Acting for Animators
A Complete Guide to Performance Animation

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Foreword by Brad Bird
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HEINEMANN
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For Ken Bielenberg, who first asked me,
“Would you be willing to teach acting on-site? I work for an animation company.”
Indeed, the more the arts develop the more they depend on each other for definition.

—E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel
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One never hears about how many tubes of paint Picasso used to create Guernica, the exact number of notes contained in Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue,” or how many facial expressions Brando deployed in On the Waterfront.

Yet when the art of character animation is discussed at all, it is usually in mind-numbingly numeric terms, with statements along the lines of “more than 23 skadrillion drawings were used in the production of Rumpelstiltskin. If each drawing were laid end to end, they would reach to Jupiter and back 6.7 times.”

When an art form is so consistently described in such a dreary way it’s easy to see why animation is often thought to be more technique than art, and its practitioners little more than technicians with pencils (or clay or pixels or puppets) in the eyes of the public.

When an animated character breaks through and becomes part of the cultural landscape, the voice actor—not the animator—is credited, because people understand what a voice actor does.

A friend of mine supervised the animation of a lead character in a major animated feature. In many interviews the well-known actress who voiced the character immodestly claimed that the animators had simply, in effect, copied her mannerisms and performance. In reality the animators had found her acting style generic and boring, and had turned elsewhere for inspiration: to people they had known in their own lives, friends and members of their families, even to studying Julia Louis Dreyfuss in episodes of Seinfeld.

What is typically lost in discussions about animation is the fact that when you watch an animated film, the performance you’re seeing is the one the animator is giving to you. If an animated character makes you laugh or cry, feel fear, anger, empathy, or a million other emotions, it is largely due to the work of these often unsung artists, who invest a lot of themselves in the creation of these indelible moments.

If the public could watch the faces of the best animators when caught up in the act of drawing an emotional scene, they would see artists as fully invested in the moment as the best live actors. The difference is that an animator stays in that moment, often
working for weeks to express an emotion his or her character takes only seconds to convey onscreen. The art of character animation, then, is to try to catch lightning in a bottle one volt at a time.

Countless books have been dedicated to the graphics, the look, the techniques, the process of character animation, but precious little has been written about performance, which is nothing less than the heart of the matter. As with any art, the vast majority of animation is garbage. It overflows with “characters”—human and not, male, female, fat, thin, tall, short, young, old, and in-between; characters who possess different voices, different clothes, head shapes, skin color, hair color, characters that have in fact only one thing in common—they all move exactly alike.

Ed Hooks knows that in the very best animated films, movement defines character: Lady moves differently than Tramp, Woody moves differently than Buzz, and Wallace moves nothing like Gromit. By looking outside the medium itself, and by intelligently and thoughtfully examining character animation from an actor’s perspective, Mr. Hooks has made a valuable contribution toward deepening our understanding of it.

I have no idea how many hours it took Mr. Hooks to write this book, how many gallons of ink was used in its printing, or how far it would stretch if you laid each copy of this edition end to end.

And I hope to God it never comes up.

Brad Bird
Acknowledgments

Though writing a book may be a singular activity, it is not something one does alone. Many talented and generous people in the world of animation have influenced me since I wrote the first edition of Acting for Animators. Their input has been occasionally extensive and intense and sometimes amounted to little more than a casual exchange of emails or maybe a passing comment in party conversation. Many have taken the time to dialogue with me in Internet news groups. Each person has been important and influential. I am not myself an animator and am therefore dependent on the goodwill, wisdom, and advice of professional animators. The more I understand about the magic that is done with animation, the better able I am to bring to bear what I understand about formal acting theory.

The list, though woefully incomplete, includes:

Doug Aberle, Brad Bird, Marc Vulcano, Michael Barrier, Paul Naas, Sven Pannicke, Brad Blackbourn, John Canemaker, Tien Yang, Jeff Cooperman, Keith Lango, Phil Tippett, Rex Grignon, Angie Jones, Mike Caputo, Alberto Menache, Larry Bafia, Jean Newlove, Leslie Bishko, Matt Brunner, Rachelle Lewis, Peter Plantec, and Siobhan Fenton.

