The TEAM Approach
A Holistic Gateway to Embodied Acting

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Introduction

The TEAM Approach: A Holistic Gateway to Embodied Acting

Actors surround us with performances every day: on televisions, in movies, on phones and through computers. Actors sell products, report the news, and satirize current events. They entertain, inform, and entreat us into new experiences. Through performance actors move us to think, feel, and behave differently. They convince us that surely we are watching “reality,” even when we are not. They enact the stories by novelists, playwrights, script writers, storytellers, poets, and song writers. We rely on actors to provide skilled performances. We want them to move us, to invite us to merge with their imaginary worlds. Actors are the conduits for all these vital theatrical experiences.

Highly skilled actors disarm their audiences, enable them to suspend disbelief, and woo them into a character’s perception of reality. Admired actors do this without the audience recognizing that finely tuned skills were applied to this acting craft—so fine the acting craft appears invisible. As the famous actor, Jimmy Stewart said, “It's well done if you can do a part and not have the acting show.” Veteran film actor and acting teacher, J. Patrick McNamara introduces his instructive DVD on the Craft of Film Acting by stating, "Now we bear an unusual burden as actors. In any other art form it's pretty simple. You say, 'What is she doing? She's painting. What is he doing? He's sculpting. What is she doing? She's dancing. What is he doing? He's playing the piano.' But if someone says, 'She's acting.' Well, that means it isn't being done very well. In our art
the process needs to be invisible." Well done acting takes a great deal of skill, and yet is applied as if it were delivered effortlessly.

An actor's skill development is much like that of the magician’s process for creating his magic on stage. A student magician studies, practices, and often fumbles through endless hours of preparation in order to make his conjuring appear swift and easy. He works long hours convincing fine muscles to carry out intricate moves. One hand flourishes to distract while the other secretly completes an act of deception. Meanwhile, his face expresses joy and ease— to create a mystical moment inspiring awe from his audience. Similarly, the student dancer sweats through hours of daily exercises, perfecting techniques, building muscles, extending flexibility and memorizing sequences to create her own physically demanding dramatic dance. The resulting dance appears from a distance as smooth and almost effortless, but up close one can witness her powerful breath, pearls of sweat, and firm muscles shaking as she holds a position.

Students of acting are no different from those studying to be magicians or dancers in their embodied preparation and extreme dedication to skill development and concentrated practice. The celebrated mime, Marcel Marceau, described this dedication to his craft by stating, “I have spent more than half a lifetime trying to express the tragic moment.” While dancers' and magicians' intentions are to dazzle, the actor's skill is hidden behind characters who are often as common as you or I. In such cases their talents and skills become invisible. Therefore, the actor may not appear as awe inspiring as the magician or the dancer, whose performances are so foreign to a common life. Great acting skills are often so well integrated into the resulting
performance that the actual skill behind it can go unrecognized, unappreciated, and unfortunately (and here is the key point for the beginning actor) unknown to aspiring actors who need to recognize and value these skills the most. Actor and acting teacher Uta Hagen recognized this. She said, "More than in any other performing arts the lack of respect for acting seems to spring from the fact that every layman considers himself a valid critic."

When the actor successfully portrays a believable character, she manages to suspend the audience’s disbelief that her performance is actually an illusion of the reality she created. Within this believed illusion the actor evokes the audience’s emotions through a fully embodied portrayal of character and story, and then the audience completes the rest of the performance through its own reactions to the successful illusion. As Katherine Hepburn put it, “If you give an audience a chance they will do half your acting for you.” An actor who manifests this kind of performance, regardless of the size of the role or the style of the performance venue, is producing quality acting.

**How Does the Actor Produce Quality Acting?**

To produce quality acting you need to replicate fully embodied truthful human behavior in a uniquely interpreted character, based on the scripted needs of that role. High quality acting also takes this into the dynamic realm by utilizing unique and strong acting choices, applying minute details to fully embodied actions and reactions, understanding deep needs and feelings in the character’s life, and considering the character’s relationship to the story as a whole. All of these aspects of acting are necessary in productions from stage to television, to the big screen. The great Russian
actor and acting teacher Konstantin Stanislavski once said, “Remember: there are no small parts, only small actors.” High quality acting presents characters that successfully suspend the audience’s disbelief, bring the audience into the world of the story, and provide a character portrayal that is convincing, provocative, and in support of the overall story.

