

Seven Pillars Acting

A Comprehensive Technique for the Modern Actor

Second Edition

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INTRODUCTION

There are two slogans that are crucial to keep in the forefront of the actor's mind. They have a prominent place in my consciousness and often fly from my mouth faster than I can restrain them. The first slogan comes from the main inspiration for this technique:

Acting is living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.

—Sanford Meisner¹

This is the golden rule of acting. As long as the actor is living in the circumstances of the character, acting is easeful and effortless. This leads us to an expression I often use:

To act is to transform with ease and authenticity.

The two slogans go hand in hand, as they both crystallize where the actor's priorities must lie. Our craft is about setting up imaginative conditions that allow the actor to behave, speak, and feel as the character. Acting is not an escape; actors put themselves in the line of fire, exposing themselves to tremendously high stakes to tell a story. Integration, the harmonizing of the actor with the role, is vital. This is our ideal: to train the actor to live and breathe within their own body, mind, and spirit within the *circumstances* of their character.

Seven Pillars Acting is a comprehensive acting technique intended to help actors transform into character by living truthfully under imaginary circumstances. The Pillars strive to convey a path for the artist, but they do so with the utmost reverence for the pure spark of natural inspiration that occurs in the actor. The Seven Pillars do not replace that spark but coax it into a flame and, from there, into a hearth the artist can call home. Through the study of acting craft, we are harnessing and rearing that creative spark that ignites in childhood and early adulthood.

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THE SEVEN PILLARS

1. Contact
2. Circumstance
3. Meaning
4. Emotional Life
5. Objective
6. Action
7. Physical Life

Contact is the foundational Pillar. It pertains to the ever-changing relationship an actor/character has with the other person in the scene. Envision it as a wide, short Pillar on top of which our other Pillars stand. As the base Pillar, Contact supports the others, in that all acting is dependent on relationship. **Circumstance** is the luminescent, central Pillar that dominates the technique. Circumstances are past, present, and future events of the scene *as the character perceives them*, which reveal the confines and contours of a character's point of view. With its roots planted firmly in the Contact Pillar, its significance radiates through the structure.

Branching out from Circumstance are the remaining five Pillars. **Meaning** refers to the character's emotional interpretation of their circumstances. This Pillar is smaller compared to the others, yet it serves an important function: it is the point at which the actor makes an honest assessment of their connection to the story. Stemming from Meaning, **Emotional Life** bridges the gap between the character and the actor through imaginative and emotional exploration. Once the actor is authentically connected to the world of the character, they are ready to *do* something about it, which brings us to **Objective**. The fifth Pillar addresses the needs and wants of the character, and the **Action** Pillar tends to the tactics the character uses to achieve their objective. The last Pillar, **Physical Life**, deals with how the body and voice activate the actor's imagination and contribute to characterization. Together, all Seven Pillars support the actor's truthful performance, which balances effortlessly on top.

Seven Pillars Acting is deeply rooted in theories and techniques from the great acting teachers and theorists of the past and present, principally Sanford Meisner, Konstantin Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski, and Ken Washington. These ideas have passed through the hands and hearts of innumerable teachers, actors, and innovators, such as Declan Donnellan, Vicki Hart, Richard Brestoff, Robert Cohen, Annie Loui, and Phil Thompson, to name a few. I make every effort to give credit where it is due. Seven Pillars Acting attempts to organize and synthesize their disparate approaches into one modern and coherent process. And its unique approach to Circumstance serves as the cornerstone of the entire technique.

The whole system hinges on the actor's comprehension of it, as it is through the lens of Circumstance that all other Pillars must be filtered. Seven Pillars Acting arranges its lessons in such a way to give the actor a dependable and repeatable process. Actors need structure and order; all art forms

are founded on this principle. And yet the Pillars are pliable, which is why they are *pillars*, not steps. In other words, the actor-in-training learns them individually, one through seven, and after that they are free to enter into a role from any angle, which allows them to stay adaptable to the creative process and timeline. With Circumstance as the hub of the wheel, the Pillars transform the way an actor approaches a role. When the actor perceives their part through the scope of Circumstance, then all other Pillars become intuitive and accessible. In turn, they experience greater ease as they negotiate the demands of the part.