On the editorial side, I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Lisa Barnett, senior editor at Heinemann. Many publishers turned down Acting for Animators before it reached Heinemann. The typical rejection response was, “If there was a need for animators to have a book about acting, there would already be one.” The publishers simply didn’t believe me. Then, in a leap of calculated faith, Lisa gave this book the green light. Without her endorsement and the financial commitment of Heinemann, it is likely you would not be reading these words right now. I am proud and honored to be working with this fine company that has since published another of my books, Acting Strategies for the Cyber Age.

And finally, thanks to my wife, Cally, and our daughter, Dagny. They are now and forever the twin animated beacons in my life. I am continually inspired and oriented by their light.
My first class with animators took place one sunny afternoon in April 1996, at Pacific Data Images, Palo Alto, California. I had at that point been a professional actor and acting teacher for twenty years, but I knew nothing about animation. When I introduced myself to the assembled PDI animators that day, I had not yet drawn a distinction between the way that animators perceive and apply acting theory and the way that stage actors perceive and apply it. I erroneously believed that there was only one way to learn acting, and that was to get up on your feet and act. That first day I brought with me a box of scripts from Neil Simon stage comedies. I handed out scripts, assigned scenes, and instructed the animators on how to rehearse together outside of class.

When we gathered for class for week number two, I discovered that hardly anybody had rehearsed their scenes. If this had happened in one of my stage-acting classes, I would have hit the roof and lectured everybody about professionalism. At PDI, however, I realized right away that I was the one out of step, not the students. I was on their turf, and this was my first reality check. I took a deep breath and started trying to figure a way of teaching acting theory to people who did not themselves want to get up and act. Looking back on those early classes from my current perspective, I am astonished that the Human Resources people at PDI didn’t send me packing. They didn’t, thanks in large part to the endorsement of their visual effects genius Ken Beilenberg (Shrek and Shrek II), who had been a student in my regular stage-acting class and who first brought me to the company. “Ken says you’re a good acting teacher, so if you’re willing to try, then so are we,” they told me at lunch. I will never be able to properly express my gratitude to them or to Ken for the opportunity.

I worked with the animators at PDI for some long weeks. We quit trying to do scene work right away, and I began lecturing on acting theory. I started considering more closely the connections between thinking, emotion, and physical action. I brought in clips from Charlie Chaplin movies and deconstructed them to display acting principles. I read The Illusion of Life (Thomas and Johnston 1981), and I convinced some of the animators to sit down with me to show me what they were doing. I designed some simple and fun improvisations to underline particular acting principles. I probably learned
more than the animators did in this process and, once they went into production for their movie, *Antz*, the classes ended. I didn’t work on the movie itself but, by then, my education about the animation process was underway and I was loving it. Because I had the good fortune of working with top-rung artists right out of the chute, other companies began calling me for acting classes. One workshop led to another and I continued to learn and tweak the content. With each class, I tried something new. That process has continued up to the present day. I’m still massaging the content, but now I have a firm grasp on the differences between the way that animators perceive and apply acting theory versus the way that stage actors perceive and apply it.

**Viva la Difference!**

A stage actor performs in the present moment, utilizing a process of rehearsed repetition. He learns the lines, plays actions, and tries not to anticipate what the upcoming moment holds. A stage actor is taught that indication (showing an audience how you feel) is an acting error. He learns to stay in the moment, playing off the reality of whatever his scene partners are doing. A stage actor’s art requires that he be psychologically visible on stage. This is why acting classes for stage actors spend so much time on the challenge of removing emotional blocks.

An animator, by contrast, is taught to be an expert at indication. An animator’s task is to specifically show an audience how the animated character feels. There is no way an animated character can play off the reality of his scene partner in the present moment because there is no present moment in animation. There is only an indication of a present moment (mocap and rotoscoping excluded). The very word *anticipation*, which is anathema to a stage actor, means something totally different and positive to the animator. For her, anticipation is a necessary part of her art. And, of course, an animator has no need to be psychologically visible, even though it may be a nice quality to have in life.

