

ACTING

AND HOW
TO SURVIVE IT

PETER FEENEY



ACTING

AND HOW TO SURVIVE IT

*Everything you wanted to know about
acting but were too afraid to ask...*

PETER FEENEY



PRAISE FOR THIS BOOK

'Acting and How to Survive It' is exactly what Kiwi (and Aussie) actors need as they try to make their way in Show Business. I am going to recommend that all actors, anywhere, read it. It comes from somebody who is a very experienced practitioner, but Peter is also a terrific writer...

Jam packed with all sorts of good advice – stories, anecdotes, tips – it's got everything. After you've read it you've got no excuses in understanding what a demanding and challenging business it is to work in, but you will also come out feeling inspired and full of enthusiasm for the craft of acting. The way Peter attacks things is incredibly useful. There's an enormous amount of common sense and useful suggestions in the book. I think it's one of the most important books written about acting, anywhere.

Peter Hambleton, Actor, on Radio NZ National, 14/12/20

For actors, teachers and directors alike I believe this collection - this wonderful organisation of what you believe is worth working with - is going to be very useful as a checklist of what we might do, should try, or should go back to doing. Your instincts for how to speak to us, how to share your ideas, totally unpretentiously, flow right out of your keyboard, word by word, idea by idea, onto the page.

Many practitioners will be encouraged and just plain grateful to be introduced to, or reminded of, these tried and tested performance ideas, all presented in such a warm, human, truly empathetic voice. You know some shit: those who pick this book up will be better off for it. I am 'buzzing from the wonderfulness,' to quote Stephen Fry.

Alex Murphy, Head of Acting, Mulholland Academy, Amsterdam

PRAISE FOR PETER FEENEY

AS AN ACTOR...

Peter Feeney delivers a colorfully nasty lead villain... a certified Kiwi answer to Bruce Campbell.

Scott Weinberg, EfilmCritic

A wonderfully layered performance by Peter Feeney.

NZ Listener

Peter your passion for your craft and your desire to engage with audiences of all ages is inspiring.

Hilary Beaton, CEO, Downstage Theatre

Peter Feeney's finely judged performance as the klutzy protagonist elicits considerable sympathy... his encounters provide an instructive journey of self-discovery.

NZ Herald

Performing as both an actor and director, Feeney succeeds admirably as the proud mentor, stalwart friend and the disappointed colleague... extremely personable, his character strikes a remarkably genuine note.

Theatreview

WRITER...

He's turned his childhood into an amazingly funny novel - one that will appeal to members of his own generation, as well of those of us who grew up in the fifties and sixties, or even earlier.

Evening Standard

A triumphant debut. It is hilarious from the outset: *Blind Bitter Happiness* became known as the giggle book in my household within a matter of two pages.

NZ Listener

You don't get any better or funnier than this delightful tale ... one of this year's most hilarious novels. I can't wait for a sequel.

Sunday News

AND A TEACHER OF ACTING

Peter is a very gifted actor who will always be genuinely interested in exploring his work and finding new approaches to it, and opening this out to his fellow actors.

Cicely Berry, OBE, Voice Director, Royal Shakespeare Company.

A gifted man with much to contribute to his profession.

Dean Carey, Director, Actors Centre Australia

Peter brings fresh vision to his work coupled with professional wisdom and his inimitable energy.

Miranda Harcourt, Actor, Director, Acting Coach

I so appreciated working with you. You bring a fantastic combination of experience, optimism, hard work and pragmatism to it all, and you're so very good with your fellow actors. Thank you!

Vincent Ward, Film Director

Peter is a gifted teacher and industry professional. I trust him implicitly with our actors for all areas of developing and maintaining their craft. He is extremely accessible, sensitive and caring.

Kathryn Rawlings, Kathryn Rawlings & Associates Agency

Peter gave me not only invaluable tools in terms of theory and practice, but also a professional approach to acting that proved essential when trying to break into Hollywood, plus an ongoing support that I truly appreciate.

Julie Collis

I started attending Peter's classes at a time that I was uninspired and, from day dot, Peter reinvigorated my imagination and confidence through consistent creative technique all packaged in an extortionate amount of knowledge and wit. After a year of classes I had a renewed sense of excitement and commitment and was accepted into *NIDA*. Peter teaches with a depth of patience and intelligence paired with a precise perception of what the individual in front of him needs. I am forever grateful for our time together and continued association.