Once learned and mastered, the Pillars take organic shape in the actor's craft. When I begin to work on a role, I attempt to listen to what the character and story are asking of me first, and from there I can build my process. Seven Pillars Acting allows for that flexibility, and yet I always know that if I get lost or confused I can return to the fundamental progression the Pillars lay out for me. Therefore, the actor must not be dogmatic about their technique but rather be intuitive and open to what a role requires of them.

When your car breaks down, do you attempt to fix it yourself? If you are like me, you call a trusted mechanic on the double because you have no idea what is under the hood. This is often the relationship actors have with their craft. When a performance "breaks down," the actor doesn't know how to fix it, which may result in them needlessly criticizing themselves and doubting their talent. In Seven Pillars Acting, you learn every inch of your process so that you can address any issue that may come up. You should be able to depend on yourself, not a teacher or director, to fix your *car-aft*. That is artistic autonomy, and it is the goal for anyone studying this technique.

Ultimately, Seven Pillars Acting engenders confidence, ownership, and ease, three crucial elements in a performance. Particularly for the beginning actor, the Pillars carve a clear path that leads to personal and artistic transformation. It is this confidence that empowers the actor to make bolder choices and to plumb greater depths of their humanity to offer to the character at hand. The easeful actor has tremendous presence; they belong in the world of the character because they are authentically living within the imaginary circumstances.

HOW THE PILLARS CAME ABOUT

Seven Pillars Acting is born out of years of practice and application acting professionally and teaching in the classroom. First and foremost, it is inspired by the many techniques I learned in my training. At NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, I learned the Meisner technique from Vicki Hart, the Neo-Classical method from Louis Scheeder, Viewpoints from Mary Overlie, Suzuki from the SITI Company, Chekhovian Balinese mask work from Per Brahe, and Plastiques from Raina Von Waldenburg and Stephen Wanhg, to name a few. It was a wonderful education. Upon graduating, I left school grateful for this abundance of knowledge but still seeking a clear, unified technique.

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As I began to work professionally, I slowly constructed a path to create a role, as all actors must do. Teaching came to me organically; friends and I helped each other prepare for auditions by swapping coaching sessions. And yet at the time, how I was teaching my colleagues took me by surprise. Without question, it was rooted in my experience and education, primarily my Meisner background, but it seemed to address the lingering questions I had about acting. Curious, I began to blog about these ideas, and it was at this time that I fell in love with teaching and acting theory. This led me to open my private studio in New York City. My curiosity and interest next led me to California to receive an MFA from the University of California at Irvine, where I studied with great professors and artists: Robert Cohen, Annie Loui, Phil Thompson, Gary Busby, Eli Simon, Richard Brestoff, and Cynthia Bassham.

Upon completing my degree, the technique took full shape in my mind and in my teaching. I realized that I needed a place where I could implement my ideas on acting and help actors directly. So, I became the owner and head teacher of the Actor's Studio of Orange County. A few years later, I opened a second school: Seven Pillars Acting Studio in Los Angeles. Both locations exclusively offered the full technique; all instructors receive certification to teach the Pillars, and students moved through a structured program that culminated in a showcase for the film and television industry. I then sought to bring the Pillars to colleges. When Louisiana State University hired me to be the Head of the Undergraduate Performance Concentration and to teach both graduate and undergraduate acting, the Pillars took another exciting step. All the changes and evolutions in the technique since moving into academia revealed to me that a second edition was needed. At present, teachers and professors around the country have adopted the Pillars as their core or supplementary curriculum, and the technique is taught at institutions all over the United States. It thrills me to observe students and actors from all schools and programs booking professional work in film, television, theatre, and commercials and gaining management and agency representation with which to seek out even greater opportunities. Meanwhile, my curiosity continues: what is the ideal path of the actor? How does one *teach* acting?

