turning my house upside down trying to find them I look up at the heavens and hope she’s having a good laugh.”

—AMANDA PEET

respect for
acting

Uta Hagen Respect for Acting

with Haskel Frankel



Respect for Acting was first published in 1973 with the cover above. This edition reprints the original chapters without alteration, and adds a new foreword and several appendices.

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*To Herbert
who revealed and clarified and
has always set me a soaring example*

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Editor's Note

by Jesse Feiler

Respect for Acting was first published in 1973 and republished in 2008 with a foreword by David Hyde Pierce. This expanded edition publishes Uta Hagen's original text and the Pierce foreword without alteration and includes a new foreword by Katie Finneran.

Additional material complements the wise instruction within Respect for Acting and deepens our understanding of Uta Hagen's work and philosophy.

"The Studio Story" by Uta Hagen and "Address to the Austrian Academy" by Uta's husband Herbert Berghof illuminate the history of HB Studio, founded in 1945 by Berghof as a home for actors who wanted to learn and practice their art in service to their community.

An excerpt from Uta's lyrical memoir *Sources* provides a glimpse of the eighteen-year-old actor embarking on the

career that would inspire actors at every stage of their craft in countries throughout the world.

All three pieces are reprinted here with thanks to the Uta Hagen Trust.

Jesse Feiler
New York City, February 2023

Foreword

by Katie Finneran

“Be the cat, Katie.”

And with that, Uta Hagen lit her cigarette, smiled, and walked away. Standing in her Bank Street acting studio and feeling too shy to question her, I stood there, puzzled, in the cloud of smoke she’d left behind. I was opening in a Broadway show (that had nothing to do with cats, never even mentions cats) and her advice to me on how to tackle my nerves was “Be the cat.”

I have always wanted to be an actor. This fact has never wavered. From an early age, I studied at many performing arts programs and devoured loads of acting books from Boleslavsky to Meisner. I found the instructions, stories, and methods fascinating, yet elusive.

Then when I was 15, my acting teacher gave me a copy of *Respect for Acting* and something clicked. As I read this book, the intangible idea of “acting” slowly came into focus. Straightforward, applicable exercises unveiled

a comprehensive and authentic way of working. I began to understand what makes an actor compelling, what they are doing with their bodies, and how their actions inform their behavior. Most importantly, *Respect for Acting* gave me a language through which to speak about acting as a craft. This has been my acting road map—the one I’ve used for more than 30 years.

When I was 19, I left a prestigious university and moved to New York City hoping to study with Uta Hagen in person. Doing my best to calm my unbearable anxiety, I auditioned for her with a monologue by Bertolt Brecht. Receiving my acceptance letter a week later was one of the most significant events of my life.

I’ll never forget my first class. A childlike giddiness pervaded the room. Every student buzzed with anticipation, simultaneously thrilled and terrified of what was to come.

Ms. Hagen was a formidable teacher. Her passion for understanding human behavior, especially her own, taught us to be astute observers. When she critiqued our exercises or scene work, everything that came out of her mouth was a revelation. She could transform the performance of a student with clear instruction that was simple to understand and implement.

Over the 12 years I studied with her, I never ceased to be amazed by how generous, how egoless she was. She would comfort us by saying, “There are no mistakes you’re making here in class that I haven’t made on stage a thousand times.” And this is key: The exercises she created all came directly from challenges she encountered as a celebrated actress.

Through relentless investigation, she found tangible solutions to these problems and shared them with us in this book. Speaking of generosity, I want to mention that she only charged \$8 a class and reluctantly raised the price to \$12—where it remained until she retired.

So, back to that cat.

As it is with most lessons taught by master teachers, it wasn't until years later that I fully understood "Be the cat."

There's an old theatre adage: "Never work with children or animals." The logic behind this advice: if there is an animal on stage, say a cat, the audience won't be able to look at anything else. Why? No matter how good the play (or the actors in it), a cat's behavior is unpredictable and deliciously spontaneous. It's undeniably exhilarating to watch on stage. The audience thinks, "The actors are doing what they rehearsed, but what about that cat? What's that cat gonna do next?"

