

THE WORKING ACTOR

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO A SUCCESSFUL CAREER

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Contents

	Acknowledgements	ix
	Introduction	xi
1.	Getting started	1
2.	Spotting opportunities	11
3.	Finding work	20
4.	Making your showreel	52
5.	Building your website	60
6.	Writing a winning letter	65
7.	Coping with rejection	73
8.	Measuring success	78
9.	Overcoming your mistakes	82
10.	Making meetings work	87
11.	Choosing your speeches	112
12.	Thinking positively	116
13.	Joining Equity	123
14.	Working with your agent	131

15.	Getting great headshots	139
16.	Working with casting directors	148
17.	Being a geek (with apps for actors)	157
18.	Working whilst resting	170
19.	Working – and playing	189
20.	Networking for work	196
21.	Getting financial support	202
22.	Using social media	210
23.	Working with an accountant	217
24.	Building your voice reel	226
25.	Taping yourself	231
26.	Being a Working Actor	237
	Work Task List	243

Introduction

In my role as Chairman of the Board of the Actors Centre, I've hosted a series of lunchtime interviews with actors at various stages of their careers, helping them share their experience and expertise with others. Partly out of laziness, and partly out of a desire to achieve some sort of commonality in the framework for the interviews, I begin each one with the question: 'How did it all start? When was that moment that you knew that this was what you wanted to do?' The answers proved revealing. For Juliet Stevenson, it was reading a poem at school. For Josie Lawrence, it was finding out that she could entertain members of her family. For Douglas Hodge, it was a natural step from being a teenage impressionist. Mark Rylance recalled helping to build the scenery for a high-school play in America. Sir Derek Jacobi remembered a particular feeling as he ran down the street wearing his mother's wedding veil.

For all of the interviewees, however, one thing was the same. There had been one moment when they knew the only thing they wanted to be was an actor. I think my own particular Damascene conversion happened in Miss Woodcock's class, late on a Thursday afternoon,

in an infant school nestling in the foothills and slag heaps of the Soviet Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire. Having press-ganged Susan Clarke and Christine Evans into sharing the stage with me, I played the role of a heroic soldier battling for his loved one against the forces of an evil witch. Imaginatively titled *Evil Spirits*, and with its envelope-pushing casting of myself as the heroic, and no doubt heterosexual, soldier, it entertained the other members of our class for nearly ten minutes. I remember the applause, and I remember thinking: 'I like this.' From that moment on, I can honestly say that I knew what I wanted to be. An actor. I was seven.

Getting there, doing it, and making a living out of it, is what this book is about. I've managed to do that now for nearly forty years, something of which I am proud. I've spent a great deal of time unemployed. There have been weeks when seven imaginative ways with a baked potato has been my diet. Approaching sixty, I'd like to think I can call myself 'a Working Actor'. It says 'actor' on my passport, and it says 'actor' on my tax return. I make a living out of it, and I know that I'm incredibly lucky to have a job that I always wanted and that I still enjoy.

Luck is obviously a great part of success, and that has to be acknowledged. Luck can be helped along, though, and working hard at your career will bring its own rewards. Understanding the business, how it works, and your place in it, is crucial. How to look at the work that is out there, the jobs, the opportunities, and how to talk to people who have the power to give you those jobs, and to give you those opportunities. To find out how they make their choices. To find out what you can do to maximise the chance of their choice being *you*. That's what this book aims to do. To help you manage

your day-to-day life as an actor. No one can teach you to act, but you can learn how to be an actor. *A Working Actor*. This book looks at ideas for the Working Actor of all ages.

One of the most important pieces of advice I think I've ever been given was from a fabulous old tutor called John McGregor at my drama school. He'd been a young hopeful at the RSC in the mid-fifties, alongside Olivier and Ian Holm. It hadn't worked for John in terms of stardom, but it had worked for him in terms of being a Working Actor. When he was our technique tutor at Manchester Polytechnic in the mid-seventies, he was still regularly appearing in television dramas and making a good living out of his acting. His mantra was one I have tried to follow ever since:

'Every day do at least one thing that might lead to work, and then get on with living your life.'

I think what he was trying to say was don't let the whole of your life be consumed by being an out-of-work actor. Don't forget to be a person. People buy people. So often in audition situations, sitting on the other side of the table, I have seen people come in absolutely desperate for the job to the point where I have had no chance to get to know them as a person. As a result, there is no hook with which I have been able to engage with them. They haven't got the job.