What has been astounding to witness is how the Pillars help brand new actors transform into talented, working professionals. This is the precise reason why I have written this book: to make it possible for actors to learn acting in the most progressive and comprehensive way so that they can tap into their gifts and share them with the world. There is a need among actors for a technique that harmonizes all the brilliant ideas and methods since Stanislavski's system in the early twentieth century, one that utilizes our modern minds and sensibilities as well as the advancements in neuroscience, psychology, and society today. I have sought this synthesis my entire career and have witnessed the powerful benefits of teaching this system.

HELPFUL CONTEXT FOR THIS BOOK

This book is part theory and part application. Ideally, the reader practices the exercises with classmates or partners while reading chapters consecutively. If the reader doesn't have a class they can apply this to, they can simply read the text and visualize themselves applying the concepts and exercises as they go. Seasoned actors coming to the text for a refresher or new source of inspiration may find this path perfectly suitable. Readers may also try applying directly what they read to a role they are working on. It is not recommended to read the Pillars out of order when learning about this method for the first time. My hope is that each Pillar and the exercises laid out in this text will aid in the actor's process and continue to influence the quality of work in our industry.

Throughout the book, I will apply the technique to a scene from Diana Son's play *Stop Kiss* along with a few other selections. Although this is from a play, I don't teach stage craft, vocal projection, or any other subject more applicable to a theatrical venue. The naturalism written into the text lends itself as much to film as it does to theatre. I believe acting is acting is acting. The adjustments you make for the different media—film, television, online media, theatre, musical theatre, commercials, and voice-over—are easy to adapt to in comparison to the rigors of simply learning how to act. Imagine acting as the hub of the wheel and all media of acting are spokes extending from the center.

A quick disclaimer: for simplicity's sake, I will refer to actors and actresses alike with gender-neutral pronouns: they, them, theirs. This helps all readers see themselves in the text. That being said, where our texts imagine characters on the binary, I've honored those choices. Therefore, our main character "Callie" from *Stop Kiss*, whose identity as a woman is intrinsic and thematic to the story, will be addressed with she/her pronouns.

Transformation, in acting terms, is the unification of the actor with the character, a process that requires rigorous emotional and imaginative work. This process results in tremendous ease and presence within the actor. Seven Pillars Acting aims to achieve this precious, alchemical state by guiding the actor through the seven essential Pillars: **Contact, Circumstance, Meaning, Emotional Life, Objective, Action, and Physical Life.**

LET'S BUILD A HOUSE

You have to build a house before you can live in it, right? It's much the same for the actor creating a role. In order to bring a character to life, the actor must craft their circumstances, history, and life conditions. Only then can the spontaneity, cognition, energy, and emotional life of the character inhabit it. The playwright or screenwriter has drafted the vision of the character. The script is much like an architect's blueprint: from this design, you (as the

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contractor in this analogy) have the task of making it a physical reality. With blueprint, i.e. script, in hand, we get to work on building this structure. The first step in any construction is to break ground.

Break Ground

This is the first step of initiating a process. Reckon with the possibility that you are at the beginning of a tremendous journey of self-exploration. Acknowledge to yourself that the path will be challenging, frustrating, thrilling, and confusing at times. Celebrate this beginning; cut a ribbon to recognize the potential you are about to tap into.

Know, too, that to learn anything you must unlearn as well. In this way, the individual embarks on breaking down outmoded forms of thought and emotional boundaries that went uninterrupted and unquestioned for some time. Unlearning is a humbling experience; it threatens the ego. But know that this is one of the most valuable sensations an actor can experience because they are always small compared to the vast unknown that a fresh character or script promises.

Break ground by making a firm commitment of time and resources to your craft. Acting training will strongly impact the actor, but the lessons will have a short life span if the actor has not carved out their commitment to them. Anything worth doing requires patience and determination. Therefore, the process of committing time and resources is the exact test of character the actor must take. As the saying goes, there is no such thing as a half-commitment. When the actor takes the bold move to begin their learning process and commits to the training, then the god of their creativity takes a leap.

Note

- 1 Meisner, Sanford and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. Random House, 1987, p. 87.

