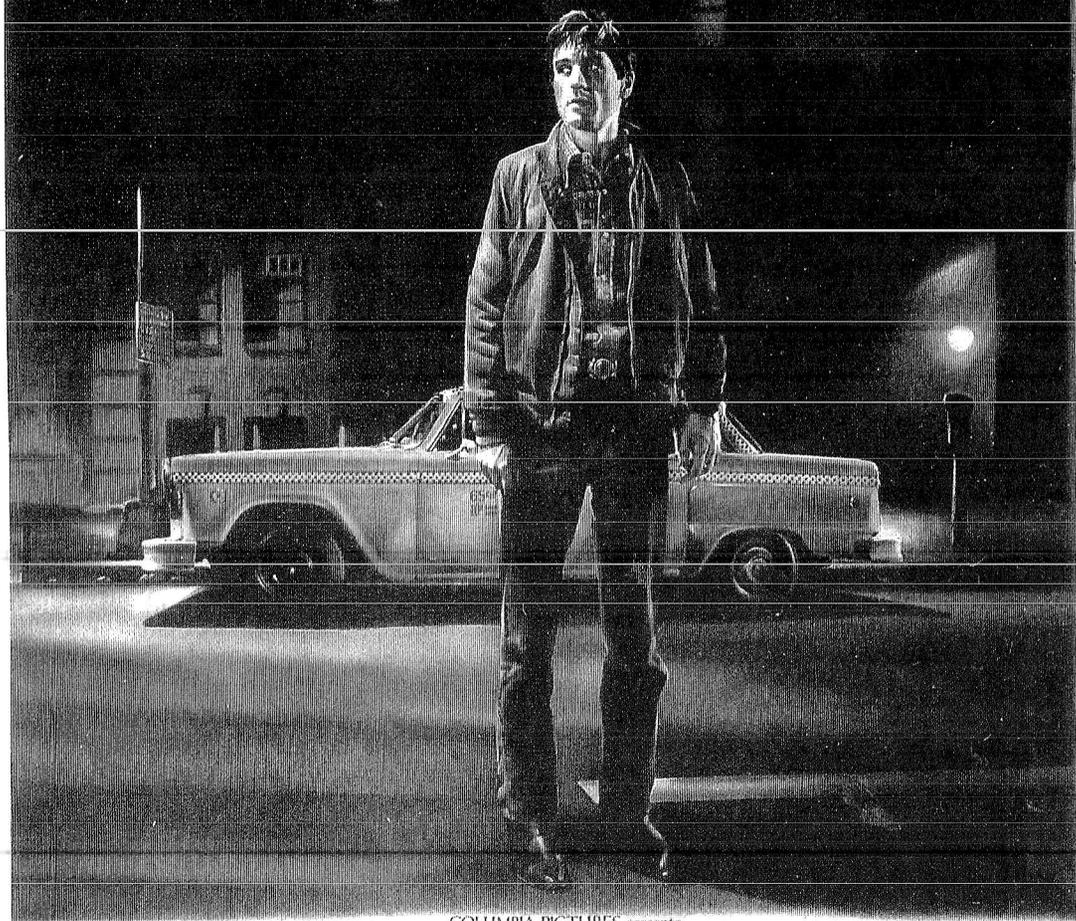


Robert De Niro worked as a cabbie for weeks to prepare for his role in *Taxi Driver*.



COLUMBIA PICTURES presents

ROBERT DE NIRO **TAXI DRIVER**

A BILL/PHILLIPS Production of a MARTIN SCORSESE Film

JODIE FOSTER ALBERT BROOKS as "Tom" HARVEY KEITEL

LEONARD HARRIS PETER BOYLE as "Wizard" and

CYBILL SHEPHERD as "Betsy"

DALL GOURA

BERNARD LIEBOWITZ

MICHAEL PHILLIPS



CHAPTER ONE

AN ACTOR'S TOOLBOX

When Robert De Niro, a famous Hollywood actor, lands a role in a new film, he doesn't just learn his lines and show up for rehearsals. He prepares for the part by doing whatever he can to experience the life his character has lived. In the movie *Taxi Driver*, for example, De Niro played Travis Bickle, a troubled combat veteran who makes a living driving a cab in the 1970s in New York City. The movie showcased De Niro's remarkable ability to create believable characters. To prepare for this role, he lost 35 pounds (16 kilograms), obtained a cab driver's license, and worked as a cab driver for several weeks in New York.

In response to an interviewer's questions about how he prepares for acting roles, he said, "Actors must expose themselves to the surroundings and keep their minds obsessed with that ... You've got to physically and mentally become that person you are portraying."