Olivia Mortimer-Eade

It was Peter who showed me the real essence of what acting is. Not the power of the words you speak, but the space inbetween. The space for reacting and expressing emotion when words just don't cut it. His influence on my acting is what put me on the road to my role in the TV series *Mystic*, and his wisdom opened my eyes to listening not just with my ears, but with my heart.

Antonia Robinson

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by Peter Feeney.

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Teaching has forced me to scrutinise the craft of acting far more intensely than I would otherwise just as an actor. Writing this book has meant I've had to dig deeper still, as I've sought a way to understand what makes acting great without deadening the explanation in dogma. Now, as I reach the end of that journey, I understand the debt I owe to my students of the last 20 years or so. Therefore, I dedicate this book to you, those who have capered inside experimental hamster-wheels of my cruel design, suffered my ignorance and misjudgments, leapt unhesitatingly through flaming hoops of artistic fancy and suffered, mostly without complaint, for the benefit of learning. Without watching you perform and figuring out what worked, and what didn't, and why, I could never have written this book.

Thank you.

I salute you.



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INTRODUCTION

Creativity in its DNA is riven with chaos and doubt. When you act, you'll probably be great. But you can never know for sure. There's no way to permanently silence our inner critic. There's no foolproof non-narcotic cure for nerves. There's no 'right' way to play each scene or role.

Instead, acting happens in an unkind and wicked environment. There are so many variables that mutate job to job that, no matter how much we yearn for it, no single infallible system can guarantee perfect acting results every time. All actors attack the job differently, and their approach alters job to job too. There are no guarantees in any career and no final destination. There's a reason it's called the *greasy* pole: if you're just holding on, you're already on your way down.

The one constant in acting, as in life, is learning. Whether welcomed or not, the learning never stops. Or at least it shouldn't, because actors are like sharks – if they're not moving, they're in trouble.

Because acting is such a slippery fish I've avoided here the peddling of a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather than trying to peg down a tent in a hurricane, I've gone for flying some beautiful kites. If you're just starting, or mid-career, here's your one-stop-shop: an acting book that aims to be useful rather than straining to be original. You'll find here not a set of commandments, but a helpful guide along every step of your personal learning journey.

This book is made up of four main parts: *Craft*, *Work*, *The Head Game*, and *Living*.

The purpose of the *Craft* section is twofold. If you're building your personal technique, it will impart everything you need to know about the nuts and bolts of acting. I've also included insights to inspire more experienced actors – who will also benefit from revisiting first principles that have been precisely described.

The chapters of the *Craft* section bring together approaches from my own experience and different schools of acting, all under one roof. As I make

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no claims to exclusive truth I've not had to omit any technique based on attachment to another competing system – or worse, bend it out of shape and rebrand it so it looks new. Instead, I've been a Weka, unashamedly borrowing and adapting shiny acting morsels wherever I could find them.

The *Work* section gives you the insights to make the most of your career opportunities, starting with self-tests and auditions. I share not only my own experience on the job but the know-how of other actors as well.

The Head Game and *Living* sections aim to impart the virtual wisdom needed to survive and thrive in this vocation over the long run. A life as an actor invites a cluster of challenges. These include not just getting but creating work, finding the stamina to stay in the game, building a supportive creative family, marketing yourself and maintaining your faith. Recent research has shone new light on how our operating human software works. In these last two parts of the book you'll find these fresh ideas, alongside my own insights, beaten into a sense that will enlighten and empower you.

The Head Game is about bringing winning psychology to the pressures of performance, with advice on nerves, overcoming your fear of failure, and owning your learning.

You may have the greatest skill in the world, but at some point you have to connect to an audience to have a career. The *Living* section covers the intersection of your art with commerce: understanding who you are and how to best promote your talent, as well as how to manage the setbacks and opportunities you will encounter.

As we go to print the planet is still reeling from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and New Zealand is emerging tentatively from a lockdown which, ironically, gave me time to finish this book. The full impacts of the pandemic, good and bad, have yet to be revealed. But it's an event that once again throws into sharp relief why we need our story-tellers: to help make sense of our ever-changing world, and remind us of our shared humanity. There's never been a more important time to be an actor.

