

Take the **A** Train(ing)

how to get your ACTING career on track

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Lesson 1 - Verisimilitude

From the moment you wake up in the morning until the moment you shut your eyes at night, you are engaged in action: the action of pursuing goals. You always want something. Always. You may not realize this because typically these goals are easily — and even mindlessly — achieved, which is exactly as we would like them to be. A day without obstacles is a “good” day, an easy day, a day without stress. We want to get to work on time, and we do because traffic is light. We want to eat because we are hungry and drink because we are thirsty, and we do because these things are readily available to us. No need to go out and chase down some bison or drill a well for water. (Onstage we want quite the opposite, but we’ll get to that later.) Therefore, in order for *verisimilitude*, or the appearance of truth, to exist onstage, you must likewise live onstage in the constant pursuit of goals.

But many actors get onstage and choose instead to “perform.” They *deliver* lines, scrunch their brows, and display their emotions intensely for all to see. They forget that offstage we rarely, if ever, determine what our words will *sound* like before we say them (aka a line reading) or encourage ourselves to *be* in a particular emotional state. *Be sad*. That is why this type of artificial display is the very opposite of verisimilitude, and, therefore, the opposite of

what an actor should do. Instead, you as an actor must put the same kind of attention into pursuing the wants and needs of your character that you put into pursuing your own needs in every moment of every single day! (Actually, you will pursue those wants much more vigorously onstage, but we’ll get to that later as well.) The good news about all of this is that if you are a human being who lives, you can be an actor who acts. You do not need an expert to tell you if you have “talent” or an agent to let you know if you’ve “got what it takes.” What it takes is for you to live onstage the same way you live offstage, i.e. constantly engaged in action, constantly pursuing a goal. It is that simple, which is NOT to say easy. Becoming an actor takes time and training, but you can do it and, if you put in the effort, ultimately you will be able to do it well.



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The only thing that speaks from the stage is truth. If you do not look like you are living on stage the way human beings live in normal life, then you might be performing, but you are most certainly not acting.

Lesson 2 - Objectives

So your primary task onstage is to achieve verisimilitude, i.e., engage in action on behalf of your character and actively pursue the goals and objectives they would pursue if they were actual human beings, rather than being mere “black marks on a page,” as playwright David Mamet calls them. But knowing that you need to have an objective and knowing how to formulate one are two very different things, so let’s get started.

Acting, actor, and action all sound the same because they all come from the same Latin root. If you are not engaged in action on stage, you are not acting.

First, a few guidelines: An objective is an action (a verb) that is aimed at and measured in someone outside yourself. The action must be something your character feels driven to make another character do or know or say or change, and the



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measure of it then lies in whether the doing or knowing or saying or changing actually occurs. Second, let’s make a critical distinction hinted at above when I mentioned bison: While a stress-free day in real life is a delight, a conflict-free day onstage is a bore, and not just for the audience, but for the actor as well! That is why unearthing objectives with obvious obstacles is the greatest difference between the daily, innumerable, mindless wants you pursue as a person, and the calculated, intentional, high stakes wants you should pursue as a character. Your objectives should be challenging, but not impossible, to achieve, and they should be matters of great importance. In fact, one of the simplest measures of an objective’s quality can be found in the answer to this question: “What happens if I do not achieve this?” If the answer doesn’t

paint your character into a corner, and/or in leave them somehow worse off than they were before they attempted to achieve it, then find a more compelling action to pursue. Keep in mind that formulating strong, playable objectives is one of the most oft-repeated, yet demanding skills an actor relies on; it’s the hammer in his toolkit, which is why diligent actors will take scene study classes over and over again. There are also some great books on this topic that are well worth getting, including one written by former students of the above-mentioned playwright; it is called [A Practical Handbook for the Actor](#).

Lesson 3 - Character

Acting is not about the words. That is the screenwriter's job. Your job is to breathe life into those words through purposeful script and character analysis. If you have not done that, you are not acting.

So how do you go about unearthing strong and playable wants for the characters you play on stage? Of course, you must start with the text, but it is an oversimplification to believe that you merely need to look at what your character says to formulate objectives. In fact, this is one of the easiest traps to fall into. Consider the heartbroken ingenue who tearfully tells her prince to leave her alone when what she really wants is for him to fight valiantly for the right to stay. She says one thing, but wants something very different, and you must be willing to entertain that possibility. Consider, too, the “bad guy,” whom you judge harshly because you would never do or say the things he does or says. But your job as an actor is to commit wholeheartedly to your character's wants and point-of-view, so how can you distance yourself from their thoughts and deeds, even from moral high ground? You can't! Rather, you must create a context for your character's behavior that both makes sense to you and justifies their world view. That doesn't mean you need to approve of their behavior, but you cannot disapprove of it either.

That's why character analysis is such a tricky business, but it is a critical component of bringing truth to the stage. You must engage deeply with questions that drill down ever further into what drives your character, never losing sight of the fact that in real life people feel justified in their behavior no matter how awful it may be. What do you know, or what back-story can you create, that explains why your character does the cruel things he does? Pain, loss, frustration, anger, persecution... these are common human experiences. You and I may respond differently to them than your character does, but some/all of those things are impacting his behavior, which is why understanding them will help you stand in his shoes.



