

## **“12 STEPS TO BECOME A PROFESSIONAL ACTOR”**

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When I went to Hollywood in 1977 I had never set foot on a television or film set, on a stage for that matter, in my life, except as a trumpet player. I had some confidence gained from the recognition I'd received for my musical skills, but I was naïve and unprepared for the realities of show business. I had no training, no experience, and no idea of how to get started.

I had a secret dream of becoming a “movie star”, as I thought of it then. Luckily I found some great teachers who gave me the guidance I needed, but like thousands of other hopefuls who descend on Los Angeles every year, I was still searching for my “big break” ten years later. I was almost ready to throw in the towel when I moved to Atlanta in 1989--but a spark of ambition still remained. Encouraged by actors, teachers, and agents here, I rekindled my dream and have never looked back.

For more than twenty years now I have enjoyed working as a professional on-camera and voice-over talent, as well as performing on stage in theatrical and corporate productions. I've learned a lot along the way, mostly from the mistakes I've made. What I'd like to share with you are 12 steps to becoming a pro—guidelines or reminders that I hope will help you to avoid the pitfalls along the way – common mistakes that many of us make, simply because we didn't know any better.

These are insights that I have gleaned from over 30 years of study and experience. Hopefully this information will smooth your journey on the road to success as a professional actor. I'm going to outline some things to *know*, ways to *be*, and suggest what you can *do* to become not only a better actor, but also a confident professional and successful person. With this information, you'll be more prepared for what you'll encounter on a professional set...

First, as in any journey, there are things you need to KNOW before you begin. In our classes at yourACT, we begin with an overview of how to understand and break down a script and some of the jargon and terminology unique to our business.

## **PART I: “*What do I need to know?*”**

Of course, there is no substitute for training, real-life experience, and finding what works for you—but there are some general tips that apply to anyone in our business—and it *is* a business.

Let’s say that you found an agent and you’ve been auditioning. Then you get a call-back—and *finally* you book your first acting job. Whew! And you thought *that* was the hard part—now you’ve got to deliver the goods!

Maybe it’s a commercial or perhaps a feature. So you find yourself on a professional set, probably one of the most intimidating and confusing places to be when you don’t know what’s going on.

We’ll begin our twelve steps with some things that you’ll need to know.

FIRST THINGS FIRST:

### **1. KNOW YOUR LINES AND THE STORY.**

It almost goes without saying, and yet I can’t tell you how many times I have seen actors show up at an audition (and I include myself here) without having their lines memorized. Of course in an audition you should keep the sides in your hand even if you know the lines, unless you’ve been told not to hold the script. It’s amazing how easily your lines can go out the window when you’re nervous.

On the set, it’s magnified. The adrenaline is pumping. You’re surrounded by unfamiliar people, equipment, and terminology (I’ll have more to say about these later), and it’s easy for your brains and your tongue to get scrambled.

Now imagine the hush that falls over the set as the camera begins to roll (a quiet like no other). All eyes focus on you. Thousands of dollars are being spent for each minute of filming. You open your mouth to speak...and *nothing* comes out! It’s the actor’s nightmare. And it’s happened to even the best, the most experienced actors. However, no one is going to care about that fact right then—they only care about getting the shot, as *you* should. If you get it right on the next take or the next, no harm done. But if you continue to forget your lines, well... It’s just too expensive for repeated mistakes that could have been avoided by simple preparation.

So do yourself a favor and rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. You can do this without your delivery sounding “canned” or phony. Try different ways of saying your lines to keep it fresh. When practicing at home, rehearse in as many different situations and

environments as possible—in the shower, while driving (be careful!), as you prepare dinner, walking, running, whatever—and always at performance level. Put them on a tape recorder and listen to them over and over. Record only the other person(s) lines, leaving time in between to say yours. Find what works for you. Sure, they may change your lines on you at the last minute. But it's still up to you to take the time (by yourself or with your scene partner) to speak your lines OUT LOUD. There's no substitute for getting used to hearing those words come out of your mouth at full volume.

