

9th Edition

# ACTING PROFESSIONALLY

An Essential Career Guide for the Actor

**James Calleri**  
with Robert Cohen

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**Ninth Edition**

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# About the Authors

**James Calleri** is an acclaimed casting director in New York City and an Associate Professor and Co-Head of the MFA Acting program at Columbia University. Along with Erica Jensen and Paul Davis, they own Calleri Jensen Davis, a creative casting partnership. Calleri has won over a dozen Artios Awards for Outstanding Achievement in Casting and served on the Board of the Casting Society of America for over ten years. Casting credits include the Broadway revivals of *The Piano Lesson*, *Topdog/Underdog*, *Burn This*, *The Elephant Man*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Of Mice and Men*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Fool for Love*, *Chicago*, and *Venus in Fur* among others. His films have appeared at Sundance and Cannes, and he has cast the TV shows “*Love Life*”, “*The Path*”, “*Monk*”, “*Lipstick Jungle*”, and “*Ed*”, to name a few. James has lectured and taught acting all over the country and as far as Shanghai, China. He also runs his own acting studio, Calleri Studio, and resides in Saugerties, NY, and New York City.

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# Preface

## The Way It Was

The acting industry as it exists today is unrecognizable when compared to the business in 1972 when this book was first published. This new ninth edition addresses today's new generation of actors seeking a career in this rewarding and oftentimes daunting profession.

From the aftermath of George Floyd to the still ever-present and lingering pandemic that has affected our industry in addition to the shocking but necessary SAG-AFTRA and WGA *double strike* at the time of this book's edit, from the #MeToo and Times Up movements that have now shaped our times, to the We See You W.A.T. (White American Theatre) movement seeking to build new principles for anti-racist theater systems and actors now demanding better work conditions and a place at the table on all matters—the time has never been more vibrant and exciting to enter the business in this ever-changing world. The great urgency of now has never been clearer for any young hopefuls reading this book. This ninth edition is for you.

## The Way It Is

Let's face it. Acting is fun. Millions of people do it for free, and millions more want to make a living from it. And why not? Who

wouldn't want to take home \$20 million for eight weeks of work? Add to this the great travel to exotic shooting locations, the fantastic parties, the global fame, and the effortless romantic and financial opportunities thrust into your lap from every corner of the world. Just imagine the amazement and envy of your friends as you go head to head with Jimmy Kimmel or Jimmy Fallon, sharing juicy gossip from the set, expounding your political opinions on Threads and suavely putting down your rivals and enemies (including the former acting teacher who said you'd never make it) with a toothy grin and a wry riposte.

And don't forget the world premieres, fawning politicians, ardent groupies, or running down the aisle to pick up your Tony, Emmy, or Oscar in front of millions of cheering viewers around the world. You might even—why not?—run for political office as Cynthia Nixon did, address a national political convention as Kal Penn did, or deliver the annual State of the Union address as President (and actor) Ronald Reagan did.

As the late Edward Albee said, "There are always going to be more actors than anybody can ever use."<sup>1</sup> So why is it that so many young people come out of schools, training programs, and, with a wing and a prayer, move to NYC and Hollywood with this long shot one-in-a-million chance? At the summit, acting is one of the most sublime activities of the human species. Playing 'Hedda' or 'Hamlet' or 'Alexander Hamilton' or 'Elphaba' may not only give you a nice income, it may also make you feel like a God. And—again at the top—acting can be *extremely* lucrative, particularly in Hollywood. For men, the sky seems to be the limit. Will Smith, Tom Cruise, Leonardo DiCaprio, Daniel Craig, Dwayne Johnson, and Denzel Washington routinely earn more than \$40–100 million for a single film, often plus profit bonuses.

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<sup>1</sup>WNBC TV interview, January 9, 1966.

And women are finally now getting equal parity. Sandra Bullock, Jennifer Lawrence, and Julia Roberts are in that category. Other members of the \$20-plus million per film club are Scarlett Johansson, Brad Pitt, Margot Robbie, Vin Diesel, Jennifer Lopez, Jason Momoa, Tom Hanks, Charlize Theron, Daniel Radcliffe, Ryan Reynolds, and Samuel L. Jackson among others. These figures are for film, the money pot for superstars, but top pay in other entertainment media isn't too shabby. On TV, Angela Bassett receives \$450k an episode for Fox's "911". She was the highest-paid Black actress of 2022. According to Puck News, Zendaya, the 26-year-old "Euphoria" star will be the highest-paid TV actor in Hollywood, raking in close to a million per episode for her deeply poignant portrayal of the series' central character 'Rue Bennett'.<sup>2</sup> According to talent reps, the top range of TV salaries has leveled off at \$750,000 to \$1 million per episode for a key player, with the next tier ranging between \$600,000 and \$800,000.