Renowned acting teachers like Stanislavski, Meisner, Hagen and Chekhov stress the importance of not only understanding the context of the script and the thoughts of the characters they portray, but also the emotions and actions of these characters. Sanford Meisner is known for having a framed sign hung in his New York City acting studio stating boldly to all his students, "An Ounce of BEHAVIOR is Worth a Pound of WORDS." Michael Chekhov's key Psychological Gestures are built upon the combination of three parts (1) thoughts (or Images), (2) feelings, and (3) will-impulses (actions). Uta Hagen provides detailed activity and sensory exercises for the actor to accomplish and write about as preparations for the student actor to perfect her craft. Stanislavski’s acting books (commonly referred to as the A,B,C Acting Books since each of the three books begins sequentially with the first three letters of the alphabet An Actor Prepares, Building a Character, and Creating a Role) provide incredibly detailed lessons in all aspects of thoughts, emotions, and actions in actor work using such terms as: action, imagination, objectives, inner motive forces, emotion memory, making the body expressive, plasticity of motion, etc. The basic lessons of these respected teachers reflect a common message for actors, to produce quality acting the ultimate goal of any actor is to perfect the study of and then portray all facets of human behavior. Many actors have this goal in mind, however far too many miss the connections or don't know
how to link these basic elements into fully embodied acting. The TEAM Approach recognizes these respected acting theories, and yet provides tangible reliable tools that assist the actor in synthesizing the character’s thoughts, emotions, and actions into dynamic embodied behavior that is supportive of the character's needs and desires.

**Acting Theories, Techniques, and Methods**

Acting methods, theories, and techniques provide the beginning actor with helpful tools for building many of these skills. However many techniques may only address one area of either mental, physical, or emotional human behavior. These singular methods do not fully address the fact that humans are fully embodied living systems with thoughts, emotions, and actions that are intertwined and cannot be separated.

The "Inside-Out" approach is an acting theory that focuses on the analytical and backstory process. This technique prescribes that by understanding the character’s background and intellectual process, the emotional and physical aspects will eventually appear out of this intellectual knowing. This theory might break down all the intricacies of the character’s thoughts, past experiences, and future desires—but how do the characters feel about these desires, and then how do they show it? Performances by actors who study this inside-out theory, and don’t learn how to connect their thoughts with actions and emotions, are often described as “talking heads” or “heady actors.” Their performances can come off as stiff, closed in, and disconnected from the rest of their bodies, as well as from other actors.
The "Outside-In" approach is the acting technique that proposes to only "play the action." It proposes that if you start with a physical action or gesture it will provoke the inner life of thoughts and emotions to emerge. This technique is purely physical, focusing on the intricacies of muscles, breathing, movement, gesture, and activity. But why is the character doing these actions and how is he moved to do so? Will reliable and appropriate thoughts and emotions emerge to support this character’s part of the story? Performances by actors trained in this physical technique with no other method for making clear connections to emotions and thoughts are mesmerizing to watch, but the question sometimes lingers at the end of the performance, “Why?” This actor portrays an acrobat of activity. However, the audience witnessing such acrobatics is often left searching for the character’s motivation and the emotions that naturally adhere to such desires.

Emotion based acting can help the actor make very valuable emotional connections to the role – but then, why is the character emotional, and how does she convey it through behavior? Shakespeare might describe such performances as, “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Actors who learn a purely emotional approach to their acting and have not gained the skills in understanding character motivations, script analysis, and embodying the intricate and ever-changing beats of action, can come across as self-involved emotional actors who have a very difficult time shifting gears, taking direction, and finding the subtleties of action and interaction.