CORE PRINCIPLES

As an artform and practice, acting evolves. Actors today are different from actors a hundred or fifty or even twenty years ago. This is because as education evolves, our art form, in turn, must grow. The shifts and sea changes in society and collective knowledge set off a chain-reaction, requiring our praxis to meet the moment. Our process should reflect the changes occurring around us. Consider the following core principles as essential elements of our shared experience of acting.

ACTING IS ACTING IS ACTING

As mentioned in the introduction, Seven Pillars Acting does not distinguish itself as exclusively for film or for theatre; it is intended for all arenas of acting. With a solid foundation in technique, the actor can adapt to any medium. Theatre acting and film acting are more alike than they are different. The difference is the proximity to the audience and point of view of the camera. Adjusting to the different media is far easier than learning how to act. Therefore, in Seven Pillars Acting, we offer a system that suits all major media: film, tv, and theatre. For this reason, we do not typically have a camera in our foundational acting classrooms. Nor do we teach projection and stage presence. On occasion we film, and in Pillars five through seven some focus is given to blocking, but that is about it. It's hard enough to know how to act, so we give space to do just that. Students can concurrently or subsequently specialize in acting for the camera, and voice and movement training, Shakespeare, etc. Therefore, you may notice that I freely interchange film with theatre, screenplay with script, and screenwriter with playwright. I am referring to them all.

COMMITMENT TO EQUITY, DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESS

You are my Other Self. If I love and respect you, I love and respect myself. If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself. In other words, you should love your brother or sister as yourself *because they are yourself.*

—Luis Valdez¹

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Seven Pillars Acting training respects and values all ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, genders, gender identities, religions, ages, abilities, and cultures. We treat each other with respect, dignity, and compassion. Material used in our training must also reflect this commitment. Material that degrades, objectifies, or espouses racist, sexist, or bigoted stereotypes has no place in our work. There may be violent and hateful language and actions in a script, but the inherent story or themes must hold true to our higher human values. Teachers and students alike are encouraged to “clean house” by educating themselves on the long and on-going history of racism, ableism, misogyny/feminism, homophobia, and transphobia in our culture and in the entertainment industry. With this knowledge, we can subvert these social ills in our selection of material, depiction of characters, and commitment to representation in casting.

DOING OVER FEELING

Acting is not feeling. Acting is taking action under imaginary circumstances. Emotion is an authentic byproduct of the actor’s imaginative connection to the circumstances and commitment to the intent and action of the character. When actors indicate emotion or effort to convey character, they are out of alignment. Several chapters in the book will extrapolate on this point.

TECHNIQUE OVER TALENT

All human beings are actors. Most need help to explore and discover how to release their creative impulses without physical, emotional, or intellectual resistance.

—Luis Valdez²

We believe in technique over talent. The teacher cannot touch or address an actor’s talent. The teacher can only give the actor the tools to discover, cultivate, and share their talents. The definition of talent is also relative. There is no one standard of what good acting is. Talent is inborn and indwelling within every person. Natural ability is a real thing, but anyone can be taught to act in a truthful, specific, easeful, and deep way within their own range of aptitude. We don’t believe “you either have it or you don’t.” If we can help an actor access their truth and their uniqueness, then we can help them transform into character with ease and authenticity.

PROCESS OVER PERFORMANCE

Actors must fall in love with their process in order to have longevity in their careers. My father taught me from an early age, “do what you have the patience for.” If you rush to results, you cannot savor the journey. And in this career, which has zero guarantees and so much rejection, one must get

their kicks from the work itself. If you are holding your breath for your “big break,” you are suffocating. The work, the pleasure, the satisfaction, the meaningfulness, and sense of completeness you feel happen all at once. Like a good workout, the work induces a stress of its own, but you swiftly experience positive feedback, affirming your efforts. I’ve always been very risk averse in my life. I don’t like jumps, skiing, or physical thrills very much because I am too afraid of physically hurting myself. Instead, I consider myself an emotional risk-taker. I love to stretch myself to the limits of what I can imagine, and I don’t mind the emotional consequences. They feel like roller coasters to me. When I complete a homework session that involves some emotional exploration, the rest of the day feels effortless. More than that, I relish the relative peace in my life since I just experienced imaginary circumstances that were not so peaceful. That being said, when I need a distraction from my every day, acting offers me the time to opt-out of “Sonya Cooke’s life” and into the life of another. The experiences we have in our process are *all we have*. Personally, I avoid even thinking of performance or results. I have no control over how an audience will perceive me. The only levers of power I have are in the tools I use and my willingness to play. That is why I am still acting today.

