

Lean Forward

An Orientation to Professionalism for the Actor
by Jack Sharrar, Ph.D. v.9.12.19 © Jack F. Sharrar

From the beginning, the American Conservatory Theater has been committed to actor training that brings young actors in contact with seasoned professionals. Experienced actors pass on theatrical tradition and knowledge to the young, and the young, in turn, invigorate the company and its productions with their energy, curiosity, and new ideas. In this way professionalism and the resources of the theater are "conserved" in the true sense of the word.

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action and because there is only one of you in all of time this expression is unique and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost, the world will not have it.

– Martha Graham

The words of Martha Graham speak to us as actors as well as to dancers. If we are to express ourselves completely and share the uniqueness of our creative energy, we must remove the obstacles that inhibit our creativity. Achieving this freedom is no easy task, however. In order for us to achieve our creative potential, we must not only study the techniques of our craft, we must also develop in ourselves a standard of professionalism that shows we respect our art and the other people who practice it. Indeed, the attitude and manner with which we approach our training and performance is as important to our art as the techniques and skills with which we perform.

What is "Professionalism?"

Professionalism is learning the skills and aims of one's profession, and then striving to uphold those ideals to the best of one's ability. Professionalism is excellence, commitment, and personal integrity. Professionalism is respect for one's self, respect for one's work, and respect for the work of others. Professionalism has to do with one's attitude and approach to work rather than the fame or financial rewards achieved.

Cultivating a professional attitude is an essential component to actor training. As actors, we must continually strive to commit ourselves to our art—our work—to grab hold and reach for the highest standards of excellence in all that we are called upon to do. We must establish training and craft goals for ourselves. If we approach our art in this way, we elevate our profession and ourselves.

Professionalism Begins Off-Stage

As actors, we should work to reflect the image of the world we want to see; have a vision of what humankind can be. We must strive to be people of substance, people who are informed and have a point of view about life and art, for it is through theater and the other arts that we can investigate the mysteries of living and express the truths we feel.

I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.

– Thornton Wilder

Taking a class or accepting a role in a production is a contractual obligation. We must be prepared to meet the requirements and demands of the process, realizing that others have also entered into this contract—we have entered a partnership. We must show respect for the work, our fellows, and ourselves.

Once cast in a production or enrolled in a class, we must honor that commitment. We must never miss rehearsals or expect others to work around our personal schedule. We must always arrive on time and ready to work. This means arriving early in order to warm up and prepare for

class or rehearsal. Remember, in the professional theater, time is money. But also realize: a paycheck doesn't make a professional.

Since we have chosen this profession and training, we should also choose to make the process positive. Our attitude makes a difference. We must learn how to work with our fellow artists—to be attentive, supportive, and cooperative. Such an atmosphere enhances the ensemble, develops camaraderie, encourages spontaneity, and allows the most exciting discoveries to happen. We should exhibit this creative attitude in training, rehearsal, and production. As Stanislavski said, "Love the art in you, not yourself in the art."

Actors have to come to a play with creative energy, instead of defensive energy about proving themselves worthy.

– Robert Joy

We must strive to keep our minds and bodies alert during rehearsal and class work. We have to "lean forward," as Harold Clurman said, and actively pay attention and observe rather than lie back and drift off, for there is something to be learned from every experience.

Acting provides the fulfillment of never being fulfilled. You're never as good as you'd like to be. So there's always something to hope for.

– Glenda Jackson

We must cultivate self-motivation, and not expect the instructor or director to be a cheerleader. We must work to make ourselves interested, choosing to listen to everything in the studio and rehearsal, asking how we might benefit from the direction. Often the advice given to other actors is applicable to us, and is most useful.

We shouldn't always depend upon teachers, stage managers, and directors to maintain control or enforce discipline. We must be our own disciplinarians, for each artist must be free to focus their energy on the creative process.

I sometimes think that if professional actors reflected a little more on how we all learn acceptable social manners, it would be a valuable guide to many of the techniques of their craft.

– Tyrone Guthrie

We must be aware of the impact we have upon the dynamics of the group, conscientiously working to strengthen the ensemble: sharing and giving our energy to others rather than taking and sapping; always giving focus to the work of others, and not stealing it. We must never forget that training with others is a privilege, and that the process and the work are larger than ourselves.

The actors must understand each other, help each other, absolutely love each other. They absolutely must.

– Laurence Olivier

Actors learn through observation. We must always concentrate and focus our energy on our fellow artists during class work and rehearsal. We should keep notes on all class work and rehearsals—study them, and review them before our next session. Keeping a journal can be both an enjoyable time for reflection and a valuable aid in evaluating our progress, assessing our strengths, weaknesses, and growth as people and as artists.

