

A Teacher's Guide for
The Actor In You, Fifth Edition

by Dr. Robert Benedetti

IMPORTANT NOTE: This guide is for the Fifth Edition. A Sixth Edition appeared in January of this year. It is much changed and I think is preferable. It was reorganized and is now subtitled Twelve Easy Steps to Understanding the Art of Acting. I urge you to examine this new edition.

Thank you for using the Fifth Edition of *The Actor in You*. This teacher's Guide has been revised specifically for this edition.

The Actor in You is designed for use in an introductory college acting course, or for a course for non-majors in the appreciation of acting, or even for advanced high school students. It grew out of the ten editions of my more advanced book, *The Actor at Work*, which has been in print for over forty years. *The Actor in You* encapsulates the essence of the longer book and writing it presented a wonderful challenge: I had to identify the most important elements of my approach and find a way to communicate them directly and simply. I learned a great deal by doing it.

Though it was written for "beginners," I believe this book would be valuable for advanced students and working professionals. Our educational tradition usually moves from simplicity to complexity; our students move through a discipline as if they were climbing the rungs of a ladder, upward toward more and more abstract and complex material. This may be fine for many disciplines, but in any art, the development of mastery involves digging deeper and deeper into the profundity of the simple. The most advanced acting class, I believe, should be indistinguishable in its content from the beginner class. As in Zen, our wish is to develop "beginner's mind;" as Ram Dass says, the next door is always there when you are ready to go through it.

The truth, I suspect, is that we all have just one acting class in us, and we teach it over and over in various forms; the student receives it at his or her own level of wakefulness and understanding, or at that moment when we manage to hit upon the manner of expression that awakens them, or triggers their discovery. How often has the advanced student said about the idea of action, for instance, "Of course! It's so simple! Why didn't you tell us sooner?" when, in truth, we have been telling them all along.

The best progression of an actor's development, I believe, is to work on basics like centering and breathing and being in action, alternating with forays into various kinds of material that make various kinds of demands on these basic skills, then returning regularly to the basics with expanded experience and richness of understanding. This has been called a "cyclical" rather than a "sequential" way of learning.

This book was written to save your valuable class time for personal contact with your students, to help you minimize talk and maximize work time. It offers exercises and principles; it does *not* offer formulas or rules. Help your students to treat the book as a source of ideas and

inspiration for their own exploration and self-discoveries. Work in the spirit expressed here by Joseph Chaikin in *The Presence of the Actor*:

There is no way to develop talent, only to invite it to be released. It's a mysterious gift, no more equally distributed than bright sunny days over a year. The teacher of the actor is like the teacher of small children. He looks for the right steps for each student, and when the student is about to make his discovery, the teacher must disappear. [page 154]

For a fuller understanding of this concept, read Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*. If I had to choose a single book for acting teachers to read, this is the one.

TIMING OF THE SEQUENCE

As in the previous editions, this fifth edition was intended to offer one full semester (sixteen weeks) of beginning course work, one Step in each week. However, the material is so distilled that I think the experience would be even more valuable if it were stretched over a full year.

This edition has been reorganized, and I believe the progression of work is now correct and would urge you to maintain it. In a full-year curriculum, I would suggest spending half of a semester on each of the four parts, with perhaps a bit less time spent on the first part. Some of you, however, may choose to start with Part 2, which begins core scene work, especially if your students have other classes that address the voice and body work covered in an admittedly cursory way in Part 1. In any case, do not rush! It is more important that what is done be done well than that the entire sequence be completed. Let the work take its natural course.

Some steps will take longer than others. The first and second, for instance, could be combined as a single week's work, whereas the basic exercises for the body and voice in Steps 3 and 4 are more beneficial if they are repeated over a period of time, and should be revisited regularly even as the class proceeds through the remaining steps. Likewise, the fundamental concept of action presented in Part 2 is the central concept of the entire book and ties all the other material together; I could imagine devoting an entire year to Part !.