ARTIST OVER EGO

I have a spiritual coach who says, “Ego always speaks first, Spirit speaks after.” As much as we’d like to think that we can negotiate the twists and turns of the day, most often our initial reaction is one that comes from our very transactional and neurotic ego. It’s the fear-based part of the mind that reacts from the vantage point of lack and limitation. With a breath and a beat, our better or higher self (some call it “spirit” or “soul”; for our purposes, we will call it the “artist”) opens to consider our situation from a more forgiving and loving place.

This is hopefully where your “artist” resides as well. While the ego seeks to defend and steel the self from those who *seem* to threaten it, the artist seeks to connect, collaborate, and create. Your artist is also quite vulnerable, irrational, and sensitive, which are all great assets as an actor. (Yes, even irrationality can be a plus!) This is all the more reason why the ego can be on guard, protecting you, the artist, from perceived harm. In this way, the ego is vigilant, and when you know this about yourself, you are better equipped to allow the voice of the ego to float into and out of your mind silently.

When your acting teacher gives you feedback, notice the desire to defend or justify your position—that is your ego. It isn’t wrong, *per se*, but its needs never actually serve the work of the artist. Instead, breathe in the feedback and set your intent on responding from the point of view of the artist. (Of course, this guidance assumes that the environment and relationship you are engaged in at the moment is built on trust and mutual respect.) When teaching, I also aim to communicate from my artist as opposed to my ego, as this

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better enables my students to grow. When my students sense that my goal is to connect to them artist-to-artist, the joy in the room is palpable. But when a student lets their ego speak first, they block their ability to grow. The ego does not want to learn; rather, the ego wants to stay in control. If you are unsure of which voice in you stems from ego and which stems from your artist, use this simple measurement: are you experiencing judgment, or are you experiencing understanding or the desire for understanding? When you can receive and respond from a place of understanding and grace, the artist is able to play. The artist will not feel safe in circumstances of fear, judgment, or guilt. One may feel very entitled to their feelings of the latter, and yet the actor must ask themselves, do they want to learn? Play? Grow? Then, let the voice of the ego flow through you and access the next voice that will follow if you allow it—that of your artist.

AGENCY OVER ADHERENCE

The purpose of the Pillars is to give you agency over your process. Adherence to the “rules” or to an individual teacher is not expected or required. This is a subject of tremendous change and discussion within performance and educational communities. The shift has been underway for decades, ever since the proliferation of the internet, actually. The exposure of tremendous knowledge to the masses revealed a weak link in professional acting training and higher education—that of the persona of the teacher, or guruism. In previous generations, and often still today, master teachers were lauded as superior human beings. And when wielding an acting classroom, these master teachers had a fearful opportunity to disempower their students. Any instructor in an authority position must recognize the potential for students to defer their agency to their instructor. The leveling of hierarchical learning has exposed the fact that information and knowledge are readily in the hands of the learner. And, therefore, students of any subject deserve to participate in a manner that gives them agency.

A branch of the performance industry that has made significant progress on this subject is intimacy choreography, which brought consent-based praxis downstage center. There are differing but similar schools of thought in intimacy choreography, and the one I’ve spent the most time studying and researching is Theatre Intimacy Education, spearheaded by Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard. In their workshops and in the book *Staging Sex*, they detail numerous tools for building a consent-based practice. They go on to detail desexualized and specific language for staging intimacy. This means that consent is the foundation for all intimacy on stage or on screen. But of course, they recognize that the issue of consent should be incorporated in every stage of actor training. I defer to their work certainly for all intimacy staging, but their guidelines for autonomy, agency, and consent are very practical in all acting classrooms and rehearsal spaces.

