

“SO  THEREFORE”

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
 FOR ACTORS

BY AL RUSCIO



“...an absolute joy on many levels ... I recommend it highly to everyone, not only actors or those involved in theatre and film – everyone.”

– Academy Award winner Martin Landau

SO THEREFORE ...

Every scene or action or speech has a *so therefore*. It is the goal, the ultimate statement of the character. You should know the *so therefore* as you begin your scene ... The climax and the payoff is the *so therefore*.

from Al Ruscio's preface

When working through a scene with a student, renowned actor and acting teacher Al Ruscio will ask, “so therefore what?” to urge them to capture the specific actions and desires that define their character at that moment. *So Therefore ...* interweaves tried-and-tested practical exercises with sound advice, and illustrative tales from Ruscio's remarkable career, to form a training handbook as uniquely pragmatic as his favourite phrase. Breaking down his method into three broad focuses, Ruscio considers:

- *Warming up* – including relaxation, going “beneath the words” and emotional recall;
- *Scene work* – ranging from character analysis to an exploration of action;
- *The play* – discovering its spine, progressing through rehearsals, and sustaining a performance.

But *So Therefore ...* also reflects wisely on such diverse subjects as “stage versus film,” and “stamina, luck and chutzpah.” Enriching and generous, it is the culmination of a career that has taken in dozens of major motion pictures, and spans the entire history of television – as well as half a century spent training actors.

Al Ruscio graduated from the famed Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre and has been teaching acting for five decades. He has served on the Board of Directors of the Screen Actors Guild and is a current voting member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

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FOR ACTORS

Al Ruscio

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I dedicate this book to four remarkable teachers who helped me, guided me, and inspired me along the way. To John Tellier, at Salem High School in Massachusetts, who taught me never to be afraid. To Dr. Delbert Moyer Staley, of Staley College of the Spoken Word in Massachusetts, who gave me my first opportunity to teach a class. To Sanford Meisner, at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre in New York City, who taught me the fundamentals of acting. And to Jeff Corey, in Los Angeles, who shared his teaching skills and expanded my approach to the craft of acting.

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	x
<i>Foreword by Martin Landau</i>	xi
<i>Preface: So Therefore ... (a few words about my title)</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>Permissions</i>	xiv
<i>About the author</i>	xv
PART I	
Warming up	I
1 Introduction	3
2 Relaxation	5
3 Concentration	7
4 Imagination	10
5 Beneath the words	13
6 Sensory exercises	15
7 Improvisation	20
8 Animal studies	24
9 Life studies	26
10 Emotional recall	35
PART 2	
Scene work	39
11 Character analysis	41

12	The spine of the play	43
13	The spine of the character	45
14	Your objective in the scene	47
15	Your actions in the scene	53
16	The <i>as if</i>	58
17	Preparation	65
18	Scenes	72

PART 3

The play 75

19	Introduction	77
20	Read the play	78
21	The main idea and special quality	79
22	The climax	81
23	Character analysis	83
24	The spine of your character	84
25	Rehearsals begin	86
26	Elements of characterization	88
27	The use of improvisation	90
28	Blocking sessions	93
29	Detailed work on each act	96
30	Run-throughs	98
31	Final run-throughs	101
32	Dress rehearsals	104
33	Opening night	106
34	... And beyond	107

PART 4

Stage versus film 111

35	Projecting versus being	113
36	The scene versus the shot	115
37	Opposing views	121

PART 5**Stamina, luck, and chutzpah, and other lessons 123**

38 Stamina, luck, and chutzpah 125

39 Remembering Lear 129

40 The semi-final lesson 134

41 The final lesson 137

Notes 139*References* 144

FIGURES

1	Barry Fitzgerald gives Al a basic acting lesson	22
2	Al in <i>The Man in the Glass Booth</i> as Arthur Goldman	29
3	Sitting Bull in ceremonial attire	30
4	My father Antonio	31
5	My grandfather Stefano Coletti	32
6	Al as Eddie Carbone in <i>A View from the Bridge</i>	33
7	Al in <i>Geniuses</i> at the Coronet Theatre	103
8	Al in <i>King Lear</i> as the regal monarch	129
9	Al as the broken king in <i>King Lear</i>	133

FOREWORD

Martin Landau

I just had the pleasure of reading Al Ruscio's *So Therefore ...* I found it an absolute joy on many levels. It's not only a great primer on the art of acting in theatre and film, but it allows the reader a close-up view of the author, a devoted and talented man whose own life's journey has instilled knowledge and given incentive to so many others over the years.

I have known Al Ruscio for over a half century, and I can honestly say that his talent and zeal have not diminished even one iota in all that time.

Al is an enlightened individual with a true and passionate love of life and his craft – and it's bursting from the pages of this book.

I recommend it highly to everyone, not only actors or those involved in theatre and film – *everyone* – as it will give the reader insights and stimulate him or her in ways which will improve how they look at and experience the world around them. *It's a terrific read!*

PREFACE

SO THEREFORE ... (A FEW WORDS ABOUT MY TITLE)

I did not invent the phrase “so therefore”, but I used it so often in my classes that my students would use the phrase whenever they would call me or see me after a class.

I believe I first heard the phrase in Sandy Meisner’s class at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York. After you finished a scene or a monologue or an exercise, he would say, “So therefore, what?” and you had to be specific in your answer.

