

NO ACTING PLEASE

“BEYOND THE METHOD”
A REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH
TO ACTING AND LIVING

BY ERIC MORRIS & JOAN HOTCHKIS

Foreword by
**JACK
NICHOLSON**

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ERIC MORRIS AND JOAN HOTCHKIS

Ermor Enterprises
Publishing

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International Standard Book Number: 0-9629709-3-X Library of Congress Catalog Number: 78-68478

Designed by Ede Dreikurs

Distributed by S.C.B.(800-729-6423)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With gratitude to Daniel Spelling for the tireless efforts put forth in editing the text. For him it was truly a “labor of love.”

And to Paul Whitehouse for his insight and encouragement in the publication of “No Acting Please.”

And to all the actors who were instrumental in the evolution of the techniques herein.

Eric Morris

Joan Hotchkis

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FOREWORD

Eric and I met as students in the sense memory class he describes in this book. No one was more zealous in pursuit of “the work” than “the manic-depressive dane.” Nothing daunted Morris. Not the actress who really fainted in “Dark of the Moon”; not the actor who wore rubber bands and couldn’t figure out from which side of his mouth to spit his Ludens cough drops; not me as the nazi of your dreams driving him quivering and vulnerable through the concentration camp of his; not even being called the most pretentious ass this side of Sasha Guitry at four a.m. by some angry young actor with Gallo on his lips. Eric was always helpful to others, and most important to himself.

The reality is no one can tell you how to act. My own feelings and observations tell me it requires deep personal commitment to allow any individual to move from that vague desirous state of “I’m gonna be an actress (or actor)” to a point where the actor has some vague sense that every part in which he is cast is not some incredible piece of luck like saying the secret word on “You Bet Your Life,” but the result of some solidly acquired skills which, in there, where the truth is, he can call his own.

No book is going to contain all of the things which have helped other actors arrive at a free use of their talent.

As is pointed out in this book, many people feel any academic approach to acting is in conflict with the “Gypsy,” or intuitive element of this craft. I suppose the reason Eric asked me to write something for the front of this book is because we have been in many classes, workshops, groups, whatever, together where we observed an experienced talent struggling for agonizing, tedious, and hysterical periods of time to break through and become expressive. If you’re interested in this sort of thing, it can be an inspiring process. It’s not for everyone. It’s not “entertaining.” though it can be. There are no guarantees or diplomas, but it can be deeply satisfying to acquire and be a part of another’s acquisition of the tool which allow them to enjoy and express their talent.

The concept of “Being” as opposed to “Acting” is Eric’s focus here. Along the way he describes exercises related to actor’s adversary number one. Tension; relating, stimuli, levels of consciousness, behavior, vulnerability, unpredictability, specificity, and many others. What is described has worked in some way for one actor or another. The Method is, “If it works, use it.”

—Jack Nicholson

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Members of a class concentrating on reaching their feelings before a Being exercise at Eric's retreat.

Chapter

1

BEING

ON BEING

Acting is the art of creating genuine realities on a stage. No matter what the material, the actor's fundamental question is: "What is the reality and how can I make it real to *me*?" In this kind of training the actor discovers himself fully both on the stage and off, since the exercises in this book repeatedly demand an integration of living and acting. It is a way of life, not just a way of work.

For the first few years I taught acting to the letter. I was faithful to the Stanislavsky-derived techniques I had learned and my approach to creating realities on the stage encompassed sense memory, affective memory, task choices, etc. Over this period I became increasingly aware that some actors could use the work quite well and other actors, also talented, couldn't make it happen. It didn't work for them. Even for the actors who did well, there remained huge areas unreachable to them and their work often seemed clinical and academic. I became frustrated. I began to doubt "The Method" as a total approach, began to believe the pessimistic sayings of the master acting teachers, that only two percent of actors could use "The Method." And even in my own work as an actor I was frustrated, disappointed in the results I was getting. It was about this time that I started asking some questions, such as how can the same technique work for everybody. Not everybody is the same. We all have different fears, different inhibitions, a variety of different concerns and certainly different backgrounds. Why are actors afraid to talk about themselves personally? Why do acting teachers shy away from discussing the personal elements in acting? Why is everybody so secretive?