One of the best ways to learn lines is, as Tony Barr points out in his book Acting For The Camera, to “learn the role—not the lines”. This *doesn't* mean you don't need to learn the words—just that your lines spring from knowing organically *who* you are as the character, your *relationship* to the other person(s), and *what you want*. Remember *where* and *when* this takes place.

Know what you're *doing* and *why*. Remember it's ACTING not EMOTING – use action VERBS to describe what you're doing rather than adjectives to describe what you're feeling. Emotions spring from going after your goal.

You'll find that the lines (and more importantly, what's *between* the lines) will be there. Remember too that the story will be shot in pieces and out of sequence. So you'll want to know how much your character knows and doesn't know about what is going on in the story at every point.

Even if you have a small part, it's a good idea to read the whole script or as much of it as you can get. It helps for you, the actor, to know how you fit into the story, what's happened, and what's going to happen, even if you, the character doesn't. If you “go up” you will know enough to ad lib, which might save the take, and may even end up being the take the director prefers! Just keep on rockin' until you hear “Cut!”

Also, let's say you're going to be on an episode of “Drop Dead Diva” or “The Walking Dead”. Knowing that these shows cast in our area, you should have been watching them to get a feel for their style and rhythm. The shows are very different genres, and so they have a different “feel”. You'll also have a better idea of what the director will likely want from you. Become familiar with the characters and the story line.

Of course, there is much more involved in acting for the camera than simply learning the basics of acting and knowing your lines. You also need to know the special demands that on-camera acting requires—which brings us to step two:

## **2. KNOW CAMERA TECHNIQUE.**

A stage actor can sometimes afford to learn his or her skill during the course of rehearsals and while performing on stage. Doing school plays, community theatre, and other productions in forgiving situations and venues is a great way to learn without risking your career. However, don't wait until you're on a professional set to learn on-camera acting. It's too costly, there's too much pressure on you (and on everyone else involved—people's careers sometimes depend on your performance), and that kind of learning is certainly not *fun*.

Every other profession has detailed training required before you enter the work force—why should acting be any different? While the basics of acting are essentially the same in theatre as they are for the camera, there are also distinct differences. And you need to know what those differences are so you can feel as confident in front of a camera as you are on stage.

You can learn much by reading books on the subject (do an Internet search—there are some good ones). You need to know how to hit “marks” so you'll be properly positioned, lit and in focus. You need to know about camera coverage, the different types of shots, framing, what the different folks on the crew do, how a film is edited and how that affects you as far as matching and continuity. If you don't understand all this, you can see that you also need to know the “language” of filmmaking. It's a complex process.

But like any knowledge, the techniques must also be practiced. Practice in a safe environment like a good on-camera class until it becomes second nature. You must bring the same discipline and dedication to learning camera technique that you would when learning how to reach an audience—maybe even more. The camera is your audience of one. The technical demands placed on your performance are numerous and difficult, and must be mastered.

As a professional you need to know what you're doing so that you can feel comfortable and relaxed. That is your best defense against panic and stage fright, the marks of the amateur. If you're going to “never let 'em see you sweat” it helps to have the confidence that only comes from experience. So get good training and get going!

## **3. KNOW SET ETIQUETTE.**

One thing that will set you apart as a pro is behaving like one—knowing what to do and what *not* to do on the set. For example, you need to know to check in with the 1<sup>st</sup>

Assistant Director (or the 2<sup>nd</sup> A.D. if you're an extra) when you arrive on set. If you need to leave your trailer or the set for any reason, even temporarily, you let them know so they're not searching all over for you when it's time to shoot.

Have your photo ID, Social Security card, agent's address and phone, and all other info with you. Know your rate but don't discuss your salary with anyone! Sit with the other actors at meals, allowing the director & crew to handle business they may need to handle. Never ask stars for autographs or photos!! No gossiping or complaining. Don't offer your opinion about the production, good or bad. It's also good ideas to steer clear of discussing hot topics such as politics or religion. I learned that one the hard way and ended up without any pictures from a movie I worked on for a week, just because I couldn't keep my opinions to myself.

