

**Your Face Looks
Familiar . . .**

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**How to Get Ahead as a
Working Actor**

Michael Bofshever

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my father,
Bernard Bofshever. Pleasant and Persistent.*

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Introduction

Many years ago when I was about to graduate from the theater school at Boston University, I was cast in a production of *Richard III* for the Theater Company of Boston, starring Al Pacino. The cast were primarily working New York actors, plus a few college students like myself. The first *Godfather* film had just been released and the fact that I was acting in a play with Al Pacino had my head spinning. Rehearsals were in a warehouse space in downtown Boston. During rehearsal we had a problem solving a scene that I was acting in. Al volunteered to direct me and the other two actors. Now I was not only acting with Al Pacino but was also being directed by him. The production was at Harvard University's Loeb Theater. Whenever Al was in the green room before the show, I would make my way there so I might listen to him talking with fellow cast members. I loved listening to his stories of working with Marlon Brando. Here's one that I never forgot: Al was watching Brando struggling to put on a pair of slacks. Al asked him why he was getting dressed in such an odd manner. Brando replied, "Don't you get bored doing the same routine over and over again? I thought I would try getting dressed using one hand to see what that was like." The consummate actor, continuing to explore—how perfect. One day before a performance, Al came into my dressing room and asked me for a favor. "Mike, when you enter as the First Murderer," he said, "would you mind making a sound so as to

motivate my turn towards you?” I lit up. My heart pounded faster. I said, “Sure Al, not a problem.” I remember I could hardly say his name out loud. The production ran for two months and was my first venture into the professional world. The point of this production was to be able to explore the material without the pressure of reviews. Al later went on to make an award-winning film about this exploration, titled *Looking for Richard*. Here I was about to graduate college, with the opportunity to act in this production and thinking, Boy, have I got it made! With a theater degree, a season of summer stock under my belt at the Tufts Arena Theater, where I made a whopping twenty-five dollars a week, and a professional acting credit, I was sure I was on my way to fame and fortune. College had not at all prepared me for the harsh realities of pursuing a professional career as an actor, however. Little did I know how little I knew!

Upon graduation I returned home to Brooklyn, New York, not sure what I was going to do next. I found an apartment in Queens and lived there for a year with my girlfriend while working as a groundskeeper at the Westside Tennis Club. I began taking acting classes in New York City with the legendary acting teacher Michael Howard. When my girlfriend and I broke up, I crashed on a buddy’s couch on the Upper West Side for several months until I found a fifth-floor walk-up studio apartment in Chelsea. I took odd jobs to support myself. I worked as a waiter, a furniture mover, a building superintendent, a house painter, and eventually a bartender in Greenwich Village. My youth, coupled with an abundance of enthusiasm, overcame my fears and my ignorance of how to earn a living as an actor. However, I quickly realized that no matter how much I fantasized otherwise, stardom was not in the cards for me. I continued studying acting with Michael Howard, developing my craft and learning how to access my inner life, which was a very frightening process. My instrument was so filled with rage. I was holding on to a deep-seated hurt that I did not know what to do with. With his encouragement, I began to tap into that well of emotion and use it in my work with great success. Accepting what was going on with me, and merging it with the character I was working on in a scene, enabled me to grow as an artist and as a person.

Frustrated by my lack of progress in finding acting work and unsure of what I wanted to do, I dropped out of acting class and fell in love with the life of being a bartender in the Village. During this period I took on

a job as a stage manager at the famed Actors Studio. It afforded me the opportunity to watch acting classes and act in some Studio projects (I was in the original workshop production of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*). Having an opportunity to watch Lee Strassberg conduct acting classes and see famous members such as Ellen Burstyn, Harvey Keitel, and Al Pacino sit in and comment on actors' work was inspiring. It helped me realize how much I wanted to act—not become a star, just act.

I remember one night at the restaurant where I worked when a regular plopped down on his favorite bar stool near closing time. He was well into his fourth or fifth cocktail of the evening and he began to bemoan his lost direction in life. If only he had hung in there and kept after his dream and had not gotten carried away with all the sensual pleasures and drunken nights. It was a moment of truth for me. You can imagine it in a film. The customer sitting at the bar just before closing time, crying in his drink. The appropriate sad song pours from the jukebox and fills the smokey room. The director slowly moves the camera lens onto a close-up of the young bartender's face. In his face you can see the recognition that this could be him if he doesn't make a commitment. Walking home at two in the morning, I realized I hadn't truly invested myself in becoming an actor. I was just testing the water, sticking my toe into the ocean, when what I needed to do was dive in fully. I did not want to live with the regret of not trying hard enough.