Granted, star paychecks can go above that with bonuses and producing fees added in. Sources also note that streamers might be willing to pay more for an exceptionally well-known A-lister making a first foray into television, but those are indeed a select few nowadays. Recent examples include Will Ferrell and Paul Rudd for "The Shrink Next Door" at Apple TV+ and Michael Keaton on Hulu's "Dopesick." Then there's the Taylor Sheridan universe, where icons like Kevin Costner ("Yellowstone"), Harrison Ford ("1923"), Helen Mirren ("1923"), and Sylvester Stallone ("Tulsa King") are all believed to be receiving handsome paychecks.<sup>3</sup> Kerry Washington received \$1.1m an episode for the limited series "Little Fires Everywhere" and was the highest-paid Black actress in 2018–20 on "Scandal" as well. No matter how you look at it, there is big money at stake. The late great James Gandolfini, who ended his reign on "The Sopranos" at a reported

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<sup>2</sup>Emily St. Martin, February 27, 2023, *Los Angeles Times*.

<sup>3</sup>*Variety*, Michael Schneider, Joe Otterson.

million dollars per episode, summed it up best: “All I can say,” he quipped, “is they wouldn’t pay it if they ain’t makin’ it.” Other top grossers include Rose Byrne, Matt Bomer, Elizabeth Olsen, Pete Davidson, Mahershala Ali, and Anne Hathaway to name a few.<sup>4</sup>

The income in legitimate (live) theater is admittedly less, but certainly more than respectable at the top. Bette Midler took in a healthy \$150k per week for the 2018 *Hello, Dolly* and Lin-Manuel Miranda received \$105k per week for acting (he was the author as well) in *Hamilton* in 2016. In fact, the other stars of that show, Daveed Diggs, Leslie Odom Jr., and Renee Elise Goldsberry, received \$18.4k per week for *Hamilton* with a further bump after their Tony wins. Broadway stars’ salaries are kept tight-lipped. However, probably the highest known base salary for a celebrity Broadway star—over \$100,000 per week—went to Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick in *The Producers*, where their salaries were over \$100,000 per week. It was reported in *The NY Post* that the base salary of Hugh Jackman and Daniel Craig in *A Steady Rain* was about \$40k per week, and they also received a percentage of the box office, which brought them to a net of more than \$100,000 per week. *The Post* also reported that Julia Roberts earned \$150,000 per week for her role in *Three Days of Rain*. Other celebrity salaries include Nathan Lane commanding \$60,000 per week in *The Addams Family*, Patti LuPone cashing paychecks for \$40,000 per week in *Gypsy*, and Daniel Radcliffe setting the production of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* back \$50,000 per week. Of course, these numbers don’t figure in their negotiated cut of the box office.<sup>5</sup>

So, why not get into the act? Children do it. Models do it. Ex-athletes and ex-cons do it. Even dogs do it. But *not for the money!* Sarah Jessica Parker added: “Work was never about wanting fame or money. I never thought about that. I loved getting the

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<sup>4</sup>*Variety*, 2023.

<sup>5</sup>Broadway.net

job, going to rehearsal, playing someone else, hanging around with a bunch of actors. I needed that, the way you need water.”<sup>6</sup> One thing must be said at the outset of this book: *Acting is a lousy way to make a living*. On this score, at least, your parents were right.

Let’s face the facts. Each year, tens, maybe hundreds of thousands, of people find their way on stage or before a camera, and some of them even get paid for it, but the number who actually *make a living* from it is ridiculously small. By “making a living” we mean receiving paid employment sufficient to provide you with a regular annual income, permitting you to rent a decent apartment or home in a big city, to marry or develop a solid personal relationship, to eat three meals a day and go out once in a while, and even to have children, pets, and take vacations if you want to.