Of course, acting students in school or community theater programs are not expected to prepare for a role the way Robert De Niro and other professional actors do. Nevertheless, every role, whether for film or theater, requires preparation, and the whole purpose of this preparation is to make the character you're playing

as real and believable as possible—not just to the audience but to you, the actor.

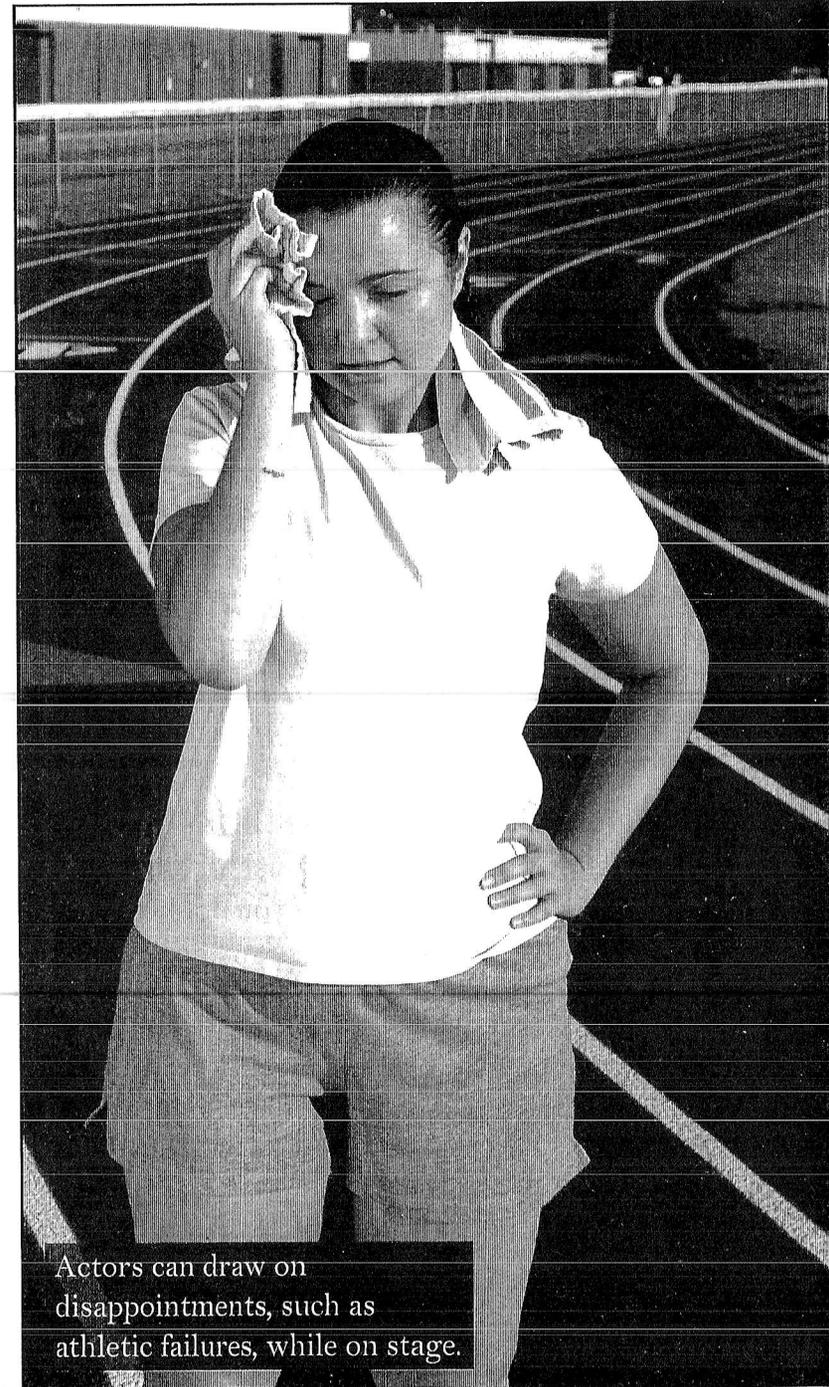
Have you ever thought about acting on the stage? If so, have you wondered what you need to do in order to become really good at it? Or maybe you've thought that acting is easy; anybody can do it. Like first-rate athletes, good actors can make what they do look effortless. But in fact, they've mastered their craft so thoroughly you don't see all the work that went into perfecting their performance. An effective onstage performance is the fruit of many hours of work, and this work has to do with practicing and refining the necessary skills—but always with one goal in mind: to develop a character that is true to the playwright's intentions and serves the overall direction, or point of view, of the play.

