



THE
CRAFT
OF
SCREEN
ACTING

Amanda
Brennan

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For my parents: Patrick and Eileen Brennan

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANS	autonomic nervous system
CP	close-up
DOP	director of photography
ECP	extreme close-up
MCP	medium close up
POV	point of view
PPF	past, present, future
PSNS	parasympathetic nervous system
TMC	traditional Chinese medicine

FOREWORD

I've never written one of these before, but I just couldn't pass up the opportunity to spill all my love and admiration for Amanda for all the world to see.

I've been working as an actor since I was eight years old, and I have had Amanda by my side for the majority of my career. She's coached me through my lead roles for Martin Scorsese and Tim Burton, and helped me hone my craft with countless others. We've built a trust together that has allowed for some of my favourite explorations of character and creativity.

You might think after almost twenty years of doing something that there is not much more to learn, but her advice has always been to keep searching for more, to find the essence of the character. She has continued to help unlock my understanding of the story and coaxed out the ideas behind my roles and has helped me find a real embodied connection to material I would have otherwise only brushed the surface of. It is advice that I have taken with me throughout my career and has left its mark on my approach to acting.

Whether it is understanding my breath, using it to create an ease in my own body and overcoming nerves, allowing me to access emotions from a place of depth and honesty. Or experimenting with shifts in weight, knowing where one's energy comes from (the head, the chest, etc.) and how it can completely change the space a character takes up in a scene.

There is always room to refine your craft as an actor; staying tuned to your body takes focus and constant practice. Like any tool, without use and care it becomes rusty, and this book provides the groundwork to keep your instincts sharp.

Without her layered and rigorous approach to screen acting I would, without a doubt, not be the actor I am today. And I am sure the countless actors she has guided and nurtured over many years would say the same thing, not only because of the time spent with her, but through the foundations shared to develop our craft independently.

If you can learn, from reading this book, even just a fraction of what I have in the 13 years I've known her, your understanding of acting, your body and the power you have to change it will never be the same.

Asa Butterfield

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INTRODUCTION

This book emerged from my explorations as a teacher and coach of acting which have involved working with various levels of experience, abilities and ages over the last three decades. I have observed that, although the skill base of the actor is always different, there are some common challenges that relate to working on screen. These include the following:

- Finding physical ease and freeing the body from tension.
- Having quick access to the depth of emotion needed for the situation.
- Channelling a sharp and precise level of focus.
- Fully inhabiting the role.
- Avoiding falling into habitual patterns.

To address these considerations I have compiled a series of chapters which I feel will offer the actor ways to shape their work and to refine their craft. As suggested by this title I am really interested in how a creative artist can work towards the mastery and advancement of craft. No skills are refined without an understanding of the elements that make up the craft. Many of these are of course related to the actual practice, the acting, and others to what has shaped your own aptitude for creative expression. Your ability to be expressive starts with you; skills can be learnt, but there also has to be a willingness to reflect and develop an awareness of how you interface with yourself and others to creatively do your best work. This is regardless of age or experience, as reflection offers the route to progression and artistic fulfilment.

The approach which the book explores is drawn from many influences such as the work of Michael Chekhov, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Bella Merlin and Lorna Marshall, body practices like qigong, tai chi, Alexander Technique, mindfulness and the ideas of various scientists and biologists. I will introduce the key components of such practices and explain how they inform my work. The overall

link is the body, which I place at the centre, as the actor needs to be in tune and connected to their body. It is the key to the facility to be present and to produce magnetic performances on screen.

Much of the material is of course focused on screen; however, the majority of the work also relates to overall acting skills. It is impossible to perform well on screen without having a good grasp of the fundamental components of acting. In the early chapters I make clear distinctions between the medium of live and screen work, to enable the reader to understand how visual storytelling requires some adjustments and possesses its own distinct technique.

This book will provide tried and tested tools to shape an actor's performance for the needs of the screen. There are strategies, tips and routines to enable you to work independently, as so often required in film and TV. These will offer ways to define character, create complex, truthful relationships and will guide you towards subtlety and the detail of expression that is rich with emotion and subtext. There is an overall emphasis on the need to prepare and tune the body to bring more somatic connection which can enhance your presence on screen. For those new to screen acting you will gain insight into how the technical considerations of shooting can impact your performance and learn how to adjust your work accordingly. Much of the content is also useful for directors who would like to access tools to deepen the actor's process in a rehearsal setting and to understand the actor's process.

The book could appeal to:

- Curious actors who want to keep learning.
- Young professionals who have not had any formal acting training.
- Those who would like to refine their practice and experiment with how they prepare for screen.
- Theatre actors who would like to work more on screen.
- Directors who may want to find out more about how actors prepare.

