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I

The Way It Is

Let's face it. Acting is fun. Millions of people do it for free, and millions more want to make their living from it. And why not? Who wouldn't want to take home \$25 million for six weeks of work? Add to this the great travel to exotic shooting locations, the fabulous parties, the global fame, and the effortless sexual, romantic, and marital opportunities thrust into your lap from every corner of the world.

Just imagine the amazement and envy of your friends as you go head to head with Conan O'Brien or David Letterman, sharing juicy gossip from the set, expounding your political opinions, and suavely putting down your rivals and enemies (including the former professor who said you'd never make it) with a toothy grin and a wry riposte. And don't forget the world tours, fawning politicians, and ardent groupies, or running down the aisle to pick up your Tony or Oscar in front of millions of cheering viewers around the world. You might even—why not?—head a national association as Charlton Heston did, address a national political convention as Christopher Reeve did, or deliver the annual State of the Union address as President (and actor) Ronald Reagan did.

As the late Jimmy Durante used to say, "Everybody wants to get into the act!" No wonder, especially when dozens of books and hundreds of acting teachers tell you that all you need to learn in order to do this is simply to "be yourself!" Forget college, medical school, or mastering the split-fingered fastball. Act!

Well, you're right, of course. At the summit, acting is one of the most sublime activities of the human species. Imagine playing

Hamlet or Hedda or Rocky XII to cheering audiences. And—again at the top—acting can be extremely lucrative.

For men, the sky seems the limit. Tom Hanks, Will Smith, and Matt Damon routinely earn more than \$25 million a movie—plus bonuses. Think that's high? Damon's turn as an amnesiac spy was the major factor in *The Bourne Supremacy's* fetching Universal Studios \$290 million in worldwide box office income plus another \$165 million in video sales and rentals in 2004—a downright bargain against his \$26 million fee. Other members of the \$20-plus million per film club are Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt, Will Ferrell, Eddie Murphy, Ben Stiller, Russell Crowe, and Denzel Washington.

Women receive only slightly slenderer bonanzas. At the time of writing, Academy Award winner Reese Witherspoon tops *Hollywood Reporter's* annual list of America's highest-paid actresses at \$20-plus million a film, but not far behind are Angelina Jolie, Cameron Diaz, Nicole Kidman, Renée Zellweger, Sandra Bullock, Julia Roberts, Drew Barrymore, Jodie Foster, and Halle Berry, all bobbing about in the \$10–\$20 million range.

These figures are for film, the money pot for superstars, but top pay in other entertainment media isn't too shabby. On TV, *CSI's* William Petersen earns more than \$500,000 per episode. Kiefer Sutherland, as a star and executive producer of *24*, rakes in more than \$400,000. *Law & Order's* Mariska Hargitay and Christopher Meloni bring home roughly \$330,000 per episode per person, and Kyra Sedgwick, star of *The Closer*, has locked in a salary of \$250,000 for turning cable channel TNT into a serious network player.

No matter how you look at it, there is big money at stake. James Gandolfini who ended his reign on *The Sopranos* at a reported million dollars per episode summed it up best. "All I can say," quips the show's Mafioso-in-therapy, "is they wouldn't pay it if they ain't makin' it."

The income in legitimate (live) theatre is admittedly less, but certainly more than respectable at the top. Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick each garnered \$100,000 a week for reprising their Broadway roles in *The Producers*. At the time of writing, Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth were making a reported \$25,000–\$30,000 to star in the Great White Way's biggest hit, *Wicked*. Movie stars rarely act on stage for the money (their greater reason is usually a love of live theatre); still, Julia Roberts earned \$35,000

a week (plus a box office percentage more than doubling this) for starring in *Three Days of Rain* on Broadway in 2004, while Kevin Spacey earned as much as \$60,000 a week (\$25,000 plus 10% of the weekly gross ticket income) for his Broadway turn in the Eugene O'Neill classic, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

You also want to direct? Just put it in your next contract.

So why not get into the act? Children do it. Models do it. Ex-athletes and ex-cons do it. Even dogs do it. Let's do it—let's act!

But *not for the money!* One thing must be said at the outset of this book: *Acting is a lousy way to make a living.* On this score, at least, your parents are right.