An actor's "toolbox" of skills involves much more than learning lines and knowing where and when to move on stage. The most basic acting skills include the following:

- Self-awareness
- Verbal and physical mastery
- Understanding the script
- Discipline and teamwork

Self-Awareness

Foremost among these skills is self-awareness. If beginning actors don't know themselves very well and aren't in touch with their own needs and



Actors can draw on disappointments, such as athletic failures, while on stage.

feelings, it will be difficult for them to identify with a character's needs and feelings and the purposes behind that character's behavior. Self-awareness is very important no matter what stage of development an actor has reached. And as people become more aware of the different sides of their personality, the more fully they are able to enter the life of a character who might at first seem too unfamiliar.

Suppose you have been cast as someone who is awkward in social situations, doesn't have many friends, and has a hard time expressing feelings. If you are outgoing, very sociable, and have an extroverted personality, you might decide you can't possibly play the part you've been given. However, if you do your "homework" by examining your life more closely, you might recall a time or a situation when you felt somewhat like your character.

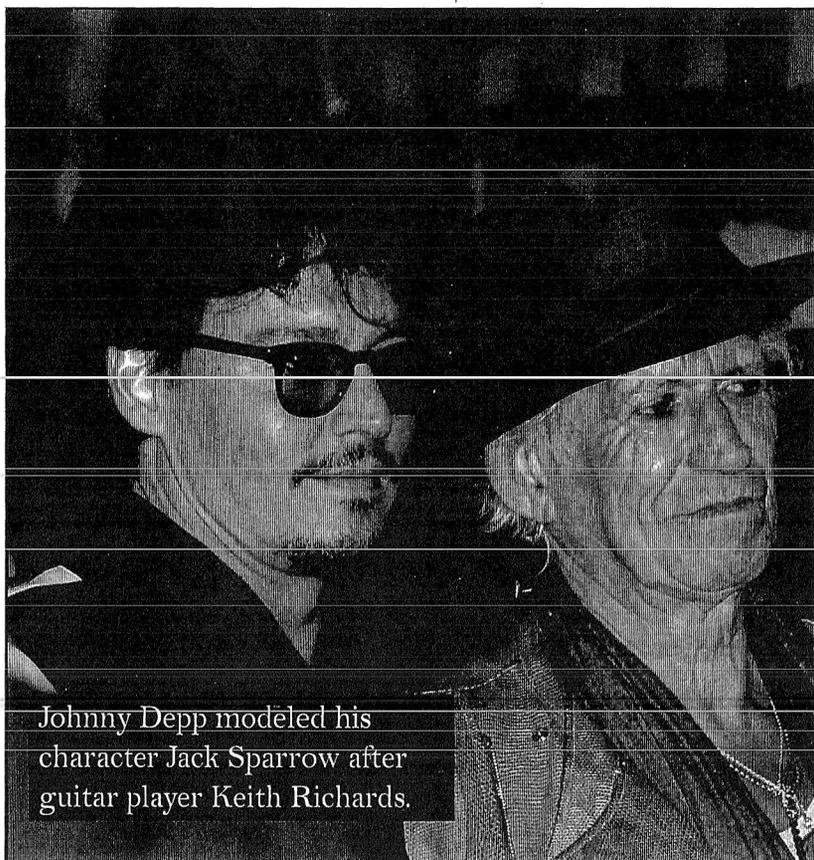
For example, maybe you tried out for one of your school's athletic teams. Suppose some of the other students at the tryout were exceptional athletes, and their prowess on the field made you doubt your abilities. When it was your turn to show the coach what you could do, maybe you lost your confidence and didn't perform as well as you could have. You could use this or similar personal experiences to help you identify with the character you're playing and bring the character's inner world to life in your performance.

Verbal and Physical Mastery

Like athletes, actors have to be in good shape or they won't be able to perform well on stage. While athletes get in shape through strenuous exercise—like running, lifting weights, or using cardio machines—actors focus on making their voice and body as expressive and supple as possible. Acting, like playing a sport, is a physical activity that can be exhausting, especially if the actor has not gotten into the condition needed to handle the demands of a live performance.

Of course, physical exercise benefits both the actor and the athlete by developing strength and endurance. But actors also have to acquire vocal mastery. One aspect of vocal mastery for actors is **projection**—the ability to use their voices effectively, without straining or injuring their vocal cords. Unless a theater has excellent **acoustics** or the actors are wearing microphones, they have to deliver their lines loudly enough to reach audience members who are farthest from the stage.