CIRCUMSTANCE OVER CHARACTER

There is no Pillar of Character for a reason. Focusing on the character can lead to self-aware performances and actors that are inclined to judge their character. Instead, we focus outwardly on the character's circumstances. If you find yourself saying "my character this ..." and "my character that ...," try instead to lead with "my circumstances are *this*" and "my circumstances are *that*." This invites the actor to imagine the circumstances, as opposed to playing a character. Remember that no one thinks of themselves as a character. We are who we are because of our circumstances, upbringing and all. People, by and large, do not seek to be a character, and similarly, the characters we see depicted in the vast majority of stories are the same. They emerge from their circumstances and seek to live a better day, just as you do. This brings us to our next core principle.

COMPASSION OVER JUDGMENT

Compassion evolves from the awareness of the perils brought about by judgement, and the actor's vulnerability is expressed in their willingness to make space inside themselves to embrace this apparent stranger in the process.

—Kym Moore³

As a part of my own education, I took a course with casting director Tracy Kilpatrick, who is based in the Southeast. I presented a scene for the first class, and Tracy said, "You are judging your character." I was surprised by the comment given that I thought I was playing the character authentically. Tracy went on to explain that judging a character often means holding a negative point of view against your character, but the implications of judgment don't stop there. Judgment can include any assumption of the character's behavior or, simply put, an *idea* of character, positive or not. So, when I have an idea about character, consciously or unconsciously, that idea will impress itself on my depiction.

Ideas are tricky. Of course, we encourage actors to have ideas about the stories they get to tell. And yet, we must be aware of the slippery slope on which ideas balance. Is the idea coming from a place of compassion? Or does it come from a place of judgment? An idea can start off as an insight into the character's point of view, which is fantastic. But if the idea dictates to the actor how to play them, then often we are left indicating character, which cannot be authentic.

Judging others is a knee-jerk reaction in life that we have to train out of our system. Surviving the day involves making snap assumptions of those around us and acting on those slight impressions. Actors who are committed to cultivating their curiosity must start with an awareness of this compulsion. From there, they can move toward questioning their ideas, assumptions, and judgments, first of their own lives and next their character's world and persona.

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Eradicating judgment has become a spiritual and philosophical practice for me. When I judge someone, I cannot have peace. It's as simple as that. And I find this point of view relates to acting. When I judge my character, I cannot become her. Instead, a commitment to compassion must be our mission.

PAIN OVER SUFFERING

Characters are rarely blissed out in their circumstances. Rather, emotional discomfort is the likely experience you will have as an actor playing characters. When the circumstances are extreme, you may be tasked to experience pain. Yup, I said it. Pain. I accept that this is a part of the job, and that I am able to safely and temporarily experience emotional and/or mental pain in order to tell the story. On the other hand, no actor should suffer due to their acting work. How do you know the difference? Pain feels temporary and present. Suffering extends beyond the acting event and seems to ricochet into the actor's life, past, present, and future. Both pain and suffering will feel personal, but when crafted correctly, the actor can exit the painful experience when they like, whereas suffering seems to occur when the emotional toll of the character surpasses the actor's emotional coping abilities.

How do you know if you can handle the emotional life of the character? In truth, you can only find out by living out the imaginary circumstances. In your homework, you can take baby steps toward the character's experience so as to ease yourself into the acute emotions. Homework is your refuge because you are fully in control of how you engage with the character's circumstances. And if you feel that a moment is causing you to suffer, then it is best to figure out a new way into the role. But actors are often afraid to feel pain, and this will stop them from taking imaginative leaps. I hope you *want* to test out how you would live under those imaginary circumstances! And rejoice in knowing that they are not the truth about you. Yes, it will hurt a little. But you are strong enough to handle it, and you have the agency to disengage when you need to. This book will be full of clear direction on how to engage with emotions in safe and effective ways.