I have learned over time that acting training for animators needs to include zero exercises for releasing emotional blocks. An animator needs to know a lot about acting, but she doesn’t need to know everything about it. She doesn’t, for example, need to learn how to make herself cry on cue because, if she were to do that, she wouldn’t be able to see to animate.
This revised second edition of *Acting for Animators* brings the reader up-to-date on my approach to acting as it is learned by animators. By the time you finish reading, you should have a working grasp of essential acting principles, some of which go back to Aristotle. This book will not teach you how to draw or manipulate pixels on a screen because I am not an animator. I cannot myself draw a credible image of a toaster! I’m presuming that my reader either already knows those skills or is currently being instructed by experienced animators. My goal is to interpret and filter the basic principles of acting so that you can apply them to animation. I have tried hard to make it brief and easy to digest. Acting is an art like music or ballet, but it ought to be fun.

**A Brief History of Acting**

The roots of acting are in shamanism. Seven thousand years ago there were nomadic tribes following the herds in Mesopotamia. A tribe would encounter a rough winter or a thinning herd and would call out its shaman who would paint himself blue, put on a mask, and chant to the animal or weather gods. The point of the exercise was to help the tribe get through another season and to survive.

By 50 B.C., when the Greek theatre arrived, the tribes still had shamans except that they were organized into choruses. There were regular Dionysus festivals in which the chorus chanted the Dithyramb. The enterprise was still shamanistic, but it had more structure than in ancient days. One day, a member of the chorus—Thespis—donned a mask, pretended to be a god, and spoke back to the chorus. Acting was born. Over the next couple of hundred years, the solo actor was joined by other actors (Aeschylus and Sophocles), and it evolved that the chorus was supporting the actors instead of the other way around. (The modern-day Broadway musical still fits this paradigm in fact.) Religious ceremonies morphed into drama as gods were replaced in the stories by demigods, human beings, and heroes. The stories shifted away from being about man’s relationship with the gods and onto man’s relationship with other men. Today, actors are still speaking to the tribe, still talking about how to get through a tough winter. When you or your character act, you are calling the tribe together. The tribe (audience) expects you to lead and to have something to say. That is the essence of the theatrical contract.
Animation Is Born

According to Donald Crafton in Before Mickey—The Animated Film 1898–1929 (1982), Emile Cohl’s 1908 “Fantasmagorie” was probably the very first animated cartoon. If true, then the animation industry today is less than one hundred years old. During this short time, we’ve gone through rubber hose animation, the birth of Mickey Mouse, Three Little Pigs, Snow White, the rise of CGI, Toy Story, and flirtation with photo-real. The technical standard in today’s major studio releases is breathtaking. Time and Newsweek rapturously report on strides being made in the depiction of water, hair, fur, and skin.

Animation is poised on the brink of truly astounding advances. Computer graphics has largely overtaken hand-drawn animation in major feature films and on TV, bringing with it sky-high audience expectations. Seventy years ago, audiences would fill the seats just to watch animated characters like Gertie the Dinosaur who seemed to move across the screen. Today, audiences are not impressed that a character appears to have the illusion of life or that its gestures appear to be motivated. The standard that used to be almost magical is almost a yawn in the twenty-first century. Indeed, this is the great challenge and opportunity that is facing the industry.

Acting for Animators

Versus Acting for Actors

Animators are oriented to what stage actors disparagingly call results. From a trained stage actor’s perspective, the way animators come at the subject is upside down. An animator is concerned with whether a character’s eyebrows should be raised to show curiosity, how many blinks occur in an excited moment, whether it is the head or the shoulders that first turns for a sideways glance, how to indicate emotion; actors, by contrast, think about such things rarely if ever because they are taught not to play results. Emotions and facial expressions are results of inner motivation. A stage actor strives to find intention and motivation, which manifest themselves in the actions, and he plays actions in pursuit of objectives. He is taught that whatever emotion and facial/body movement are appropriate to the moment will just naturally happen. If an actor in one of my stage-acting classes asked me if she should lift her eyebrows to suggest curiosity, I would be
dumbfounded. Actors shouldn’t be thinking about eyebrows! But animators ask these kinds of questions all the time, as well they should.

