



Experiencing performing on stage can put you at ease when doing a presentation.

CHAPTER FIVE

APPLYING ACTING EXPERIENCE

Are you thinking about pursuing a career in acting? Do you sometimes fantasize about making it into the big time with your name in lights and adoring fans waiting in line for your autograph? If you're in high school, you might be considering majoring in theater arts in college to prepare you for an acting career. According to the journal *U.S. News & World Report* in 2012, "The riches and glamour of movie stars is not the reality of most college graduates with a drama and theater arts degree. Recent graduates can expect an average salary of \$26,000 and an unemployment rate of 7.8 percent. With experience, however, majors can boost their salary to \$45,000."

That's not very encouraging news, especially since the cost of living keeps going up, and many graduates are saddled with a huge bill for their college education. Even so, each year thousands of young people aspire to become actors and are willing to make the necessary sacrifices to make their dreams a reality. This could mean accepting a nonprofessional

job like waiting tables or doing temporary office work while auditioning for roles in plays, movies, commercials, or other types of media that employ actors. The sense of personal fulfillment that comes from following a career in the creative arts—whether acting, dancing, writing, or some other endeavor—can bring a deep sense of personal fulfillment that outweighs the risks and drawbacks.

But there's more to the story: Even if you don't want to become a professional actor, for whatever reason, the experience of working in the theater can give you a range of marketable skills. Marketable means you can transfer these skills to jobs in other fields that offer both financial and personal rewards. So let's look at some of these skills and occupations in which you could apply them.

Effective Communication

Salespeople, real estate agents, teachers, instructors and trainers, therapists, administrators, managers—these are a sample of the many career options in which effective communication skills are essential. Acting is all about communication, with the audience and with other performers. To perform her part well, an actor needs to develop her ability to speak clearly, with good diction, and to convey her character's emotions and purposes. An effective performance succeeds in connecting with the audience, so the people sitting out there in the darkened auditorium feel what the character is feeling and experience what she is going through in the course of the play.

An actor also learns how to memorize lines. This skill comes in very handy when preparing a sales pitch, getting ready to make a presentation in a meeting, or even when managing people.

Marketing, public relations, and advertising have changed dramatically with the reach of the internet. There are many more outlets for content than there were in the early 2000s. This content must be written, filmed, edited, coordinated, and in some cases, dramatized, all skills that can be learned while working on a theater production. Businesses must learn to tell their story; someone who has done some acting can help them do that.

Creative Problem Solving

Practically every occupation requires the ability to correctly identify problems and come up with possible solutions, including those that may not have occurred to anyone else. Albert Einstein, one of the world's greatest scientists, once said the following: "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend fifty-five minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions." His approach to most things in life was highly creative. In today's world, we might say he thought "outside of the box." That's what creative people do, and actors are nothing if not creative. They begin rehearsals with only the written words of their characters. And from these words, which a playwright has written, the actor creates a character that he brings to life on stage and in the hearts and minds of an audience.

A common assumption is that what artists do is creative, while people who work in other occupations aren't so lucky. Actually, creativity is a very important skill not only in the arts but in just about every field of human endeavor, including business, education, medicine, sports, and science. Creativity is especially valuable when it comes to solving problems, whether at home or in the workplace.

Creative problem solving involves sidestepping our routine, conventional way of looking at things and coming up with a brand new, maybe even radical solution to a problem. Careers in marketing, communications, advertising, design, and architecture, to name a few, all need creative people; people with acting experience are already one step ahead of the game when it comes to exercising creativity.



Theater prepares you to work on group projects.

LIFE AFTER THEATER

When she was a child, Allison Ford dreamed of becoming an actress. One day she would take Broadway by storm, and her career would zoom upward with no end in sight. For much of her childhood, Allison studied acting and performed in shows. Later on, she majored in theater arts at college and did so well that she was confident her dream was destined to come true.

Like so many other young people with stars in their eyes, Allison moved to New York City, the "place to be" for aspiring actors. She got an agent and began auditioning for both stage and on-camera work in TV and film. Her talent and acting experience enabled her to land roles in a variety of productions. But when she was only twenty-six, Allison decided to give up her lifelong dream and follow a different path—working as a professional writer. As of 2016, she was the senior writer on the digital team for Sephora cosmetics stores.

In her blog, allisonford.com, she reports that her short-lived acting career had a downside that made her wonder if acting was what she really wanted to do for the rest of her life. She attributes her decision to begin a new career to the internet, where she discovered it was possible to earn a living by writing, which she finds far more satisfying than acting. Thanks to her background in theater, she got her first writing job as a theater and film critic and has since become a successful writer and editor of creative nonfiction for women.

