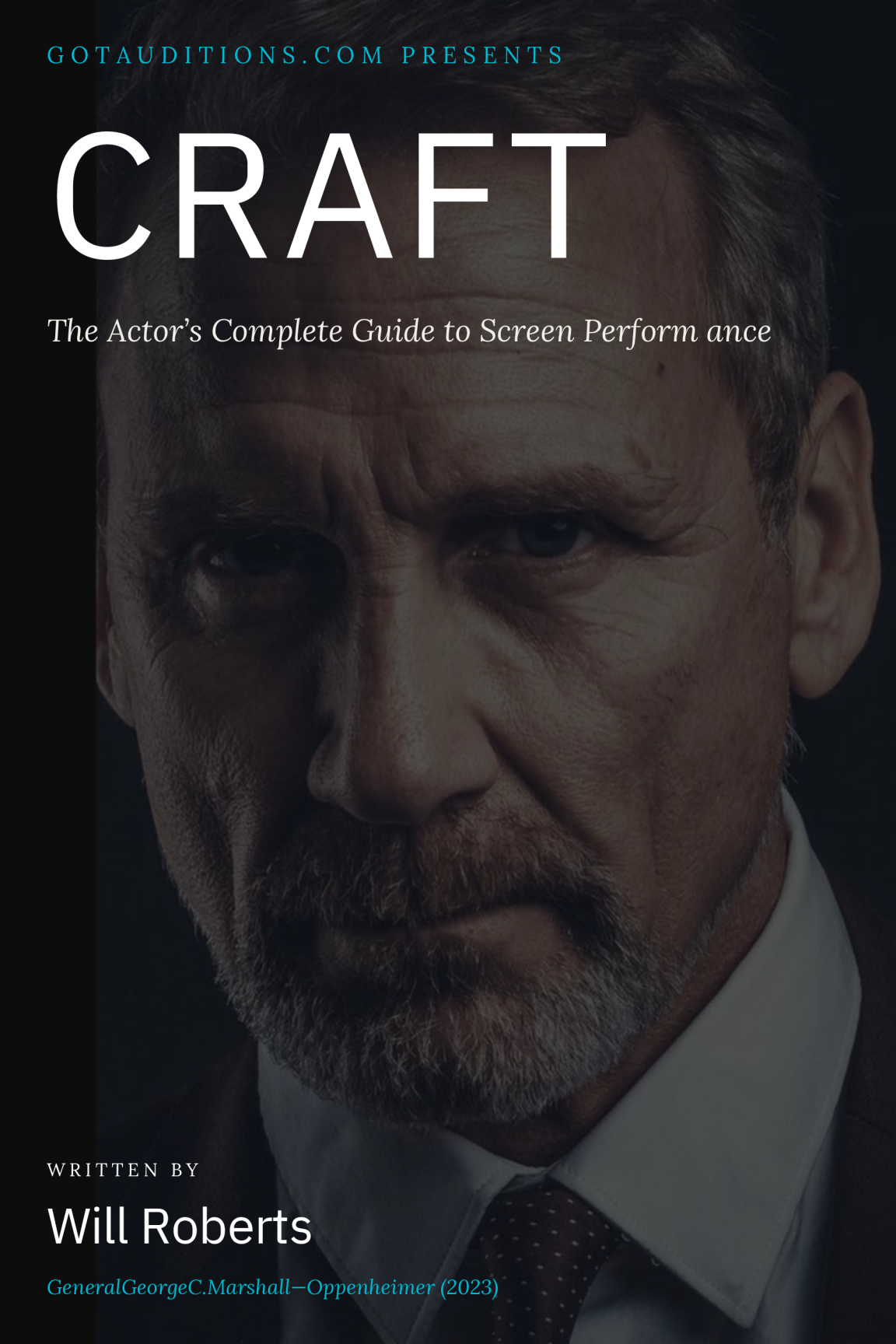




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CRAFT

The Actor's Complete Guide to Screen Performance

WRITTEN BY

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General George C. Marshall—Oppenheimer (2023)

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*The Actor's Complete Guide to Screen
Performance*

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INTRODUCTION

The Camera Doesn't Lie

The first time I watched myself on camera in a real scene, I wanted to quit acting.

Not because I was bad — though I certainly was — but because what I saw on that monitor had nothing to do with what I felt I was doing in the scene. I was working. I was committed. I was using everything I'd been taught. And on screen, I looked like someone doing a school play in a gymnasium.

I projected. I moved. I indicated. I performed. The camera picked up every single one of those choices and broadcast them to the world in high definition. What I thought was emotional truth looked, on screen, like effort. What I thought was subtlety looked like smallness. What I thought was presence looked like self-consciousness.

The camera doesn't lie. That's the first thing you need to understand about this craft. It doesn't have the courtesy to hide your mistakes. It doesn't let the theater's distance soften your choices. It walks right up to your

face — sometimes literally, in a close-up — and it asks you one simple question: *Are you really there?*

I've been working as an on-camera actor for years. My career has taken me through commercials, television, independent films, and eventually to a role I'm deeply proud of — General George C. Marshall in Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*. Along the way, I've made every mistake in this book, learned from most of them, and had the rest corrected by directors patient enough to keep working with me.

What I found, over and over, is that the same problems trip up actors at every level. Smart, talented, trained actors who understand their craft and love their work — but who weren't taught the specific things that make the difference between being watchable and being forgettable on camera. Nobody told them. Their teachers were often stage-trained. Their classes had them performing for human audiences instead of a lens. The translation never happened.

This book is that translation.

Everything in here is practical. I'm not interested in theory for its own sake. I'm interested in what happens when the director says "action" and you have to deliver something real, technical, repeatable, and alive — all at the same time. I'm interested in what actually works,

what the camera actually picks up, and what directors actually need from you.

"On camera, the size of your truth has to match the size of the frame. That's the whole game."

Some of this will feel counterintuitive at first, especially if you come from a stage background. Some of it will confirm things you've sensed but never had words for. All of it is learnable — none of it is magic.

Let's get to work.

Part One — Understanding the Camera

The Camera Is Not Your Enemy

When you're on stage, your relationship is with the audience. They're out there in the dark, a collective organism that you're performing for, performing with, performing at. You feel them. You adjust for them. Their energy enters the room and changes what you do.