Uta Hagen herself said, "I refuse to let the cat win!" She knew that if an actor worked to clarify all aspects of a character, understood the space and immediate circumstances, had clear desires and intentions, and created a living breathing human being then they had a chance to be as free, as unpredictable, and as riveting as a cat. She urges you to clarify what makes animals and children impossible to ignore and to harness that quality for yourself.

I'm a better actor for having had the honor of studying with Ms. Hagen in person, but I can truly say that my entire foundation as an actor is firmly based upon this book.

My wish for you as an actor is that this book "clicks" for you, as it did for me. That it encourages you to develop every skill you can. Learn how to prepare. Observe your own behavior. Be curious about those who are different from you. Appreciate how you change in new circumstances and how different people bring out surprising aspects of your character.

Become an excellent instrument and learn how to tell a story with your whole being. Be unrelenting. Be brave. Be the cat.

Foreword

by David Hyde Pierce

I had the life-changing experience of acting with Uta Hagen in a two-person play a few years before she passed away. I was excited to be working with this legendary actor and teacher, but also daunted by the prospect of being the only other person on stage with her, so I re-read her books, both to prepare for my role and to prepare for her.

Well, nothing could prepare you for Ms. Hagen. When we met she was in her early eighties and still a force to be reckoned with. She was demure, passionate, charming, ferocious, tireless, and *theatrical*. As a student of her writing, that was the biggest surprise for me—everything she did was real, and grounded, and deeply human, but she had an extravagance of gesture, a physical and vocal lyricism that had its roots in an earlier era.

She really did practice what she preached about the physical life of a character. She insisted that we have the actual set-pieces and props, even kitchen appliances, in the rehearsal room. No cardboard mock-ups for her—“I want

to have opened and closed that refrigerator door a hundred times before I set foot on the stage,” she said. All through rehearsals we used a cruddy old plastic take-out container to hold the cookies she’d serve me in act II. On the day we moved into the theater, the designer had replaced it with a fantastic metal cookie tin which was in every detail exactly the sort of thing the character would have had in her kitchen. Ms. Hagen took one look at it, called it a name, and hurled it into the wings. We used the plastic cookie container for the run of the show.

Her obsession with these details was neither frivolous nor selfish. She was a generous actor, the reality she created for herself on stage was contagious, and acting with her you felt both safe and free. I remember a scene in which I had a speech about losing my mother to Alzheimer’s disease. I felt the speech needed to be emotionally full, and because my own mom had passed away, and I’d lost family to Alzheimer’s, I never had to use substitutions—the emotion was always there for me. But one night as I began the speech I sensed that the emotion wasn’t coming. I might have panicked, or tried to force it or fake it, but sitting there talking to Uta I didn’t want or need to be false. I thought of her advice not to try and pinpoint when or how emotion will come (emotional memory, page 51, item 2), I knew she would accept whatever I gave her, and I went on to the end of the speech, dry as a bone. Then I stood, began my next line (something innocuous like “Would you like a glass of water?”), and came completely undone. As we were walking off stage after the scene, she turned to me with a twinkle in her eye and said, “That was interesting.”

You should know that Ms. Hagen disowned *Respect for Acting*. After she wrote it, she traveled around the country visiting various acting classes and was horrified by what she saw. “What are they doing?” she’d ask the teacher. “Your exercises” was the proud response. So Ms. Hagen

wrote another book, *A Challenge for the Actor*, which is more detailed and perhaps clearer, and should certainly be read as a companion to this. She hoped it would replace *Respect for Acting*, but it hasn't, and I think the reason this book endures is that it captures her first, generous, undiluted impulse to guide and nurture the artists she loved.

In this book, you will hear Ms. Hagen's voice and catch a glimpse of who she was. She wanted us actors to have so much respect for ourselves and our work that we would never settle for the easy, the superficial, or the cheap. In fact, she wanted us never to settle, period, to keep on endlessly exploring, digging deeper and aiming higher, in our scenes, in our plays, in our careers. *Respect for Acting* is not a long book, and with any luck, it will take you the rest of your life to read it.

Acknowledgments

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.

PART ONE

The Actor