The number of people who actually become fully self-supporting through acting alone for, say, ten years in a row is probably no larger than those holding a seat in the US Congress. Yes, SAG-AFTRA (the actors’ union that in 2012 merged the Screen Actors Guild with the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) covers both film and TV actors and boasts about 160,000 professionals in these fields. And another 50,000 professional actors—many of whom are also in SAG-AFTRA—are in America’s Actors Equity Association (Actors Equity), which covers, and sets wages for, all professional stage productions. But fewer than *half* of these actors, though professionals, will earn an income *higher than the national poverty level in any given year*, which in 2023 was only \$14,580. And far fewer than half of *them* will earn that amount for ten years in a row!

To put it in a clearer perspective: There are far more self-supporting acting *teachers* in the United States than self-supporting actors.

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<sup>6</sup>Sarah Jessica Parker, *Sam Magazine*, 2005.

So, not only is acting one of the toughest businesses in the world to break into; it is, even more so, one of the toughest to build a lifetime career in. Maybe it's *the* toughest. The vast majority of acting hopefuls who try out don't even get a foot in the door, and the vast majority who do get a foot in the door don't keep it there for very long. You may hate us for saying this, but you must face it nonetheless: the vast majority of America's professional actors are, at any given time, "between jobs." And for most of them, "between" is simply a euphemism for "without."

Acting is therefore a boutique profession, like being a US senator or a network anchorperson. Only a handful make it into the boutique. This wouldn't be quite so bad except for the fact that acting is often treated (and marketed) as if it were a mass occupation. Nearly 200 graduate actor-training programs are offered in the nation's 1,000-plus college and university theater and drama departments, and another 1,000 private acting schools and studios claim to train professional actors. Just how many Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs or private schools do you think are out there offering professional training for aspiring US senators or network anchorpersons? A good guess would be none. And for this reason, acting enjoys a lot more competition than most boutique professions, and it certainly has more disappointed aspirants.

But do not despair utterly. If you've got the goods and the smarts and the opportunities—and the luck—you have as good a crack at it as anyone. Our book will give you some solid pointers in that direction. You're going to have to really work at it, though, and that's the most fundamental point underlying these pages. Master Acting teacher Ron Van Lieu said it best: "We have a dream of what acting is, and then when we realize it's not like that many people stop. You have to like to *work*. It's mostly work. You must learn to get satisfaction by putting in a good day's work. Find value in that."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ron Van Lieu, Lecture at the National Congress Alliance of Acting Teachers 2018.

Wanting success isn't enough, studying for it isn't enough, and no amount of dedication or commitment will, on its own, get you into the casting office. Being "discovered" at a drugstore soda fountain is, and always has been, a fan magazine myth. Today a young hopeful may think Instagram or TikTok may be the way. In truth, you're going to have to work harder than you ever have on your acting, and to work even harder on learning how to *be yourself*, *present* yourself—and *represent* yourself—in the job market. Yes, you're going to have to *market* yourself. In the context of an essential guide to what constitutes the acting market, that is what this book is about.

## The Industry Awakens

Since the Harvey Weinstein scandal thrust the *#MeToo Movement*<sup>8</sup> into the national spotlight, the industry has been going through a major upheaval. The industry has finally "woken up" and misconduct that was allowed largely to go unreported, unchallenged, and unchecked is finally being noticed and heard. *Time's Up*<sup>9</sup> is a movement against sexual harassment and was founded in 2018 by Hollywood celebrities in response to the many alleged and often admitted abusers in the entertainment industry.

A seismic shift has occurred. It is a vastly different landscape now. New awareness—and legal implications—of sexual harassment has moved at an unprecedented pace. The clock has run out on sexual assault, harassment, and inequality in the workplace. The purpose of *#MeToo* is to empower women, through empathy and strength in numbers, especially young and vulnerable women, by visibly demonstrating how many women and men

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<sup>8</sup>[moveme.berkeley.edu](http://moveme.berkeley.edu)

<sup>9</sup><https://timesupnow.org>

have survived sexual assault and harassment, especially while job seeking and in the workplace.

American actress Alyssa Milano posted on Twitter, "If all the women who have ever been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote '#MeToo' as a status, then we give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem."<sup>10</sup> A number of high-profile posts and responses from American celebrities Ashley Judd, Gwyneth Paltrow, Mira Sorvino, Jennifer Lawrence, and Uma Thurman, among others, soon followed. Widespread media coverage and discussion of sexual harassment, particularly in Hollywood, led to high-profile firings, as well as criticism and backlash. Sexual misconduct has no place in seeking a job opportunity or a career move. If you sense this could be the case, run the other way! Better yet report such misconduct immediately. Thankfully, the time is up on such wrongdoing and malpractice.