I returned to Michael Howard's acting class with a vengeance. I worked on challenging scenes and exercises to help me grow as an artist. I read the trade papers and auditioned for anything I felt I was right for. I waited endlessly on line at Equity open calls. I did extra work in commercials, acted in industrial films, and did under-fives (roles with five lines or fewer) in soap operas. I made the rounds, dropping off my 8 by 10, looking for an agent. I became a founding member of a theater company. Whenever things didn't go my way, which was often in the beginning, I would tighten my belt, deal with the loss, and become more determined never to quit.

I have been a working actor now for more than thirty years. I've had the good fortune to have been a series regular and I've made countless guest-star appearances on episodic television. I have been featured in fifteen motion pictures and acted in several hundred television commercials. As an actor-director-producer of an acting company, the Actors

Producing Company, I was involved in developing new plays for seven years in New York City with my colleagues. I have acted on stage in Los Angeles, Off Broadway in New York, in summer stock, and in regional theaters. As a director I have been part of the creative process of directing new plays on both coasts. I became a director member of the Playwright/Director Unit of the Actors Studio in Hollywood. My love of the craft of acting and my ability to convey this knowledge helped me become a well-respected acting teacher.

An actor cannot rely on talent alone. He must also be industrious, creative, hopeful, and persistent. An acting career has no guarantees. Perseverance is key, but there are many who do not get the breaks needed to enable them to earn a living as an actor. The road to success has no limits, no final destination, no singular way to get there. The statistics supplied by the acting unions suggest that the odds are overwhelmingly against you earning a steady living as a performer. Yet so many of us are willing to chance all that. We believe in our heart of hearts that, given the opportunity, cast in that one role, we have something to offer. That we can make a difference and be recognized for our work.

We go on pursuing our elusive dream. The nobility lies in taking action with determination and hopefulness. I have had the good fortune to have earned my living doing what I always wanted to do. My wife and I have raised a family and sent our children to college. At times I've earned a steady income from residuals for film, television guest-star appearances, and commercials, while other times we have had to scramble to pay the rent. To succeed as an actor is to be a survivor. My intention is to show how my acting colleagues have made their journeys, to share our knowledge with those beginning or those who may have gotten lost on the way. I want to attest that in between the celebrity artist whose name and face are instantly recognizable and the unknown struggling artist, there is a contingency of rank-and-file actors who show up, do their job, and live the life of a working actor.

At first I interviewed several acting friends of mine on audiotape. I asked them to tell from their experiences what their life as a working actor is like. I wanted to know how they managed to persevere, how they dealt with the numerous obstacles they faced, and what tools they used to succeed. One actor would then recommend another to me. It became *Six Degrees of Separation*. As my interviewing skills improved, I was able to

recognize something in the voice or a sparkle in the eyes that was unique to that individual. I then transcribed the recordings, with minor editorial changes. The actors who participated thoroughly enjoyed reminiscing and sharing the vast knowledge they have gained along the way. If you are interested in learning more about a particular artist, I encourage you to go to the Internet and search for a more definitive biography.

While I was doing my research, a former acting student of mine, Todd Amorde, introduced me to Marcia R. Smith, the executive director of the Screen Actors Guild Foundation. I told her that I was interested in moderating a panel discussion on the journey of the working actor and that I was prepared to discuss what it takes to create and maintain a career as an actor. Marcia felt that, with my credentials as both a working actor and a teacher, I could offer something that would be useful to the SAG membership, and she gave the project a green light under the auspices of the SAG Foundation Life Raft Series. The James Cagney Room at the headquarters of the Screen Actors Guild in Los Angeles was packed with fellow actors. With a panel of four experienced actors, I led a discussion on how to succeed in show business. I sensed in the room an unquenchable thirst for the knowledge my panelists and I wanted to share. At the close of the evening the actors and I were surrounded by our colleagues, still wanting to know more. It was one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever been associated with. I have made this a recurring event in Los Angeles and New York because of the overwhelmingly positive response and the SAG Foundation's encouragement.

Many of the actors in this book have at one time or another been approached by someone with a quizzical look on his face. It is almost as if we have made some personal connection. We're aware that perhaps you may have seen our work on stage, on television, or in a film. It feels good to be recognized, since we are not inundated as celebrities often are. We are frequently asked, "Your face looks familiar; do I know you?"