Each of these techniques provide valuable tools for actors, and if looked upon as one of many approaches for the actor to study, each can become a valuable acting tool in the
actor’s “tool box.” However, if an actor studies only one of these methods, he may miss the vital whole of his character, and his acting craft. The actor must always remain aware that in order to depict the entirety of human behavior, all parts that make the whole of being human, in addition to the performance text, must be studied and practiced. We are beings that think, feel, and behave as we manifest our lives. Acting is a living art, combining the current life of the actor with the imagined life of the character. There is a saying, "You cannot step into the same river twice" for not only is the river ever flowing and changing, but so are you. When an actor performs she intertwines the character emerging out of the scripted text with her own vibrant living system. Performing a character is a multi-layered process with two personalities interwoven in the act of presenting one.

An actor is responsible for creating a well-rounded truthful character who interacts with external conditions— the story, environment, and other characters and actors. At the same time the actor interacts with internal conditions— thoughts, emotions, and beliefs of the character and the actor. Stanislavski states, “The main factor in any form of creativeness is the life of a human spirit, that of the actor and his part, their joint feelings and subconscious creation.” The actor must be constantly aware of the ever changing circumstances for the character and for the actor – both internally and externally. Every change and shift in the parts will affect the whole.

When we consider how complex this process is, we cannot simply rely on one aspect of this intricate whole. The actor needs a process that helps her explore all external and internal components, understand their inter-relationships, and learn the skills to connect
these with her entire thinking, feeling, and being. The TEAM Approach provides this process.

**What is the TEAM Approach?**

The TEAM Approach pulls from actor training methods, such as Stanislavski, Meisner, and Chekhov, and synthesizes these with the holistic embodiment technique of Alba Emoting, and then incorporates basic human behavior theories, side coaching methods and somatic education approaches to assist actors in creating fully embodied dynamic acting. The root of the word somatic is *soma* meaning, "living body as experienced within," a term meant to resolve the gap between the mind and body and represents a holistic perspective of the person.

I developed the TEAM Approach during my 12 years of teaching acting for the University of North Carolina, Asheville and as an international workshop instructor of Alba Emoting™. I recognized in my classes and workshops that student actors struggled with creating fully embodied acting in such areas as: acting on clear active objectives, creating authentic and diverse expressions of emotion, basing actions and emotions in strong needs and reactions to conflict, and utilizing actions that are in line with, and not contradictory to, the objectives and feelings the character is expressing. I also found that student actors struggled most with putting all these elements together in performance. They often favored one element of emotion, action, or intellectual acting investigation over the other and did not fill in the other elements or synthesize all three parts to complete a more holistic performance.
Student actors may analyze the script for intellectual choices, but then leave these discoveries behind on the page and never fully manifest those ideas into the final performance product. Or an actor may make exciting emotional connections, yet have no reason why the character was so emotional or know what the character wanted. Another actor may have vigorous movements and gestures, fully embodying a character, but lack grounding and cohesion with the text or subtle nuances of listening and reacting off another actor. It was through these discoveries and the need to provide students with tools for making connections to all the aspects of an embodied performance that I created the TEAM Approach. I've thoroughly tested the approach, terms, and exercises through extensive classroom and rehearsal investigation and feedback.

The TEAM Approach synthesizes three elements in human behavior: thought, emotion, and action. This holistic technique helps actors see how these three inter-related parts are present in the actor’s life, in the character’s life, and in basic human behavior. This union manifests a fully realized, passionate, embodied performance.

TEAM is an acronym: Thought + Emotion + Action = Manifestation.

The TEAM Approach employs the somatic method called Alba Emoting™, developed by neuroscientist Dr. Susana Bloch as a reliable, safe, and measurable technique for fully embodying emotions and actions of expression. It utilizes three parallel and interconnected levels as well: an expressive level (facial and postural), a physiological level (breath and effects of breath patterns) and stimulates a subjective level (mental or
feelings). This somatic technique, threaded throughout The TEAM Approach, helps the actor examine all levels of human expressive behavior by considering physiological activities, expressive behavior, and an inner thoughtful experience and then melding them together into a fully embodied performance.