Let's face the facts from the outset. Each year, tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of people find their way on stage or before a camera, and some of them even get paid for it, but the number who actually *make a living* from it is ridiculously small. By "making a living" we mean receiving paid employment sufficient to provide you with a regular annual income, permit you to rent a decent apartment or home in a big city, marry or develop a solid personal relationship, eat three meals a day and go out once in a while, and even have children and take vacations if you want to. The number of people who actually become fully self-supporting through acting alone for, say, ten years in a row is probably no larger than those holding a seat in the U.S. Congress. Yes, the United States boasts about 150,000 professional actors, but *fewer than half of them earn an income higher than the national poverty level* (which for a single person was \$10,210 in 2007) in any given year. And far fewer than half of *them* earn that amount ten years in a row.

The fact is that most *professional* actors are unemployed most of the time. At the time of writing, the Screen Actors Guild has 122,000 members but, according to the *New York Times*, two-thirds of them make *less than \$1,000 a year* from their performances.¹ Only about 3% earned middle-class wages of \$25,000–\$100,000 per year. Stage work is even less promising financially. In the 2006–07 season, only 43.8% of the union (Actors Equity Association) worked at all, and in any given week only 14.3% of them were employed as actors—meaning that *in any average week 85.7% of America's professional stage actors were not acting professionally.*

¹ June 30, 2008, "Don't Forget the Little People."

As for earning the average middle-class income described above—it would be hard to find 10,000 American actors reaching that annual income level across all media, or more than three or four thousand earning it regularly. In a country with more than 1 million lawyers, 4.5 million mechanics, and nearly 8 million machine operators, those three or four thousand actors should probably be thought of more as a club than a profession. And the year-long 2008-09 Screen Actors Guild contract negotiations with film and TV producers only pointed up the new dangers (reduced film production and TV reruns, increases in internet distribution and reality TV) that threaten the club even further.

To put it in even clearer perspective: there are far more self-supporting acting teachers in the United States than self-supporting actors.

Let's face the facts squarely: Acting is both one of the toughest businesses in the world to break into, and to build a lifetime career in. Maybe it's *the* toughest. The vast majority of people who try don't even get a foot in the door, and the vast majority who do get a foot in the door don't keep it there very long.

It's a reality. It's raw. You may hate us for saying it, but you must face it nonetheless: At this moment, the vast majority of America's professional actors are "between jobs." And for most of them, "between" is simply a euphemism for "without."

Acting is therefore a boutique profession, like being a U.S. senator or a network anchorperson. Only a handful make it into the boutique. This wouldn't be quite so bad except for the fact that acting is often treated (and marketed) as if it were a mass occupation. Nearly 200 graduate actor-training programs are offered in the nation's 1,000-plus college and university theatre and drama departments, and another 1,000 private acting schools and studios claim to train professional actors. Just how many MFA programs or private schools do you think are out there offering professional training for aspiring U.S. senators or network anchorpersons? A good guess would be none. And for this reason acting enjoys a lot more competition than most boutique professions; and certainly has more disappointed aspirants.

But do not despair utterly. If you've got the goods and the smarts and the opportunities—and the luck—you have as good a crack at it as anyone. This book will give you some solid pointers in that direction.

You're also going to have to really work at it, though, and that's the most fundamental point underlying this book. Wanting success isn't enough, studying for it isn't enough, and no amount of dedication or commitment will, on its own, get you into the casting office. Being "discovered" at a drugstore soda fountain is (and always has been) simply a fan magazine myth. No, you're going to have to work harder than you ever have on your acting, and to work even harder on learning how to present yourself—and represent yourself—in the job market. Yes, you're going to have to *market* yourself. In the context of the "raw facts" that constitute the acting market, that is what the rest of this book is about.

So let's get started.

Acting jobs—and the entertainment industry

Whatever else acting might be, it is a job—and a job within one of America's biggest enterprises, the entertainment industry. You should be aware of the scale of this larger world—"the industry"—in which an actor plies his or her craft. It's one of the biggest in the world.

The worldwide gross movie theatre income of the films *Lord of the Rings: the Return of the Ring* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* have each already topped a billion dollars and *Titanic* is closing in on two billion. Add DVD sales and licensing arrangements, and you can double the figures; indeed, getting a fair share of that money was what the 2007–08 Hollywood writers' and directors' strikes were all about.

Theatre is not a poor relative here: you will probably be surprised to find out that more money is taken in at the Broadway theatre's collective box offices each season (\$938.5 million in the 2006–07 season) than by all New York's professional sports teams (the Yankees, Mets, Nets, Jets, Giants, Knicks, Rangers, and Islanders) *combined*. Even the major regional theatres run annual budgets ranging from \$5 million to \$15 million per year. Anyone who thinks today's theatre is a "fabulous invalid" is looking backward through a telescope.