How the book is organized

I have organized the book into three parts which should create a journey for the reader. Part One concerns exploring the territory of the craft – which includes the fundamentals, such as cultivating your creativity and developing somatic awareness. I explore how the body is your resource, emphasizing that ease and overall physical connection are crucial for screen. The chapters provide exercises and routines which can be integrated into a personal training programme to retain skills and find new ways of working.

Part Two takes the reader through approaches to preparing for screen projects. The emphasis is on finding your creative process, one that allows for discovery and innovation. The chapters explore how to define the character, through understanding the impact of the bigger picture such as the social context of the world and how this shapes behaviour, physicality and overall expression.

Part Three considers the specific practicalities and requirements of filming and the potential impact on your performance. The chapters highlight how actors can adjust their work to accommodate the technicalities of shooting whilst still retaining the necessary embodied connection.

In many ways, the content contains some themes and topics that could fill whole books, and there are places where I refer the reader to other sources for more extended research.

PART ONE

CRAFT AND REFINEMENT

1 IN SEARCH OF TRUTH

STRIPPING BACK

KEY WORDS/CONCEPTS: Visual storytelling → Acting → Honesty → Truth → Authenticity → Craft

There is a specific craft and technique to screen acting which, like any pursuit, when practised can be refined and lead to various levels of mastery. The core skills, as with live theatre, revolve around the voice, body and imagination. However, these fundamentals have to be adapted to suit the distinguishing features and processes of visual filmmaking. This chapter hones in on the key elements of the craft, exploring the key principles. I will use the term 'screen' interchangeably to refer to both film and television work. Though there are some distinctions in the process and scripts, they share the technical components of film language.

The language

The specific language of visual storytelling dictates the features of screen performance. It is through the composition of shots that the story is told. Central to this is movement, as the camera has the potential to photograph at any distance. It can take in a huge landscape or hone in on a freckle on a face. Creating angles from various heights and distances, allows for different perspectives which when cut together possesses a seamless narrative. The other aesthetic layers are the design components, set, costume, lighting, props and the colour palate. Each of these underpins the director's vision with immense accuracy and impact. The final composition is edited as an organization of all of the cinematic components, which, with the sound and music, shape the rhythm and tempo. There are many

features and building blocks which promote the development of the plot, all of which, including the acting, need to slot effortlessly together.

Authenticity: Keep it real

Screen work should have verisimilitude in all of its aspects, that is, the appearance of truth. Regardless of the genre, the viewer needs to be drawn in to invest and be affected as the world will only be believed if all aspects are based on either facts or consistent perceptions of the environment. If the environments are congruent in terms of time, space, setting, tone and behaviours of the characters, the viewer will believe the story.

The acting therefore should show no signs of artifice, but appear *bona fide*, as if the actor is actively living through the circumstances. In a way there is 'no acting' which may seem like an odd thing to say as that is what an actor does. To achieve this, the smallest nuances of the character's behaviour, the words spoken, the gestures and movement patterns and all of the relationships within the script have to be plausible. This is simply because an audience will not empathize with the protagonists or have any interest in their struggles without it. The viewer does not want to be reminded that the story is in fact not real.

Integrated into the language of screen and at the heart of this authenticity that directors so readily seek are some primary factors. The performance is not exclusively about the verbal dialogue; the character's thoughts and feelings can be revealed through gesture. A line of text is often substituted by a look; a short action sequence can replace a lengthy conversation. The viewer learns about the character by the precision of what they do rather than solely what they say. Every detail is read and open for interpretation. Often actions and reactions are a more immediate means of revealing story beats than words.

Filmmaker Janis Pugh considers that a great screen actor is 'Someone who understands the subtlety of how action and dialogue translate on the screen' (Pugh, 2021). This dialogue is not necessarily in the form of words but exists as energy, which can be experienced as the emotional force, the dynamic of the thoughts, the unspoken and the slightest movement which carries significant meaning. There is a real need to channel and at times condense your energy as part of the craft is knowing how to control and balance emotional expression. It involves the facility to look inward and examine thoughts which reveal the layers of inner activity that can be captured by the camera. This demands a delicate vulnerability and a high level of introspection from the actor; which comes with a heightened awareness of mental and physical processes. This ability to really look inward and connect with thoughts and feelings allows the actors to adapt and access a broader range of emotion.

Inner life

I often say that with screen acting the ‘action is on the inside’, as the camera can capture the intensity of all that may be bubbling within and that which is not outwardly expressed. A complex inner life, also known as inner landscape or inner monologue, is the private terrain composed of a plethora of activity which can be hidden but also exposed by bodily and energetic expression. In all humans there is a constant stream of consciousness composed of thoughts that are not spoken, as well as secret hopes, dreams and pressing needs that are hard to articulate. People often retreat into their secret world to reflect, take stock or remain private. This is the space for the imagination, where fantasies and dreams are created, new ideas and concepts cultivated. It is busy, always alert to sensory stimulation, and natural instincts.

