

THE ART OF ACTING 5: DISCIPLINE AND COMMITMENT

From *Acting One*, by Robert Cohen

Discipline is the flip side of imagination. It is the final element in an actor's instrument and the one that should be taken for granted by the time an actor begins serious study.

Unlike most of the creative arts, acting is a team enterprise; an actor is, by necessity, a team player. Rehearsals, although frequently improvisational, freewheeling, and fun, are serious artistic collaborations. Absolutely faithful attendance and punctuality are universally required.

The discipline of the actor is what permits the shared trust of the ensemble. If the imagination is to be free and the fantasy uninhibited, then each actor must feel the support of the whole and must know that the trust will not be misplaced, the fantasy not misread, and the emotions not ridiculed. An atmosphere of trust permits the wildest leaps of imagination and the most daring personal choices.

The theatre is always greater than the sum of its parts. Acting excels only inasmuch as interacting excels. To be on time, to learn your lines on time, to commit to the reality of the situation and style, to treat the work seriously and with spirit – these are the marks of the disciplined actor and the joys of the disciplined acting company. There is no better place to learn discipline than acting class. People do not work one way in school and another in the professional world; discipline is an artistic habit, and it has its own artistic rewards. It is not merely something you have to accept; if you are a serious actor, you accept it because you want to.

There are, obviously, no "discipline exercises." Show up on time, lines learned, ready to go, and commit yourself. Do your homework. Experiment. Share with your co-workers. And do it every day of your life. That's discipline – starting now.

Imagination and discipline are the intangible aspects of an actor's instrument – intangible because they are attitudes rather than skills. The actor's imagination must be liberal, provocative, and lively; the actor's self discipline must be firm, unambiguous, and freely given. Imagination and discipline can be practiced, perhaps even taught, but they are intrinsic aspects of every committed artist in the theatre. They should come into play now, not at some vague future in your studies or career.

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit."
- Aristotle