

uta hagen

with haskel frankel

foreword by david hyde pierce

respect for
acting



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by David Hyde Pierce

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

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, *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

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 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 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 counterpoint 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 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, 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 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 problems 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 himself, through an understanding of himself and consequently an understanding of the character he is portraying. The Representational actor finds a form based on an objective result for the character, which he then carefully watches as he executes it. The Presentational actor trusts that a form will result from identification with the

character and the discovery of his character's actions, and works on stage for a moment-to-moment subjective experience.

For an example of the above, let me again refer to Bernhardt and Duse. Each, in her native tongue, had played the same popular melodrama of the time, the high point of which was the moment when the wife, accused of infidelity by her husband, swore her virtue. "Je jure, je jure, JE JUUUUURE!" Bernhardt proclaimed in a rising vibrato of passion. Her audience stood to scream and shout its admiration. Duse swore her virtue softly and only twice. She never spoke the third oath, but placed her hand on her young son's head as she looked directly at her husband. Duse's audience wept.

One night, after having received accolades for his performance from the audience, the nineteenth-century French actor Coquelin called his fellow actors together backstage and said: "I cried real tears on stage tonight. I apologize. It will never happen again." His approach to acting was obviously Representational. For him, a genuine experience on stage was rejected in the belief that it would muddy or blur the acting.

I believe that the illustration of a character's behavior at the cost of removing one's own psyche, no matter how brilliant the performance that results, creates an alienation between audience and actor. The audience may yell "Bravo!," they may even rise to their feet and cheer, but they are reacting in the same manner they would to an acrobat or a high-wire performer—they are cheering the visible skill, they are applauding the feat pulled off. But the vital empathy with human behavior, the emotional involvement between actor and audience will be lacking.

Formalized, external acting (Representational) has a strong tendency to follow fashion. Internal acting