Teamwork

Actors are team players. They have to be. There's no room in the theater for actors who are only thinking of themselves. Cast members need to work together, or the show won't go on. Of course, conflicts and disagreements are bound to arise, and actors may occasionally give more attention to their egos than to the success of the play. But overall, putting on a play requires a high degree of teamwork.

And teamwork is very much a part of life in the world outside the theater. In many corporate settings, a top-down, hierarchical model of authority is no longer the norm. The new norm is to organize employees into project teams or management teams. Even a project manager is still part of the team and not an isolated overlord dictating from above.

Putting on a play also requires meeting deadlines. The show must go on. So taking part in theater teaches students to work under pressure and to get things done on time. These are valuable skills in the business world.

At one time, airline pilots were the highest authority in a chain of command. Other members of the flight crew were expected to defer to the pilot's judgment and follow his orders without question. But those days are disappearing like vapor trails in the sky. The new model depends a whole lot more on teamwork. Of course, the pilot (captain) is still in charge and remains responsible for what happens aboard the plane. But now, pilots (who include both men and women) perform their duties as part of a

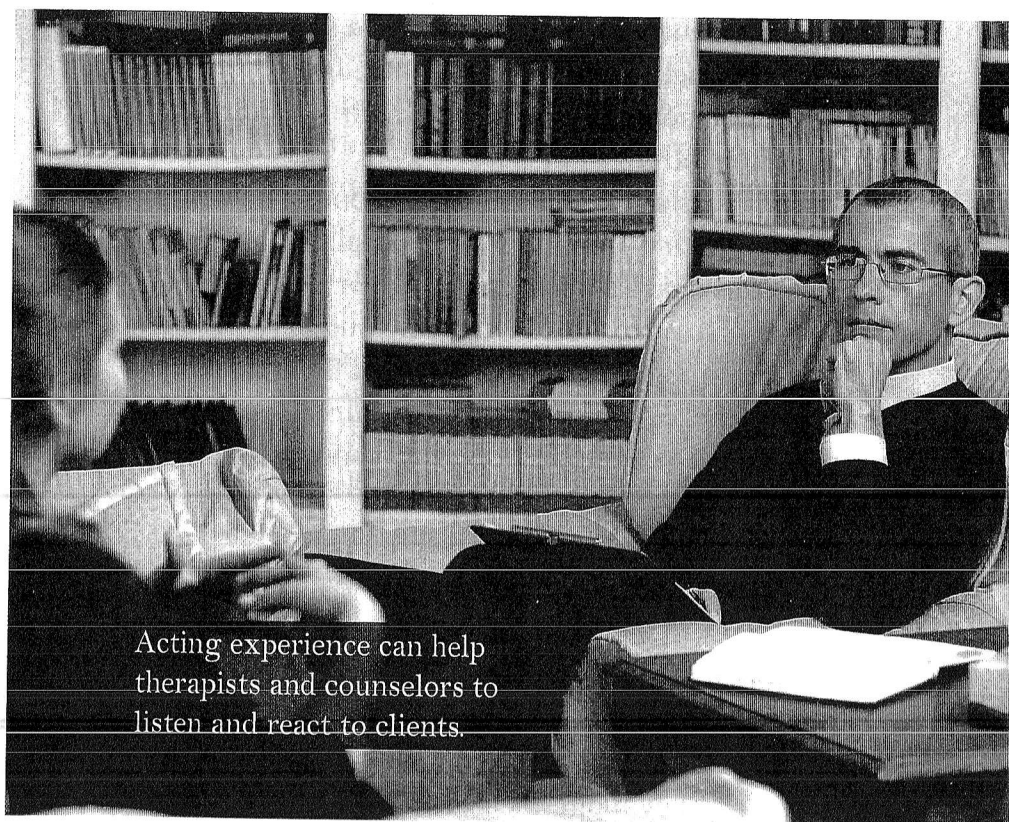
team. As recent scientific studies have shown, the flight crew, including the captain, needs to coordinate their actions and work closely with air traffic controllers and flight dispatchers.

Employers are seeking to hire people who can work well with others. A good team player also assumes his share of responsibility for the work being done. He also contributes ideas and suggestions and is open to constructive criticism. Sound familiar? If you have acting experience, then you've already had an opportunity to develop these very same skills.