On camera, none of that exists. The audience isn't in the room. The director isn't your audience — she's watching you through a monitor, making a thousand technical decisions that have nothing to do with the emotional truth of your performance. The crew doesn't count. The only audience you have is the lens. And the lens is, depending on how you think about it, either the most terrifying or the most intimate audience you'll ever perform for.

Here's the key insight: the camera is not a recording device. Stop thinking of it that way. A recording device is passive — it captures whatever is in front of it with mechanical indifference. The camera is something more like a collaborator. It has a point of view. It has an opinion about what's happening in your face. It responds to

intention, to thought, to the specific quality of attention you bring to a moment.

What the camera loves — and I mean this literally, in practical terms — is specificity and truth. It loves when you're actually thinking about something real. It loves the micro-expressions that happen when a genuine emotion crosses your face. It loves stillness that has an internal life behind it. It loves the exact moment when something lands for your character — not the moment after you've decided to show us that something has landed, but the actual moment of arrival.

"The stage is about what you show. The camera is about what you experience. One is performance. The other is presence."

This is why great screen actors often say that film acting is about doing less. But that's a dangerous shorthand, and I want to complicate it before you take it as gospel. The issue isn't less — it's different. Doing "less" in a technical sense while doing "more" in an internal sense. The physical scale shrinks. The emotional commitment doesn't. In fact, it deepens.

Think about the last time you were moved by a performance on screen. Not dazzled, not impressed — moved. I'll bet it wasn't because the actor did something big. It was because the actor was completely, entirely,

unmistakably present in a moment. The camera found that presence and gave it to you at close range, and you had no choice but to feel what they were feeling.

That's the partnership. You bring truth. The camera brings intimacy. Together, if you've done your job, the audience gets something they couldn't get in a theater, on the street, or anywhere else — complete access to another human's interior experience.

Starting the Relationship

The first practical step is simple: make friends with the camera. This sounds absurd until you try it and realize how different it feels. Before every take in rehearsal, acknowledge the lens. Not dramatically — just a moment of recognition. *This is who I'm talking to. This is what will carry this story.* It shifts something in your orientation that pays off when you're rolling.

Second: watch yourself on camera, even when you don't want to. Especially when you don't want to. Actors who avoid playback never learn to see what the camera sees. You don't have to love what you see. You just have to understand it. Every time you watch your own work, you're learning the translation between your internal experience and its external effect on screen.

The Practice. Set up any camera — your phone works — and run a scene alone. Don't perform. Just live in it, say the words, respond to imaginary stimuli. Then watch it back. Notice what reads. Notice what disappears. Notice the moments when your inner life made it through the lens and the moments when it didn't. That gap is exactly what this book is about.

Scale: The Biggest Misunderstanding in Screen Acting

Actors hear "tone it down" so many times in the first year of screen work that they start to think restraint is the whole of screen acting. Pull back. Be smaller. Don't indicate. Don't push. And then they pull back so far that nothing is there anymore — a blank face, flat delivery, empty eyes — and the director is saying "give me more" and they're confused, because they thought more was the enemy.

The truth is more precise than "less is more." The truth is: *the size of your performance must match the size of the frame*.

Patrick Tucker, one of the clearest thinkers on screen acting, figured this out decades ago. The camera frame is a container. Whatever shot the camera is in — wide, medium, close, extreme close — defines the boundaries of your playing space. A wide shot can handle more physical expression. A close-up demands almost none. Your job is to read the frame and calibrate.

This is actually harder than it sounds. On stage, you have a fixed relationship with the audience that doesn't change from night to night. The back row is always the back row. You calibrate once and maintain it. On camera, the frame changes constantly — a director might cut from a wide two-shot to a tight close-up in the same scene, sometimes in the same take if they're shooting multiple cameras. You need to be able to work at any scale without your performance fundamentally changing. The emotion stays the same. The size shifts.

The Scale Spectrum

Think about it this way:

- **Wide/Establishing Shot:** Your full body is visible. Physical choices read. Gesture, posture, and movement carry meaning. You can use your physicality here — but still not the way you would on stage. The camera still picks up truth vs. performance.
- **Medium/Cowboy Shot:** From the waist or mid-thigh up. Your hands matter here. Your physical relationship to the scene matters. You're still using your body, but the frame is bringing the audience closer.
- **Close-Up:** Face and upper chest. Physical gesture is largely irrelevant. The camera is reading your eyes, your micro-expressions, the subtle shifts in your

muscle groups. This is where "less" actually means something specific: less face, more thought.

- Extreme Close-Up: Eyes, lips, a specific feature. You are living inside a microscope. A single tear, a slight jaw tension, the almost imperceptible widening of an eye — these are the entire performance. Nothing else is visible.

Here's the thing that catches actors off guard: you often don't know what shot you're in. The director knows. The DP knows. Sometimes the AD will tell you — "we're tight on you here" — but often you're working with general awareness of where the camera is positioned and making educated guesses.

So you develop camera sense. You notice the lens position relative to your eyeline. You feel whether the camera is close or pulled back. You know your marks and understand that the camera's distance from you is telling you something. Over time, this becomes instinct. Early in your career, it has to be conscious.

"Stage actors are taught to fill the room. Screen actors have to learn to fill the frame — which is a different size entirely, and changes from shot to shot."

The Stage Actor's Specific Challenge

If you came from theater, your instrument was built for

projection — vocal projection, physical projection, emotional projection. You learned to send things outward, to the last row, past the proscenium, across the footlights. That training is valuable. The vocal control, the physical discipline, the ability to sustain a performance over two hours — theater training builds things that screen actors without it often lack.

But the projection reflex is the specific thing that has to be unlearned for camera. Not the energy — the direction. Stage energy goes out. Screen energy goes in. The camera comes to you. Your job is to have something real happening inside, and let the camera find it, not push it toward the lens.

Michael Caine puts it plainly: on stage, you project to the back row. On camera, the back row is sitting three feet from your face. There is no row to project to. There's just a lens, and behind that lens, eventually, is one person watching in a dark room.

The Close-Up

Your Greatest — Opportunity

No invention in cinema has done more for the actor than the close-up. Before it existed, film acting looked like pantomime — big expressions, telegraphed emotions, exaggerated gestures necessary because the camera was twenty feet away and the only way to communicate was physically. The close-up changed everything. It walked the camera up to the actor's face and said: *tell me the truth*.

The close-up is where careers are made and lost. It's where the camera's intimacy becomes almost unbearable. It's where a truly present actor can communicate things that words can't express — and where a performer who's pushing, indicating, or simply not home gets ruthlessly exposed.