In the studio, you learn to conform—to submit yourself to the demands of your craft—so that you may finally be free.

– Martha Graham

Audition Procedure and Behavior

- read the entire play, not just sides you may have received

- find out as much information as you can about the director, the play, and the type of audition
- find out if there will be cold readings or prepared pieces?
- find out if all roles are open, or have some been precast?
- check out the audition space, if possible
- wear clothing that seems to be in the spirit of the play, but not a costume or theatrical makeup
- assess your previous commitments and time conflicts
- arrive early enough to warm up
- carefully read all written instructions and accurately fill out all forms
- bring a resume and quality head shot
- make certain your resume *accurately* and *honestly* reflects your acting experience
- don't try to second-guess the director; make your choices and present them to the best of your ability

It should be a cardinal rule of an actor's life: Always audition. You may find out something about the role you haven't gleaned from the written page; you may find the director has a concept totally unlike the writing. Half the actor's life is auditioning, half is performing. Why stint on the auditioning half? – Michael Shurtleff

Professional Training and Rehearsal Ethics

Please note: the following precepts, and those throughout, should not be thought of as hard-and-fast "rules"; they are mutually agreed upon principles that should not be violated casually, unthinkingly, or without good reason.

- make it a point to read all handbooks for A.C.T., or any other school or production company of which you may be a part
- reading about the history and philosophy of a company is also helpful in better understanding its aims and goals
- be early in order to warm up
- avoid personal activities that interfere with concentration and energy:
- eat beforehand, not in the studio or in the theater
- TURN OFF all electronic devices in the studio rehearsal room; texting, answering cell phones, or surfing smart phones, iPads, etc. during class or rehearsal is rude and can be demoralizing to your associates; do these activities during breaks outside the space
- do not read newspapers or magazines during rehearsal or class; it's also rude and can be demoralizing to your associates; do this reading during breaks outside the space
- do not chew gum; it may be distracting to others
- always wear clothing that the instructor or director has requested
- learn and follow all smoking rules; you are responsible for the health and safety of others
- do not wear dangling or jangling jewelry; it may be distracting to others
- take responsibility to do your own research and analysis—this is part of your process
- memorize all lines accurately and on schedule as directed

I can't understand actors who learn their lines approximately. If it's a good script, the writer has sweated over every part of it and a single word can throw everything. – Katharine Hepburn

- never interrupt the teacher/director and the actors during rehearsal
- avoid walking between the director/teacher and the actors during rehearsal
- do not direct or coach your fellow actors; if you have suggestions, channel them through the director/teacher

- control impulses to recite fellow actors' lines while they rehearse, or cue them if they forget a line
- avoid the temptation to proffer opinions about scene work or attempt to "fix" the work of others
- in discussion, think as an investigator, not as a director or a critic
- accept criticism without defensiveness; use what works and discard the rest
- apply observations of others to your own work
- be open to new methods and techniques; there is no one "right" way to successful acting

Create your own method. Don't depend slavishly on mine [or someone else's]. Make up something that will work for you! But keep breaking traditions, I beg you. – Konstantin Stanislavski

- avoid talking and whispering during class work and rehearsal. Many times the actors perceive such talk as negative criticism. We must work to remove obstacles, not create them.
- never invite guests to attend class or rehearsal unless you have secured permission from the stage manager/instructor in advance
- take responsibility to keep the studios and rehearsal rooms clean

We should show enthusiasm for the work of our fellow artists: actors, designers, technicians, directors, and teachers alike, giving praise when it is justified, and offering constructive criticism when it is appropriate. When discussing the work of our colleagues, we must strive to be open and honest while avoiding negative, destructive comments that may serve to mask our own insecurity; pettiness and selfish defensiveness produce negative energy.

Let me say something about ethics in the theater. [One] reason for the collapse of well-intentioned venture after venture is sloth and egomania. We must accept the fact that the theater is a communal adventure. Unlike the soloist, we can't perform alone in the theater . . . The better the play, the more we need an ensemble venture. We must recognize that we need each other's strengths, and the more we need each other's professional comradeship, the better the chance we have of making theater. We must serve the play by serving each other; an ego-maniacal "star" attitude is only self-serving and hurts everyone . . . We must aim for "character" in the moral and ethical sense of the word, compounded of the virtues of mutual respect, courtesy, kindness, generosity, trust, attention to the others, seriousness, loyalty, as well as those necessary attributes of diligence and dedication. – Uta Hagen

We must be loyal to our fellow artists and the projects we are creating, choosing to contribute positively to the work rather than finding fault. A supportive atmosphere is essential so that the group feels secure; not in a cozy, comfortable sense that encourages complacency, but in an atmosphere of nurturing that encourages actors to take risks and stretch themselves.