I came to the realization that while there's lip service paid to using your personal life on stage and getting "deep" into your own emotions, few actors have the courage to do this and most teachers aren't even aware of the necessity for this kind of search. You can't teach a man to run if he hasn't got legs. Nor can you teach a person to act if he isn't connected to his inner self. I started to develop an approach to acting which embarked on a search of the *self* and led toward usage of the *self* on stage. Out of this approach came a whole system of work which included some of the skills of "The Method," but these skills now became really applicable because they were emanating from a really personal nucleus. I discovered that one of the reasons why many actors couldn't use the Stanislavsky system was because of the separation between technique and personal reality. How can a system designed to be personal work for actors who

are not personal and don't even know what they feel?

I invented exercises which required that actors search for their own personal points of view about everything and express it. Hundreds of exercises evolved out of working with actors who were struggling with individual problems. Some of these exercises are named after the actors they were first designed for, although later, of course, they applied to other actors. The "Rounds" were born. I demanded that actors encounter each other in Reluctancy Exercises, in Honesty Stream of Consciousness, in Ego Reconstructions and other Round Exercises. (We'll describe all of these later.) I encouraged them to be extremely personal with each other, to do away with their social impositional life and to experience the *real moment* no matter what the imagined consequences.

At first it was unsettling. People offended each other. People walked out of class, broke down and cried, became hysterical. But something important started to happen to these actors that had never happened in their work before. A kind of visceral reality superseded their concerns about how they looked, how they sounded, or how the scene "should go." I started to see the real people in the scenes, as they were when they weren't acting. People were beginning to BE, at first only in brief moments here and there, but the difference between BEING and *acting* was glaringly obvious to all of us. Once the actors had tasted these moments of BEING, their appetites were whetted for more. Both actors and audience became dissatisfied with less than the truth.

In my classes I urged each actor to do the most difficult thing first, because then all the less difficult problems were done away with in one fell swoop. For example, a girl would come into class very uptight, very proper, possibly with parochial school background, wanting desperately to act, but paralyzed with her concern about being a nice girl. The first exercise I'd give her might be a Vulgarity or perhaps a Sensuality or an Anti-Social. If it was a Vulgarity, I'd ask her to stand up in front of the class and be crude, vile, pick her nose, scratch her ears, belch, use profanity, put her hand on her crotch. All of these things would be overwhelmingly difficult for her to do. But even if she would do part of these, the ice was cracked. The class would accept and encourage her and the atmosphere was permissive, supporting her awareness that she has the right to do these things and it's okay. After this one exercise, the actress might be freed of a whole cluster of social mannerisms which had stood between her and her real feelings.

The results of these Therapy Exercises were amazing. What in my first five years of teaching had remained a persistent problem with the student was now alleviated immediately and in several months didn't exist. The solving of problems like this allowed us to get deeper into the rich life which lay beneath. In the process of discovering themselves, the actors became aware of not only how they felt on a moment-to-moment basis here and now, but also of the scores of things that had affected them throughout their lives. Now we were no longer just using sensory choices that sounded good and usable in a scene. The sensory choices had become more personal and private and affecting. We were beginning to touch the nucleus of the individual self. A more personal and exciting reality began to exist on the stage in the framework of a scene, not consistently at first, but with continued work, more and

more. Often in class I would give an actor a “Jellybean” which is a statement, a thought, or a concept designed to pinpoint specifics, or inspire the actor to think in a certain area of craft or personal concern. Sometimes a simple three word “Jellybean” would take the place of a long-winded critique, and zero in on the overview of the entire problem.



I must define at this point what I mean by BEING. It is not a word I chose accidentally. It came to me from working with actors who were trying to achieve that state of life on stage which was the fullest, the most real and the most total. This state usually occurred when they would get closest to what they really felt, and farthest from their customary “acting.” When they were closest to what they really felt, their behavior on stage included all kinds of life, infinite colors, distractions, interruptions and unpredictable changes of emotions. Even the identifiable emotions—anger, hate, love, fear—had more facets when they came out of this kind of reality. When an actor in a scene attempts to achieve a particular emotion, what usually occurs is that his presentation of that emotion is flat and one-dimensional. I refer to this phenomenon as “on the nose” acting. It happens because the actor is concerned with delivering the result “on the nose,” so consequently the emotion doesn’t contain all the elements from which it came, the sources, the impetus which caused the emotion in the first place. When the actor is functioning from a BEING state, all that he feels is included in the life being expressed, and then the resulting emotion contains all of his own personal truth and reality.

