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Part Three, “The Play and the Role,” covers how to approach the play and identify with the character the actor will undertake. It also shares practical thoughts and answers the questions young actors ask most.

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UTA HAGEN was the recipient of innumerable honors and awards during her long career, including the prestigious National Medal of Arts in 2003. She died in 2004 at the age of 84.

HASKEL FRANKEL was the drama critic of the National Observer.

Jacket Design: Wendy Mount
Jacket Photograph: © Jack Mitchell

$19.95 USA/$21.99 CAN

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Legendary actress and teacher Uta Hagen knew that an actor’s finest work was often achieved for love rather than for money. She lived this philosophy alongside her husband, Herbert Berghof, at HB Studio, their acting school in New York. It was there that they created a workplace and spiritual home for actors such as Robert DeNiro, Jack Lemmon, Anne Bancroft, and Bette Midler.

Respect for Acting is Hagen’s blueprint for the actor, her design for “enlightened stage acting.” This classic book has helped generations of actors hone their craft, and its advice is as useful now as it was when it was first published. Hagen draws on her own struggle with the techniques of acting as well as her decades of teaching experience to break down the areas in which actors can work and search for realities in themselves that serve the character and the play. This approach helps actors to be specific in their actions in order to communicate an artistic statement.

Hagen’s instructions and examples also guide the aspiring actor through practical problems such as “How do I talk to the audience?” and “How do I stay fresh in a long run?”

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respect for acting
Respect for Acting was first published in 1973 with the cover above. This edition reprints the original without alteration.
respect for acting

uta hagen

with haskel frankel

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
To Herbert

who revealed and clarified and
has always set me a soaring example
Contents

Foreword by David Hyde Pierce ix
Acknowledgments xiii

PART ONE
The Actor

Introduction 3
1 Concept 11
2 Identity 22
3 Substitution 34
4 Emotional Memory 46
5 Sense Memory 52
6 The Five Senses 60
7 Thinking 65
8 Walking and Talking 69
9 Improvisation 73
10 Reality 75
PART TWO
The Object Exercises

Introduction 81
11 The Basic Object Exercise 91
12 Three Entrances 95
13 Immediacy 102
14 The Fourth Wall 106
15 Endowment 112
16 Talking to Yourself 119
17 Outdoors 124
18 Conditioning Forces 129
19 History 134
20 Character Action 139

PART THREE
The Play and the Role

Introduction 145
21 First Contact with the Play 147
22 The Character 152
23 Circumstances 158
24 Relationship 165
25 The Objective 174
26 The Obstacle 180
27 The Action 184
28 The Rehearsal 192
29 Practical Problems 201
30 Communication 213
31 Style 217

Epilogue 222

Index 224
I had the life-changing experience of acting with Uta Hagen in a two-person play a few years before she passed away. I was excited to be working with this legendary actor and teacher, but also daunted by the prospect of being the only other person on stage with her, so I re-read her books, both to prepare for my role and to prepare for her.

Well, nothing could prepare you for Ms. Hagen. When we met she was in her early eighties and still a force to be reckoned with. She was demure, passionate, charming, ferocious, tireless, and theatrical. As a student of her writing, that was the biggest surprise for me—everything she did was real, and grounded, and deeply human, but she had an extravagance of gesture, a physical and vocal lyricism that had its roots in an earlier era.

She really did practice what she preached about the physical life of a character. She insisted that we have the actual set-pieces and props, even kitchen appliances, in the rehearsal room. No cardboard mock-ups for her—“I want
to have opened and closed that refrigerator door a hundred times before I set foot on the stage,” she said. All through rehearsals we used a cruddy old plastic take-out container to hold the cookies she’d serve me in act II. On the day we moved into the theater, the designer had replaced it with a fantastic metal cookie tin which was in every detail exactly the sort of thing the character would have had in her kitchen. Ms. Hagen took one look at it, called it a name, and hurled it into the wings. We used the plastic cookie container for the run of the show.

Her obsession with these details was neither frivolous nor selfish. She was a generous actor, the reality she created for herself on stage was contagious, and acting with her you felt both safe and free. I remember a scene in which I had a speech about losing my mother to Alzheimer’s disease. I felt the speech needed to be emotionally full, and because my own mom had passed away, and I’d lost family to Alzheimer’s, I never had to use substitutions—the emotion was always there for me. But one night as I began the speech I sensed that the emotion wasn’t coming. I might have panicked, or tried to force it or fake it, but sitting there talking to Uta I didn’t want or need to be false. I thought of her advice not to try and pinpoint when or how emotion will come (emotional memory, page 51, item 2), I knew she would accept whatever I gave her, and I went on to the end of the speech, dry as a bone. Then I stood, began my next line (something innocuous like “Would you like a glass of water?”), and came completely undone. As we were walking off stage after the scene, she turned to me with a twinkle in her eye and said, “That was interesting.”

You should know that Ms. Hagen disowned Respect for Acting. After she wrote it, she traveled around the country visiting various acting classes and was horrified by what she saw. “What are they doing?” she’d ask the teacher. “Your exercises” was the proud response. So Ms. Hagen
wrote another book, *Challenge for the Actor*, which is more detailed and perhaps clearer, and should certainly be read as a companion to this. She hoped it would replace *Respect for Acting*, but it hasn’t, and I think the reason this book endures is that it captures her first, generous, undiluted impulse to guide and nurture the artists she loved.

In this book, you will hear Ms. Hagen’s voice and catch a glimpse of who she was. She wanted us actors to have so much respect for ourselves and our work that we would never settle for the easy, the superficial, or the cheap. In fact, she wanted us never to settle, period, to keep on endlessly exploring, digging deeper and aiming higher, in our scenes, in our plays, in our careers. *Respect for Acting* is not a long book, and with any luck, it will take you the rest of your life to read it.
I want to thank Dr. Jacques Palaci who helped me with his scientist’s knowledge in many areas in which I need further enlightenment and understanding about human motivation, behavior and psychological problems.