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Lesson 4 - On Camera

While everything we have covered thus far is true for any actor on any stage, there are distinct differences between acting on a stage in front of an audience seated quietly in the dark and acting on a soundstage surrounded by a crew busily operating cameras and lights. Some people will tell you the difference lies mainly in the “size” of your performance, but since you now know better than to “perform” at all, you also know better than to think of it that way. Rather, think of it like this: In a theater you must speak and move and live so that the audience in the uppermost seats will perceive everything that happens on stage. On screen, the same is true, but the “distance” from the audience is determined by the tightness of the shot, and so your vocal and physical energy must be adjusted accordingly. Imagine being framed in a tight closeup, yet moving and speaking as you would on a Broadway stage. Not only would that be unsettling to watch, the camera would not contain you.

It is for this reason that people mistakenly discuss the size of your performance onscreen, but don't be thrown. Approach your on-camera work with verisimilitude. Create strong objectives, and then pursue your character's actions as wholeheartedly and vigorously as you would on any other stage. Then keep in mind how remarkably well-suited film and television are to intimate storytelling and appreciate that unique strength. It is one that places singular demands on actors to be as alive internally as they are externally — often through the use of inner monologues — and to effectively put into service the knowledge that “the eyes are the windows to the soul.”



From [Beige on Both Sides](#) on [YouTube](#)



From [Beige on Both Sides](#) on [YouTube](#)



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That's a Wrap

Shakespeare's Hamlet says, "The purpose of playing was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." Ensuring that the mirror reflects only the truest human behavior — whether glorious or hideous, agonizing or hilarious, familiar or unknown — is what makes acting such a noble pursuit... yet one that is often misunderstood. Acting is not about pretending, emoting, reading, nor being a "ham" or a drama queen/king. It is not about forcing sentiment, posturing for the audience, nor delivering lines. It is not about being physically stunning, naturally funny, nor inherently gifted. Must your emotional palette be plentiful and readily available to you? Absolutely! Must you have the empathy required to stand inside someone else's shoes and speak from their point-of-view with faithfulness and vigor even if you utterly disagree with their point-of-view? 100%!! Must you be willing to read eagerly, study diligently, and work recurrently on the various elements of the craft, which include strengthening your body, training your voice, and building your stamina? You bet.

According to renowned teacher [Sanford Meisner](#), "Acting is the ability to live truthfully under given imaginary circumstances." Simple and true.

Emotions are always the by-product of doing. If you are working towards some emotive rendition of the text, you might deliver a lovely interpretive reading, but you are not acting.

But it is a demanding task that he was also famously quoted as saying "takes 20 years." If that statement discourages you, acting may not be the path for you, even if you take his advice, as you should, with a grain of salt. To get there you will need to cultivate a relationship with wholly honest expression, learn to be present in each moment, will yourself to be vulnerable and authentic, sharpen your capacity to listen fully and actively, and reconnect with the youthful impulse to do that which you are compelled to do. You will also need to develop skills related to character and text analysis, formulating objectives, audition technique, and more. But as I said on page 1, if you are a human being who lives, you can be an actor who acts. Not discouraged? Good! So start today with [my free online acting videos](#), the articles on [my blog](#), or [by contacting me](#) to set up your own private session or just to be in touch. In the meantime, I wish you BREAK A LEG! ~Cie

About the Author



Writer, director, content creator, voiceover artist, and acting coach

Cie Peterson is a native New Yorker, who began her actor training as a teenager at the renowned Gene Frankel Theatre in the Broadway district and later studied with noted acting coach Sande Shurin as well as Sanford Meisner apprentice Larry Silverberg. She earned an MA in Theater from Hunter College in NYC and has years of acting experience both on stage and in more unusual venues, such as her stint as a giant Mitt for the NY Mets. (Ask her about it!) While she has an extensive resume of theatrical credits, nowadays as an actor she can more often be found in the audio booth working as [a voiceover talent](#) who regularly books TV and radio spots, video tutorials, corporate gigs, and the occasional audio book and documentary.

Cie is also an accomplished director, writer, master teacher, and private coach. Her many directing credits include theatrical and video projects; [If I Had a Dime](#), the warm, witty, grown-up cartoon series that she conceived, created, and wrote; as well as countless showcases for Play On Acting Studio, the Farmington, CT studio she founded and led for several years.

In 2017 with myriad digital projects completed — and many more in the pipeline — Cie launched [Clouds and a Waffle Productions](#) and in short order spearheaded the development of two web series: [Beige on Both Sides](#), which in 2018 received an offer for a production/distribution deal, and season one of the recently released comedic digital series [A Coupla Pros](#).

Of course Cie is also [an experienced acting teacher](#) with a reputation of excellence based on her work with such esteemed local institutions as The Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts and Hartford Stage, as well as her [free online acting classes](#) viewed regularly by her 1300+ YouTube subscribers. In addition, she is a much in-demand private acting coach sought out by aspiring performers and working professionals from both coasts. Cie invites you to [be in touch](#) and to follow her on social.