In addition, I've selected relevant ideas and exercises from Sanford Meisner, Michael Chekhov, Constantine Stanislavski, as well as many original exercises created through years of experimenting with this approach. The text also presents Maslow's basic psychological theory of a human hierarchy of needs, with examples from daily living and stories of acting and directing experiences my classes and rehearsals to help actors and directors recognize these qualities in the thoughts and behaviors of characters as well as in their personal lives. The first four chapters present these theories and an approach for each of the areas of Thought, Emotion, and Action. The final chapter, Manifestation, provides detailed exercises to help the actor move from theory into embodiment and performance.

**The TEAM as a Holistic Approach to Acting**

Thoughts are intrinsically tied with emotions and actions, and these ultimately lead to manifested visible results. Whatever name one assigns the result, the TEAM Approach makes it clear that three simultaneously cooperative elements of thought, emotion, and action create that result. These three inter-related aspects are present in your life, in the character’s life, and in all human behavior. When you feel an emotion, you simultaneously have thoughts about this emotion, or had thoughts that influenced that emotion. At the same time you engage behaviors and physical reactions to these
thoughts and feelings. You take actions that express more emotions and thoughts in yourself, while evoking these multi-layered responses in others. Since all these equally influential aspects are present in human behavior, the TEAM Approach addresses them holistically as equal and reciprocal building blocks for manifesting quality acting.

The TEAM Approach also recognizes that the resulting performance is the merging of actor and text. The actor analyzes and interprets text as a means of building a character that is supportive of the text’s story. The TEAM Approach applies somatic methods for embodying text analysis in order to maintain this holistic process.

**The Acting Gateway**

An actor brings her own thoughts, emotions, and actions to playing a character, as well as engaging her acting education. The actor’s personality, life history and feelings about the character or the text, all influence how she interprets the character. Likewise, the actor’s style of learning, mode of receiving information, and personal preferences for physical, emotional, and intellectual engagement in the craft of acting, will also influence how she integrates her acting education. Multiple layers of her conscious and unconscious life will not only influence her performance of a character, but also building her acting craft. This individualistic approach to learning and developing a craft is important for an actor to recognize and respect. Additionally an actor must recognize that the character she plays will also have these individual preferences for personal expression. So, the actor may play a character in one script that she feels is best to approach physically first and then fill in the other aspects of emotion and action. Whereas the same actor may play a role from another script where she realizes the
character is highly intellectual and requires a thought process as the first approach, filling in the other needs later in the process. In the TEAM Approach we call this the Acting Gateway. Some actors may already know it as their own acting style, their personal rehearsal process, how they prefer to approach acting a role, or their learning mode. Other actors may recognize this as fitting their acting approach more specifically to the role they are playing at the time. It is vital to the actor's growth to first recognize their Acting Gateway (Thought, Emotion, or Action), how it may change from one situation to the other, and then learn how to fill in the other TEAM elements in order to provide a holistic product.

This book provides clear steps within each of the three parallel areas of thought, emotion, and action so that you can begin a rehearsal process by studying any one of the three areas. By doing so you are being true to your Acting Gateway into learning the acting craft, as well as developing a personal method for approaching a specific character and its individual needs for development. You may find that one element of thought, emotion, or action is more accessible to you, or your character, than another. We see similar understandings of personal ways of knowing in various philosophies of multiple intelligences, personality types, and various movement theories. You may struggle with one element of the TEAM, while immediately understanding and fully engaging in the other. This is a natural response. Each person has their own preferred modes of knowing and understanding concepts. You may prefer a Thought, Emotion, or Action gateway into your acting work.
Once you learn your personal Acting Gateway, it is equally important that you recognize when you approach a certain role, a different gateway may be more appropriate for the needs of the character. In this case, the needs of the character you are playing dictates the gateway approach. For example, an actor may find that he normally approaches his acting roles through an emotional gateway, preferring to delve into the feelings and emotional reactions of the character from beat to beat, filling in the rest of the TEAM gradually through rehearsal. However, the actor finds himself in a situation where he is playing a character plagued with a serious illness. Throughout the script the character’s lines refer to physical symptoms and active behaviors that are directed towards remedying his illness. This actor may decide that an Action gateway is a more appropriate starting point for his work on this role. He researches the physical symptoms of the disease, and makes choices on how the character would respond physically to these symptoms and takes specific actions to resolve the character’s serious situation. Later in his process of rehearsing, he will discover the Emotion and Thought aspects of the TEAM to fulfill.

