

SURVIVING  
**ACTORS** ■■■  
MANUAL

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## ■ Introduction

Surviving Actors was created by actors, for actors, and we have maintained our ethos of supporting actors' development since we started in 2009. Our first event was held in the basement of a nightclub, and since then we have evolved into running annual, large-scale conventions in London, Manchester, Edinburgh and New York, welcoming between two to three thousand visitors per day, with over forty exhibitors, and a busy programme of events, seminars and workshops. Our team has grown over the years, and will hopefully continue to do so as our organisation does. We are proud of what we've achieved, and our feedback from visitors has proved invaluable, validating our success.

After five years running the conventions, we decided to draw on the knowledge of many of our wonderful speakers and contacts, as well as our own experiences, to put together this comprehensive handbook to help you create, develop and sustain your own successful acting career. With this book we hope we can help support and inspire many more actors than are able to attend our events.

Our aim was to write a book that you could come back to, day after day, week in, week out, so you don't need to sit down and read it through from cover to cover. You can dip into it, pencil in hand, making notes as you go, finding the straightforward advice or support you need on any given subject. It's not a book that teaches you how to act – but how to manage your career as an actor, in order to survive and thrive.

Pursuing a career in acting can feel like climbing a huge mountain, and often your efforts may go unrewarded. It's a job for those who are willing to follow their passion and make a career out of their talent. Enjoy chasing your dream, and congratulate yourself on what you achieve along the way. Be careful not to listen to the cynics, the doubters or those who don't understand the industry asking questions such as 'What have I seen you in?' Remember: you have chosen this life, so be proud of that choice at every step along the way – throughout the quiet, the challenging, the busy and the exciting times.

You may have read other acting books or attended events aimed at supporting actors, and you may find yourself receiving conflicting opinions, advice and guidance. It's a subjective industry, and what works for one person may not always work for another. Yvonne l'Anson, a freelance arts and marketing consultant, has some useful words of advice as you begin reading this book:

Let's face it: being an actor can be a pretty lonely and daunting job. You may be part of a large company, have lots of actor friends and a brilliant agent, but sometimes you need to make decisions on your own – and it can be scary and tough.

I see many actors throughout the year, either on a one-to-one basis, in lectures or at talks. Like a lot of people, I am very happy to listen and advise, but I always say that this is *my* opinion and someone else might give you the opposite advice. We all come to our opinions from different perspectives and it doesn't mean that one of us is right and one wrong – just that we look at it differently. I say what I think, but then suggest the client goes away to consider options. If necessary, make a list of pros and cons, then trust your gut feeling to find the answer.

I have often had people asking me to make a decision for them. I can't do that and nor would I want to – and to be honest, no

one should. You have to feel at one with your decision. Never look back. Move forward with belief and purpose.

It is always hard when friends, family and partners want to share their thoughts, especially when it comes to work. Parents, quite rightly, want to see you earning; partners want you to stay close to home; and friends may want to warn you about a bad experience they had. An acting couple had a heated discussion with me because she was auditioning for a brilliant TV job in Yorkshire and he didn't want her to because he thought it would destroy their relationship if she got the job. I asked him what would happen if it was the other way round and *he* was going for the job. That, he felt, would be okay. To me this demonstrated an unbalanced relationship and potentially had a huge impact on her career.

Only you can decide what is best for you, whether it is accepting a job offer, deciding which agent to sign with, or choosing a particular headshot photo. If you have an agent, listen to them, and if you are unsure about their advice, discuss it with them: your relationship should be based on trust. You have to think about your career path and what you want to achieve – but you must also remain realistic, which is why it is important to get objective advice. Never beat yourself up about a decision made or an opportunity lost. Every day is a clean page and you have ownership of your experiences.



With that in mind, we hope the pages of this book will encourage new experiences, provoke different ways of thinking, offer ideas for exploration, and inspire you in your career. If you have any comments or feedback (for future editions!), please do get in touch. Enjoy the book – and good luck!

# *Developing*

## ■ Your Actor's Toolbox

It is a phrase we have all heard before as actors, whether in training or during our career: 'The key equipment in an actor's toolbox...' So what are these vital tools of the trade?

There are six pieces of equipment, three of which are imperative to have from the start, to give you the best chance of success. In order of importance, your toolbox must contain:

- 1. Headshots**
- 2. Showreel**
- 3. Business cards**
- 4. Voicereel**
- 5. Website (and a blog)**
- 6. Contacts database**

In this chapter, we'll explain how to get the very best quality for each of these six tools, to ensure they help you develop and sustain your career.



### **Headshots**

'Video is increasingly important, but potential employers need to be hooked by that still image. The headshot has existed for a hundred years, but today a portfolio of shots helps sell you best.'  
*Michael Wharley, theatre photographer*

at least five versatile images. When choosing your photographs, it is easy to be tempted by Photoshop and airbrushing tools to make you look better. Do not let this happen or request it – again, your headshots have to be a true representation of you, so no teeth whitening or tanning of the skin! A small amount of editing is acceptable – for instance, if there is a really good shot but you had a stray hair on your face, or if on the day you had a blemish which isn't usually there. When you are happy with your finished images, be sure to request them in high resolution and in colour.