It is important to remember the great passion of the entertainment industry is for success, not sex. No producer, director, or casting director (CD) should ever put you in a position where you feel compromised and pressured to provide sexual favors. Good people in our business work too hard and have too much at stake for such inappropriate behavior. Women and some men have risen up and begun to seize power they have long been denied in Hollywood and New York. Sexual harassment and bullying behavior should have no part in the pursuit of becoming a working actor. None.

The well-being of actors and actresses who participate in intimacy scenes and sex scenes in theater, film, and TV production is also now at the forefront of our industry. This creation of an intimacy coordinator is a fairly new and welcome addition to the industry. Demand for the role grew in the US entertainment industry after the 2017 Weinstein scandal and

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<sup>10</sup>@Alyssa\_Milano, October 15, 2017.

the #MeToo movement highlighted the often routine nature of sexual harassment and misconduct.

What is an intimacy coordinator? An intimacy coordinator, or intimacy director, is a member of a stage, film, or television crew who works closely with directors, movement directors, and choreographers to help plan out intimate scenes with both the actors and other crew members. Actors such as Emily Meade, on the TV show *"The Deuce"*, began to demand professional safeguards for their well-being on set, noting that given the structure of power in a production, actors (particularly young, inexperienced ones) might otherwise not feel able to speak up if directors, staff members, or other actors disregarded their consent or previous agreements regarding intimate scenes. In October 2018, the television studio Max (formerly HBO Max) adopted a policy of using intimacy coordinators for all its series and films with intimate scenes.<sup>11</sup> Intimacy coordinators and intimacy workshops teaching best practices for intimate scenes are now also beginning to be used in theaters as of 2018.

## A Reformation

Actors have had to accommodate themselves to the existing theater, film, and television industries—which, of course, have their own rules and procedures, some of which may not thrill you as you get closer to them. To be an actor in the industry means to stand, sit, smile, and move on command, and sometimes the command comes down from a source that you find hard-pressed to respect. Professional acting means making self-tape after self-tape that feel like they are being sent into an abyss, schlepping about at your own expense,

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<sup>11</sup>Martinelli, Marissa, "HBO Will Use 'Intimacy Coordinators' for All of Its Sex Scenes," October 29, 2018, *Slate Magazine*. Archived from the original on January 22, 2021. Retrieved October 29, 2018.

from office to office and from CD to CD, and being emotionally and financially subject to a ruling elite who you may have no personal interest in or sympathy with. This means spending most of your life hustling for work, even when you are well into middle age. And most of your professional concentration will be not on developing the work itself but, rather, on developing your network of contacts, improving your self-marketing skills, and figuring out where your next job is coming from. Actors can enslave themselves to a set of industry conventions that are brutally dehumanizing.

In 2022, Jesse Green wrote a series of articles for *The New York Times* entitled “The Reformation.”<sup>12</sup> In this series, Green addresses pivotal points, arguing theater must change for the better. Given the harsh realities of life in theater, Green argues for better pay equity, in addition to an examination of the physical and emotional demands on actors and the abusive practices of the theater artists in power. Finally, he highlights the demand for diversity and equity in theater by people who have bravely come forward to talk about the disparity.

Is the business improving since this book’s first edition in 1972? Yes. As the recent *New York Times* article by Jesse Green<sup>13</sup> notes, “the requirements of the theater, and the constant physical and emotional risks facing performers, have many demanding their basic needs as humans. The pause during the pandemic gave theater workers, including actors, time to consider the lives their profession requires them to lead.” As Green reports, “the idea that theater is a calling, not a job, and that the two categories are mutually exclusive, is so ingrained in the industry ethos—not to mention its business model—that demands for shorter working days, more understudies, intimacy coordinators,

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<sup>12</sup>Jesse Green, “Is It Finally Twilight for the Theater’s Sacred Monsters,” June 8, 2022, *New York Times*; “When Paying Dues Doesn’t Pay the Rent, How Does the Theater Survive?” July 6, 2022, *New York Times*.