Empathy, or Understanding Others

For actors to portray characters effectively, they have to be able to enter that fictional person's field of vision, to see the world through their eyes, and to have empathy for them. If they judge their character harshly or fail to make strong connections with the character's deepest needs, their portrayal will fall short of its mark and leave the audience unmoved. The ability to have empathy for others requires a degree of self-awareness. What this means for an actor is getting in touch with her own needs, feelings, desires, strengths, and weaknesses. Without this awareness, an actor will have a hard time relating to a character who is very different from himself or herself.

The ability to listen to and understand others is a skill. Actors have it (or need to develop it if they don't have it). Other occupations also need people with this skill. Psychologists, teachers, school



Acting experience can help therapists and counselors to listen and react to clients.

guidance counselors, social workers, ministers, and others following religious vocations are among the many occupations for which empathy is a necessary qualification.

Improvisation

According to legend, the eighteenth-century Scottish poet Robert Burns was plowing his field one day when the blade of his plow accidentally destroyed a mouse's nest. With the plow handle still in his hand (or so his brother claimed), Burns composed a poem as an apology to the mouse. A phrase in the

poem reads "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley." A popular interpretation is "Even the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." In other words, no matter how well we prepare for something, there's no telling what will happen or what will go wrong.

Bloopers during a play (or other types of live performances) are a great example of things going wrong. No matter how carefully the actors and the production crew have prepared, the unexpected can still take everybody by total surprise. A light cue is missed; part of the stage set collapses; the seat of an actor's pants rips open; the sound effect of a ringing phone goes off at the wrong moment; an actor forgets to enter during his next scene. You get the picture. Onstage, actors have to handle the unexpected, and this means being able to improvise—to come up, on the spot, in the heat of the moment, with a reasonable response to a situation they had no way of foreseeing. That's what it means to improvise.

Improvisation is a skill. When something goes awry on stage, actors who lack this skill are likely to become flustered, not knowing what to do. Here's an example of two actors who didn't let a blooper throw them off their game. Instead, they improvised, much to the audience's delight. During a performance of the Broadway musical comedy *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, one of the actors is supposed to shoot John Lithgow (former star of the hit television series *3rd Rock from the Sun*). But she doesn't have the prop gun! Oops!

Improvising, she points her index finger as if it were a gun and “shoots.” The audience hears the sound effect of a gunshot. Several seconds pass. Lithgow is still standing instead of falling dead. Then he goes offstage and returns with the missing gun, which he hands to his would-be killer. The audience bursts out laughing. The show continues. This brief improvisation was a smashing success.

In the workplace, with few exceptions, people are sure to encounter the unexpected, and when they do, it will be necessary to improvise. Closely related to the ability to improvise is flexibility, being able to adapt to change. When sudden changes and difficulties occur, a flexible person stays calm (ideally) and comes up with alternative strategies for handling problems. Say you are in a room with other vendors trying to win a contract, and the client changes the requirements for the job. Thinking quickly and coming up with solutions rather than panicking can bring in business. Employers will notice. Working in the theater can help you become more flexible while honing your ability to improvise.

Outside of the theater, you can apply these skills in any number of careers and occupations. Consider athletic coaches. They can never be absolutely sure their game plans will succeed, so they have to be ready to improvise. If a star player is injured on the field, the coach will have to substitute a different player on the spot. Or suppose the opposing team is pulling out all the stops and taking the lead. Whatever strategies had been developed off the field will need to be adapted or abandoned to avoid defeat.



Actor John Lithgow kept his cool when a mistake was made in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*.



Improvisation can prepare television journalists for any situation on camera.

Imagine you're working as a television journalist. Maybe you landed the job because working in a community theater had helped you fine-tune your communication and presentation skills. You are reporting live on a standoff between police and a gunman with hostages for a local news program. As you give your prepared update on the situation, gunfire breaks out a good distance behind you. The update is now old news and the cameras are on. You must improvise while simultaneously trying to find out what is going on.

In another scenario, you're a trial lawyer handling a big case. Your actor's training has come in handy: you know how to reach the witnesses, how to get across your client's story as effectively as you once pursued your characters' objectives onstage. But now, in the courtroom, the opposing legal team has filed an objection, and the judge agrees with them. Evidence gets thrown out. With little time to prepare, you need to change your strategy. You can do it, thanks in part to all the times you have improvised your lines during a performance, or dealt with missing props or unanticipated scene changes.

Improvisation doesn't just mean "winging it," although there are occasions when that's exactly what needs to happen. In a larger sense, the ability to improvise involves a willingness to change, to be fully open to new information or new ideas instead of clinging to whatever may have worked in the past. If you can do these things, chances are you'll find a home in the fast-changing environment of the modern workplace.