Professional acting training is a relatively recent development in history, dating back only to 1897, when Constantin Stanislavsky established his workshops at Russia’s Moscow Art Theatre. It was he, under the influence of Freud and Pavlov, who fathered naturalistic, psychologically-based acting techniques. Remember Pavlov’s famous experiment with the dog, the food, and the bell? Pavlov would ring a bell whenever he fed the dog so, after a while, the dog would salivate when he heard the bell, even if there was no food involved. Stanislavsky observed this behavior and asked himself why actors couldn’t do that, too. Would it be possible to train actors to have an emotional reaction to something like a bell ringing? That was the basic idea behind Stanislavsky’s work. Before his innovations, actors struck poses and “showed” the audience that they were experiencing emotion. The implied message to the audience was, “I’m not really feeling anything but, if I were, it would look like this.” Stanislavsky said, “Let’s really feel something instead of pretending to do so.”

Prior to Stanislavsky, stage acting was learned mainly through a process of informal apprenticeship. An aspiring actor would present himself at the theatre door and ask for the opportunity to learn by doing. He would pull curtains, move props, carry spears in crowd scenes, paint flats, and generally sit at the master’s knee, soaking up accumulated theatrical wisdom. When formal acting classes later took root in the United States and in England, the teachers were dependent on this same initiative on the part of the student actor. A student actor was one who wanted badly to be on the stage. In my stage-acting classes, I depend on the student to bring a certain initiative to the process. The students memorize scenes—mainly from stage plays—rehearse outside of class, and then present the scenes for critique, analysis, and re-work.

Since animators do not generally aspire to being on stage themselves, it is nonproductive for an acting teacher to expect them to rehearse and present scenes. Acting training for animators is training with a difference. It is more akin to acting training for writers or puppeteers. Animators need to have a seat-of-the-pants understanding of acting, but they learn it through observation, discussion, and example rather than workshop scene work and appearances in front of audiences.

Frankly, I think the acting that animators do is more difficult than what stage actors do. Stage actors work within the fleeting moment, moving from action to action, emotion to
emotion, never looking back, never focusing on the emotion itself. A good animator
must go through a similar process of motivating his characters on a moment-to-
moment basis, but he then must keep re-creating that same moment over and over and
over again, sometimes for weeks on end, while he captures it on the cell or computer
screen. Actors learn that once a moment is gone, it’s gone for good, but animators have
to pitch camp at the intersection of movement and emotion. For the stage actor, it is an
error to attempt re-creation of the performance he gave yesterday. For the animator, the
ability to re-create—and describe—yesterday’s performance is essential.

When a stage actor rehearses a show, he is not trying to get the performance to a
point where it can be frozen and replayed on demand. He is connecting the emotional
dots, finding through-lines in intention and objectives. The only thing that remains the
same on a performance-to-performance basis is the blocking. This is why performances
in the theatre are so unique. The audience and the actors get together in the same place
at the same time and cocreate the performance. The play your friend saw last week will
never be seen again. When you go see the same show on his recommendation, you’ll
see the same story and blocking, but a different performance. True, an actor’s perfor-
manccan be captured on film but even in that process, the acting happens in the pre-
sent moment when it’s being captured. If an actor does twenty “takes” on a given shot,
they are going to be twenty different takes. On a moment-to-moment basis, nothing
remains the same. The performance that was captured on film this morning is going
to be different from the performance that is captured after lunch. Animators, compar-
atively speaking, operate in a much different kind of environment. This is why the
“outtakes” that Pixar included at the conclusion of the Toy Story movies are so amusing.
The entire idea of outtakes in animation is insane! That is a concept that only works
with live action.