<sup>13</sup>Jesse Green, “Shifting the Door on Hard Knock Life,” August 3, 2022, *New York Times*.

mental health stipends, child care reimbursements and other accommodations are met with doubt or derision.”

More and more actors today are seeking a better business model in which to work, operate, and live. These demands for better treatment, pay, work hours, and conduct are being examined and are finally challenging the status quo. This examination and evolution for the actor in the industry are paramount. The stepping down of Artistic Director Mandy Greenfield at the Williamstown Theater Festival in 2021,<sup>14</sup> after complaints by some employees about working conditions and interns concerned about safety, was one of many inflection points that theater “as it was” must change. These “tectonic shifts” have rocked the industry of today. Change is good. Change is happening.

## **Equity, Inclusion, Diversity, and Belonging**

Equity means recognizing that not everyone has the same opportunities and providing individuals with what they need to overcome—intentional or unintentional—barriers that create an imbalance in access to opportunity and success. Inclusion and belonging ensure actors from diverse groups are not just included but feel welcome and are able to participate as themselves. The Broadway and Off-Broadway League now has an agreement to ensure that productions are cast with diversity in mind. Actors Equity and the League now co-sponsor an annual networking event for actors of color and actors with disabilities. Many of these good faith improvements have come out of the recent pandemic to provide stability and clarity. By

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<sup>14</sup>Ashley Lee, “Artistic Director Resigns after Times Investigation into Theater Festival’s Culture,” November 1, 2021, *Los Angeles Times*.

increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion, artists have better protection with hiring practices, in the rehearsal room and other places that now address discrimination and harassment.

Television shows like *Pose*, which focuses on the lives of LGBTQ+ communities, have been praised in the past for casting a person of transgender experience to play transgender characters. Productions like the recent Broadway revival of *The Boys in the Band* consisted of only male actors that self-identified as gay. We may see more and more of the work reflect this standard. Current casting practices lean heavily toward authenticity. When casting directors say they want the real thing, they really mean it.

Gender is, of course, a major aspect of your look and type. (More on this later.) But women, men, and non-binary individuals should understand that their casting potential—at least statistically—can be daunting. Men still receive the lion's share of the action in virtually all acting media. As a number of female-fronted TV shows, including *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, vie for top Emmys, a recent study finds that though women are enjoying historic highs in television, they are still vastly underrepresented. According to the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, which focuses on the representation of women, "female characters are vastly underrepresented in film, and this has not changed much in the last half a century." But there is also reason for optimism in this sector. The percentage of women cast in both leading and supporting roles has risen by more than half since the first edition of this book was published fifty years ago.

Your *ethnicity* may be a factor as well. Indeed, the casting of ethnic minorities has steadily increased in all acting media in recent decades, particularly in American TV, where in 2021 no fewer than twenty-five new TV shows (*Abbott Elementary*, *The Chi*, *Atlanta*, *Insecure*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Black-ish*, *Bel-Air* among them) were created with Black actors playing major

roles. Similarly, Latino/Latina/Latinx actors were playing major roles in at least twenty-five shows as well (including “*Jane the Virgin*”, “*Pose*”, “*One Day at a Time*”, “*Narcos*”, “*Only Murders in the Building*”, “*Gracepoint*”, and “*The Flash*”), and the percentage of minority actors in American films and television has increased by a staggering 3,000 percent since this book’s first edition.

How does this play in the theater? An effort initiated by Black Theatre United<sup>15</sup>—an organization composed of members of the Black theater community that advocates for Black professionals in the arts—new industry-wide standards and reforms around equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging (EDIAB) have been created. These standards and reforms are long overdue and a balancing act for actors who have been underrepresented in the past.<sup>16</sup>

One pivotal turning point in this evolution came out of an emerging set of principles for building anti-racist theater. #weseeyouwhiteamericantheater,<sup>17</sup> for example, is a reaction to the civil unrest in our country. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) theater makers formed this collective of multigenerational, multidisciplinary, early career, emerging and established artists, theater managers, executives, students, administrators, dramaturges, and producers to address the scope and pervasiveness of anti-Blackness and racism in the American theater. The response was a strong testimonial letter, “Dear White American Theater,”<sup>18</sup> collectively crafted by theater makers from across the country, exposing the indignities and racism that BIPOC, and in particular Black theater makers, face on a day-to-day basis in the theater industry. This powerful movement is here to stay and has disrupted the industry. To

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<sup>15</sup><https://blacktheatreunited.com>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2021/September/the-curtain-rises-on-a-more-inclusive-broadway.html>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.weseeyouwat.com>

<sup>18</sup>June 9, 2020, *Variety*.

learn more about these principles and this movement, go to <https://www.weseeyouwat.com>.