This book consists of twenty-six subjects. An eclectic mix, and made as a result of my own individual choice. At the end of each article is a work task. So, on the basis of Mr McGregor's mantra, this book gives you at least five weeks of one thing to do each day before getting on with your life. Assuming you take the weekend off! Not

all of them may apply to all of you, but if just one of them leads to something, then I have done my job.

There may be a lucky few who, after leaving drama school, will jump from job to job, but for the vast majority it will be a constant fight, a struggle, to keep that employment as continuous as possible. It will require huge reserves of energy and focus to cope with unemployment, and it will rely on a constant input of imagination and creativity to maximise the opportunities that come along.

Not for nothing do people call it ‘The Industry’ or ‘The Business’ – a business is exactly what it is, and that’s how you have to treat it and behave in it if you are to succeed.

I sincerely hope that this book helps. Helps you on a day-to-day basis. Helps you to manage your career as a business, and to maximise your potential. Above all, I hope it helps you realise those childhood dreams.

1. Getting started

‘I want to be an actor.’

From the moment I started saying that, aged seven, it was all I wanted to be. It came as a great surprise when I went to drama school to discover there were some people who hadn't made this decision until much later in life. I thought it was a childhood dream for all concerned. Something that, once you got it into your brain, that was it. Think back to the moment when it happened for you. What made you take that decision to be an actor? What was the initial spur? One thing seems clear: once that thought is in place, it's very hard to ignore it. It's been said that you don't choose to be an actor; it chooses you. Something has been set in motion that is going to govern your life for many years to come. For just how long will depend on how well you manage to make it work.

Let me be upfront about it: this book can't get you work. If there were some magic formula to getting a job, I would publish it, everybody would buy it, and I would now be languishing on a sunbed somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere. There is no easy answer. Just how do you make that jump from training into the world of work? What you need to tap into is the wealth of experience and guidance that can be brought

10. Making meetings work

So, you have got the meeting, interview or audition. Well done. Your agent has sent you an email telling you where and when, and attached to it are a couple of sides of script that you're going to read. How are you going to make the best of this opportunity – in the ten or fifteen minutes you get with someone who has the capacity to give you the job?

Most people in their working lives have few job interviews. My partner has reached the dizzy heights of a major company and has only had two job interviews in nearly twenty years of work. It's not unknown for some actors to have two interviews per week, for that is what each and every audition is – it's a job interview. It's an easy thing to forget. If you have spent a few weeks, or a few months, languishing out of work, the appointed time in your diary can seem like the light at the end of the tunnel. For some, however, it is the headlight of an oncoming train, rushing towards you, and the nerves associated with this meeting can prevent you from functioning at your best. So just how do you make the meeting work? Any successful meeting can be divided into six stages, which cover before, during and afterwards.

They are:

- Preparation.
- First impressions.
- Building rapport.
- ‘What have you been up to recently?’
- The escape.
- Following up.

Let’s take a look at each of those six stages in turn and what exactly you can do to make them work in your favour.

Preparation

Preparation is ultimately the key to success. ‘Fail to prepare and prepare to fail’ is as true for the audition situation as it is for the military campaign. Plan everything, from knowing your travel arrangements and checking that the shirt you think is the right one to wear has been ironed, to double-checking the location of the meeting online or on a map. All this is part of the regime that will get you stepping into the room in the right frame of mind.

Very few auditions or meetings now require you to do an audition speech. Perhaps if you’re going for a general casting at a theatre, you may be asked to take along a couple of speeches, and sometimes fringe-theatre shows who are seeing a lot of people ask you to bring an audition speech for a first audition. Sometimes the first-round audition for a season at the RSC can demand a speech. Or they may ask you to prepare something they

- Make the interview element of your meeting a conversation if you can.
- Think about how you will answer that question: ‘What have you been doing recently?’ in a way that shows you in a good light and is relevant. A good answer might not be about acting work.
- ‘Fail to prepare. Prepare to fail.’ As good a piece of advice for auditions and interviews as for the job itself.
- Engage them with your conversation. Entertain them with your piece. Bring a performance in with your reading.

Work Task

For your next interview, prepare one of the strategies that we have just looked at.

Positive greetings – can start you off on the right foot and help you through the meeting.

Open questions – can help you turn the interview into a conversation.

Prepare an answer to the ‘What have you been up to?’ question – it should allow you a chance to show your attitude to things, not just repeat the facts on your CV.

Escape – by being aware of when the meeting is over. Make the other person feel good.

Don’t try and do them all. If you do, you will be so focused on that, you may forget to read the script or be yourself.