Broadway shows encounter huge costs however—beginning around \$10 million and reaching the stratosphere with musicals: the 2007 London musical stage production of *Lord of the Rings* cost its producers an estimated \$49 million, and will doubtless cost

more when it transfers to New York. Film production costs even more—the average American studio film cost over \$100 million in 2006. These costs, and the potential revenues and losses, mean that the major dramatic media (stage, film, and TV) are not Mom and Pop enterprises any more. They are *very* big businesses.

Entertainment these days is a many-sided oligopoly, with vast interconnections among its many corporate members. The Disney Corporation has expanded from Mickey Mouse cartoons to a virtual lion in the multiple worlds of film production (Disney, Touchstone, Pixar, Miramax), television production (Buena Vista, Touchstone, the Disney Channel), stage production (*Mary Poppins*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Lion King*), books, magazines, recordings, radio, retailing, theme parks, and internet sites. Disney also owns a film library, a bunch of television stations, separate broadcast (ABC) and cable networks (ESPN, Toon Disney, Family Channel), a fleet of cruise ships, and newly renovated stage theatres—one on New York's Broadway and another across the country on Hollywood Boulevard. Indeed, Disney contracts alone provide 6.8% of the income for all *stage* actors in the United States, according to Actors Equity Association figures. Mickey is now a mouse that truly roars!

But Disney is not the only entertainment conglomerate. Time Warner now includes not only *Time* (a magazine) and Warner's (a film studio) but also HBO, Turner Broadcasting, New Line Cinema, CNN, and AOL, among many other news and entertainment companies. The Viacom conglomerate owns Paramount Pictures, MTV, Nickelodeon, BET, and Comedy Central, while GE's umbrella shields Universal Studios, NBC television, MSNBC, CNBC, the Bravo Channel, and the USA television network. Even newspapers are getting into the act, as when Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation added the *Wall Street Journal* to its accumulation of foxes (Twentieth Century Fox, Fox Searchlight Pictures, Fox-TV, Fox News, Fox Sports, FX), Harper Collins Publishing, and dozens of major newspapers and magazines on three continents.

These five megacorporations utterly dominate the industries in which actors play their professional roles, and, not surprisingly, the corporate execs running them make the most crucial decisions on what happens on the movie set, the TV studio, and sometimes even the Broadway stage.

Even live stage production, long the bastion of independent individual producers such as David Merrick and Alexander Cohen, has in the past twenty years become dominated by just three corporations—the Shuberts, the Nederlanders, and Jujamcyn—that own virtually all of New York’s Broadway theatres and many of the theatres in which Broadway shows appear on national tours. In sum, these are not the sorts of groups that hold bake sales to pay for the costumes.

Entertainment is not just one of the nation’s largest industries, however. It is also one of its most economically important. American entertainment (particularly through movies and television) provides the United States with—apart from airplanes—its strongest trade balance with the rest of the world. It truly is a blessing for the American economy. American films and TV shows—and the actors who appear in them—are as familiar in Rome, Rio, Seoul, and Jakarta as they are in Peoria and Sioux Falls. Broadway musicals, many of them cast in New York, are on the boards daily in major world capitals. And the spread of American films, theatre, and TV—and of American acting—has played a major role, like it or not, in making English the world’s universal entertainment language. Even foreign films these days are often filmed in English with American actors, such as Roman Polanski’s Polish/German film, *The Pianist*, starring American actor Adrian Brody. The reason? Major films need an international audience to break even. “Go above three million dollars and you have to sell abroad,” says a Spanish producer.

The point is that acting professionally puts you in the big leagues of a great international industry. You may rarely, if ever, see the big-wigs above you—the “dreadful pudder o’er our heads,” as King Lear says—but they’re there. They, their policies and influence, will determine much of what goes on in your professional life. As Hollywood casting director Francine Witkin makes clear, “Actors must understand this is a business and treat it as a business. They’re a product. Most people don’t think of themselves as products, they think of themselves as human beings with fantasies and dreams. They’ve got to realize what this business is and what the politics are.”

Art and industry

If acting is part of an industry, is it still an art? Well, of course. Indeed, one of the problems of acting professionally is that it’s an

art within an industry, within a world in which “the gross” and “B.O.” are both fiscal realities and cultural metaphors.