Here's what the camera actually reads in a close-up:

- The quality of your attention — what you're actually focusing on internally

- The micro-muscular responses in your face that you don't consciously control
- The aliveness or absence of life in your eyes
- The breath — whether it's free or held or controlled or fearful
- The moment of genuine reception — when something actually lands
- The precise texture of your thought in a given moment

Notice what is not on that list: gesture, vocal projection, physical expression. In a tight close-up, the face is the entire performance. And the face, when it's doing something real, does extraordinary things without any help from you.

The Eyes

I cannot overstate the importance of the eyes in screen acting. The eyes are where the audience connects to the character. Not the words. Not the physical performance. The eyes. Stanislavski called them the mirror of the soul — which sounds like theater romanticism until you see the same shot in a close-up and understand exactly what he meant.

Live eyes on camera have a quality that's unmistakable and impossible to fake. They're moving — not darting

around anxiously, but processing, responding, receiving. There's a thought behind them. There's a specific intention. There's evidence that this person is actually here, in this moment, engaged with something real.

Dead eyes — eyes where the actor is technically present but internally somewhere else — are equally unmistakable and equally impossible to hide. You can give a perfect vocal performance with dead eyes and it will read as hollow every single time.

"In a close-up, your eyes are your entire performance. If they're alive, you can get away with almost anything. If they're dead, nothing else saves you."

What Kills a Close-Up

The most common close-up killer is self-monitoring. This is the actor watching themselves perform in real time — an internal critic sitting just behind your eyes, evaluating each moment as you're living it. *Was that good? Was that too much? Did that read? Should I try something different?* The problem is that this internal commentary is visible in the eyes. The camera sees you thinking about your performance instead of living your scene.

The second killer is blinking. I'm not talking about natural, physiological blinking — that's fine and

unavoidable. I'm talking about the stress blink: the repeated, rapid eye movement that happens when an actor is anxious, self-conscious, or working hard at something. Blinks under stress are like punctuation on a typewriter — they break the sustained quality of attention that a close-up requires.

The third killer is what I call "face acting" — consciously arranging your facial features to express an emotion rather than letting the emotion arrange them. If you're thinking "sadness" and making your face do what you've observed sadness looks like, the camera will catch the craft. If you're genuinely in contact with something that moves you, the face does its own job and you don't have to manage it.

Close-Up Exercise. Sit in front of a camera. Think of someone you love — a specific person, a specific memory. Say nothing. Do nothing. Just hold that thought for thirty seconds. Then watch the playback. What you'll see in your eyes is what great close-up acting looks like. Now your job is to bring that quality of genuine internal life to scripted material.

Eye Lines: Where You Look Is What They See

An eyeline is where your gaze lands when you're performing. It sounds technical — and it is — but it's also one of the most emotionally significant choices you make in any scene. Where you look tells the audience who has power, who's vulnerable, what you want, what you're hiding. The camera reads eyelines with extraordinary precision.

In life, we instinctively understand eyelines. We know when someone is looking at us versus looking past us. We feel the difference between eye contact that's seeking connection and eye contact that's asserting dominance. We notice when someone avoids our gaze and what that avoidance means. The camera doesn't interpret these things — it just shows them, and the audience interprets them the way they would in life, automatically and unconsciously.

The Downstage Eye Rule

When you're in a scene with another actor and you're looking at them, focus on their downstage eye — the eye

that's closer to the camera. This is one of the most practical pieces of technical advice I can give you, and here's why it matters.

If you focus on your scene partner's upstage eye, the audience watching your close-up sees a slight shift in your eyeline — your gaze is directed slightly away from camera. This small difference, imperceptible to you in the moment, gives your performance a slightly averted quality on screen. It reads as distraction, inattention, or evasiveness, none of which may be what your character is doing.

Focus on the downstage eye, and your gaze is directed slightly toward camera. The result is stillness and presence — you seem to be looking directly at someone, and the audience feels the connection.

The Off-Camera Scene Partner Problem

On any working set, you will regularly perform your close-up to a scene partner who isn't there — either replaced by a script supervisor standing just off camera, or by a piece of tape marking where your partner's eyes would be, or simply by your imagination. This is one of the most challenging things about screen acting, and nobody in acting class prepares you for it.

Your job in these moments is to create a complete, specific, vivid imaginary presence for the person you're talking to. Not a vague human shape — a specific person, with specific eyes, a specific way of holding themselves, a specific energy. The more specific your imagination, the more the camera catches genuine responsiveness in your eyes instead of the slightly glazed quality that comes from genuinely looking at nothing.

"The audience believes what your eyes believe. If your eyes are looking at nothing and you know it, they'll know it too."

Direct Address — Looking Into the Lens

Occasionally, a script calls for a character to address the camera directly — speaking to the audience, breaking the fourth wall. This is a specific technique that requires its own adjustment. When you look directly into the lens, you're in a fundamentally different relationship with the viewer than in any other shot. You're not sharing a scene — you're making direct contact.

The specific technical challenge is this: the lens of a camera is not a human eye. It has no response, no receptivity, no warmth. But you have to behave as though it does. You have to treat that cold glass circle as if it's the most interesting, important, specific person you've ever spoken to. The quality of connection you

project into that lens is exactly what the audience feels on the other end.

Practice this. It feels strange at first. Actors who are good at it make it look natural, which obscures how much work went into developing that naturalness.

The Art of Listening

On Camera

Sanford Meisner famously defined acting as "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances." The first and most foundational application of that principle in screen acting is listening. Real listening — not waiting for your cue with half an ear while you mentally rehearse your next line, but complete, present, unhurried reception of what the other person is actually saying and doing.

The camera loves a listener. This is not a metaphor. On any well-assembled cut, the editor will use your reaction shots constantly — your face while the other person is talking often carries as much narrative weight as your dialogue. Reaction shots are where editors live. And reaction shots are where actors who don't truly listen get exposed.

There's a specific quality to genuine listening that the camera catches and a specific quality to pretend-listening that it also catches. Genuine listening involves micro-responsiveness — the slight shift when something unexpected is said, the moment of receiving information and processing it, the continuous

adjustment of your internal state to what's actually happening in the scene. Pretend listening involves a kind of held stillness — a face that's arranged to look attentive but that has no internal movement, no reception, no adjustment.