"Yes," I reply with a warm smile, "I'm a working actor."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

You're Working; You're Not Working

To survive in this business, actors have to develop skills to cope with the insecurity of unemployment, fear, the constant rejection, and the pitfalls of success if they are to have longevity with their careers. That is no small task. Unless you are able to overcome these obstacles, you will be driven away from your passion. Time and time again you will be tested. How much do I want to do this? What psychological price am I willing to pay so that I can remain in the game? Those that keep focused on their goals and are willing to live through the heartbreak and make the necessary sacrifices are the ones who will remain at the end of the day.

Something you will have to adapt to right from the start is the euphemism of being “in-between jobs.” It is a positive spin on a very serious problem. If you are in need of money, then first and foremost you have to get a survival job. Never feel you have to make any excuses for working; there’s nothing dishonorable in it. Being broke and unable to pay the rent is no way to live. You do not need to suffer. You need to support yourself. Always remember that your commitment is to being an actor and that the survival work should be temporary and flexible so you can keep on auditioning. Don’t lose sight of your intended goal, which is to act. Even actors who are able to pay their bills solely by acting may actually be performing only a few days or weeks out of the year. There is constant downtime in the life of an actor. It is important to use this time and remain inventive. Actors should be taking classes to widen their perspective on life and to hone their craft. Learn to paint, write, teach, direct, play an instrument, anything that will keep your creative juices flowing. If the opportunity arises, start a business. Volunteer for a cause that you believe in. By focusing on something outside yourself and your

career, you can use your downtime constructively. Negative, destructive behavior does nothing to advance your career or your craft. Suffering will not make you a better actor. It is tough enough to be an actor and the last thing you want to do is wallow in self-pity.

Landing acting work goes in cycles no matter how successful you become. Hopefully there will be times when nearly every audition results in your getting the job, and you can go from one booking to the next. When this good fortune occurs, ride it out without thinking about it for as long as possible. For just when you believe you have got it made, the door may close. You go back to wondering if you will ever get cast again. You're auditioning as well as before but nothing is coming your way. This is the time to have faith in your ability and know that what goes around comes around. If you choose how to spend this time wisely, you can make the unemployed periods productive.

Fear destroys an artist. The fear of failure and success. The fear of criticism. The fear of being seen. They are all psychological concerns that prevent an actor from being whole and fulfilling her potential. It stifles your instrument during an audition, prevents you from giving it your best shot. You break out into the sweats when performing, making a once natural task an unpleasant experience. Uncomfortable feelings sneak up on you when working on challenging material so that you want to shut down. When you begin to acknowledge your fears, you are then able to harness them and make them a useful addition to who you are. As you welcome that part of yourself to the work, you open the door to the endless creative possibilities that exist for an actor.

What makes actors so special, and the reason the public will pay to see us on stage and in film, is our ability to express the human condition with all its complexities in a creative way. It is a gift that we possess, but we must allow ourselves to reveal it. An actor has to choose to want to be truly seen. To be open and available. To stand emotionally naked before a group of strangers and to know that it's safe to do that. A trustworthy and experienced acting teacher coupled with a willingness on your part will help you break through those barriers and develop the craft to be able to be open. By learning how to breathe through a moment, you afford yourself the opportunity to get to the other side—as difficult or as painful as it might be. When you shut down and hold on to that fear, you are denying your own personal sense of truth. When confronted with this challenge, actors

in who you are, you'll be able to withstand the temptations that come with being a success.



Mary Pat Gleason: Actors have a hard job ahead of them. The muscles to take on rejection at the rate you should be taking it on, because you should be going out after things and struggling to get things. Which means if you are really doing that on a day-to-day basis, you're getting rejection on a day-to-day basis as much as success. You have to get a really tough inner core that believes that this is your calling. I needed to know it was my calling. It couldn't be just a career, it's too tough as a career; I could go back to nursing anytime. When I realized this is a calling and I might have something to say of some import, that helped me whenever I was up against difficulty. Or even a year of unemployment, which can happen after many years of lots of employment and good money, wonderful jobs and lots of support. You may all of a sudden find yourself with a year where you cannot find work. If you believe in your heart that's where you're supposed to be, you can do any kind of survival job. You can hang in there. It will come around again. There's a rhythm to this business. Most of us don't know that either. That's hard to tell a young person because they don't want to hear it. But there is a rhythm. You work a lot and then you don't work. If you want to see that, you can take a look at any celebrity. You'll see years where we saw tons of film from them or a lot of television and they disappear for a while. And they have to sustain themselves and some of them can't and they drift out of the business.