Also be sure your students read and understand the introductory section for each part; we all know the tendency to skip prefaces and other introductory material. (And please be sure that each exercise is read as well, even if it is not used in class.)

STEP BY STEP TEACHING AIMS

PART ONE: The aim of the first five steps is to introduce fundamental concepts and information, and to prepare the student's body, voice, and attitude for the work in the later steps.

Step 1: This first step was intended for those with no previous experience of acting. However, it raises some issues about the qualities and ethics of good acting that even advanced actors may benefit from considering. It sets priorities about what we want to accomplish in the course of study as a whole.

Step 2: This presents a brief history of western acting, and is worth considering even for somewhat advanced students.

Steps 3, 4, and 5: These three steps present a mini-course in relaxation, centering, voice, speech, collaboration, and the proper frame of mind for the actor. The aim is to integrate and prepare the student's organism to respond as fully as possible to the work that follows.

I think nearly all teachers of voice, speech, and acting would agree that relaxation and centering are good places to start. This step presents time-tested exercises to set the student on the path, but this work must be repeated with regularity for the rest of the course.

If your students are also taking classes in voice and movement, you might skip Steps 3 and 4; at least discuss my approach with the teachers of those classes to ensure coherence.

The trust exercises in Step 5 are meant to open the student to interaction with his or her fellow actors. They have all been in use for many years, and are a fond echo of the sixties and seventies.

PART TWO: Steps 6 through 10 are the heart of the book. Here we develop the idea of action, making the critical point that it takes both internal and external forms. We also stress the fundamental idea that dramatic action occurs *between* characters. The aim is to experience the flow of give and take that moves a scene.

In Step 6 we discuss the actor's state of mind and present the important concepts of dual consciousness and public solitude. However, it matters not whether a student understands these concepts unless they can experience them – and if they can, I'd skip conceptualizing about them altogether. Helping them to understand *indicating*, however, can be very useful in critiquing their work later.

In all, Part 2 tries to direct the student's attention *away* from emotion and character and *toward* action, which produces both. I try very hard, in both teaching and directing, to avoid even talking about emotion and character. Step 7, in particular, introduces the critical idea that entering into a full experience of the character's action and circumstances produces transformation. This is the real value of stressing the idea of action and is central to the entire book.

In Step 7, the students must pair up and choose a short scene to which they will apply everything that follows, and this is a crucial choice. See the section, SELECTION OF MATERIAL, below.

Step 10 hopes to help the student understand the way in which dramatic action is structured, and seems to me a necessary prerequisite to being able to break a scene down. This step is a quick course in Aristotelian structural analysis. Again, this must live as an experience in the muscles, not as an idea in the mind. I was ambivalent about whether this Step should be part of Part 3, but since it appears consecutively to Part 3, it works as part of a mini-course in script analysis.

PART THREE: These three steps continue a mini-course in script analysis, and develop the central idea of action in greater detail.

Step 11 is a basic mini-course in Aristotelian character traits as taught to me by my mentor, Oscar Brockett. This Step also presents the loaded idea of emotional recall: I believe that

emotional recall happens automatically if the actor is truly experiencing what is happening in a scene. Therefore, one scarcely needs to use it as a conscious technique, and as I point out, Stanislavski eventually abandoned it. The argument about it divided Lee Strasberg, for whom it was paramount, and Stella Adler, who returned from later observation of Stanislavski saying that it had been abandoned. I was unsure of whether I should mention it at all, in fact, and did so only because it is expected by so many teachers and students. I present it only as a last resort sort if an actor is unable to empathize with the character, or has trouble entering into the work in a personal way. But in general, I don't like it and stress, as Stanislavski did, that it must never be used in performance. Besides, I think some acting teachers misuse personal material from students' lives and tread dangerously close to the edge of psychotherapy. Yes, the student – as I say often – must invest themselves in the material personally, and internalize the action and given circumstances, but the specifics of how this is achieved must be the student's private business.