When commenting upon an actor’s work, telling him or her it was fuller and more believable, I’d invariably get the response, “But Eric, I didn’t do anything! I was just being me! What about the theatrical demands?” Ironically, when the actor would approach the BEING state, he’d become much more theatrical and he’d meet the demands of his material on a more complex and imaginative level, because more kinds of life, more subtleties of reality were going on. The exciting thing about successfully achieving BEING on stage or in front of the camera is that it stands out like a beacon in the night. The actor brings to his work the undeniable uniqueness of himself and the work takes on a personal quality that has a fabric incomparable to anyone or anything else. It is unpredictable to the actor. It is filled with inspiration and surprises which eliminate conventional expectations. It has a crisp “one time” feeling that actually makes the audience believe it is happening here and now for the very first time, because, in a sense, it really is.

The craft is not designed to be an esoteric laboratory involvement, but an applicable approach to achieving the most exciting life possible. In the last analysis, if it doesn’t

produce results, it is only good sounding philosophy.

BEING is a state you work to achieve. To BE you must find out what you feel and express it totally. Let one impulse lead to another without intellectual editing, including all the life that is going on—the interruptions, interferences and distractions. These elements should all be included in the behavior. *Do no more or less than you feel.* BEING is the only place from which you can create organic reality.

TAPED EXCERPT FROM *BEING* EXERCISE

The scene: A class for professional actors at the Eric Morris Acting Workshop in Hollywood. Everyone is seated in the theatre seats. The stage is bare except for a chair in the center. Eric says, “E.J., get up there.” E.J. walks on stage. She is a musical comedy actress known for her soubrette-ingenue roles on stage and television. The following dialogue was taken from a tape of the class session.

Eric: All right. I want you to sit in the center of the stage and BE. Do no more or less than what you feel.

E.J.: sits down on the chair and begins to pull herself together. She sits up straight, smiles winningly at the audience, folds her hands in her lap. She is getting ready to present the best part of herself to the world.

Eric: What are you doing?

E.J.: What do you mean, what am I doing?

Eric: How do you feel?

E.J.: What do you mean, how do I feel?

Eric: You’re doing things on stage that have nothing to do with what is.

E.J.: Well, I’m nervous. I feel a little shaky. You’ve got me upset.

Eric: Okay.

E.J.: I don’t like to be picked on.

Eric: You’re not being picked on.

E.J.: The hell I’m not. I know what you’re doing.

Eric: Okay. I think you’re angry and I think you’re suppressing it and functioning in spite of it. You’re hostile and defensive and you’re functioning above that.

E.J.: Yes, I am.

Eric: That’s not BEING. That’s not BEING at all. That’s “I’m BEING in spite of myself.” What’s that? That’s not BEING.

E.J.: Well, I don’t know what the hell you want me to do, Eric! You told me to sit here and I’m trying to sit here!

Eric: Okay. Do you want to cry now?

E.J.: (Starting to cry) No!

Eric: It's not pure.

E.J.: (Sobbing) Stop it!

Eric: Stop what?

E.J.: (Sobbing and screaming) I felt so great coming into this lousy class!

Eric: You do this, one, to avoid finding out what's going on and, two, to get yourself off the spot and, three, to get out of dealing with what you have to deal with. You still aren't BEING. You're closer because you've expurgated a little shit. How do you feel?

E.J.: I feel great. Thanks. I really do. I mean I'm so tired. I worked all day, I earned—earned a lot of money this week and I'm tired. I didn't even want to come tonight, but I did. Because I love to come here and be spit upon!

Eric: Is that what you think we're doing?

E.J.: No. I'm teasing. I know what you're doing Eric...Somewhere. I don't know...(crying a little). And BEING—I mean—just BEING—I'm trying to figure it out.

John (a student): You can't figure it out.

Eric: Maybe you shouldn't try to figure it out. Maybe you should just find out how you feel. So far you've told us what you did this week and about coming here tonight—

E.J.: (Yelling) Well, I felt all right, Eric, before I got here!

Eric: What makes you think that you don't feel all right now? Because -

E.J.: Because—

Eric: Does all right mean this as opposed to that? What does all right mean?

E.J.: It means all right.

Eric: All right means everything. You're still not doing the exercise. You're avoiding and evading, evading and avoiding. You know how you get to BE? You get to "How do I feel now and am I functioning in terms of how I feel now? If not, why not and what can I do to get to that?"

E.J.: My hands are shaking.