It's important that you act like a pro on the set. Remember it's a business, and every business has its rules and codes of conduct. Knowing how to act involves more than just knowing how to act...if you know what I mean. So have fun, be creative, but know what's appropriate and what's not.

#### **4. KNOW THE BUSINESS.**

Yes, this *is* a business, and you need to know your job and do your job. That starts with using good judgment when looking for professional training and representation. Use care when checking out teachers, schools, and agencies to make sure these are legitimate. There are plenty of scams out there more than happy to take your money. Be cautious and use common sense. There are a lot of people who want to be actors, so anything that seems too easy or promises too much is probably suspect. Call the Screen Actors Guild or the Better Business Bureau if you're not sure. Check it out. See if the school offers a free audit so you can experience a class first-hand to see if it's a good fit for *you*.

Once you have representation, another part of knowing the business of acting is working effectively with your agent. Don't waste your energy complaining about how your agent doesn't do enough for you. *Become a pro* and your agent won't be able to do enough for you. And don't rely on them to get you work. There are many ways for you to market yourself—too numerous to go into here. Approach all aspects of your role as an actor as if you were self-employed in your own business—because you *are*.

You should approach your career like any other business. There *are* some things that make show business unique, but for the most part the powers-that-be in our industry value the same qualities in performers as those in other fields do—character traits like preparedness, politeness, and perseverance.

Actors usually *are* granted more freedom to be themselves. After all, you are your product. But that also means you have to *sell* yourself. People have to like you and be able to trust you. You have to be likeable and it helps if you like other people too!

There are many, many other things to learn about the business of acting. I won't go into them here. But one thing to keep in mind is that there *is* life outside “the business”. Don't be one of those actors who talks of nothing else besides themselves, acting, or the entertainment industry. It's understandable but it's boring. It comes from insecurity and the obsession of always looking for the next job. So develop other interests and find other goals in the greater world outside our make-believe world. Keep things in perspective. Cultivate friendships with people from all walks of life. Not only will it make you a better person, it will also make you a better actor! And the next time a casting director asks you to “tell me about yourself”—you'll have something to say that they can't already read on your resume'.

OK, so let's look at that first day on the set...

## **PART II: “*What makes an actor a pro?*”**

### **5. BE ON TIME.**

If you can't be on time...*be early*. Nothing sends a worse message than having a reputation for always showing up late. You will soon find that no one wants to work with you. Make sure you arrive on the set with plenty of time to spare, rested and ready to work. When you see just how hard everyone on the crew works, when you see the pride and professionalism that everyone puts into their duties—from wardrobe & makeup to grips, cameramen, DP's, and directors—how can you in good conscience bring anything less to the table? And that begins with being on time.

Arriving late, hurried, or ill prepared to do your job says that you just don't care—and believe me, the director, producer, and everyone else involved will not forget. ***Being late is the cardinal sin on any set.***

This applies to auditions too. If you arrive late for your audition, that tells them you are likely to be the same way on the set, and they can't afford to take the chance, regardless of how talented or how right for the part you may be.

So make sure your car is working and any wardrobe you have been asked to bring is ready the night BEFORE the audition or the shoot. Get up a little earlier, allow time for unforeseen delays like traffic, and then enjoy some minutes of relaxation after you get there early. (But no more than 15 minutes before your call time for an audition! Go

somewhere nearby where you can relax, rather than crowd the waiting area with yet another body.) Rehearse your lines. Have a cup of coffee (not too much—makes you jittery and sweaty) and prepare yourself mentally and emotionally for the audition or your day ahead.

## **6. BE POSITIVE, OPEN, HONEST, AND GIVING.**

I won't belabor the point, but a good attitude and cheerful disposition, a willingness to learn, truthfulness, and a giving nature are some of the most important qualities for an actor to develop. These are critical factors in being a pro and vital to your career.