‘Colour headshots are now very much the norm. Although some drama schools are behind the times, top agencies are selecting full-colour portfolios for their clients.’ *Michael Wharley*

When sourcing a reprographics company for printing, quality should again take priority over cost. It is not a good idea to have a set of fantastic headshots taken, then ruin them with low-quality printing. Seek out a company that specialises in or does a lot of headshot printing. That way you are guaranteed to have a high-quality product that represents you well and portrays you in a professional manner.

### Michael Wharley's Top Tips

- Don't let your portfolio get stale: review it regularly and be hard on yourself. Make sure that each shot really earns its place on merit, not just because it's been there for a while, or because you secretly love it.
- But don't throw out your old shots too quickly. You might achieve a nice balance from one session, or you might combine shots from different photographers to create a dynamic portfolio.

- Make sure you have colour shots. One or two in black and white can be useful, but the industry increasingly expects colour. Black and white has its place, but colour offers a better preview of your hair, eye colour and skin tone.
- Use the tools on casting websites to get feedback from other professionals. Various sites allow you to request other actors to comment on and rate your shots.
- Six steps toward better headshots:
  - Know your budget and make a photographer shortlist.
  - Research your photographer.
  - Prepare for the session.
  - Relax in the shoot.
  - Choose a balanced portfolio to show range.
  - Promote yourself in print and online.



## Showreel

The next most important item in your toolkit is your showreel. Some actors may ask, 'Do I really need one?' The answer is yes. Not only must you have one, it's also important that it is up to industry standard. A bad showreel can be more damaging than not having one at all.

'Actors at all levels need a showreel to showcase their skills and prove their worth as an actor. Even one good scene can be enough to get you a job, but it's not just about your acting. The scenes need to come across as professional. That includes the writing, the quality of the footage, the sound and the editing. Casting directors need to be convinced that you're good enough to be called in for an audition. The only way they can decide that

## CASTING CALL

*Project Name:* Airline commercial

*Dates:* Wardrobe Call – 23rd September;  
Shoot – Week of 29th September (2 days)

*Location:* UK

*Casting Director:* Sally Smith

*Casting Details:* 15th September, Location TBC.

*Pay category:* Equity minimum or equivalent

*Agreements:* Hero BSF up to £350 per day (2 shoot days) Buyout 1 year UK & Ireland TV, Internet, dealership & PR at £8,500



*Role:* Driver

Male, early 30s. Cool and collected. Likeable. Good-looking. Charismatic. Facial stubble preferable. Must have a valid driving licence.

*Playing age:* 30–35

*Height:* Any

If you're sending directly through a casting website, the casting director should be able to see which role and production you are applying for. As a result, your submission note should be as straightforward as the following:

‘Dear Sally Smith, I have a valid driving licence and facial stubble as shown on my headshots. I am

available for the wardrobe call and the week of the shoot. As you can see from the showreel displayed on my profile, I have previously worked on commercials and am aware of the fast-paced nature of the work. Best wishes, Mark White.’

This cover letter is short and to the point, and shows that you have read through the casting. The most important points are put at the beginning – driving licence and facial stubble – and it then goes on to explain relevant experience.

‘An easy way to make your application stand out from the rest is by making your submission note personal. Read the casting in full, and personalise your application to that specific job. *Stephanie Charles, StarNow*

Research each casting website you are using to see how many characters of your cover note the casting professional will actually see. Being aware of how your application is viewed from the casting side can really ensure you are equipped to make it look as good as possible. Casting websites such as Spotlight, StarNow and Casting Call Pro often run seminars at events, including Surviving Actors. Take opportunities to meet the people behind the websites to ask how the casting director will view submissions, enabling you to stay ahead of other actors applying for the same roles.

Typically, the earlier you submit, the better your chances are. So do not wait until the last minute or worry about your cover letter for too long. Be prepared, and submit in the best possible way, but be quick! It goes without saying that you should only apply for the roles you are suitable for, and for which you fit the description. Casting directors are already sifting through thousands of profiles, and submitting your information to a casting you’re unsuitable for can be detrimental in the future.



## The Agent Interview

Even after they've seen you on stage or in a showcase, most agents will want to have an interview with you before signing you. It is a two-way decision, so an interview is a great opportunity for you to decide whether or not this is the right agent for you. Be careful not to jump at the first agent who offers you representation.

Be fully prepared for your interview. Give yourself time to travel there. Have some questions ready that show how well you have researched the agency. Try to prepare for possible questions they may ask you – for example, about gaps on your CV or in training. Be confident and honest in your answers. Here are some key interview questions an agent might ask, and to which you should prepare answers:

- What role from a current TV show/film/play do you see yourself playing and why?
- What project from your CV have you most enjoyed and why?
- What role do you think you could be cast in tomorrow?
- Where do you see yourself in five years' time?
- What have you been up to during the past few months of your career?
- What is it about this agency that you think will be a good fit for you?
- Are you in discussions with any other agents?

First impressions matter! The interview is a great opportunity for an agent to see how you would come across in auditions,