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NOTE

As you will see, the two authors alternate throughout the book, distinguished one from the other by different typefaces.

This is Prunella Scales's 'voice'.

And this is Timothy West's 'voice'.

I PREPARATION

FIRST THOUGHTS ABOUT BECOMING AN ACTOR

What gave you the idea? Did you go to the theatre much as a child? The cinema? Watch a lot of drama on TV, and wish you were doing it? Did you do many plays at school, or with amateur groups, and found you liked it, or were quite good?

All these are perfectly valid reasons for trying to go into the business. But above all, don't do it as Second Best.

We will not insult the obvious intelligence you have displayed in buying this book by supposing that you believe the life of an actor is one long round of companionable jollity, a passport to fame, fortune, free sex and fashionable restaurants. It could be that you hold a more pragmatic view of your likely development: starting as a badly paid, unknown and unappreciated small-part player in some far-flung theatre never visited by casting directors, gradually getting better parts, achieving a modest foothold in television, developing by sheer hard work into someone who might one day be employed by the National Theatre or the RSC.

That sounds logical, but I'm afraid it very seldom works like that. No, your development will largely depend on luck, fashion, who you know, what you look like, and the general state of the business. It's tough, but there it is. HOWEVER, before you cast this book away in despair – talent comes into it somewhere. So does your ability to work hard and variously, and to be easy to get along with.

Think very hard about it. Unemployment statistics in the profession are hard to ascertain accurately, but a recent *Equity* survey showed that only some 20 per cent of members worked more than 30 weeks a year, while 48 per cent worked fewer than 11 weeks. Of course, that's only *Equity members* (more about that later), and, among them, only those who responded to the survey.

If you honestly feel that you will have difficulty coping with lengthy periods of hardship and frustration, then you should seriously consider the alternative option of taking what my father (who worked in the theatre all his life) used to call a Proper Job. Then you can join one of the better amateur companies

and carry on acting in your spare time. This is what I did, when I tried for a time to do a Proper Job. So what went wrong, you ask? Well, I simply found that my after-hours dramatic activity was eating up most of my energy, enthusiasm and, indeed, thought. So it seemed reasonable to try and get paid (modestly) for what I clearly cared about most.

The British actress Athene Seyler, in her book *The Craft of Comedy* (get it, if you haven't got it), refers to an imaginary friend making the leap from amateur to professional theatre: 'William . . . is marrying his mistress, as it were, and what has up till now been simply delight in the expression of his love for her, will turn into staid responsibility and monotony, with all the other cares attendant upon married life.'