** Performers, male and female both, are called actors here and, rather than using a male or female third person 'voice' throughout, I've opted for jumping from 'he' to 'she' randomly – and, I hope, about equally.*

PART 1

CRAFT

*Talents are best nurtured in solitude; character is best formed
in the stormy billows of the world.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

CHAPTER ONE THE INVESTIGATIVE PROCESS

Private study is the backbone of any fine actor or actress.

Peter O'Toole

I once read that the great Renaissance artist Michelangelo, before he even picked up hammer and chisel, could already see his subject, the embryonic sculpture, trapped within the marble. All he had to do was release it. But then I subsequently learnt that, in fact, for his every masterpiece there were ten misshapen failures, the bastard children of his genius, hidden away from the starry-eyed patrons who visited his studio. We actors don't have that luxury. We can't hide our unloved performances. Our average films, the terrible opening nights, the TV guest roles we'd rather forget: all are paraded for eternity for the public to see.

It's no wonder then that so many acting books promise the warm assurance of a winning formula. Such a fiction is particularly attractive to actors starting out. The truth is rather less comforting. You can prepare diligently and still fall flat on your face. We crave certainty but it is an illusion. Performing under pressure alongside self-consciousness and difficult feelings *is* the gig.

Yours then is a fresh voyage of discovery into every new role. What you prepare at home is what you bring to the party. New Zealand actor Joel Tobeck said in one of his visits to my Acting Studio: 'Come in with something – anything – and believe in it. Don't worry about getting it right. Commit to it and drive it home.' Your talent lies in your choices; how you have decided to approach this role. You still cannot be entirely sure if it's worth the price of a Netflix subscription or a theatre ticket. But at least you have a basis to begin work. You're now a contributor, ready for as much collaboration, input and direction as time and budget allow.

And, contrary to what you may think, bringing a strong offer makes you *more* directable, not less. It's far easier to move from something tangible to anything else, than from nothing. This is because if you have a tangible

The Investigative Process

choice in hand, it follows that from the process of finding it you considered the many other possibilities that also exist in the script. Said cartoonist Scott Adams: 'Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.' Your offer is what's left after winnowing out the chaff. It's not a narrowing of possibility. It's the spine of an idea you'll hang your acting on, making your full personality available.

I seem to get an acting lobotomy served alongside my audition sides and this is a not uncommon experience. Broadway director and Emmy award-winning producer Bob Benedetti told me that acting is at its heart anxiety making because it's the actor's job to make order out of the chaos of every new scene and role. We always seem to be starting at ground zero with every fresh script. You're not of course, because you've won a technique: your unique approach, your 'way in.'

But there are many ways 'in' actor to actor – read Chapter 14, *Preparing for a Role*, for proof of that. And any seasoned actor knows that there are no guarantees of outcome. It's why we're such a superstitious lot. Each night before the first day of a new acting job Cate Blanchett has what she calls her '3am moment.' She turns on the light, wakes her husband, and asks him with utter sincerity: 'how do I act again!?'¹

Sometimes our anxiety can draw us into a ritualistic process when we prepare. We may unimaginatively plonk layer upon layer of work onto the words, methodically applying actions or objectives and given circumstances, trying to insulate ourselves against disaster by striving to 'get it right' in our prep so that in the room we can present some finished masterpiece. But of course, there is no 'right' way to do a scene. It's never 'finished.' There's always another take, more collaboration.² That's why we often dislike seeing our work at a premiere or on TV - we can no longer improve on it. Our prep should be like making a cake without a recipe. Our kit bag of acting tools holds all the ingredients we might need. We just don't know what the combination will be until it's baked.

Working actors aren't just talented. Some great actors will insist they're not talented at all. 'I'm a skilled professional actor,' asserts Sir Michael Caine. 'Whether I've any talent is beside the point.' Actors like Caine are driven by the need to learn as much as they can in the time available about their role. They ask the hard questions – of themselves, of their imagination, of

1 Revealed in an interview with Sir Ian McKellen: 'Actors on Actors: Cate Blanchett and Ian McKellen,' Youtube.

2 If it's not green and growing it's ripe and rotting, my acting teacher Dean Carey used to say.

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the director, of their collaborators. They want to go into a scene knowing precisely what they are doing because they know then they can be open to being surprised.

Talent can't be relied upon. Work can - but only the right kind of work, that asks the right kind of questions.