Step 12: Learning to experience the character's needs, action, and world *personally* is, of course, the greatest step, and can, all by itself, produce wonders. And yet, this is perhaps the most contentious area among different schools of acting technique. The argument can be summed up by considering the matter of identification between actor and character. Stanislavski always urged the actor to "experience" the character's action and world, rather than to "become" the character. He spoke not of identification in the sense of the actor losing himself or herself in the role, but rather wanted the performance to be a *fusion* of actor and character. He even sometimes used a hyphenated phrase to identify a role, like Stanislavki-Trigorin. My desire, then, is to stress that the character becomes a new "version" of the actor's self, but one which meets the demands of dramatic function. This is, for me, the most important single step in the book, and presents the heart of the acting process. If the student can be helped to experience the specific flow of arousal-strategic choice-action-objective, we will have achieved our aim, for this is how the Magic If becomes real, transformative experience. The inner monologue exercise, by the way, is one of those dangerous ones that can mislead more students than it helps. Use it cautiously.

Step 13 in particular is a woefully brief attempt to awaken the student to the psychophysical implications of a good text. My own background in Oral Interpretation convinces me that internalizing a good text – that is, achieving *organic congruence* with it – can be the starting point and basis for the actor's work. However you can do it, try to move the student's relationship to the text out of the left brain and into the right. The work of my friend Cicely Berry is very good for this – I recommend especially her book *Text in Action* – and I have been able to incorporate more of this in my longer book, the tenth edition of *The Actor at Work*.

PART FOUR: The remaining three steps are a mini-course in the day-to-day acting process itself. This could be an entire semester's (or year's) work by itself, following what has gone before.

Step 14: This extends the previous moment-by-moment into the larger patterns of the through-line and superobjective. It is difficult for the student to experience these concepts when working only on a single scene; perhaps attending a performance together and then discussing these concepts as they lived in the performance would help.

Step 15: Many users stress the usefulness of the practical matters introduced here, and you may want to make more of it than I have.

Step 16: Again, there is a lot here, but I think we do want the work of the course to result in some kind of closure, and it is valuable to end the term by presenting the work as a short program of scenes for an invited audience. This step makes that possible.

By the way: I have sometimes been asked about my injunction against “cheating out:” I don't like cheating out because the weight of the body is carried at the center, and it's what you do with your center that establishes relationship; cheating out diffuses the character-to-character onstage relationship in favor of the actor-to-audience relationship. If actors need to cheat out to keep open to the audience, there is something wrong with the blocking or the groundplan. The trick is to provide a justifiable reason for actors to deliver important speeches downstage, and I always design my groundplans so it will be easy for there to be a downstage focus in the reality of the space when needed. In a class situation, however, this is scarcely a concern.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS: I urge you to require that students read the Glossary. Beside familiarizing themselves with common theatrical jargon, there are some valuable tips imbedded in it.

SELECTION OF MATERIAL

When dealing with people who have never performed before, it may be useful to start off with simple storytelling exercises or short solo speeches. However, I feel strongly that all actor training should involve the give and take of scene work or transactional exercises as soon as possible; we want to discourage insular performance in favor of an interactive sense of shared action.

Scenes or scene segments should be relatively short for class purposes, probably not more than three to five minutes in length. Longer scenes usually do not repay the class time invested in them (until advanced work, of course) and a shorter piece can usually be critiqued more effectively.

It is best, of course, if the scene or scene segments have a clear shape (that is, they contain a crisis, however minor) and preferably a single central focus. Take the time to work over your students' selections with them at the beginning; this time will be handsomely repaid later.

While it is understandable that we usually start beginning students on realistic scenes involving characters “close” to their real selves, the level of the material chosen has never seemed to me to be as crucial as many teachers think. Depending on the intelligence and literacy of the student, I have, for example, successfully used Shakespeare in beginning classes, as long as the focus is on the human dimension and actions embodied in the scene, and not on poetic delivery. In any case, the material selected should have sufficient literary merit to repay the investment you and the student will make in it, but this may well include scenes from reputable commercial products. The indispensable key is that something in the scene or character must *touch the student in a personal way*; this is far more important than the style or genre of the material.