People like nice people. They like working with someone they can trust, someone who is fun to be around without having to be the center of attention or feeling that it's their job to keep the crew entertained. Be upbeat, open to suggestions (*especially* the director's, and *only* the director's where your performance is concerned), and if you don't know something, just ask. Don't worry; they'll be aware of your level of experience anyway, so don't pretend you know more than you do or that you're someone you're not.

Having a hidden agenda, talking down other people, or trying to upstage other actors on camera is unprofessional and unnecessary. You'll find the more you give, the more your fellow actors and crew will respond in kind. Don't be demanding of anyone but yourself—and always demand the best from number one.

It's important to remember that you *are* number one in your own book. You have to be on your own side. Sometimes things can get pretty tense on a set if things go wrong or fall behind schedule. Maybe it seems that the client always looks at you with a sour expression as he whispers to the director. That's the time when you really need to be your own best friend. Don't let it get to you. Give yourself a pep talk. Take a few deep breaths. Often we take things personally when that sour expression may just be a case of indigestion. So lighten up and relax.

## **7. BE AWARE.**

There is a lot of activity on a film set. Stay aware and pay attention. Listen. Stay out of the crew's way while they're setting up the shot. Much of the time on the set will be taken up with setting lights and dealing with the camera dolly & tracks, etc. Watch that you don't trip over the myriad cables lying around. Listen to everything that is going on, and pay special attention to anything the director may offer.

Don't talk excessively, move off your mark, or look away from your "eye line" while lights are being set. Use this time to rehearse your lines and prepare yourself for the scene about to be shot.

You also need to be aware of what your job is as an actor and what is not. Sometimes in trying to be helpful, you may overstep your bounds and find that you are doing someone else's job. For example, if the director asks for a chair to be moved closer to you—that is the job of the prop person, not you. Should you move the chair as a favor, because you may happen to be closer? No! Unlike some theatre productions, where everyone may pitch in to get the job done, each person on the set has a very specific job, and for good reason.

What happens if you injure yourself moving the chair and can't continue the shoot? As callous as it may sound, the reality is that you can't be replaced as easily as the prop person. All of your scenes would have to be shot again—a very expensive delay. Be helpful, courteous, and considerate—but concentrate on doing *your* job and let the crew do theirs. They'll appreciate it. You'll make them look good if you're performing your role to the best of your ability. *That's* your job.

Also, be sensitive to everyone's needs and moods. Someone may be dealing with a personal matter that is interfering with their ability to be as friendly as you might like them to be. Be understanding. We never know what's going on inside of others. Don't try to play psychic.

Be aware when you're not preparing to shoot of what the director and the crew are doing. Learn as much as you can about the process of filmmaking and each person's role in it. Then you'll have a better understanding of how you fit into the big picture.

If you do all of these things, you will be appreciated, and you'll be perceived as a pro. And what's more—you'll be remembered and probably rehired!

## **8. BE YOURSELF.**

Being an actor in a glamorous production is heady stuff. Don't go on an ego trip. There are going to be a lot of people paying attention to you and catering to your every need. You are the reason everyone is there—they want you to succeed. It's great! Don't abuse it. Don't treat anyone on the set as if they were less than you in any way, including extras, stand-ins, production assistants, and especially the hard-working members of the crew. They are professionals too. And if they're not acting like it, remember it's not your job to draw attention to the fact that their behavior is unacceptable.

Try to relax and enjoy the experience. Let them see who you really are—that’s what got you the job in the first place. Whatever it is that makes you unique, what makes you YOU, just let that speak for you. The rest will take care of itself.

So now you’ve got more insight into what you need to know to be a pro. The moment of truth has arrived. The cameras are ready to roll. No matter how experienced you are, you’re going to be somewhat nervous. If this is your first time, you’ll probably be *really* nervous. It helps to know what to expect—and what’s expected of you.