The way our brains make connections and burrow into the characters we play is not logical or predictable. But any meaningful investigation of a role takes time. Honour your work by making the time and space to prepare. Nature abhors a vacuum. Do the work and create the time to do so and inspiration will follow.

We should enjoy acting, otherwise what's the point? On occasion a job can be a real white knuckle ride: your co-star a complete nightmare, everyone screaming while the show goes off the tracks and hurtles towards a cliff. But we owe it to ourselves to find the fun where we can, and we can always do that in our prep; our 'private study,' as Peter O'Toole said in the quote that began this chapter. Research shows that most workers can't manage more than eight hours of quality work in a single day. But for creative jobs, the figure can be just six. Our brains like variety so mix up your prep: do some script work, some online research, watch other actors tackling similar roles on Youtube, do a bit of character work, then accent drills, learn some lines - and so on. Once you've prepared you need to trust it. Acting is not the execution of a minutely detailed plan. It's playing with the energy of the other actor, living in the moment, reacting to what's happening. Better a live sparrow than a stuffed eagle.

You know more than you think. You know how to act. Your instincts are all you have. You just need to know the right questions to ask to bring them to life. Let's get started on that.

CHAPTER TWO

CHARACTER - THE NUTS AND BOLTS

The Lists; Base Character; Status; Imaginative Explorations; Physical Explorations; Research; Getting into Character; Empathetic Imagination

An actor's only job is to enter the lives of people who are different from us and let you feel what that feels like.

Meryl Streep

IS CHARACTER WORK FOR YOU?

It's nerve-wracking to be watched. It shouldn't be. But it is. It's always you up there. But every role you play has not been written specifically for you. The audience doesn't see you. They see your character. Understanding that can free you from self-consciousness and free your acting.

Imagine that here *you* are but over *there*, on the other side of the room, stands your character: an imaginary person. She has your body shape but much else is different. She's wired differently: she thinks, feels, talks - even walks - differently. If you stepped inside her body and wired yourself up to all the neurons in her brain, and the nerve endings in her extremities, how would that feel? What would the world look like through her eyes?

If you can get involved with that made up person as a separate entity, if you can think about what might make them tick, figure out what you have in common with them, empathise with what they're doing - *then* you'll be on your way to creating a character. Creating a character is moving from where you are to where she is, sliding inside her skin and breathing life into her, creating something unique as you do so.

This chapter is full of suggestions about how you might make that journey. Just know that everyone approaches character differently. Some actors kind of haunt their characters until they inhabit them. For his role as 'Bud' White in *LA Confidential* actor Russell Crowe spent weeks dressed in too tight clothing, living in a small apartment to embody Bud's hulking strength. To

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prepare for what ended up being his swansong role, ‘The Joker’ in Chris Nolan’s *Batman*, the late actor Heath Ledger lived like a hermit for weeks. In his journals, there are pictures of hyenas, clowns and comic strips of Malcolm McDowell’s character ‘Alex’ in Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*. Said Heath of the process: ‘I sat around in a hotel room in London for about a month, locked myself away, formed a little diary and experimented with voices – it was important to try to find a somewhat iconic voice and laugh.’³

It’s also true that ‘character work’ isn’t for everyone. Often we are cast simply because of who we are; because we’re similar in some way to the role as written. Great contemporary performers who we may see as ‘character’ actors, the likes of William H Macy or Bill Nighy, actually disavow character work. David Mamet, the American playwright and director, also argues that there is no such thing as a character. Audiences, he believes, just construct character in their minds out of story, costumes and sets, without the actors having to do anything, except act.

But of course there are also many self-confessed character actors, true chameleons like Brenda Blethyn and Gary Oldman. Today, as pay-TV takes on film, and the star system erodes, we may even be evolving into a new age of the character actor. More than ever before the ability to inhabit different personalities, to play different aspects of ourselves, grows our versatility, and our employability. What sort of career would Matthew McConaughey have enjoyed if he hadn’t stepped out of the leading man box in his middle years and embraced character roles?

Studies have shown that actors display different brain activity when in character.⁴ But we can be unaware of the character work we do, and therefore unappreciative of it. The truth is that when we act we are *always* in character. The likes of Macy and Nighy, our two prominent character deniers, just remind us not to make too much of it. Once, during an unscripted improvisation, I reacted off the cuff to the question: ‘how is the divorce going?’ I’m usually pretty relaxed when asked a personal question myself. But on this occasion my character responded very tartly. I hadn’t felt that I was deeply in character at all, but there ‘he’ was. The lesson from this is that it can be a mistake to hold out for a towering transformation of yourself with character work. It’s often a small shift from where you live in your head, but a meaningful one.