Black, Asian-American, MENA (Middle Eastern North African) and Indigenous actors, actors with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ actors have all seen more representation in our industry in recent years. Promoting full diversity in theater, film, and TV is uppermost in the industry's mind. Vanessa Portillo, Creative Extras casting director, for example, reminds us: "Diversity is authenticity. Keeping it real and including everyone is the best way to ensure that the audience doesn't feel tricked or manipulated." What has finally changed is the demand for authenticity and the demand for equal and fair representation.

Most casting offices today post, publish, and lead with equity and diversity statements in prominent places. Schools and training programs all have upped their game with EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) training and departments. EDI or sometimes called DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging) programs did not even exist a few years ago but thankfully the students, faculty, and now audiences are demanding such important matters be at the forefront of not just the actor's training, but also the industry as a whole. The entertainment industry has long been one of exclusivity and privilege. We have come a long way when nonprofit theaters, Broadway producers, and studios for TV and film recognize that more diverse, equitable, and inclusive casting is integral to their mission.

## **Acting Jobs and the Entertainment Industry**

Whatever else acting might be, it is a job—and a job within one of America's biggest enterprises, the entertainment industry. You should be aware of the scale of this larger world—"the

industry”—in which an actor plies his, her, or their craft. It’s one of the biggest in the world. The gross movie theater income of the films can be astonishing. *Avatar*, *Titanic*, and *Top Gun: Maverick*, for example, have topped \$2 billion each with their worldwide attendance. Similarly, *Barbie*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Jurassic World*, the *Avengers*, and Marvel franchises each opened to comparable numbers as well. Add streaming, cable sales, and licensing arrangements to these films, and you can probably double the figures.

Live theater is no poor relative either. You will probably be surprised to find out that the money taken in by Broadway’s collective box office was the historic high of \$2.8 billion set by the 2018–19 Broadway season (the last full season prior to the 2020 pandemic shutdown).<sup>19</sup> And this was more than the income for all of New York’s professional sports teams (the Yankees, Mets, Nets, Jets, Giants, Knicks, Rangers, and Islanders) *combined*.

Even the major regional theaters in the United States run annual budgets that can range up to \$40 million or more each year. They are *very* big businesses. Entertainment these days is a many-sided oligopoly, with vast interconnections among its many corporate members. Unlike a generation ago, mega-corporations utterly dominate the industries in which most film and TV actors play their professional roles, and, not surprisingly, the corporate execs running them make the most crucial decisions on what happens on the movie set, the TV studio, and sometimes even the Broadway stage. Even live stage production, for example, long the bastion of independent individual producers such as David Merrick and Alexander Cohen, has in the past thirty years become dominated by just three corporations—the Shuberts, the Nederlanders, and Jujamcyn. These three organizations own virtually all of New York’s Broadway theaters (Shubert owning

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<sup>19</sup>May 25, 2022, *Deadline*.

seventeen of them, Nederlander nine, and Jujamcyn five). In sum, these are not the sorts of groups that hold bake sales to pay for the costumes.

Entertainment is not just one of the nation's largest industries, however. It is also one of its most economically important. American entertainment (particularly through movies and TV) provides the United States with—apart from airplanes—its strongest trade export to the rest of the world. It truly is a blessing for the American economy. American films and TV shows—and the actors who appear in them—are as familiar in Rome, Rio, Seoul, and Abu Dhabi as they are in Peoria and Sioux Falls. Broadway musicals, many of them cast in New York, are on the boards daily in major world capitals. And the spread of American films, theater, and TV—and of American acting—has played a major role, like it or not, in making English the world's primary entertainment language. Even foreign films these days are often filmed in English with American actors. The point is that acting professionally puts you in the big leagues of a great international industry. "It's called Show Business not Show Art," said the great icon Jean Seberg of *Breathless* fame. There is truth to what she said.

So are you ready to see how *you* fit into all of this? Let's take a look.