A person can have inner characteristics that are very different to their outer appearance. The externally shy person may be bursting with fury, desire or ambition. Or the confrontational assertive individual could be full of doubt and self-criticism. These contradictions can trigger complicated emotions, which may not be socially acceptable, for example, feeling jealous of a friend who seems more successful or the urge to punch the person who questions your authority. Inner expression is always buoyant, as the body continually navigates different environments, and responds to all it encounters. The cultivation of this inner territory is fundamental to screen craft. The words carry one layer of communication; the unspoken is far more powerful on camera. A strong inner life keeps you present; it motivates speech and all action.

Silence and stillness

Director James Kent explains that screen actors need to be able to ‘communicate through words and silence. I want the camera to pick up the thought processes’ (Kent, 2020). This again highlights the importance of the unspoken and how what is said is not necessarily the sole means of communicating on screen. The silences allow for the journey of the thoughts and for those moments when the character may struggle to say what they feel to be cultivated.

He moved on to say that ‘The best screen actors have a universal emotional intelligence. They can access emotions swiftly. They are able to inhabit the role so at the casting stage are already close to the world’ (Kent, 2020). Having emotional intelligence is the ability to regulate and manage emotions. It is important for the actor to be able to understand, relate and empathize with the experiences and feelings of the character and so fully place themselves in the imaginative context. Kent is suggesting that behind every action and reaction is an emotional response,

which needs to drive the communication on screen. This response precedes and surrounds the words; it is energetically expressed through the body.

It is common for those new to the medium to need to identify the right balance of expression. Emotion often has to be adjusted, as it can appear theatrical if overly energized or non-existent if under-energized. There is no need to over-project outwards; the felt energy of the moment ideally ruminates in the body to retain a strong connection. This indicates that at all times connection to the whole body is vital; the performance is not solely about the thoughts but also where they travel and reside in the body. (See Chapter 3 for connection.)

Listening/attention

Discovering body synchronicity enables the actor to listen with the necessary sharpness for screen. The potential intimacy and exposure of the camera brings with it the need to focus with real intent, to galvanize the thoughts, emotion and inner drive to allow each moment to be alive. It becomes vital to know where your attention lies in each beat, to direct inner energy so thoughts are clear. To eliminate the unnecessary thoughts and concerns, you need to align with the character's intention and firmly elect one point of focus. This offers clarity; it sharpens the thoughts and reaction. When you focus the mind, you are selecting what it is you want to attend to, and you become more available.

Just being

Casting director Sharon Sorrentino talks about the need for the actor to 'just be' and find ease in the performance.

We want to just watch the character in the situation. So the actor has to find a way to 'just 'be' in front of a camera and lose any self-conscious behaviour that can remind us of who the actor is, or we lose suspension of disbelief.

(SORRENTINO, 2021)

'Just being' is when the actor has reached the stage where they are able to naturally focus their attention, to eliminate any irrelevancies and sit with what is unravelling in the reality of the moment. 'Being means that you totally accept the given circumstances and are aware of moment to moment reality' (Comey, 2013: 29). The immersion is such it is as if the actor has lost themselves in whatever dilemma the character finds themselves in, whatever the stakes and wherever that takes them. They have surrendered to the fiction as if it is real. A common saying is

for the actor to 'be in the moment' which, Bella Merlin says, 'loosely refers to the actor's concentration of attention being focused on the action in hand' (Merlin, 2010: 58).

Process

The process of preparing for screen work is often more independent than theatre – you may not be able to work extensively with the other actors prior to filming, so being able to instantly tune in and connect to the various relationships in the story is therefore integral. When preparation is more solo you have to consider how to shape your creativity. (See Chapter 2 for creativity.) This implies developing a journey which enables you to immerse yourself in the world of the story and find the shades of the character's behaviour and your unique interpretation.

Preparation has to take into consideration the structure of filming. The consequences of shooting non-linearly mean you know the story inside out, connecting with the emotional timeline of the character – what they feel, when they feel it and the triggers – and also how such feelings impact their actions across the whole story.

It is necessary to galvanise a readiness which can speedily and repeatedly take you to the imagined situation. The immediacy is contrasted with the waiting, the time taken for technical factors to be organized. This makes managing your mind and body necessary and finding ways to retain focus is part of the craft.