OUTSIDE-IN VS. INSIDE-OUT

These opposing concepts will be spelled out in greater clarity in the Physical Life Pillar, but still, they are omnipresent in the entire system of thought. Inside-out pertains to crafting a character from the mind and imagination first and allowing it to manifest outwardly. Outside-in describes an acting process that starts with the body, voice, or an external stimulus, which then kicks off a creative chain reaction in the mind and imagination. *Seven Pillars Acting*, as it is written and taught, is mostly inside-out, and it is the final Pillar, Physical Life, that is meant to upset the apple cart, turn everything inside-out by tasking the actor to play outside-in. The point of this final

lesson and overhaul of the previous steps is to blatantly challenge the actor to reject acting rules. Do not act prescriptively. Learn the Pillars one through seven, then practice the Pillars one through seven, and *then* start to mix it up. Follow your own creative impulse and your needs of the day. I hope to empower you with multiple avenues for entering into character, whether or not they are outside-in or inside-out.

BREAKING THE GOOD/BAD PARADIGM

Actors will ask, “Was it good?” Or they will say, “Oh, that was bad.” What a judgmental way to perceive your work. Instead of thinking on the good/bad paradigm, let’s switch to the effective/ineffective paradigm. Another one is useful/not useful. It is far healthier to analyze your choices and work this way. The good/bad paradigm will keep the actor fearful of failure, but the effective/ineffective paradigm feels more neutral and process oriented. Throughout the book, *parallel* and *perpendicular tracks* are used to convey when an actor is in alignment with their character and when they are at cross-purposes. This new paradigm helps to clarify what needs work in an actor’s process and what is already serving the performance without a negative pass/fail aftertaste.

TWO RULES FOR PERFORMANCE

Inspired by *Backwards and Forwards* by David Ball, there are two rules to live by as an actor. Rule number one: the story has to move forward. In other words, the plot has to progress at a steady pace. David Ball writes, “A forward is any of a myriad of devices ... that make an audience eager for what’s coming up.”⁴ There must be a sense of natural causation in your acting. This causes that, which causes this, which then causes that. And audiences want to see those actions accumulate, resolve, explode, transform, or whatever the next inevitable step is. As an actor, this pertains to your Action and Objective Pillars the most. Are you fighting for something that would improve your circumstances on a moment-to-moment basis? Are you taking action accordingly? If you are, then you are playing forward. You are playing to win.

Rule number two: something has got to change. This pertains to staying ahead of your audience by frequently delivering shifts to the picture, image, or event. Ball refers to the interplay of stasis and intrusion to deliver change for the audience.⁵ If you don’t dispense change, and instead you keep playing the same action or event, your audience will get ahead of you by anticipating your next action. Think of that famous Einstein quote, that insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results. Your audience will question your character’s humanity if they don’t sense that you are adapting in the moment to what is happening around you. Deliver change by diversifying your actions, allowing the thought to manifest through the body, and act on impulse. Rule number two also pertains to circumstances. The actor registers

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“change” by delineating the scene into sections, or episodes. In turn, the actor avoids knowing too much in the scene. If they play the end of the scene, then we cannot see how they got there. So, by breaking the scene into sections, they will *delay discovery*, which ensures that the audience experiences successive changes in the storyline.

WHAT IS “TRUTH”?

When pretending to be someone else, you must portray believable human behavior.

—David Ball⁶

Let’s start off with an awareness that although the bulk of acting work in the United States and in mainstream film and television around the world requires actors to depict believable characters, certainly this is not true for all material, media, countries, cultures, and genres. Other forms of acting and performance abide by their own historied aesthetics and processes. Rooted in a legacy of acting methodologies from mostly Slavic, European, and American origins, *Seven Pillars Acting* is geared toward preparing actors for the otherwise prevailing style of acting. I do not claim to write on the art of acting in its vast entirety, as that is beyond my expertise and scope.

