

THE  
WORK  
OF AN  
ACTOR

MICHAEL WOOLSON *On Technique*

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# INTRO

*Sharing your gift.*

There is a lot of debate on what makes for a great acting career. Some think it's about a look or a magical *it* factor. Although that may be an element when it comes to getting a job, I don't believe it's the secret to a long-term career. Others say it's luck, or being at the right place at the right time. That can definitely play a part as well, but what happens if an actor isn't prepared when that amazing opportunity comes along? I can think of too many situations where people threw away their careers or disappeared after their "big break." Natural ability – which is often over-emphasized or used as a crutch – plays a small part in being a good actor. To be a great actor, however, takes tremendous effort.

When talking about a great acting career, I am talking about the people who stay on top, doing projects with integrity that inspire people; the ones who find deep connections to the characters they play, who make real contributions, and who seem to grow with every new endeavor. These people are truly rare.

You may or may not find this hard to believe, but most people who want to be actors don't really want to be actors, they want to be celebrities. They pose as actors because they dream of the attention it might give them. Most of these people don't stick around for very long and those that do are rarely happy. I learned early on that if I continued to feed my own narcissistic desires and need for approval

instead of building a good relationship with myself, I would never find joy in my work.

Meryl Streep said, “So much of acting is vanity, but the real thing that makes me feel so good is when I know I’ve said something for a soul. I’ve presented a soul.” When you are excited about great stories, creating characters and having an honest human experience outside of your own, you can genuinely call yourself an actor. To have a sense of value and a feeling of being in possession of a true gift though, you must have to have a good relationship with yourself and your work.

Although I strongly believe in the technique I teach, I don’t believe there is only one way. I think most actors take from multiple sources and develop their own technique over time anyway. I myself was inspired by the work of Stella Adler, Larry Moss, Uta Hagen and many others. I encourage you to devour this book and take from it what works for you. It can also be a resource to go back to when you feel the need for ideas or information for a particular role. No matter what level you’re at in your career, my biggest hope is that this book will inspire you to get excited about your potential as an artist and as a person.

I’m aware that there are some who are hesitant about using technique because they think it will make them mechanical or inauthentic. Don’t think for a second, that I want you to act from a place of intellect. The tools in this book exist for one purpose only: to get you emotionally fired up so you can give dynamic, memorable, in-the-moment performances. It doesn’t help to do this homework mentally if it doesn’t bring you real emotions. You must never *act* a character but instead use these techniques as a means to deepen your work and eventually free yourself. Technique is a safety net when natural ability is just not enough or when the circumstances on the set are less than ideal. Shooting out of sequence is common for film and television, and the distractions are often enough to throw off even the most seasoned players.

There is also quite a lot of debate about whether real life experience or imagination is better when building background, inner imagery, and emotional work. There are coaches out there that are going to tell you to use only your real life and others that preach



imagination. The truth is that every actor is different in what works best for him or her, so I use both methods in my coaching. There are fewer limitations that way. Your job is to delve into them both and find out what works best for you.

Above all, enjoy yourself. Find a platform to do what you love everyday and do it! Expanding your technique will often bring the passion back to your work and remind you why you became an actor in the first place. Great acting is about truth, connection and collaboration. It's about creating characters for the joy of the process. Take your work seriously but not yourself. People that happily give what they love are intoxicating to be around. So, get off your ass, embrace all you have yet to learn or master, face your limitations, find a coach who tells you the truth, and do what you came here to do. You have something unique to offer, so share it!

# 1

## WORK ETHIC

*The secret behind all great success.*

If someone told you that the amount of time you spend working on your acting is directly proportional to the quality of your career, would you invest more time in it? Think about people in other professions who are at the top of their game and look at how much time they spend doing what they do. Compare that to the amount of effort most actors expend in order to be good enough to be at the top. Do they spend as much time on their acting as agents do at their desks? How about sales reps? Stockbrokers?

Michael Phelps won eight gold medals in the 2008 Olympics – the most ever won by an individual in single Olympic Games – largely because he has a relentless work ethic. When training, he swims for hours a day, every day of the year, including Christmas. Tiger Woods played fifteen years of golf before he became the youngest winner of the Amateur Championship. It's widely known that even after winning several world championships, he redeveloped

his swing twice because that's what it took for him to keep improving. The very same principal applies to actors. Too many think they can avoid hard work and still have a chance to play great roles with the best. It just doesn't happen. People at the top of their game don't want to work with people who don't put in the effort; they want to work with people on their level. I'm not much of a sports guy, but I know enough to realize that Serena Williams probably wouldn't want to play tennis with me. Well, maybe a pity round.

There's a lot of talk about self-confidence in show business but I don't think people fully understand what it is. Confidence is merely the feeling that you can rely on something or someone which, in the case of self-confidence, is yourself. Where does true self-confidence come from? From doing the things you say you're going to do, finishing things you start, and having real skills. Don't just talk about projects; dive in. Even when you don't have auditions or acting work, spend time on great material in a class or on your own. Doing so will reaffirm that you are a creative person first and foremost.