Technical elements

There are of course technical elements which make the process of filming very unnatural. Specific blocking to stay in frame, hitting a mark, and adapting your position to accommodate the light are conscious adjustments that have to go unnoticed. This highlights a need to have a technical eye, which will differ according to the shots and how much movement there is. If you are moving with the camera operator, in a steady cam shot, out of necessity you have to be in sync; if you move too quickly, the crew cannot keep up. There is also the need to stay within the frame and be on your mark. Should you be even slightly out, it will impact the composition of the shot. The tighter frames will affect how much you can move. Such factors draw on the actor's ability to be spontaneous, receptive and physically free. You must automatically attune yourself to the operator, whether you are in a moving sequence or the camera is moving to you.

The liberating aspects of filming on location with all of the intricate layers provided by the production designers really allow the actor to enter into the world.

They have what they need to be in the situation including personal props, objects costumes and spaces which have significant memories. Multiple takes potentially allow for more immersion and varied choices.

There are many processes that we will explore in this book that can move you closer to a truthful performance. These will involve strategies to refine your physical skills and expand your facility to be somatically aware. Helen Mirren describes acting as 'Out of control inspiration' (Mirren, 2022). In real life there is no control over what has happened in the past, nor can we govern the future. Humans live with continual uncertainty: on the edge of possibility. This is perhaps the state needed for acting on screen, the reality of uncertainty. To truly live with whatever is happening in the present moment.

2 FINDING YOUR CREATIVITY

BEYOND THE EVERYDAY

KEY WORDS/CONCEPTS: Creativity → Resources → Process → Resources → Blocks → Craft

In this chapter I will focus on what it means to be creative and suggest that screen work brings some interesting distinctions and challenges, with regard to both the inventive stages of an actor's process and the shoot. A major factor is that elements of the preparation process for most projects are largely independent. Once cast, the interrogation into the world of the story, the mining of the script, and the choices in regard to physicality, voice and behaviour of the character are often the solo work of the actor. It is a unique phenomenon which is at times hard to understand but ingrained into how films and television projects are produced. This makes managing your creativity pretty vital.

As an actor you are a creative artist; your work is to communicate ideas through various means of expression. Essentially you need to cultivate an imagination that totally immerses you in the fictional layers of the story. Being creative is a skill; the process requires practice. To make work you have to be self-motivated, inventive, seek ways of interpreting the given circumstances, experiment, generate ideas, solve problems and often break through times of feeling blocked. In the book *Awakening Your Creative Soul* Sandra Duran Wilson talks about the need to move through the layers of the body to discover expressive freedom. 'Below are the layers of our experiences, followed by the layers of our emotions and, at the innermost centre, our soul's core layers' (Sandra Duran Wilson). To see the ordinary with fresh eyes you need to realign your vision. Creating a fully-fledged complex character for theatre or screen is an act which requires you to travel into the void, to lose yourself in a journey of discovery.

In the arts the origins of the work are often sparked by the individual, be that a painter, writer, director or actor. It is suggested that flowing between solo and group work maximizes creative potential – with the collaborative contact being the most beneficial as it allows for the kindling of new ideas (Moore, 2000). As working on screen project can be more independent, I want to explore how to practise, maintain and develop your creativity to keep you curious, so you automatically pose questions, adopt different perspectives and avoid getting stuck in making the same choices for every role. Creativity interrupts linear and logical thinking, it encourages the discovery of new ways of moving, speaking and imagining. This is all possible because with creative expression the brain switches off the usual executive mode, making more uncensored processes possible. Neuroscientists Charles Limb and Allen Braun found that activity in the area of the brain which acts as your inner critic, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, reduces during playful improvisation and the prefrontal cortex, responsible for language and creativity, becomes more active (Limb and Braun, 2008). This tells us that being free and fluid in expression will affect your level of both immersion and creativity.

As an actor you are a creative – so make it part of your daily routine to practise and explore. This could involve writing, drawing, moving, singing, playing an instrument or imagining. Cultivate curiosity about the world; be an observer of human behaviour. Observe the dynamic between people, the gestures, speech rhythms and emotional journeys. Be able to play like a child, so you retain the ability to get lost in fantasy and move away from logic. Regularity is key, as it tunes the mind and body. As acting coach Harold Guskin says, ‘the creative process necessitates giving up normal logic’ (Guskin, 2004: 66). This implies analysing less and entering into the world where impulses are not edited and there is no right or wrong. Either working independently or with others, you should be emotionally available and able to make offers, respond to notes by playing the scene with varied energies, be spontaneous and make choices that are unexpected. This does not come without practice.

Doing

The experience of preparing on your own does not have to be less fruitful than working in a group, as it requires you to go through the same discovery stages of the theatre ensemble. Fully utilizing your own resources will support your process. I find that ‘doing’ is the key to adaptability and to breaking through any obstacles you may have, such as being in your head too much. It is useful to change the rhythm of what you do and how you do it. If you usually study the text with a focus on the language, taking another approach will proffer something new: draw your character; find objects or costumes which help you access the physicality. Whatever you usually do, change it.