

ACTING AT ALL LEVELS

by Tom Erb



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A Practical Guide to Stage, Screen, and Craft

Author: Tom Erb
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CHAPTER 1

The Actor's Craft & Core Fundamentals

Acting is fundamentally about truth—behaving truthfully within imaginary circumstances. Over six decades of working as an actor, stage director, playwright, and producer, I have observed that lasting artistic success is built on rigorous preparation, physical clarity, and deep emotional honesty, never on superficial tricks or vanity.

Defining Your Type & Physical Baseline: Understanding your natural age range, vocal timbre, physical energy, and baseline presence is essential. Typecasting is not a restriction; it is an entry point. Embrace how casting directors initially perceive you, then expand that baseline with technique.

TOM ERB'S ACTOR'S TEN COMMANDMENTS

1. **Know Your Lines:** Do the work before rehearsal requires it.
2. **Know Your Character:** Words without motivation are only words.
3. **Listen:** Your scene partner is giving you information.
4. **Be Prepared:** Preparation gives you freedom.
5. **Be on Time:** Early is professional. On time is late.
6. **Respect the Director:** Understand the singular responsibility of the director's vision.
7. **Respect the Stage Manager:** The stage manager is the production's operational backbone.
8. **Respect Your Fellow Actors:** Their performance directly affects yours.
9. **Respect the Audience:** They gave you their time and attention.
10. **Never Stop Learning:** The day you believe you know everything about acting is the day you stop growing.



Figure 1.1: Vocal control, physical posture, and emotional grounding in performance.

CHAPTER 2

Audition Strategy & The Talent Registry Model

Auditioning is a separate skill from acting. In the audition room, your objective is not to 'win' a role, but to present a clear, compelling solution to the director's creative challenge.

The SW Florida Talent Registry Model: Erbana Productions utilizes a centralized digital talent registry. By completing a single, free 5-minute profile at erbanaproductions.com/talent-registry, actors, directors, stage managers, lighting/costume designers, crew, and musicians are placed onto an ongoing regional roster. Auditions are scheduled individually by private appointment—eliminating impersonal cattle calls and ensuring every artist receives focused attention.

Audition Prep Checklist: Always arrive 15 minutes early, bring a clean printed headshot and 1-page résumé, prepare two contrasting monologues (one comic, one dramatic) scaled to 60-90 seconds, and greet the stage manager and accompanist with professional warmth.



Figure 2.1: The professional audition studio environment.

CHAPTER 3

Script Analysis, Text Analysis & Published Works

Tom Erb's Two-Read Script Analysis Method:

- **First Read (The Audience):** Read straight through without stopping to analyze. Experience the emotional arc, surprises, rhythm, and mystery just as a theatergoer would.
- **Second Read (The Artist):** Examine the structural mechanics. Map out beat changes, character objectives, obstacles, tactics, French scenes (marked by character entrances and exits), and embedded technical cues.

Erb Publishing Catalog: Erb Publishing maintains a licensing catalog of **155+ published plays**, ranging from full-length historical dramas and comedies to one-acts and educational texts. Proper script analysis honors the playwright's exact words while unlocking the subtext driving each line.



Figure 3.1: Detailed script notation, beat analysis, and French scene breakdowns.

CHAPTER 4

Rehearsal Discipline, Blocking Notation & Communication

Rehearsal is the sanctuary where choices are tested, refined, and set. Discipline in rehearsal creates freedom under stage lights.

Standard Stage Blocking Shorthand: Always record director blocking in soft pencil directly in your script margins:

- **Areas:** UR (Up Right), UC (Up Center), UL (Up Left), SR (Stage Right), CS (Center Stage), SL (Stage Left), DR (Down Right), DC (Down Center), DL (Down Left).
- **Actions:** X (Cross), XDS (Cross Downstage), XUS (Cross Upstage), Ent (Enter), Ex (Exit), Sit, St (Stand), K (Kneel).

Prompter Protocols: When calling for lines off-book, say 'Line' clearly without breaking character posture. The prompter or stage manager will provide the next three words.



Figure 4.1: Stage floor grid markings and blocking notation discipline.

CHAPTER 5

Technical Integration, Live Performance & Active Casting

Tech Week brings together acting, lighting, sound, scenic movement, and stage management. Respect the technical crew—they ensure your performance is seen and heard safely.

ACTIVE ERBANA PRODUCTIONS CASTING CALLS:

1. **Building Paradise:** Flagship 2-Act Historical Drama (22 Actors). Set in 1925, telling the true founding story of Venice, FL. Featured roles include Dr. Fred Albee ('The Visionary'), John Nolen ('The Planner'), Bertha Honoré Palmer ('The Foundation'), and The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers ('The Backers').
2. **Wedding Secrets:** Full-Length Comedy (8 Actors: 4M / 4F). A chaotic wedding weekend at the Engle family home unravels when an uninvited guest arrives.
3. **Ghost Note:** 2-Man Stage Drama (2 Male Actors). Original Beatles drummer Pete Best and 13-day substitute drummer Jimmy Nicol reunite in a Liverpool bakery.