With either approach, an actor uses his Acting Gateway as a rehearsal approach and process. For example, as he begins his character study with an Action approach, exploring how a character holds his posture, extends gestures, moves around his surroundings, and how his character expresses himself through this movement. He can later check into the Thought and Emotion aspects of the character, and make sure they are all in line with his physical discoveries and are supportive of the text. Or perhaps another actor realizes that her character requires an approach that delves into the Thoughts of the character first, exploring character needs, objectives, and then working
from specific Thought Statements from beat to beat as a motivation for her actions. Later the actor can check that she is also including the emotions and actions of the character as she progresses with characterization development and rehearsal.

When you understand that your initial, instinctual approach might be through the Thought, or Emotion, or Action gateway, you can be true to your own, or your character's, personal entrance point. By following this entry point and then checking into the other two elements, you will fill in all necessary areas of human behavior to complete the TEAM and create a fully realized, holistic performance.

**How to Use This Book**

While each chapter can stand alone, I recommend that you read this entire book first to learn and understand the TEAM Approach theories as a whole. By reading the entire book and trying out the exercises, you will be able to identify your own Acting Gateway when work through this approach. Many acting students have started my classes thinking their preferred gateway was one element, but then after reading the text and engaging in the various chapter exercises, discovered they preferred an entirely different Acting Gateway. Often actors establish acting gateways initially based on habits or limited experience with other acting techniques. Once you are introduced to new approaches to scene study and character development, a new gateway can provide a fresh and more versatile process never before imagined. You can also return to this book for constant reference on roles, particularly if you're trying a new Acting Gateway for a specific role.
The book is written in the order of the acronym TEAM, Thought + Emotion + Action = Manifestation. The first chapter on Thoughts addresses textual analysis, since most acting performances start with a text. Each of the following chapters build upon the acting examples set up in previous chapters to help you understand the inter-relatedness of each of the TEAM parts. The book culminates with a final chapter on Manifestation that provides lessons for full embodiment, as well as summary worksheets for constructing and deconstructing the TEAM Approach. Although the book is written in a specific order, you are encouraged to approach the study of your role in whatever order satisfies your Acting Gateway needs, however it is very important that you ultimately include all parts of the TEAM.

Throughout the book, examples from various play scripts and movies are provided to illustrate the theories presented in each chapter. The play, *Proof*, by David Auburn, is used consistently for script analysis and application of The TEAM. If you are not familiar with this play, it is recommended that you read it as well.

**The TEAM Approach for Both Actors and Directors**

Whether you are an actor or director, once you understand how to apply this holistic approach to acting, you can easily recognize when acting is lacking the layers and dimensions necessary to present fully embodied truthful behavior. If an actor performs a role applying only one gateway, then we have an actor who is not recognizing the multiple levels of true human behavior, or the TEAM Approach.
The TEAM Approach offers building blocks for preparing any acting role, testing approaches to scene work, addressing the delivery of a song or dance, and preparing monologues. The TEAM Approach can also be used as a deconstruction method for looking at a performance and analyzing each element of the performance. When a director knows from rehearsal that a moment in the performance is not coming across believably, he can use the TEAM Approach to find the missing link. The side coaching techniques in this book also provide the director with rehearsal methods for coaching actors on elements of the TEAM and helping actors embody their choices in the moment. An actor can use the approach as a reflection method after receiving notes for changes from the director. Also, when an actor recognizes that something is not working right in a scene or performance, he can apply the TEAM Approach as a review process before the next performance. Both actor and director can utilize the TEAM Approach as an active tool for initially creating dynamic acting roles, and as a retrospective analysis of performances in process.

Stories from actual play rehearsals, auditions, classroom acting classes, and acting workshops are included throughout the book to illustrate how the TEAM Approach is used. Try This exercises are also provided to assist the reader in connecting acting theories with daily activities and behaviors. The book concludes with detailed embodiment exercises, side coaching instructions, and Tips for the Actor that transform theory into practice.