For example, in the play *Golden Boy* by Clifford Odets, the boy is trying to explain to his family, especially his father, that he wants more from life: “Poppa, I have to tell you,” he says, “I don’t like myself – past, present and future. Do you know there are men who have wonderful things from life? Do you think they’re better than me?” Then he continues, “Tomorrow’s my birthday! I change my life.”¹ And, I would say, “So therefore, what?” And the student would yell, “So therefore, leave me alone: I’m going to be a fighter.” Or in the play *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters, when Lucinda Matlock talks about her great life and then says, “What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness, anger, discontent and drooping hopes? Degenerate sons and daughters,” she says, “Life is too strong for you – it takes life to love Life.”²

Her *so therefore* is something like, “Stop complaining, grow up, and enjoy this wonderful gift called Life.”

Every scene or action or speech has a *so therefore*. It is the goal, the ultimate statement of the character. You should know the *so therefore* as you begin your scene. That knowledge is the springboard that drives the scene. It gives you the impetus and the confidence to play your action fully. The climax and the payoff is the *so therefore*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Putting this book together was truly a family affair. I want to thank my wife Kate Williamson for her love and encouragement. We met years ago as two struggling actors in New York and together we've had a fantastic journey that continues to this day.

I also thank our daughter Maria and her husband David Seward for their help and excellent suggestions. I thank our son-in-law Leon Martell. He has used this book in his own classes and he has given me great insight, especially regarding the exercises.

I thank our son Michael, an editor and director, for his help, particularly on Part 4, regarding film and stage acting, the editing process, and how it affects the actor.

I thank our daughter Nina, who used her knowledge of production design, and her husband Franz Metcalf, a published author, for organizing and editing this material.

I would be remiss if I didn't recognize the contributions and love and understanding of my agent-manager Judy Fox who was always there to do anything she could to help make this book successful.

Finally, I want to acknowledge and thank our daughter Elizabeth for her extraordinary effort in typing the entire manuscript and offering editorial and research assistance throughout the writing and rewriting process.

PERMISSIONS

Photograph of Al Ruscio in *The Man in the Glass Booth* © Eric E. Emerson, Tanstaaf Photography.

Photograph of Sitting Bull in ceremonial attire. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Photo by William Notman and Son Co.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Al Ruscio was born in Salem, Massachusetts, and began his theatrical career in earnest after serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II. While attending Staley College of the Spoken Word during the day, he acted with the New England Shakespeare Festival at night, playing Edgar in *King Lear*, Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Lucifer in *Dr. Faustus*.

The following summer, he joined the North Shore Players where he played roles in *Dream Girl* with Lucille Ball, *Burlesque* with Bert Lahr, and *Angel Street* with Francis Lederer. The summer after, he was playing leads opposite Martha Scott in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, Elissa Landi in *Theatre*, and Robert Alda in *The Male Animal*.

During his senior year in college he was invited to teach a course called Psycho-Gymnastics. This was a class in movement and gesture designed to help priests, ministers, rabbis, and politicians. Among his students, a future United States president: John F. Kennedy.

That same year, he was selected by director Henry Hathaway to appear in the film *13 Rue Madeleine*, with James Cagney and Richard Conte. It was Conte who suggested that Al study in New York. After graduating from college, and armed with Conte's recommendation, Al was accepted at the famed Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre. He studied there for two years with Sanford Meisner, David Pressman, Martha Graham, and a host of wonderful teachers in acting, improvisation, dance, speech, production, and technique.

He then began teaching a class called Acting – The Professional Approach at Brooklyn College. At that time he also started to work in live television, appearing in episodes of *Kraft Television Theatre*,

Lux Video Theatre, and *Robert Montgomery Presents*. During the summers, he acted in summer stock in a variety of theatres in Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania. Outstanding experiences were touring with Kim Stanley in *The Country Girl*, with Steve McQueen in *A Hatful of Rain*, with Gertrude Berg in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and playing Max Levene in the road company of *Heaven Can Wait*.

Shortly after he arrived in Hollywood, Al starred in *A View from the Bridge* at the Players Ring Theatre. He also began to play major roles in *Bonanza*, *Mr. Lucky*, *The Untouchables*, *Playhouse 90*, and *The Lawless Years*. He appeared in the film *Al Capone* with Rod Steiger.

He began touring in George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*, playing the role of the Devil. During this time he was serving on the board of directors of the Screen Actors Guild. Jack Dales, the executive director of the Guild, suggested Al might be interested in a position at a new school just opening in Iowa: Midwestern College, in the small town of Denison. The position was Actor-in-Residence, Chairman of the Theatre Department, and Managing Director of the Fine Arts Festival.

Al accepted the challenge and for five years he taught acting and theatre history. He also acted, directed, or produced some 25 plays, including *Darkness at Noon*, *The Lark*, *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*, *The Music Man*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Barefoot in the Park*, and *The Seagull*. Unfortunately, the college closed after five years, but Al and everyone else involved will treasure that great adventure for the rest of their lives.

The University of Windsor then beckoned. Al and his family moved to Canada where he acted in or directed *Three Men on a Horse*, *J. B.*, *The Gingerbread Lady*, and *Leaving Home*. While acting and directing, he taught classes in improvisation and acting technique.

He was then invited to serve as artistic director at The Academy of Dramatic Art, Oakland University's professional acting school in Rochester, Michigan. There he directed *Look Homeward, Angel*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *The Green Cockatoo*, *After the Fall*, *J. B.*, *A View from the Bridge*, and four one-acts by Tennessee Williams. During this time in the middle of the country he also appeared as an actor in *Fever Heat*, as well as in several industrial films for Ford and General Motors.