What Meisner Gives Screen Actors

If you haven't studied Meisner and you work in screen acting, you're missing the single most directly applicable acting methodology for camera work. Meisner's core exercise — repetition — is designed to develop one specific skill: the ability to respond to what's actually happening, rather than what you predicted would happen. And that responsiveness, that genuine openness to the other person, is exactly what the camera rewards.

Directors who love working with Meisner-trained actors often describe them as "unpredictable" and "specific" — which sounds contradictory until you understand that what they mean is that each take has life and variation because the actor is genuinely responsive rather than executing a pre-planned performance. The work is alive because the listening is alive.

"Your reaction is as much your performance as your dialogue. In screen acting, you're always on camera —

even when you're not speaking."

The Practical Discipline of Listening

Even with the right training and instincts, there are practical habits that support genuine listening on set:

- Stay in the scene between takes, especially when you're getting coverage on your partner. Don't half-check out. Give them everything you have every time.
- When your off-camera partner is replaced by a script supervisor or stand-in, invest more in your imagination, not less. The less you have externally, the more you need internally.
- Let lines land before you respond. The camera catches actors who come in too fast — actors who respond not to what was said but to their memory of what's in the script. Real people don't answer instantaneously. Real people receive, process, then respond.
- Notice when something your scene partner does surprises you, even slightly. Allow that surprise to register. Don't cover it with your planned performance. Those moments are gold.

Stillness That Breathes

Every director who has worked in film has said some version of the same note to an actor at some point: "Less. Be still. Stop moving." And almost every actor, on receiving this note, becomes statue-like — frozen, airless, dead. Which is the exact opposite of what the director wanted.

Stillness in screen acting is one of the most misunderstood concepts in the craft. When a director asks for stillness, they're not asking for the absence of life. They're asking for the concentration of life into a smaller physical space. They want the energy that was spilling out through gesture and movement and physical restlessness to go inward — to intensify, to deepen, to become available as internal pressure rather than external activity.

Think of it this way: a pot of water on low heat just sits there. A pot of water at a rolling boil is a spectacle that uses a lot of energy to communicate that something is happening. A pot of water just about to boil — that moment right before the first bubble breaks — holds

enormous energy in complete stillness. That's the stillness directors are asking for. The energy is there. The potential is there. Nothing is being wasted on unnecessary expression. The camera can feel that potential, and so can the audience.

The Internal Activity of Stillness

Genuine stillness on camera requires an abundance of internal activity. You are thinking — specifically, actively, continuously. You are receiving the scene around you — the other actor, the environment, the stakes. You are holding the history of your character in your body without displaying it. You are existing in real time, which means your breath is free, your attention is mobile, your emotional life is present even if your face is relatively quiet.

This is why stillness is hard and why it gets misinterpreted as emptiness so often. Emptiness is easy. You just stop doing things. Stillness requires that you fill yourself completely and then exercise an almost athletic control over how much of that fullness is expressed physically. It's a kind of internal discipline that's completely invisible to the audience but completely visible to the camera.

"A face at rest that has a thought behind it is infinitely more interesting on camera than a face in motion that

has nothing behind it."

The Breath

One of the surest indicators of genuine stillness versus held stillness is breath. Held stillness often comes with held breath — the actor going quiet externally by going tight internally. The camera picks this up as tension or anxious control. Genuine stillness has free breath — air coming and going naturally, the respiratory rhythm of a person who is genuinely present and genuinely calm.

If you find yourself regularly holding your breath during close-ups, that tension is what's reading as "trying too hard" or "stiff" or "self-conscious." The physical release of free breath changes the quality of stillness from constraint to openness, and the camera responds.

Still but Alive. Before a take in close-up, take one slow breath and let it go completely. Feel your feet on the floor. Find a specific thought — not the line, not the blocking — but a genuine piece of your character's inner life in that exact moment. Then let the scene find you, rather than reaching for it. The camera will meet you there.

Part Two — The Inner Work

Truth Over Technique

There's a trap that technically skilled actors fall into, and it's one of the most insidious because it's invisible from the inside. It's the trap of executing technique instead of using technique. You become so good at the tools — substitution, emotional recall, given circumstances, objectives, all the vocabulary of your training — that you start doing them rather than disappearing into them. And the camera catches exactly that: an actor doing acting.

Emotional truth on camera comes from genuine contact with something real. Not the simulation of that contact. Not a technically correct version of what that contact looks like. The actual experience of it, in the moment, available to be caught by the lens. And the only way to get there consistently is to understand what you're actually trying to do under all that technique: you're trying to make yourself feel something real, so that the camera can share that real thing with an audience.

Substitution and Personalization

Substitution is a technique where you replace an element of the fictional scene — a person, a place, a

situation — with something from your real life that carries the appropriate emotional weight. If your character is grieving someone they love and you're not in grief, you find a specific personal memory or person that genuinely moves you and bring that into the scene.

The key word is "specific." Vague sadness produces vague acting. A specific person — someone whose face you can see in your mind's eye, whose voice you can hear, whose absence has a particular texture in your chest — produces specific acting. The camera doesn't know the story behind your eyes, but it knows that there is one, and that knowing is what makes a performance land.

Personalization goes further. It's not just substituting one element — it's asking "what is true for me about what's true for this character?" Finding the genuine personal connection to the given circumstances, so that the character's situation isn't foreign territory you're performing in but familiar ground you actually understand from the inside.

"You can't fake it on camera — not the deep stuff, anyway. The camera is the most honest critic you'll ever have, and it will not be kind about unearned emotion."

The Body's Memory

Actors who've worked with sense memory know that the body holds emotional experience in ways that the mind

sometimes can't access directly. The smell of a specific place can return you to a state you haven't experienced in years. The physical sensation of cold, or heat, or a particular kind of touch, can unlock emotional textures that purely intellectual recall can't reach.

For camera work, this is particularly valuable because the body's emotional responses are the exact things the camera reads in close-up. A jaw that tightens slightly under genuine suppressed anger. A quality of alertness in the eyes that comes with real fear. The particular quality of breath that accompanies genuine grief. These are physical signatures of real emotional states, and they're different — subtly but unmistakably different — from their performed equivalents.

What Directors Mean by "More Real"

When a director says your performance needs to be "more real," they're almost never talking about volume or scale. They're talking about this. They're saying: I can see you working. I can see the technique. I can't see the human being underneath it. Stop doing the acting and start doing the living.

That's a terrifying note to receive on set when you have twenty crew members watching and you're already in

your head. But it's also the most useful note you can get, because it's telling you exactly where you are and what you need to find. The path back to real is always the same: get out of your head, get back in your body, find a specific truth, and let the camera find you there.