When young actors first read a trade paper like *Variety*, they might be excused if they think they’ve ended up with the *Wall Street Journal* or *National Hygiene*. “Grosses” and “B.O.” hold the main attention, page after page. “*Amazing Grace* grosses” headlined *Variety* when the film by that name had an “amazing gross” income at its weekend premiere. “B.O. flags in August sag” trumpeted a *Variety* column when one year’s late-summer blockbusters tanked at the ticket office—and the trade wasn’t talking about damp underarms.

The gross (income) and B.O. (box office revenue) are the bottom line of the accountant’s report. But grossness (in the sense of crassness) and the odor of mendacity—as Tennessee Williams might have said—often pervade the entertainment industries as well. Hollywood, of course, comes in for most of the disdain. Exposés such as William Bayer’s *Breaking Through*, *Selling Out*, *Dropping Dead*, Steven Bach’s *Final Cut*, Bernie Brillstein’s *Where Did I Go Right?*, and Lynda Obst’s *Hello, He Lied*—as well as plays such as John Patrick Shanley’s *Four Dogs and a Bone* and David Mamet’s *Speed the Plow*—show us the seamy, commercial side of tinseltown, where (we are told) lying, stealing, nepotism, lawsuits, and sexual politics are the order of the day. But the so-called legitimate theatre isn’t all that super-legit, either. For *Speed the Plow*, the (nonprofit) Lincoln Center Theatre production company cast Madonna as the female lead—not, one must imagine, wholly for her thespian talents (though they are considerable) but for the potential contribution to the gross receipts that such a sometime sex symbol and rock star might generate. The aroma of B.O. knows no geographical boundaries in the entertainment business.

Where do actors fit into the gross? The “suits” (that is, executives) are at the top, as in every industry. As for the actors, Samuel Beckett put it best:

Estragon: Where do we come in?

Vladimir: Come in? Come in? On our hands and knees!

(*Waiting for Godot*)

The most fundamental law of economics, as you probably know, is the law of supply and demand. In part it means that the more of something there is, the less anyone has to pay for it. Well, an awful lot of actors willing to work are out there—a fact not lost on theatre and film producers. In addition to the over 150,000 union actors already active in the profession, over 1,000 college drama departments are turning out new actors every year, and an even greater number of high school drama programs, private acting schools, conservatories, and private teachers are sending young men and women to New York and Hollywood with plans to “break into” the field. Thousands more simply head into town on their own. The supply of actors, in other words, vastly exceeds the demand—and the economics reflect this.

Although everyone in the Western world must know by now that a star can make \$25 million performing in a film, few are aware that the star’s fee will vacuum up half or more of the entire cost of making that film, which means that the rest of the actors (together with the several hundred other people involved in making it—from the director to the set dressers to the caterers) can only divide the other half, after the producer has also tapped that same pot for the scenery, costumes, rentals, royalties, and what-not.

The point is that today actor salaries, other than the star’s, are a stunningly *minor* part of the entertainment industry budget. As the “Secret Agent Man” in *Backstage’s* column said as this book was heading off to press, “You’re either getting millions or you’re getting scale,” which means that those film and TV pros who are *not* stars are working for the Screen Actors Guild’s minimum wage. And actors in low-budget films will receive even less, under a recently approved “SAG Modified Low Budget Fee” of \$268 per day. Yes, that may be more than you’re making now—but remember that, if hired, you’ll probably be making that for only *one day*—which could turn out to be the only day that year.

We want you to think about this. Young actors are often very idealistic about this inescapable reality of the business. Many are quick to point out that they don’t have any desire to become “stars” but are simply seeking steady acting work, say, an acting position at a modest repertory company in a medium-size town. They will, they proclaim, happily trade fame and riches for “just” a position that offers creative opportunities and artistic respectability. They don’t need a lot of money, they assert, “just enough to live

on.” Fine, but beware of the “just.” Having “just enough to live on” is the big problem! Surprise! Merely rejecting Broadway and Hollywood does not magically get you into the Denver Theatre Center any more than rejecting an unoffered Mercedes Benz will put a bicycle in your driveway. The fact is that it is *desperately difficult* for a beginner to get *any* professional acting job. At *any* theatre. In *any* city.

At a statistical level, your chances are about one in a hundred—one in a hundred *literally*, and maybe one in a thousand if the truth be known. That’s the law of supply and demand working, and in acting the supply is all but unlimited. The fact is that you should no more expect to get a paid acting job because of your undergraduate drama degree than your brother can expect to become a U.S. senator on the basis of his BA in political science. You can *hope*, of course, but not *expect*. “Listen,” says a prominent and hardworking casting director (and most theatre professionals will give you the same advice), “if you can think of anything you can possibly do instead of acting, do it! Get out now! Save yourself the heartache and the pain—and save me the time.”