Throughout this book, the reader learns both standards for truthfulness as well as methods for accessing or depicting it. Which begs the question, what is truth in the performative sense? And who is the arbiter of truth? The teacher? The director? The actor? The audience? In *truth*, all of the above are entitled to their experience of it, but ultimately the truth we aim to center is that of the actor. Yet this requires that the actor determines for themselves what truthfulness means. For our purposes in this book, I’d like to set some parameters that may help the actor sense their own truth.

In simple terms, we will determine truthfulness in acting by the actor’s sincerity and openness to their emotions under imaginary circumstances. Truthfulness is a moment-to-moment experience, as the internal safeguards instilled within us are ever fastidiously attempting to suppress or stifle the displeasing and vulnerable sensation of emotion. Certainly, we do not pursue empirical truth as would an investigator or scientist. As later chapters will unpack, objectivity is not valuable to the actor. Rather, one’s subjective experience is prime. This means that one’s point of view does not need outside validation or a factual basis. Instead, an actor’s truth emanates from their unique point of view, their somatic sense, and their access to a wide range of emotions. One’s truth is not necessarily pleasant; in fact, it can feel raw and vulnerable. Truth may not feel familiar either, as it can be through acting that the actor safely explores new emotions and physiological responses, new experiences, and unknown feelings. One knows they are on the path to truthfulness in acting when they feel the vulnerability that authentic presence in the moment generates.

This is why truthfulness can be risky, even scary, to experience. Actor and director Craig Ester cautions that, “Actors of Color in general are often code switching to be legible to their White⁷ professors, directors, and acting counterparts.” As a result, they “have the barrier of code switching as one of the obstacles to being able to share their truth.”⁸ Although the onus does not lie exclusively on the actor of Color, I encourage them to seek out teachers who they feel may hold space for their authentic expression and to simultaneously acknowledge this as a barrier to overcome in their training. Teachers and directors as well can add tools for ensuring their students of Color have as much access to their truth in the classroom as anyone else.⁹

This topic will be explored throughout the book, employing additional terminology such as *sense of truth* and *truth barometer*, to name a few. I invite readers to seek out for themselves how they can sense their truthfulness within their own bodies, hearts, and minds.

IN SUMMATION

Today, there is an awakening to the power of perspective on life. Truth is becoming more and more subjective, for better and for worse. Seven Pillars Acting recognizes these shifts in our states of mind and builds its concepts from this premise: that it is our perspective that determines our circumstance. In many ways, character is born from circumstance. But the character cannot come alive without the native spirit of the actor. And this is why no two actors could manifest the same characterization. To use the psychology concept of nature vs. nurture, it is both the nature of the actor and the nurture of the character’s circumstance that combine to create the ideal performance. For this reason, the Circumstance Pillar is the most critical of all the lessons; it is the hub of the wheel and thusly requires the most diligence in study.

Notes

- 1 Valdez, Luis. *Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being*. Routledge, 2021. p. 126.
- 2 Valdez, Luis. *Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being*. Routledge, 2021, p. 57.
- 3 Moore, Kym. “Words of Wisdom for Actors.” *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, edited by Sharrell Luckett and Tia Shaffer, Routledge, 2017, p. 215.
- 4 Ball, David. *Backwards and Forwards*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1983, p. 46.
- 5 Ball, David. *Backwards and Forwards*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1983, p. 22.
- 6 Ball, David. *Backwards and Forwards*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1983, p. 27.
- 7 Note the choice to capitalize both “White” and “Black.” MLA guidelines recommend: “When the dictionary gives both the capitalized and lowercased form as acceptable options—as many do for *black* and *Black*, for example—choose one and be consistent.” I felt confident about capitalizing Black, but was not sure of the best approach to take for the term “white.” After some research and consultation, I’ve decided to capitalize them similarly. Writing white in the lowercase

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could give the impression that it is the default, neutral, or a standard. According to the guidelines set by the American Psychological Association and the National Institutes of Health, “the capital letter for racial identity is not intended to elevate, but to situate.”

⁸ Ester, Craig. “Chapter Notes.” Received by Sonya Cooke, May 9 2025.

⁹ Specific tools and suggestions for teachers are included in “The Teaching Actor” chapter.