Start by accepting that, like it or not, you are always in character. Just don’t

³ In *Empire Magazine*, November 2007.

⁴ Nicola Davis, ‘Actors show different brain activity when in character, study finds.’ *The Guardian*, Wednesday 13 Mar 2019.

Character – The Nuts And Bolts

hold out for some grand arrival: it's always a work in progress.

There are definite pluses to including character work in your process. As an actor you're going to work occasionally on average material. But when you craft a character, you can always bring a creation of genuine artistry, all of your own. When constructing your character, your choices will be bounded not by the range of your own experiences but by the wider world of your imagination. When performing you instinctively know how to react because you understand how your character would behave in almost any circumstance. You know your character better than anyone in the world.

Unlike Mamet, British theatre director Mike Leigh, who uses character at the heart of his work, considers that the actor's job is *only* character. They should leave everything else to the director and not burden themselves with the weight of the whole story. Certainly, it won't feel so personal if it's your *creation*, not you, being criticised. Direction becomes a delightful opportunity to explore yet another facet of your character.

For all these reasons introducing character to your process can be deeply satisfying. 'The further you get away from yourself,' says Benedict Cumberbatch, 'the more challenging it is. Not to be in your comfort zone is great fun.' Our ability to become someone else is one of the essential functions of story-telling, inspiring audiences by giving them a sense that in their lives transformation is also possible.

The techniques outlined in this chapter are not a 'to do' list; they are just different doors to open. Not all will work for you. And there usually won't be time to do them all. But a little character work is better than none.

THE LISTS

The lists are how you collect the writer's ideas about your character. Writing them out is a labour, no question. As with line actions (we'll get to them in the next chapter), the lists aren't for everyone. But as for all the tools I offer in this book, persevere. Once you have mastered the lists, you can then decide if they are for you. Like panning for acting gold, the lists shake the text through a sieve that reveals shiny details not immediately visible on a first read. They allow us to absorb the writer's full contribution before we add our invention.

Typically, along with your Character Diary (see 'On the Job'), the lists are work you'd do once you are cast. But even for an audition where you don't have the full script, a version of the lists can still be helpful.

The lists are gleaned from multiple readings of the script. Try and write just one

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list per reading.

You'll be surprised at what you discover. Multiple reads are a tremendous benefit just on their own. We should read and re-read our scripts regularly, even when filming or doing a run of a play. There's much our brains miss, or forget, and more still to discover when we think we know the script inside out. Here are the lists as British theatre director Mike Alfreds describes them:

1. Facts about your character

These are the incontrovertible facts. Write them down as you go along. They'll include physical descriptions, behaviour patterns, biographical details and things your character does e.g. join the army, marry a princess, have nightmares about death. Pay attention to big print (the scene directions) for any relevant information. Your list may be short: accuracy is the key.

2. What your character says about him or herself.

3. What your character says about others.

4. What other people say about your character (and do record who it is that says it).

Write the lines verbatim; don't paraphrase. But do choose the relevant sentences – don't copy out whole speeches if they are full of irrelevant chunks. Include what characters say both to others face to face, and behind their backs. Sometimes the same text may be written down in more than one list. That's fine. Don't interpret or make choices at this stage.

For the lists 3 & 4, you can collate them either in character blocks or chronologically.

A fifth (optional) list is of imagery used by your character. This is a list you need usually only for heightened text where imagery is important, for writers such as Edward Bond, Lorca or Shakespeare. The images that your character employs can give you insight into the character's psychology. For example, in his 'serpents egg' speech, Brutus is describing Julius Caesar. But the pictures he paints with his words tell us more about the dark place he lives at this moment in his head, than Julius Caesar himself.

And so the lists are completed. At the very least you've had the benefit of reading the script numerous times. But you've also likely started to make connections in your head that will have escaped you just from a single read.⁵

FLESHING OUT THE LISTS

If working in a group, read your lists and get feedback from others. An outsider can often see things you might have missed. Let it all stew in your

⁵ There's a great example of how completed lists look in Mike Alfreds' *Different Every Night*, where he does the lists for Masha in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*.