Developing a mature viewpoint

The previous paragraphs contain some hard lessons, but they are basic adult realities—and they are lessons worth learning. If you’re going to pursue an acting career, you’re going to have to deal with adult reality. And you’re going to have to be an adult—while retaining enough of the childlike innocence required of any artist.

What does being an adult mean? It means, basically, that you—not your parents or teachers—will be taking the initiative in your own life. You will be making (and responding to) your own assignments, as it were. The biggest difference between life as a student and life after graduation is that after graduation *nobody assigns you anything*. Nobody tells you what to do next. Nobody *cares* what you do next. And you receive no grades. As wonderful as this may seem, it can lead to life’s first great agonies: What do I do now? How good am I? Am I going to make it? Why doesn’t anybody care about me?

No one in the adult world will answer those questions for you—unless you pay them to (in which case they are not unbiased) or unless they love you (in which case they are *definitely* not unbiased)!

Moreover, you have no *automatic* community to rely on. Think of it: From kindergarten to college or graduate school, you have been thrown in with dozens of people (at close range) and hundreds more (at extended range) close to your age and with parallel aspirations. They're now gone—or at least they're not showing up in your life in the way they once showed up at your nine o'clock class. To have a community, you must re-find your old friends and, more important, find some new ones. (Modern technology comes to your aid here: Facebook, one of the great inventions of the twenty-first century, is—along with its descendents and imitators—one of the true innovations of modern professional life.)

But along with maintaining and developing a community, you still must assume leadership of your own life. And this is harder: You are now wholly responsible for your decisions and accountable for your actions. Your life is now about working, not whining; striving, not complaining; staying focused, not being buffeted by the winds of gossip, empty promises, or false praise.

And yes, one thing you need to get out of your system right away—if you want to be an actor—is your incessant craving for praise.

Praise is so easily given and so inexpensive to part with as to be functionally meaningless (and cruelly misleading) in the adult world, where it is mainly a soothing balm in the often abrasive world of doing business. It costs nothing (and therefore means nothing) for casting directors to say “Oh, you're very talented, I loved your audition!” It's simply the easiest (and safest) way to turn you down. In the words of Pauline Kael, “Hollywood is the only place where you can die of encouragement.” Nothing is more depressing than to hear actors coming back from an audition exclaiming enthusiastically “I didn't get the part, but I could tell that they liked me!” It's depressing because professional actors don't audition to be liked; they audition to be hired. Acting professionally is a business. What difference does it make whether they like you if they never hire you? And *do* they like you? Maybe they're just trying to get rid of you. Some actors hang around for years subsisting on such dollops of empty praise.

Praise is an incentive to children; it's the A+ or the gold star or the pat on the back that induces good study habits and good behavior. But praise is mainly a lubricant in an adult business that generates enormous friction and despair among its participants.

Praise is doled out by worldly-wise producers mainly to keep you from seeking retaliation. They may give you praise when you seem to need it, but they will give you a job only when *they* need it—and that's where you have to learn to fit in.

Here's to you

If you've read this far—and haven't yet thrown the book against the wall—you might just have a chance. If you suspect that the discussion on the past few pages has been designed to alarm you, your suspicions are indeed correct. There are much pleasanter things to say about acting as a profession, however, and there is much more positive advice to be given. The rest of the book will move in this direction.

Of course acting is one of the most thrilling and wonderful things you can do with your life. If the raw facts of the entertainment industry don't frighten you off altogether, if you have a passion for acting and for the theatrical arts, if you think you have the gifts and the drive and the emotional stability to begin and sustain a career—well, you could surely do worse than give it your best shot. The challenge is daunting, but the quest will teach you more about yourself—and more about life—than almost any other. You will find the pursuit demanding, sometimes depressing, but much of the time exhilarating as well. You're undertaking a high-stakes adventure. The rest of this book, like an adventure, might even be fun.

Always know, however, that you're going to be in the competition of your life. Don't settle for half measures. This is a business of champions. Your competitors are every bit as dedicated as you are. They too have their dreams and their fantasies and their hometown reviews from the *Fresno Bee* and the *Keokuk Gazette*. They've read this book—or others like it. But realize also that they're no more likely to make it than you are—at least at this point. The path, though desperately narrow, is not altogether blocked. By all means, go for it if you want to—but go for it all the way.

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