So few students have an adequate grounding in dramatic literature that the selection of material is usually a real problem. I suggest that you create a short list of representative plays which, over a period of time, your students will read in their entirety. Draw your examples from the plays on your list and allow students to select exercise material from them as well; in this way you will avoid the common problem of students doing speeches and scenes from plays they have not actually read. I mistrust “scene books” because they invite students to work on scenes out of the context of the whole play. Help your students to feel an obligation to fulfill the dramatic function of the character and the scene within the play as a whole.

TIP: When doing scene work, I like to ask the students to begin by briefly telling the story of the play, and then to describe how this scene fits into it. A good question is: “What’s the one thing that happens in this scene that is most important to the entire story?” Asking them to review this just before they begin work helps them keep their priorities clear and focus on the dramatic function of their characters.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Few schools offer the acting teacher as much class time as we would all like. I have found six hours per week of acting class time (assuming additional time for voice and movement work) to be optimum for a professional conservatory situation; most schools get along with much less. If you have a choice, I suggest that fewer but longer working sessions are preferable to the same amount of time split into standard fifty-minute hours. I have found ninety minutes to be a real minimum for an acting class, with two full hours even better. In most situations we would be very happy with two class sessions per week, each two or more hours long. This schedule gives the class sufficient time to develop momentum while also giving the student time to prepare work between classes.

Few schools offer spaces which are appropriate to a serious acting class; certainly the traditional classroom (especially one with fixed seating) is nearly useless. Look about your school for a space which can be your home and which has (or can be provided with) any of the following:

1. A sprung or wooden floor, or tumbling or yoga mats.
2. A modicum of stage-type lighting when needed, even if this means simply mounting two or three spotlights or PAR lamps on the walls.
3. Basic rehearsal furniture and a cabinet, box, or closet full of basic hand props and costume pieces.
4. A changing room nearby and lockers for clothing and valuables.

Use your ingenuity — let the class help to create and maintain its working space and don’t depend on the janitors!

The actors should wear loose clothing when they do the exercises. You might consider a simple rehearsal uniform to enhance the sense of discipline. If conditions permit, I advise working barefoot or in ballet slippers to get a more direct feel of the floor. Long hair should be worn back, out of the face, to discourage that annoying unconscious fiddling with the hair that is so

distracting in a performer. As a matter of safety, avoid wristwatches and jewelry; glasses should be secured with an athletic band.

MOTIVATING THE WORK

At some point early in the work, I encourage my students to consider why they want to study acting, to identify the personal energies that bring them into the class. Part of this consideration can be a preliminary inventory of their most basic needs as actors (such as the need to learn to relax, to overcome inhibitions, to rediscover the joy of storytelling or role-playing, and so on.) On the basis of this inventory, they can select one or two “growth objectives” toward which they feel personally motivated, and to share these with the class. It is wonderful when everyone feels responsible for respecting and supporting the specific growth objectives of everyone else; this reduces competitiveness and enhances the value of class critiques.

CLASS CRITIQUES AND EVALUATIONS

Ongoing class critiques are essential, but they must be kept within reasonable limits. Don’t fall into the trap of talking one three-minute scene to death while twelve other students try to stay awake. Set a time limit for your critique and for class discussion. I encourage the entire class to join in discussion of exercises, so long as these rules are followed:

1. Be a stern moderator; don’t let anyone monopolize the discussion.
2. Cut off instantly defensiveness or offensiveness in anyone; we seek the truth, not personal victories.
3. Give every point of view (within the above limits) a fair hearing. Most importantly, put all attractive ideas to the test immediately. In other words, critiques should be reworking sessions, not just talk fests.
4. Insist, within the bounds of respectful behavior, on honest and direct criticisms. Your students will quickly tune out if they see faults being whitewashed; students want expert, direct, and honest criticism. We must respect them enough to assume that they can take it; and if they can’t, they are better off out of the theatre anyway.
5. Help the class to create a supportive environment by keeping critiques and discussions objectively balanced between positive and negative commentary, and ensure that success is as fully analyzed as failure. Sometimes when we praise something, our students are secretly thinking, “Fine, but now tell me what you really thought!” Help your students to recognize good work and to learn from it as much as from failure.