Figure 5.1: Live theatrical performance under full technical lighting and cues.

CHAPTER 6

Stage vs. Screen — Adapting the Craft for Camera

While the emotional core of acting remains identical across mediums, the technical transmission differs radically between stage and screen. Having performed in over 75 stage roles and major feature films including Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *You've Got Mail*, and *The Man Without a Country*, I have learned that camera acting requires extreme internal economy.

Vocal and Physical Scale: On stage, you must project your voice and physical gestures to reach the back row of a 1,000-seat house without pushing. On camera, the lavalier microphone sits inches from your chest, and a 50mm lens captures every micro-expression. On camera, thinking the thought is often sufficient.

Eye Lines and Hitting Marks: Film requires absolute physical precision. You must hit your physical tape mark without looking down, maintain consistent eye-lines to partner actors off-camera, and repeat prop movements exactly for editor continuity across multiple takes.

CHAPTER 7

Building a Sustainable Career in Theatre & Film

Talent gets you noticed; craft and professional integrity keep you working. Building a multi-decade career in the performing arts requires viewing yourself as both an artist and a small business.

Networking with Integrity: True networking is not asking for favors; it is demonstrating reliability, punctuality, and positive energy on every project. Directors rehire actors who make the rehearsal room productive, support fellow cast members, and respect backstage staff.

Financial & Mental Resilience: Maintain secondary income streams that offer schedule flexibility for auditions and rehearsals. Treat rejection not as a personal failure, but as an impersonal matching process where casting directors are solving a complex visual puzzle.

CHAPTER 8

Performance Day Protocols & Extended Runs

Opening night is not the finish line; it is the beginning of the performance journey. Maintaining performance freshness across a multi-week run requires physical discipline and mental focus.

Pre-Show Rituals & Half-Hour Call: Arrive at the theater before half-hour call. Conduct physical and vocal warm-ups, check your props on prop tables, inspect costume fastenings, and quiet your mind before places are called.

On-Stage Recovery: If a line is missed or a prop breaks on stage, stay in character! Trust your partner, listen actively, and work through the moment naturally. Audiences forgive mistakes; they never forgive breaking character.

CHAPTER 9

Practical Exercises for Solo & Partner Work

Consistent daily practice keeps your artistic instrument sharp. Here are four essential exercises for individual and partner training:

- 1. Tactic Switching Drill (Solo):** Take a 4-line monologue. Perform it using three distinct verbs: *to persuade*, *to intimidate*, and *to beg*. Observe how vocal cadence and physical posture shift automatically.
- 2. Listening Mirror (Partner):** Sit face-to-face with a partner. Repeat a simple line of dialogue back and forth, allowing the tone to be altered purely by reacting to the eye contact and energy received.
- 3. Scale Shifting (Solo):** Perform a dramatic speech calibrated for a 1,000-seat house. Immediately repeat it whisper-quiet for a close-up camera frame 18 inches away.
- 4. Subtext Layering (Partner):** Perform a mundane conversation (e.g., making coffee) while carrying the hidden secret that one of you is moving away forever tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER 10

Common Performance Pitfalls & How to Avoid Them

Recognizing common performance traps allows you to correct course quickly during rehearsal:

- **Indicating (Showing rather than Being):** Pushing emotion externally rather than allowing genuine thought to generate expression.
- **Anticipating:** Reacting to a line or event before your character logically hears or sees it.
- **Over-Rehearsing to Rigidity:** Locking in vocal inflections so tightly that you can no longer listen or adapt to your scene partner.
- **Neglecting the Ensemble:** Treating other actors as props for your solo moment rather than collaborators.

APPENDIX & BACK MATTER

Checklists, Industry Glossary & Author Biography

INDUSTRY GLOSSARY:

- **Blocking:** The planned physical movements and positions of actors on stage.
- **Call Time:** The mandatory arrival time for cast and crew at the theater.
- **Cue:** The final words or action of another actor that signals your line or entrance.
- **French Scene:** A structural scene division created by the entrance or exit of any character.
- **Off-Book:** Having all lines and stage business fully memorized.
- **Sides:** Excerpts from a script used for auditions.
- **Strike:** Disassembling the set and props after a show closes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tom Erb is Executive and Artistic Director of Erbana Productions, founder of Erb Publishing, and creator behind TommyErb.com. His distinguished 60-year career encompasses directing **40+ regional stage productions** since 1994, performing in **75+ stage roles**, dozens of television appearances, and major feature film credits including Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *You've Got Mail*, and *The Man Without a Country*.

SW FLORIDA TALENT REGISTRY: Submit your headshot, résumé, or reel at erbanaproductions.com/talent-registry for active show consideration.