Breaking Down Your Script for Camera

Script analysis for screen work is different from script analysis for stage — not in its foundations, which are universal, but in its emphasis. On screen, you often have very little material to work with. A scene might be two pages. The sides you get for an audition might be one page. You may not have the full script. You have to extract maximum information from minimum material, and you have to do it in a way that produces a performance ready to be captured in a tight frame.

Start With the Objective

Ivana Chubbuck's breakdown system remains one of the most useful frameworks for this work. Every character in every scene has an objective — what they want in this specific scene — and a super-objective — what they want over the entire arc of the story. Get both right and your scene has a spine. Get either wrong and you're making arbitrary choices that may feel motivated but don't actually serve the story.

Objectives should always be phrased as active verbs with a specific relationship to another person. Not "I want to feel loved" but "I want to make Sarah believe I'm the only one who understands her." Not "I want to succeed" but "I want to force my father to admit he was wrong about me." The specificity of the action is what gives you something to do — literally to pursue — throughout the scene.

Given Circumstances

The given circumstances are everything that's true before the scene begins — the where, when, who, and what of your character's world. They are given by the script and non-negotiable. Your job is to make them felt rather than known — not to demonstrate that you've done your homework, but to inhabit a circumstance so fully that its reality shapes your behavior without you thinking about it.

For screen work, given circumstances become particularly important because you're often shooting out of sequence. You might shoot the end of a story before the beginning. You need to know where you are in your character's arc at every moment, independent of when you're shooting it, so that you can carry the appropriate history into any scene.

"The script is not a blueprint for your performance. It's a description of a world. Your job is to live in that world, not execute the blueprint."

The Moment Before

One of the most underrated concepts in screen acting is the moment before — what was happening for your character immediately before the scene begins. Every scene starts in the middle of something. Your character has a history that led to this doorway, this phone call, this confrontation. The quality of your entrance into a scene is determined by the specificity of your imagined moment before it.

Create that moment in detail. Where were you? Who were you just with? What happened in the last five minutes that put you in this state? The more real and specific your answer, the more your body and face will already be in the right place when the director calls action. You're not starting a performance — you're continuing a life that was already underway.

What to Leave Alone

Over-preparation is a real trap in screen acting. You can do so much analytical work on a scene that the performance becomes a demonstration of your analysis rather than a living experience. Know your objectives.

Know your given circumstances. Know the moment before. Then put the script down and trust that the work is in your body. The on-camera performance needs room to breathe, to be surprised, to receive what your scene partner actually gives you — which may not be what your analysis predicted.

Cold Reading: The Skill Nobody Teaches

A cold read is when you receive material immediately before performing it — often in the waiting room of an audition, sometimes literally as you walk into the room. No preparation time. No opportunity to break it down fully, find your substitutions, establish your given circumstances. You read it, you feel whatever you feel about it, and then you perform it.

Cold reading is used constantly in television, frequently in commercials, and occasionally in film. It's a skill that's almost never explicitly taught, but which separates actors who work consistently from actors who work occasionally. Casting directors use cold reads specifically to see your instincts — what you do when you can't rely on preparation, when all you have is your technique and your humanity.

What Casting Actually Wants

When a casting director hands you sides and says "take a minute," they're not expecting a fully formed performance. They're expecting your natural instincts.

They want to see how you enter material, what choices you make without overthinking, how your instrument responds to the given circumstances of a scene before you have time to manufacture a performance.

This means the actor who spends the available time frantically trying to memorize lines is making a mistake. The actor who uses that time to do the one or two things that actually open the material up — finding the objective, creating a person to speak to, locating the emotional temperature of the scene — will perform better.

"In a cold read, your instincts are the performance. Trust them. A clean, present, committed reading of a scene is worth more than an over-prepared, over-considered one."

The Ninety-Second Protocol

When I get cold material, here's my process, built over years of getting it wrong first:

- Read it once, quickly, for the story. What is this scene about? What's happening between these people?
- Find the objective. What does my character want, specifically, from this other person, in this scene?
- Create the other person. Who am I talking to? Give them a face, a specific quality, a history with my

character. Make them real.

- Find the emotional temperature. Where does this scene start and where does it end? What's the journey?
- Let go. Don't try to lock in any specific choices. Walk in open.

Notice what's not on the list: memorization, beat analysis, substitution work, physical blocking choices. There isn't time for those things. What there is time for is the two or three commitments that give the scene life — who you're talking to, what you want, and what state you're in.

The Script in Your Hand

Many actors are embarrassed to hold the sides during an audition and try to perform without them, which leads to dropped lines and broken concentration. Hold the sides. Use them. Casting knows this is cold material and expects you to reference the page. What they don't expect is for you to read at the page — there's a difference between glancing down quickly to catch the next line and staring at the paper while you deliver dialogue.

The technique is peripheral awareness: your eyes are on your scene partner (or their stand-in) most of the time, and you're picking up text in your peripheral vision or in

quick glances. It takes practice to develop this, but it's learnable, and it makes your auditions look exponentially more present and connected than actors who either memorize desperately or read directly from the page.

Part Three — The Technical Craft

The Technical Discipline

Acting school doesn't teach you to hit a mark. Theater training doesn't teach you about continuity. And yet on any professional film or television set, these technical disciplines are as important as your performance. An actor who can't hit marks consistently wastes time and money. An actor who ignores continuity gives the editor nothing to cut together. An actor who treats the technical requirements of filmmaking as an imposition on their creative process will not be hired again.

The good news: these are learnable skills, not innate talents. The better news: once they're second nature, they don't interfere with your performance. The early challenge is integrating them — doing the technical work without letting it colonize your attention and kill your truth.

Marks

Marks are pieces of tape or small rubber T-shapes on the floor that tell you exactly where to stand so you're in focus, properly lit, and in frame. They're placed by the

camera department based on where the lens is focused. If you're not on your mark, you may be out of focus, poorly lit, or cut off by the frame edge — and none of those results are usable footage.

Hitting marks consistently requires proprioception — the body's sense of where it is in space. Professional actors develop the ability to find their mark without looking at it, using peripheral awareness of the set and the physical sensation of proximity. In early career, you look at the mark whenever possible and develop the muscle memory over time.

The actor's challenge is to hit the mark while staying fully in the scene. This means the technical awareness has to run on a parallel track, underneath the performance, without displacing it. When it's working, nobody knows you're doing anything technical. That invisibility is the entire point.