GRADING

Finally, we come to the painful subject of evaluation, which for most of us means grading. If you are in the common but unenviable situation of having no control over admission to your class, you can at least grade in a way that actually reflects the quality of the work done. Sadly, there are many programs in which every acting student gets an “A” grade; in such a situation, how does a better-than-average student develop any confidence in his or her own abilities when they see

lesser students receiving the same grade? Have the courage to let grades reflect accomplishment; you will quickly earn a reputation as a serious, exacting, but fair teacher, which will serve you almost as well as the ability to audition your students, and your best students will have the pride of knowing that your continued commitment to them is a meaningful reflection on their development.

In those desirable situations in which we are teaching within a sequence of classes, where successful completion of one level is a pre-requisite for further work, we must remember that the ensemble nature of acting means that members of a class tend to learn more from one another than they do from us. You can see this in the history of older training programs where “vintage years” occur; in these cases, a given class had a magical chemistry by which the talent of each member was enhanced by membership in that particular peer group. For this reason, you must jealously guard the quality of the continuing peer group by cutting out the drifters and the dilettantes and — more painfully — the hard-working but untalented students.

Of course, even a very talented student may not benefit from your particular method of teaching. If this is the case, be direct and honest and convince him or her to seek more useful tutelage. And if you are teaching in a conservatory situation, know when it is time for a talented student to “leave the nest.” I know several stars who say that the best thing that ever happened to them was being asked to leave a training program!

Above all, avoid accepting every student failure as your own. “Where did I go wrong with him or her,” we ask ourselves time after time. Spare yourself; fulfill your sense of duty and creativity, and insist that the student fulfill his or hers.

TEN USEFUL PRINCIPLES

1. Never encourage the student to please you. The student’s task is to explore the problem you have defined; the search must be his or hers, not yours.
2. Insist on sufficient preparation; stop any exercise which is obviously ill-prepared. Teach your students the importance of an actor’s homework, that work which must be done outside rehearsal time.
3. Talk as little as possible; let the students *do* as much as possible.
4. When you do talk, try to give your notes in active terms with an indication of an external focus; that is, talk about the *doings* of the exercise.
5. Never outline the “desired results” of an exercise, as this will ensure “playing for results” rather than true exploration. Try to banish “desired results” from your mind; when an exercise is done, accept what has really happened. If nothing has happened, find out why or set a condition which will make something happen. If something happened that you didn’t expect, rejoice and learn from it. In short, be in the Here and Now just as much as you want your students to be. You are a guide and facilitator, not a manipulator.
6. Never justify an exercise. When a student demands justification, he or she is hiding from the exercise or has simply failed to have the experience which the exercise offers.

Don't waste time explaining what "should" have happened and why; try something else until justification becomes unnecessary.

7. **IMPORTANT:** Keep the focus of the class on the *work*, not on the *student*. Acting students are narcissistic and introspective enough without being encouraged in these largely unproductive perceptual postures.

8. To help keep the focus on the work, try to center each class session around a theme of exploration: "Today we will explore the way in which we use our bodies in the expression of relationship," and so on.

9. Inculcate the attitude that class-work is acting, not merely a preparation for acting. Help the student to know that theatre happens whenever and wherever we make it happen, not just on a stage when the curtain goes up.

10. Most important, **ALWAYS BE LEARNING YOURSELF!** Teaching Is the best education available; the teacher who has ceased to learn, to make discoveries in almost every class, is useless to himself or herself and to his or her students, and to the theatre. If you feel yourself going stale, try something new: get out and do, get up and act alongside your students, find something which touches your joy in the work. You have nothing of real value to teach without it.

Thanks, and best wishes to you! Remember: We are creating the theatre of the future!