An actor has no right to mould their partner to provide greater possibilities for their own performance. Nor have they the right to correct their partner . . . Intimate or drastic elements in the work of others are untouchable and should not be commented upon even in their absence. Private conflicts, quarrels, sentiments, animosities are unavoidable in any human group. It is our duty towards creation to keep these in check in so far as they might deform and wreck the work process.

– Jerzy Grotowski

We must create an environment away from the studio where we can explore and develop: channel our energy and make it work for us rather than against us by structuring our time so that we are able to bring our full creative power to the artistic process.

Let someone explain to me why the violinist who plays in an orchestra on the tenth violin must daily perform hour-long exercises or lose their power to play? Why does the dancer work daily over every muscle in their body? Why do the painter, the sculptor, the writer practice their art each day and count that day lost when they do not work? And why may the dramatic artist do nothing, spend their day in coffee houses and hope for the gift of [inspiration] in the evening? There is no art that does not demand virtuosity.

– Konstantin Stanislavski

Actor training is a demanding, life-long process. We must continuously work to improve our bodies, voices, imaginations, and knowledge; we are our own instruments. We must cherish our health the most and take care of ourselves, especially avoiding substance abuse and unsafe sexual activity. If substance abuse is a problem, we must seek help and commit our energy to our art.

Like it or not, we must accept acting as a competitive profession. We will be constantly competing with other actors for roles. And, like it or not, we are constantly auditioning and presenting ourselves to others. Yet we won't get every role we seek. Therefore, a sense of self-worth and self-esteem are essential if we are to keep our careers in perspective. We must persevere and be self-assertive without being pushy or cut-throat. Negative energy backfires.

Professional Performance Ethics

When performing, we must build our day around that event, preparing ourselves so that we can give full energy to the work we have helped create:

- performance schedules vary and change; check your assumptions
- be early; lateness can be equivalent to absence
- always enter and exit through the stage door, never through the lobby and house
- leave personal problems at the stage door
- always sign yourself in; contact the stage manager if you are going to be late
- check the callboard every day for information
- do not smoke, eat, chew gum, or drink in costume or in the wings unless required by performance
- check on your own props at half hour
- do not sit on prop furniture backstage
- place only props on the prop tables
- remember, backstage energy affects onstage energy
- respect the warm-up and pre-entrance preparation of your fellow actors
- always be ready in the wings for your entrance; missing an entrance is betraying the trust of your fellow artists. Always be thinking ahead.
- be aware of sightlines; if you can see the audience, they can see you
- play every role to the best of your ability, no matter how small or how large
- always respect the audience, regardless of size; the audience is a partner, not an adversary.
- do not break the illusion of the theater by appearing in costume and makeup offstage or outside the theater
- take care of your costumes. Hang them appropriately after each rehearsal/performance.
- never allow the comments of outsiders to change any aspect of your characterization; always consult with the director about your work.

We must always remember that A.C.T. is a professional theater as well as a conservatory. Therefore, we need to be sensitive to patrons and individuals who may be in the building on business. Avoid boisterous behavior or loitering in the conference room area.

When wearing clothing with the A.C.T. logo, we must realize that we are representing the theater in public, and behave accordingly.

A.C.T. encourages an atmosphere of open communication. In keeping with this philosophy, we should always seek out the proper individual to express our concerns and our praise.

One mustn't allow acting to be like stock broking—you must not take it just as a means of earning a living, to go down every day to do a job of work. The big thing is to combine punctuality, efficiency, good nature, obedience, intelligence, and concentration with an unawareness of what is going to happen next, thus keeping yourself available for excitement. – John Gielgud

There are no shortcuts to solid artistic work as an actor. The cultivation of a self-disciplined, professional attitude in our training and production work is a commitment we must all be prepared to make. We must have patience and strive together, supporting one another in our development. This kind of attitude strengthens and enriches the technical skills we learn to tell a story and communicate a character effectively to an audience, and leads us closer to an invigorating, successful life in the theater.

This pamphlet was compiled and written by
Jack F. Sharrar, Ph.D., Director of Academic Affairs,
and incorporates the ideas and philosophies of the staff of
the American Conservatory Theater.
© Jack F. Sharrar