Continuity

Continuity means that your performance, your physical behavior, and the physical elements of the scene — props, clothing, hair position — are consistent across multiple takes and across coverage of the same scene. Editors piece together a scene from multiple angles and multiple takes. If your glass is in your right hand in one shot and your left hand in the next, the edit will be

jarring. If you scratch your nose in the master and not in the close-up covering the same moment, you've given the editor a problem.

The script supervisor is your friend and ally. They're tracking every detail of your physical behavior, and it's absolutely appropriate to ask them "what was I doing when I said this line?" They're watching so you can perform. Use them.

"Continuity is not a constraint on your creativity. It's a form of professionalism. Actors who master it get more screen time because editors have more to work with."

Coverage and the Camera Plan

Understanding how a scene is typically covered — master shot, medium shots, close-ups, reaction shots, insert shots — helps you understand what each take is for and how your performance will be used. The master establishes the geography of the scene. Coverage builds the emotional architecture. Knowing this helps you make smart performance choices in each setup.

For instance: in the master, where you're both visible at a distance, your full physical performance is in play. In your close-up, all of that drops away and it's entirely about your face. Actors who give exactly the same performance in every setup regardless of frame size are

missing an opportunity to serve the material differently at each level of intimacy.

Michael Caine's Rule. If you're going to do action — a physical gesture, picking up an object, any movement — decide exactly when and how you'll do it, and then do it exactly the same way every take. You can change your emotional performance from take to take. You cannot change the action without breaking continuity. Pre-plan your physical choices and commit to them.

Working With Directors

The director is your collaborator, not your boss and not your audience. I want to be precise about that distinction because how you think about the relationship determines how you behave in it. If you see the director as a boss, you become passive and execution-focused — you wait to be told what to do rather than bringing your own creative intelligence. If you see them as your audience, you start performing for them rather than for the camera and the story. Neither serves you or the work.

The director is the keeper of the whole film. They're making hundreds of decisions — visual, tonal, structural, logistical — in the time it takes you to run a scene. Their attention is distributed across the entire production in a way yours is not and should not be. Your job is to be completely prepared, completely present, and completely open when they turn their attention to you — and to give them what they need as efficiently as possible.

Taking Direction

The two most common failure modes when receiving direction are resistance and collapse. Resistance is when the actor hears a note and defends their choice instead of trying the direction. Collapse is when the actor hears a note and abandons everything they were doing, throwing out the baby with the bathwater in an attempt to comply.

What works is reception and integration. You hear the note. You understand what the director is after. You take that information and integrate it into what you're already doing — not replacing it, not fighting it, but adding it. Most good directors aren't saying "what you did was wrong." They're saying "here's what else is possible." Treat the note as new information about the scene, not as a judgment of your performance.

"The actors who work with great directors repeatedly are the ones who make the director feel like a genius. That means taking their ideas and elevating them, not just executing them."

When You Disagree

You will sometimes disagree with a director's choice. Disagree professionally, once, in private if possible. Not on the floor in front of the crew. Not with defensiveness or ego. Ask a question rather than making a statement: "I

was thinking about this scene that my character might also be feeling X — would it serve you if I tried that?" You're offering, not insisting. If the director wants something different, you deliver it without debate.

The actor who argues on set is an actor who doesn't get called back. That's just reality. Your leverage in a creative disagreement is the next take — try the director's version, then ask if you can try one more. Most directors will give you that. And in that extra take, you do it your way. The editor will ultimately decide which serves the film.

Building the Relationship

The best working relationships with directors develop in rehearsal — not always available, but invaluable when it is. This is where you can have real conversations about character, intention, and the emotional logic of scenes without the clock running and the crew watching. If you have rehearsal, use it for this. If you don't, try to get five minutes with the director before major scenes to align on the emotional temperature and key choices.

Come prepared, come open, and come with ideas. Directors love actors who do their homework and still leave space for discovery. What they don't love — and what will get you quietly dropped from consideration for future projects — is actors who show up underprepared,

or who refuse to deviate from their pre-set choices, or who treat the collaborative process as an obstacle to their artistic vision.

On Set: The Rules

Nobody Wrote Down

A film set is one of the most complex working environments in any professional field. Dozens of departments — camera, lighting, sound, art direction, wardrobe, makeup, props, effects — are each doing highly technical, specialized work simultaneously, all in service of capturing a few minutes of usable footage in a finite shooting day. The logistics are staggering. The pressure is constant. And in the middle of all of it, the actors are supposed to produce something spontaneous, true, and emotionally alive.

This environment has its own culture, its own hierarchy, its own unwritten rules. Learning them — really learning them, not just intellectually but behaviorally — is one of the fastest ways to become an actor that people want to hire and hire again. The relationship between an actor and a crew is a real professional relationship, and it matters more than most acting programs acknowledge.

The Hierarchy

The Director is the creative lead. The First Assistant Director (1st AD) runs the set — they manage the

schedule, manage the crew, and are the person who calls "action" and "cut" when the director delegates that. The Director of Photography (DP) is responsible for everything the camera sees. The Script Supervisor tracks continuity and the script. These are your primary professional relationships on set.

Treat everyone else — grips, electricians, PAs, art department crew — with the same respect you give department heads. The person wrapping cable at the end of the day has as much impact on the quality of your working day as anyone, and they absolutely notice how actors treat them. Word travels in this industry. The crews talk to each other. Be the actor who makes the whole set better, not the one people dread working with.

What Not to Do

- Don't touch the camera. Ever. Not casually, not to look through the viewfinder, not for any reason.
- Don't move props from where the props department placed them. If something needs to be adjusted for your performance, tell props.
- Don't give other actors direction. If something is bothering you about the scene, talk to the director.

- Don't disappear between setups. Stay accessible, stay ready, stay in the vicinity of where you're shooting.
- Don't be on your phone during lighting setups when the director or AD might need to speak to you.
- Don't request multiple additional takes after the director has called "moving on." One question — "could I try one more?" — is professional. Pushing after that is not.

"Every person on that set showed up to make a good film. Your job is to make that easier, not harder.

Professionalism is a form of generosity."

Between Takes

How you spend the time between takes affects your performance. Some actors need to stay in the scene — they maintain a kind of internal continuity that keeps them ready. Others need to completely release between takes to avoid going stale. Know which you are and honor it.