In addition to projection, actors also need to develop vocal flexibility and expressiveness in order to convincingly convey a character's particular accent or speech patterns, and whatever emotions are required. Think of Johnny Depp's performance as Captain Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. If you've seen the movie, then you may remember how his character had a very unique way of speaking and moving. Depp revealed that he "borrowed"



Johnny Depp modeled his character Jack Sparrow after guitar player Keith Richards.

the speech patterns and physical mannerisms of Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards to create the character of Jack Sparrow.

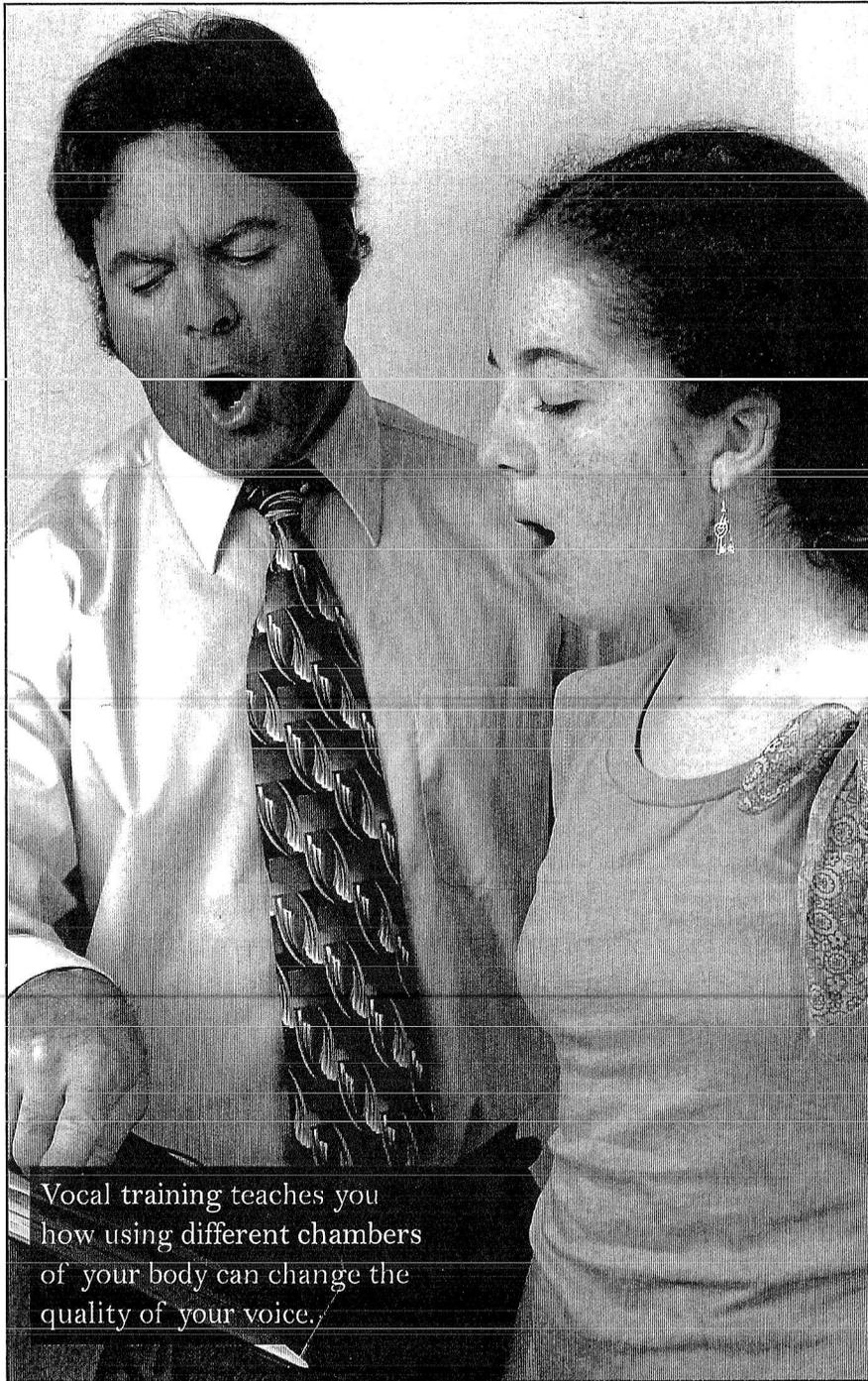
Becoming adept at using your voice to express your character's feelings and particular way of speaking also requires good **diction** and breath control. These skills, when practiced and honed, will help you achieve vocal mastery. The words and phrases we use to express our thoughts and feelings—and the way we say them out loud—are what constitute our diction. In a play, the playwright

has already decided how each character speaks. The choice of words reflects how the writer envisions the characters. As an actor, one of your major responsibilities is to bring these words to life, to make them come across to the audience as exactly right for each moment of the play or each scene in which your character appears.