### **PART III: “*Now what do I do?*”**

#### **9. DO WHAT YOU’RE TOLD, WHETHER IT FEELS RIGHT OR NOT.**

When the director calls “ACTION!” the real fun begins. You may finish your scene thinking that you did everything exactly the way you wanted to, and be very surprised when the director does his job and gives you direction or an adjustment. Now is the time to listen very closely. This is where the pros are separated from the wannabes.

When the director tells you to say a line a certain way, hold a prop in a particular manner, cheat your look in another direction, or anything else—DO IT! Trust the director. What looks right on camera may feel very unnatural, forced, awkward, or just plain wrong to you. That doesn’t make it wrong. Make the change and do it again.

*Don’t argue!* It wastes everyone’s time & energy, creates bad feelings on the set, and shows everyone that you don’t understand what it means to be part of the team. Don’t be a diva. Know your part, do your part...*just do it*. It is your job to determine what motivation you can use to justify the action. Find a simple, quick, and effective way to do the action or say the dialogue the way the director wants.

Speaking of motivation, you may notice that a film set is often far less emotional than you may be used to in the theatre. Professionals don’t always get all emotional about getting a job done, but they are still highly passionate and motivated about their work. The attention to detail and perfectionism displayed by these individuals is often astounding. They are driven by a desire for excellence, wanting to do their jobs well and expecting you to do the same. Unlike the theatre, the work is not over when the curtain comes down, it is preserved on film or tape for years to come.

## 10. TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS & TAKE RISKS.

At this point, I may have scared some of you to death—thinking that one false move on your part and “you’ll never work in this town again...” There is certainly room for error. And fortunately, Atlanta is somewhat more forgiving in this respect than Hollywood. Still, you need to be as prepared and professional as possible. We are fast becoming the kind of market where we are expected to be every bit as talented, creative, and professional as the best actors in L.A.

You are expected to take risks, to be bold, to have the courage to venture into areas of the psyche that may be unfamiliar and frightening. That is also part of your job. When it comes to your performance, you can’t afford to hold back.

Commit yourself to the character 100%. No, make that 110%. It’s that extra miles, that extra 10% effort, that moment when you try something different or maybe even a little bit strange, that separates the great actors from the merely good. (By the way, the time to do your experimenting is in the *master shot*, not during the *coverage*, something you’ll learn in a good on-camera class.) No one succeeds in our business playing it safe. If the director doesn’t like it—he or she will tell you. Change, adapt, and move on. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as they say. “No Fear” is a good motto for actors or better yet—“In Spite of Fear”.

## 11. PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.

You will never be a perfect actor. Why would you want to be? The constant struggle to become better is half the fun. But whether it is character development, auditioning, scene study, camera technique, memorization skills, or letting go of inhibitions—the only way to improve is through practice and more practice.

Take every opportunity to hone your skills. Acting is not learned by reading, talking, or listening to a lecture—it is learned by DOING. And doing produces the ability to do more and better. You’ve chosen an occupation that is competitive and difficult—it’s a lifelong learning process and you’ll never come to the end. You’ll never “graduate”. Enjoy the journey.

## 12. DO YOUR BEST.

It sounds corny, but the old adage, “anything worth *doing* is worth doing *well*” applies to all facets of show business, especially so to actors. Allow yourself the errors of growth and embrace the possibility of change. Commit yourself to your career as you would to your performance. Do whatever it takes to get the job done, and to do it well, as many “takes” as it takes.

We live in a world of celebrity worship and the quest for fame. One thing I have learned on my journey is that my dream is not really to be a “movie star”. If that happens, fine. But I have found much more satisfaction simply knowing I’m good at what I do, being professional in my dealings with others, and doing my part as well as I can. My wish for you would be that the desire for glamour or power or riches be replaced by the drive to do the best work you can do, to become a pro. Seeing your name in lights or your face on the silver screen is still a great dream—now all you have to do is connect that dream to reality.

Acting is tough. All too often the person who wants to work in TV, film, commercials, and video thinks it’s going to be easy. It’s not. But it’s also challenging, rewarding, and a lot of fun. And it’s worth it—in more ways than one--

I can think of at least 12...