What neither type should do is spend between-take time in anxious self-analysis. Reviewing what you just did, deciding what was wrong, planning improvements — this is preparation disguised as production, and it pulls you out of the present where the performance lives. Trust what you prepared. Trust your instincts. Let the takes breathe.

Formats: Film, TV, Streaming, and What Changes

On-camera acting is not a single discipline. The way you work on a single-camera drama pilot is different from the way you work on a three-camera sitcom. The pace and rhythm of a feature film set is different from a procedural television show shooting seven pages a day. Streaming content has its own aesthetic, its own pace, its own relationship to performance. Understanding these differences helps you adapt to each environment instead of being surprised by it.

Single-Camera Film and Drama

Single-camera work — which encompasses most films and most prestige television drama — is what most of this book is about. One camera films the scene from multiple angles in sequence. Coverage is constructed through multiple setups. The pace is deliberate enough that performance preparation and adjustment is possible between setups. The actor has time and space

to find the truth of a scene across multiple takes and angles.

The performance aesthetic in prestige drama has shifted dramatically over the past two decades toward extreme naturalism. What read as compelling screen performance twenty years ago can look theatrical today. Contemporary audiences, trained by decades of closer and closer access to performance through streaming and high-definition intimacy, have extraordinarily sensitive detectors for inauthenticity. The margin for performed emotion versus genuinely experienced emotion has narrowed almost to zero.

Multi-Camera Television

Multi-camera sitcoms and some procedurals shoot with multiple cameras simultaneously, in front of a live audience or with a studio audience track. The performance requirements are notably different. The scale is bigger — you're playing to a room, not just a lens. The pace is faster — multi-cam moves quickly, rehearsals are compressed, and the comedy timing requirements have a physicality that single-camera work doesn't demand. Many actors find the transition between formats disorienting. The skill set overlaps but the calibration is different.

Streaming and the New Intimacy

Streaming platforms have rewired audience expectations in ways that continue to unfold. Content consumed on phones and tablets — often with earbuds, often in close quarters — creates an even more intimate viewing experience than theatrical film. Performances that feel appropriately sized in a theater or even on a television screen can feel too large on a phone held twelve inches from someone's face.

This is not a theoretical concern. Directors working in streaming content have noted the shift in what feels right, and actors who are doing the self-awareness work — who are watching their own performances on different screens in different contexts — are calibrating accordingly.

Know Your Format Before You Walk On Set. When you book a job, find out as much as you can about how the show is shot. Talk to other actors who've worked on it. Watch existing episodes if they're available. Understand the pace, the aesthetic, the directorial style. This preparation means you arrive calibrated, not confused.

Building Character for the Camera

Character building for camera has a specific requirement that doesn't apply to stage work: your choices have to hold up at six inches. In a close-up, the camera is going to examine your face with forensic precision. Any external character element — an accent, a physical affectation, a physicalized emotion — that doesn't have deep roots in genuine internal experience will look like a costume in close-up. The audience will see the costume, not the person.

This doesn't mean external choices are wrong. Accents, physical adaptations, specific body language — these are legitimate character tools, and they're part of building a full human being rather than just playing yourself in different circumstances. But they have to be integrated, not applied. The difference between an integrated character choice and an applied one is whether the camera can see through the choice to the human being underneath it.

Building From the Inside Out

For camera, character builds most reliably from the inside out rather than the outside in. Start with psychology — who is this person in terms of fundamental drives, fears, desires, self-image? What do they want and what are they afraid of? What's the wound they carry? What's the gift they offer? Get those things real and rooted, and the physical life of the character will emerge organically rather than being imposed.

This is why Meisner, Chubbuck, and the Strasberg traditions each in their own way emphasize the actor's own psychology as the raw material. Not to make every character an autobiographical self-portrait, but because the only psychology you have full access to is your own. You use your psychological understanding of yourself to create imaginative access to another person's psychology. The craft is the bridge between those two things.

"The most memorable screen performances are ones where you can't see the actor. You only see the character. That invisibility of craft is the highest form of the work."

Physicality That Reads on Camera

Physical character choices for camera need to be economical and specific. A character's physicality should be visible in posture, weight distribution, quality

of movement, and specific gestural vocabulary — but these elements should be distilled, not elaborated. The camera amplifies specificity and drowns broad strokes.

Think about the specific details that make a real person recognizable: the way they hold their shoulders, a particular habit of gesture when thinking, the specific quality of their eye contact. One or two of these, deeply integrated, are worth more than ten physical choices that sit on the surface.

Consistency Across Non-Linear Shooting

Film and television are almost always shot out of sequence. The scene where your character reaches their emotional nadir might be filmed before the scene where they're happy and confident. This demands that you hold the complete arc of your character's psychology at all times — that you know exactly where in the story you are in any given scene, what's happened before it, and what follows it, regardless of the shooting order.

A detailed character journal, written before shooting begins and maintained through production, is one of the most useful practical tools for managing this. It doesn't need to be elaborate — it's for you, not for anyone else. But having a record of your character's inner life at each point in the story means you can find your place

instantly, even when you haven't shot the preceding scene yet.

The Audition Is the Performance

The audition is not a preview of the performance. The audition is not a demo of your capabilities. The audition is the performance — a complete, committed, fully inhabited expression of who this character is and what this scene is about, delivered under difficult conditions to people who have seen fifty versions of it today and will see fifty more tomorrow.

When you walk into an audition room thinking "I'm trying to show them what I can do," you've already lost. You're performing for the wrong reason — not for the story, not for the character, not for the scene, but for the approval of the people watching. And that neediness is visible. Casting directors can feel it the moment you walk in. The best actors walk into an audition with one thought: *here is this scene, here is this person, here is the truth of this moment.*

Preparation Without Rigidity

Come fully prepared. Know the material completely. Have clear choices — an objective, a specific

relationship with the other person, an emotional starting point. And then leave room. Leave space for the scene to be different from what you prepared, for something to surprise you, for the reader or casting director to do something unexpected that changes the dynamic.

The actors who get callbacks are almost always the ones who came prepared and stayed open. Not the ones who came perfectly rehearsed and delivered a sealed, finished performance that had no room in it for discovery. Discovery is what the room is looking for. Discovery is what the camera will continue to catch if you book the job. Show them discovery and you show them what working with you will be like.

"An audition is not a test. It's an invitation to collaborate. The casting director wants you to be right for this. Walk in knowing that."