The problem is that most actors are in fantasy. They think they can rely on their looks, charm, or natural talent. No matter how many of these traits you have, you will inevitably come across a character that will be out of your reach and the role will go to someone whose ability has surpassed yours. Despite the smoke that's blown in this business, the artists who are dedicated to working on themselves and their craft and who make real contributions are the ones who often have long, successful careers. So let's get out of fantasyland.

If any of the following sentences describe you, you may be in fantasy:

- You're not working daily on your personal and professional weaknesses. For instance, some actors may be able to express anger, but not vulnerability. Others are physically weak, have timid voices, or lack real technique.
- You don't have a platform to do the work – class, auditions, plays, a show, a film, etc.
- You spend less than two hours a day working on your craft.

- You don't finish the projects you start.
- You talk about your dreams of being an actor and don't back them up with actions.

So, how'd you do? Are you in a dream world? Maybe a little? Regardless, I think many actors are confused about what they can do each day to be productive and work on their potential as an artist. Reading this book is definitely a step in the right direction, but there are many other actions you can take to be proactive. Below is a list of ideas. Please understand that I'm not suggesting that you do all of these things now. It would be overwhelming and counter-productive to attempt them all at once. For the time being, just choose a couple that excite you and take simple actions to put them into motion.

- Work daily on your acting weaknesses. If you don't know what they are, find a class or professional situation that will expose them.
- Finish what you've started. Make a list and follow through.
- Make acting goals and be proactive about keeping them.
- Create situations that will challenge you and then show up for them prepared, on time, and passionate.
- Take a physical workshop like Alexander Technique. If you need to work on having physical strength, try kickboxing. If you're stiff or uptight, a hip-hop class might be the way to go.
- Write a script (short film, feature, or play).
- Produce or direct a play that you're passionate about.
- Get a camera and make a short with your friends.
- Read acting books that interest and inspire you.
- Block out a time each week to get together with fellow actors and read/present material that interests you.
- Sign up for an acting class and work on scenes as much as possible.

- Work on an accent that suits you and could be useful for future roles.
- If you're not going out on auditions enough, submit yourself for projects through *Back Stage*, *Actors Access*, and other reputable resources.
- Create a plan with a life coach or someone who will give you clear actions to take and hold you accountable to them.
- Take a voice class so you can vocally handle projecting, yelling, and highly emotional scenes.
- Raise your level of emotional intelligence by taking a psychology class or something similar.
- Improve your state of mind with self-help books, affirmations, meditation, yoga, etc.
- Improve your physical health and lower your stress level by working out and learning about holistic nutrition.
- Further reduce your stress by cultivating a spiritual practice that works for you.
- Learn a new skill that is challenging for you like singing, rock-climbing, a new language, painting, playing guitar, etc.
- Take an alternative type of acting class like improvisation, Shakespeare, or clown to gain a new perspective and challenge yourself in unexpected ways.

Do this exercise:

- Think of a career goal you really want.
  - What new skill could move you closer to it?
  - What class could you take?
  - What person could you model your actions after?

- What is one form of self-sabotage that interferes with your goal?
  - Make the decision to eliminate that sabotaging behavior and put a new thought process or action in its place. If your goal is to make a short film and you sabotage it by watching too much TV, make the decision to grab something to write with whenever you feel the need to grab the remote.
- Commit to an amount of time each day to focus on new strategies for reaching your goal.
- Hire a life coach or meet with a mentor to help you brainstorm new tasks that you must do each week. Make sure the person is supportive and holds you to your word.

Despite this list of suggestions, it's important to note that sometimes life shouldn't be entirely task-oriented. Occasionally, just being an engaged observer and watching people in a café, attending a concert or simply living your life can help make you a better actor. Just remember to breathe and enjoy your process, whatever that may be.

## ***Resistance***

Once you've committed to doing the work, you need to be prepared to battle the biggest villain of work ethic and passion: *Resistance*. It can come from many places and manifest itself in various forms. It has the ability to take you down and crush your dreams unless you expose and face it day in and day out. Steven Pressfield says in his book *The War Of Art*, "Most of us have two lives. The life we live, and the unlived life within us. Between the two stands *Resistance*." Without it, everyone would have everything they desire. It is a real force that keeps people from doing the things they know they need to do.

As a young actor, I struggled greatly with *Resistance*. Many of the friends I chose were often more competitive than supportive, they convinced me to do things I wouldn't normally do and involved me in

situations I didn't care for. My *Resistance* picked those friends. I also made bad choices with food, exhausting myself with sugar binges and losing the focus I needed. My *Resistance* made those choices. It even lured me into romantic relationships that distracted me from discovering my blind spots as an actor. I went from one relationship to the next, addicted to that feeling of being loved or validated and, once again, avoiding the things I needed to be doing.