Stephen Mendillo: There's so much of it. Nothing but fear, uncertainty, insecurity, rejection—those are the four. That's all the acting business is, in one sense. Of course, it's a lot of other things, but it's rife with that. I believe it's the antithesis to what's necessary. That actors need to be supported, need positive reinforcement. They need encouragement. These are the things that actors need. They don't need so much of what they in fact do get. A lot of times directors are so mean to actors and actresses, tearing them down. It is the last thing the creative gestation process needs. It needs the exact opposite. I abhor it. I think it's terrible. There is plenty of it, there's too much of it. I'm finding actually it a little less and less as time goes on, that there is a little bit less than in the, quote,

started out I never thought about making money. I never thought about being famous. I never thought about anything other than doing quality work that would earn the respect of my colleagues. I would be acknowledged as a player, somebody who knew what they were doing in this field, who was a true actor. A good actor.

Barry Shabaka Henley: If you know yourself you can walk into these situations where 99 percent of the time you are going to be rejected and not take it personally. If you are the kind of sensitive soul who takes it personally, this is not the business for you. You are going to get more rejection than acceptance. A casting director once said to me, “It’s not about rejection, it’s about selection. They selected somebody else, they didn’t reject you.” It’s a process of selection. There’s five different actors coming into a room and there are ten people making a decision. It’s not personal. That is one thing a young actor is going to have to learn early: 90 percent of why you don’t get a job will be out of your control. All you can do is your work. Come in prepared, come in with energy, come in with a positive attitude. I think that those who stay in acting are either masochistic fools or people who are on a spiritual journey. To be able to take rejection without humiliation—that’s a spiritual evolution.

Shelley Morrison: I have a wonderful family. I have another life. I’ve had a myriad of other jobs. I’ve worked as a nurse, I’ve worked as a salesgirl, I’ve worked as a music engineer. I write. I have a family, I have an anchor. We have a very wonderful spiritual community. We follow the Lakota Sioux traditions. If anyone needs anything, we circle the wagons. Even when I didn’t have the visibility that I have now, I was always involved in charity work. Volunteerism. This is the work. Acting is the work. Be prepared when you go for an audition for a job, that’s the work. Knowing how to give an interview. How you treat the people you work with, the people you meet. So you have a life and you don’t become bitter.

Richard Fancy: In my thirties I couldn’t get arrested as an actor. It became clearer and clearer to me that I was so angry all the time and frightened. Which had something to do with being so angry all the time. I said I actually need to look into this. I went into psychoanalysis, which is not the option for every actor. The thing that I thought was most

them. You just walk [in] there and if your hand is shaking, put it on something, ground yourself. If you need a prop in your hand, get a heavy prop so it doesn't start shaking with your hand. I know I'm going to be nervous so I just live with it.

Magda Harout: We all have had rejection and we still get rejection. You either fall into that abyss of psychological mutilation, "Oh God, why not, why didn't they?" Or you can take a few minutes and feel that pain and then *get over it*. Just get over it. You can't be that self-absorbed. OK, you didn't get it, then you say, "What did I do wrong?" Sometimes it's not that you did something wrong; sometimes they weren't looking for that. Maybe you didn't look it, maybe they were looking for someone else, maybe they wanted to cast a friend. You just never know. You can't take it personally. You must never take rejection personally.

Robin Bartlett: I have [a] certain amount of a fear of fame. I don't want to live a life where I can't go to the supermarket. Especially living in L.A.—all you have to do is have to be on TV once and people will notice you. I am grateful for the fact that I'm a character actor and I have lots of different experiences and people don't identify me with a very particular thing. So people will come up and say, "Did we go to camp together?" That's fine. I think our whole celebrity culture is very corrupting and an awful thing. I don't want to participate in it. In a certain sense that made me less ambitious than a lot of people. If you really, really go for stardom, that's what you are going for. To me that's not real life.

Maria Canals: Sometimes you don't get the job, several times in a row. That disappointment can stay with you. We can't live in that. We have to be a little crazy, a little overly optimistic, a little bit of a dreamer. You have to have great belief in yourself. The tendency, I have talked to my actor friends, is to protect yourself. A human defense is to not pour your soul and guts out at the next audition. It wasn't well received last time. So there is a tendency to protect yourself, which is death to an actor. The whole advantage that you have is you are special and unique. You have to put that out there. You have to put your heart on a platter. Even if they don't accept it, your job is to put your heart out on a platter. We have to remember to not protect ourselves. Not getting the part is the nature of