The Camera in the Room

Most screen auditions are now recorded, even in the room — either as backups for the director or as the primary record that goes to the team who wasn't present. This means you're always performing for camera, even in a live audition. The self-tape skills you've developed apply directly. Your eyeline, your

stillness, your scale, your listening — all of it reads on that recording exactly the way it reads in a self-tape.

Position yourself so that the camera, wherever it is in the room, has a good angle on your face. Be aware of the frame. Work in the eyeline of the reader but with awareness that the camera is also in the conversation. This is not about playing to the camera — it's about not ignoring it.

The Callback

Callbacks reward consistency with room for evolution. When you get a callback, they liked what you did. Don't abandon it. Don't try to do something completely different because you've convinced yourself it wasn't enough. Come back with the same foundational choices that got you there, and be available for adjustment if the director or casting director wants to explore different territory. A callback is a conversation, not a re-audition. Come as the character they already responded to, and see where the conversation goes.

The Self-Tape: Your Audition Room, Anytime

The self-tape isn't a lesser version of a live audition. In many ways, it's a more demanding one — you control everything, which means everything that goes wrong is on you, and everything that could be right has to be consciously created. There's no casting director in the room to give you energy. No reader who might surprise you. Just you, a camera, a neutral background, and the material.

The self-tape era has permanently changed who gets access to auditions and how castings are conducted. Actors who used to be out of the running for certain projects because they weren't in the right city now have full access. But that access is meaningless if the technical quality of your tape is poor or if you haven't adapted your performance to the specific demands of the format.

Everything in This Book Applies Immediately

Every principle in the preceding chapters — scale, eye lines, stillness, listening, truth, close-up technique — applies directly and immediately to self-tape. In fact, the self-tape is a perfect training ground for all of these things, because you can shoot and immediately watch what the camera saw. The feedback loop is instant.

The specific self-tape considerations — lighting, background, audio, framing — are technical requirements that frame your performance. Get them right and they disappear. Get them wrong and they compete with your acting for the viewer's attention, which is a competition your acting will lose.

"A self-tape with excellent performance and imperfect technical setup will often still move forward. A self-tape with perfect technical setup and a lifeless performance never does."

The Eyeline Advantage

In a self-tape, you typically don't have a scene partner — you have a reader whose voice may or may not be audible on the tape, or whose voice you may cut. Your eyeline management becomes critical. Place your reader as close to the lens as possible. The closer your eyeline to the camera, the more connected the viewer feels to your performance. An eyeline that's two feet off-camera

creates a slight sense of distance. One that's just beside the lens creates intimacy.

The Gift of Multiple Takes

Unlike a live audition, a self-tape lets you do as many takes as you need. This is both a gift and a trap. The gift: you can find the performance, experiment, discover. The trap: you can do forty takes and then spend hours in analysis paralysis trying to pick the "best" one, usually ending up with something overworked rather than alive.

My rule: the first three or four takes are for getting loose, finding the scene, shaking off the technical self-consciousness. The next few are usually where the real work happens. After ten takes, you're usually getting worse, not better. Trust your instincts on selection. Often the take that felt most alive in the room is the one that reads most alive on screen.

For a full breakdown of self-tape technique, equipment, lighting, framing, and submission best practices, see the companion guide on [GotAuditions.com](https://www.gotauditions.com) — we've covered it in exhaustive detail there, and there's no reason to repeat it all here.

Part Four — The Philosophy

My Methodology:

Putting It All Together

Everything in this book is, in some form, borrowed. The principles come from Meisner and Barr and Caine and Tucker and Chubbuck and dozens of other teachers and practitioners who figured things out before I got to them. My job — and this is the honest version of craft development — was to put them in a room together with my own experience and see what survived.

What survived, for me, is a way of working that I've come to think of as *prepared spontaneity*. I do intensive preparation — script analysis, character psychology, given circumstances, objective work — and then I walk onto the set or into the audition room and I put the preparation away. Not because it doesn't matter, but because the preparation is already in my body. I don't need to execute it. I need to live in it.

Before Every Shoot Day

I don't run lines the morning of. I know them. Instead, the morning of a shoot is about arriving in the right internal state — not a specific emotional state, not a

forced readiness, but an openness and a quiet. I eat well. I sleep enough. I arrive early enough that the technical environment — the set, the crew, the space — has time to become familiar before the cameras roll.

I review my character's position in the story: where they are today, what happened yesterday for them, what they're hoping for and afraid of in the scenes I'm shooting. Not executing this review — just visiting it. Letting it settle into the body rather than living in the head.

My Approach to a Take

Before the director calls action, I find one thing: the thought my character is having in the moment before the scene begins. Not the line. Not the objective. The specific thought. It's usually a question my character is asking — about the other person, about the situation, about what's about to happen. That question keeps me in a state of genuine inquiry throughout the scene, which is where real listening and real responsiveness live .

I let each take be different. I have a throughline — the objective, the emotional arc — but I'm not executing a plan. I'm following the scene wherever it goes in that take. If my scene partner does something unexpected, I follow it. If something lands differently than I expected, I

go with it. The consistency that makes the coverage cuttable comes from the consistency of my objective and my truth, not from repeating my performance.

"My job is not to deliver a performance. My job is to be a person, in a specific circumstance, with a specific stake — and let the camera find that."

After the Take

I don't analyze between takes. I might make one small adjustment — a technical note I gave myself, or a director's note I'm integrating — and then I release the previous take and prepare to be fully present in the next one. The actor who can release each take without dwelling in it, without holding onto "that was the one" or "that was terrible," is the actor who keeps getting better as a shoot day goes on instead of tightening up and running out of fuel.

The Long Practice

Everything I've described in this book is a practice. Not a set of techniques you acquire and then have — a practice. Like any practice, it develops through repetition, through failure, through the discipline of returning to the work even when the work is hard. The actor who shows up to class, who shoots the student film even when it doesn't pay, who self-tapes the audition

seriously even when they know they probably won't book it — that actor is building something that compounds over time.

The camera will show you where you are in your practice with absolute honesty. That's its gift and its demand. Honor both. Watch your work, learn what you see, go back to the work. Repeat for as long as you want to call yourself an actor.

I'm still doing it. I expect I always will be.

One Last Thing. You can read every book on acting ever written, take every class, study every master. None of it means anything if you don't put the camera in front of you and do the work. The practice is the practice. Go do it.

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Craft

The Actor's Complete Guide to Screen Performance

Written by Will Roberts

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