*Resistance* has even affected me while writing this book. It told me I shouldn't do it, whispering in my head, "You're a teacher, not a writer. Why not just take a vacation instead? How can you possibly say something that hasn't already been said about acting? Are you really old enough to be a purveyor of wisdom? Why not write a book later when you have more time?" In the end, the thing that finally made me begin this project was the realization that not writing it was making me unhappy. Now I feel joy and great satisfaction with the process, and that's reason enough to continue. We are so fortunate as artists. It's one of the few jobs that allows and prompts you to better yourself as you better your career.

Expose your own *Resistance*. It can take the following forms. Check any that apply to you:

- Drugs of any sort.
- Laziness or complacency – not working on your weaknesses everyday. I like to think of laziness as disguised fear.
- Mindless activities like bad TV shows, surfing the net, or anything else that zaps time.
- Unhealthy relationships. Some will cause you to lose yourself to the point of giving up your dreams. It becomes easy to avoid your own dreams when you're busy helping others with theirs. Other relationships may be destructive, unsupportive, or negative. Get away from these people. You may think you'll have fun or be able to save them, but it's far more likely that they will take you down with them.

- Over-working. Yes, it's possible to over-work. If you are someone who does, make sure to take breaks and cultivate other areas of your life.
- Staying in limbo on decisions that need to be made. Just pull the trigger and move forward.
- Going to bars, parties, or clubs too much.
- Speaking negatively about the industry. "I hate this business," "I was the best actor but they went with a name," "Casting people are all the same," etc.
- Disorganization – not having a space or desk for business. Your acting career is (Your Name), Inc. Would you hire a company that didn't have their shit together if there were millions of dollars on the line? Keep your environment in order – that means your work area as well as your living space. Staying organized sends a positive message to yourself and others.
- Avoidance. Face your fears and enjoy the rewards.
- Emotional problems you don't address. These spill into every area of your life whether you realize it or not.
- Spending time gossiping about or judging others.
- Being a victim. Remember that there are successful people who were older than you, less attractive than you, poorer than you, had fewer connections than you, or who had more hang-ups than you, and yet they still became successful. The only thing that is guaranteed to stop your success is victimhood. "Poor me" is deadly.
- Self-Abuse – hurting yourself physically. Thinking or telling others how you will never be good enough.
- Denial. If you're in denial, take off the blindfold today.

The bottom line is that the roles you're able to play are determined by your personal limitations and your willingness to work on the areas that are uncomfortable but necessary for taking the next step. So be honest with yourself about your limitations or find



someone who will tell you the truth. That means admitting things that may be painful, but doing so will allow you to move forward. **Remember, life problems are acting problems.** I encounter people everyday who deny their weaknesses, and as a result, they stay in the same place. Then there are those who admit their weaknesses but make no effort to move forward. **Always remember that those who argue their limitations get to keep them.**

So, maybe you have too much fear, or passivity problems, or you're struggling with an addiction of some sort. Whatever your weaknesses may be, finding and facing them will bring you new freedom. This business can be extremely difficult and frustrating. As an actor, you'll be talked about both negatively and positively and you can't let either of those stop you from fulfilling your potential. If you overreact to criticism or let praise go to your head, you're putting your career in the hands of others.

So, what are you waiting for? Make your own success. Do what you can do to make personal and professional improvements so that when the opportunity presents itself, you'll be ready. **If you put in the time and find a platform to do what you love, the world will conspire to give you what you want.** *Resistance* is real. *Getting off your ass* is the answer to most peoples' problems. Just remember to reward yourself for a job well done.

## **Reward**

None of the work in life is worth it without reward and celebration, which is why I tell my students, no matter how small the accomplishment, "Reward yourself." When someone has a breakthrough in class, I say, "Buy yourself a cookie." Why? Well, one of my favorite things in life is sitting down with my chocolate chip, chocolate-dipped, fruit juice-sweetened – because I'm hypoglycemic – cookie from the bakery around the corner. The truth is that any cookie will do, but those are heaven for me. They put me

right back in my grandma's kitchen, when a cookie made me feel like the luckiest kid in the world.

So here's my question for you: what's your cookie? How do you reward yourself for a job well done in a way that isn't a form of sabotage? Going on a hike? Buying some new music? A movie date with a close friend? Whatever it is, it's your cookie and it will keep you going when times get tough or when you need to cope with the struggles that come with being an actor of any level. Treating yourself is a great way to avoid becoming bitter and angry. The last thing you want is to allow those kinds of emotions to spread into your relationships and career.

Casting – and anyone for that matter – can sense anger and desperation the minute it walks into a room. I define a desperate actor as the individual who walks in hoping the powers-that-be will give him a life by giving him the job. Instead, I encourage actors to come into castings with a full life and a passion to share their creativity – I'll talk about this more in the chapter **HAVING A BALANCED LIFE**.

Yes, auditions should be important, but when they become everything going on in your life, you're in trouble. Remember that even if you're rejected after putting yourself out there, your bravery deserves a reward. Take pride in your efforts and most importantly, have a sense of humor about it all. **Always remember that artists who happily express themselves and give what they love are intoxicating to be around.**