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*And finally, to all my brave and talented students—this book is for you.*

JC

# 1 Things to Consider

## Art and Industry

If acting is part of an industry, is it still an art? Well, of course. Indeed, one of the problems of acting professionally is that it's an art within an industry, within a world in which "the gross" and "box office revenue" (B.O.) are both fiscal realities and cultural metaphors. When young actors first read the trades like *Variety* or *The Hollywood Reporter*, they might notice something first. It's often about the money. So, where do actors fit into the gross profit? The "suits" (i.e., the executives) are at the top, as in every industry. As for the actors, Samuel Beckett put it best in his *Waiting for Godot*:

**Estragon:** Where do we come in?

**Vladimir:** Come in? Come in? On our hands and knees!

The most fundamental law of economics, as you probably know, is the law of supply and demand. In part, this means that the more of something there is, the less anyone has to pay for it. Well, there are an awful lot of actors willing to work out there—a fact not lost on theater and film producers. This is in addition to the roughly over 200,000 stage, film, and TV actors currently in Actors Equity and/or SAG-AFTRA unions.

Moreover, 1,000 college drama departments are turning out new actors every year, and an even greater number of high school drama programs, private acting schools, conservatories, and private

teachers are also sending aspirants to New York and Hollywood with plans to “break into” the field. Thousands more simply make it to Atlanta, Chicago, Seattle, or other “acting mini-centers” of their own choice. The supply of actors, in other words, vastly exceeds the demand—and the economics of acting reflect this.

Yet while everyone in the Western world must know by now that a star can make a lifetime income performing in a single film, few are aware that the star’s fee will vacuum up half or more of the entire cost of making that movie. This means that the rest of the actors (together with the several hundred other people involved in making it—from the director to the set dressers to the caterers) can only divide the other half, and that is after the producer has also tapped into that same pot for the scenery, costumes, rentals, royalties, and what-not. This goes with TV as well. The point is that today actor salaries, other than the stars, are a stunningly *minor* part of the entertainment industry’s budget.

As the “Secret Agent Man” in a *Backstage* column said, “You’re either getting millions or you’re getting scale,” which means that those film and TV pros who are *not* stars are working for SAG-AFTRA’s minimum daily wage of around \$1,082 per day. And actors in low-budget films will receive even less, under a recently approved “SAG-AFTRA Modified Low Budget Theatrical Wage” of \$361 per day as of 2023. And remember that, if hired, you’ll probably be making that for only *one day*—which could turn out to be the only day that year.

We want you to think about this. Young actors are often very idealistic about this inescapable reality of the business. Many are quick to point out that they don’t have any desire to become “stars,” but are simply seeking steady acting work, say in an acting position at a modest repertory company in a medium-sized town. They will proclaim that they would happily trade fame and riches for “just” a position that offers creative opportunities and artistic respectability. They don’t need a lot of money, they

assert, “just enough to live on.” OK, but please beware of the “just.” Having “just enough to live on” is the big problem! Merely rejecting Broadway and Hollywood does not magically get you into the Guthrie Theater, any more than rejecting an unoffered Mercedes Benz will put a bicycle in your driveway. The simple fact is that it is *extraordinarily difficult* for a beginner to get *any* professional acting job. At *any* theater. In *any* city.

At a statistical level, your chances for getting a professional (i.e., paid) role after any *single* application or group audition are no more than one in a hundred—one in a hundred *literally*, and maybe one in a thousand if the truth be known. That’s the law of supply and demand working, and in acting the supply is all but unlimited. The fact is that you should no more expect to get a paid acting job because of your undergraduate drama degree than your sister can expect to become a US senator on the basis of her BA in political science. You can *hope*, of course, but not *expect*. “Listen,” says a prominent and hardworking CD (and most theater professionals will give you the same advice), “if you can think of anything you can possibly do instead of acting, do it! Get out now! Save yourself the heartache and the pain.”

## Developing a Mature Viewpoint

The previous paragraphs contain some hard lessons, but they are basic adult realities—and they are lessons worth learning. If you’re going to pursue an acting career, you’re going to have to deal with adult reality. And you’re going to have to *be* an adult—while retaining enough of the childlike innocence required of any artist. The late great Paul Newman said: “To be an actor, you have to be a child.”<sup>1</sup> But what does being an adult mean? It

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<sup>1</sup>Attributed, *Paul Newman: A Life in Pictures* by Pierre-Henri Verlhac and Yann-Brice Herbier, October 19, 2006.