Our voice tells others a great deal about who we are, our personality. In fact, the word “personality” derives from the ancient Greek word for “mask” and the translation of *per sona*, “through sound.” In your development as an actor, you will eventually discover how you can use your voice to express your character. But to do this, you will need to turn your voice into a flexible, responsive instrument capable of conveying a range of emotions.

In theater, effective vocal projection is not limited to speaking loudly enough for others to hear what you're saying; more importantly, it's about **articulation**—speaking clearly, so that others not only hear but understand what you're saying. Actors can improve their ability to articulate—that is, to pronounce words clearly and accurately—by understanding how spoken language is produced: what muscles and other parts of the body are involved in turning breath into speech.

There are numerous exercises that help actors improve the quality of their voices and their ability to project and creatively adjust tone, pitch, and tempo (how fast or slow the character speaks). The ultimate aim of these exercises is breath control. A trained actor understands and uses the natural unity



Vocal training teaches you how using different chambers of your body can change the quality of your voice.

of breath, voice, emotion, and movement to express character or, in other words, to breathe life into the person being portrayed.

In addition to vocal mastery, an actor needs to acquire physical mastery. Just as training and exercises will help transform the voice into a flexible and expressive instrument, proper training will do the same for the actor's body. Many theater programs emphasize fencing, gymnastics, and dancing as activities that will develop strength, coordination, flexibility, and responsiveness. These essential qualities enable the actor to "embody" the character in specific gestures and movements.



In stage combat, actors learn how to express their characters through the conflict.

Every person, or character, has a particular way of moving. Have you ever picked out someone you know in a crowd without seeing their face or even hearing their voice? Maybe it was the way they held their shoulders or tilted their head or swung their arms while walking. You identified the person at once from the smallest detail of their particular way of moving. As an actor explores a character, he or she might experiment with different ways of moving until finding one that really feels right. A young, free-spirited character will not move the same way as an older, world-weary character. Similarly, someone who lives in their own mind much of the time will move quite differently from someone who is more open hearted or heart centered. Student actors can experiment with moving from different centers of the body—head, heart, gut, or groin. Each center, when used as a point of focus by the actor, will yield ways of moving unique to that center.

But an actor's physical preparation doesn't stop with the exploration of moving from different centers of the body. The purpose of this and other forms of physical preparation is to create a believable character with their own unique way of doing things, from walking in or out of a room to picking up a cup, taking a coat from a guest, or handling a priceless object.

Understanding the Script

Text analysis is another key aspect of an actor's training. In practice, this means being able to read



Guys and Dolls requires a unified effort from a very large ensemble to succeed.

deeply into the play's script. An actor needs to understand what makes a character "tick," or in other words, what motivates them, what do they want—in the play as a whole and in each scene. However, the actor also needs to know how the character relates to the other characters in the play and why they relate that way. Text analysis doesn't stop there.

Beyond this basic understanding of the script, it's important for actors to study the time and place of the play. Is the play set in a contemporary location, like a neighborhood in New York City, or someplace in the past, like Venice in the sixteenth century? Whatever the play's setting, the actor's job is to do a certain amount of background research so that his or her performance is true to where and when the play takes place.

Compare the setting of *Ruined*, a play by Lynn Nottage, with *Spike Heels* by Theresa Rebeck. In *Ruined*, a businesswoman named Mama Nadi runs a bar in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during that country's brutal civil war. She employs young women who have been severely hurt by the war and protects them from the world outside. By contrast, *Spike Heels* is a comedy. The setting is Boston in the present, where the characters explore what it means to be a woman in today's world and how men are (or are not) adapting to the influence of **feminism**. Actors performing in either play have their work cut out for them; they need to understand how the setting, which includes time and place as well as significant social or cultural developments, affects the characters and their interactions.

Discipline and Teamwork

All of the acting skills discussed so far have little benefit without discipline, which is its own kind of skill. Discipline means working on the technical, or craft, elements of acting with as much regularity as you can build into your schedule. It means showing up on time for rehearsals, learning your lines in a timely manner, and respecting the director, fellow actors, the stage manager, and members of the technical crew. These include the lighting, sound, and set designers, and the prop master/mistress. Discipline also means respecting yourself and what you can contribute to the overall experience of producing a play. An actor is part of a team, and putting on a play is a team effort. While actors are not all equally talented or skilled, they are all equally responsible for the final result—the quality of the performance in front of an audience.