Eric: You took your glasses off. You keep maintaining that you can't see and then you take your glasses off so that you won't see.

E.J.: (Laughs)

Eric: Does that protect you?

E.J.: Will you wait until I finish wiping my eyes, okay?

E.J. puts her glasses on and looks out at the audience.

Eric: How do you feel?

E.J.: Nervous.

Eric: Okay. Let's see it.

E.J.: I don't know what to do!

Eric: Admit it.

E.J. I just did!

Eric: Where are you nervous?

E.J.: My hands are shaking. (She holds them in her lap.)

Eric: Let us see that. Share that. How can you BE if you want to hide? You're looking at the floor now. Now that you've got your glasses on and can see, you don't want to see. You know why? Because you want to avoid the responsibility of feeling the feedback. *Deal* with the feedback.

E.J.: You mean the looks I'm getting from the people?

Eric: And the involvement in the people and the moment-to-moment changes and everything.

E.J.: Everything...and say what I see coming out of them, right?

Eric: Just BE. Feel what you feel, communicate what you feel, experience what you feel, allow what you feel.

E.J.: (Starts to cry) I'm looking at Morty and I feel like crying.

Eric: Why do you feel the responsibility to explain that to us? If you feel like crying, cry! Look at Morty and cry! Don't tell me about it. That isn't BEING.

E.J.: (Sobs louder)

Eric: Why are you crying now, because I'm yelling at you?

E.J.: No. No, it's not because you're yelling at me.

Eric: What is it?

E.J.: (Sobs and says something incoherent)

Eric: Okay. Let it run its course. Don't cover your mouth. That's not BEING. Let it run its course and maybe it'll give way to something else. Don't cut it off. Let it happen. Let it run its way out.

E.J.: (Sobs even louder with prolonged moans)

Eric: You know, I don't believe you. You're doing everything except what I'm asking you to do. Almost all of your hostility and defensiveness and all of your crying is something which is self-stimulated, something that you encourage to happen.

E.J.: Oh, fuck, Eric! I felt so great when I walked in that door tonight!

Eric: Now wait a minute, wait a minute. Let's iron out what you mean by I felt so great. Do you mean now you feel terrible?

E.J.: (Sobbing) Well, I really feel shaky.

Eric: As opposed to what?...Listen to me.

E.J.: I am, Eric!

Eric: Why do you feel the necessity to be defensive? I'm not attacking you. I'm trying to help you.

E.J.: I know you are.

Eric: Do you believe that?

E.J.: Yeah, I do.

Eric: Okay, fine. I think that you function on a level which is *above* BEING. *Beyond* BEING. It is a level of social obligation. I think you are enormously affected by social obligation. Therefore, when social obligation is heightened by the presence of people and the obligation to see and be seen, you feel the necessity to *do*. And when that is frustrated, the only thing you then can do is to cry, to feel upset and frustrated and anxiety-ridden. And that expresses itself in a single way—the way you saw it tonight. But your expression isn't pure. It comes out of frustration and instead of being frustrated and expressing that, you go to the crying and yelling because that expurgates the tension, the anxiety of being on the spot. It alleviates your confusion and it fulfills an element which is very important to you: meeting the social obligation. You have been doing what you think people expect of you forso long that you don't know what *you* expect of yourself or how to get it. When the social obligation is a big question mark, as it is to you in this exercise, you function on a level which you think is interesting-theatrically attractive. You function on a level of life which feels more secure to you than stopping that indulgence and finding out what the component parts of E.J. are. Now I interrupted you constantly for one very important reason: I wanted you to know from the outset what you do and don't do to find out what you feel, who you are, and what's going on here and now. Every single time I pinned you. you responded the same way—crying or defensive yelling, instead of really allowing yourself to be hurt, openly confused, afraid, helpless, whatever—and allowing those impulses to express themselves moment to moment. Do you know what I mean by BEING?

E.J.: I do now.

Eric: Okay. BEING is "I'm sitting here, I'm looking around the room. I feel boring and dull and that's okay. I'm crossing my legs. I'm beginning to feel a little self-conscious. All these people are looking at me."

E.J.: You mean BEING is like a stream of consciousness?

Eric: It can be. It can be anything that is. I'm just doing this out loud to demonstrate, but you don't have to do it out loud. You don't have to open your mouth, unless you're impelled to. (Continuing the demonstration) "I feel a little tension creeping into my neck. Hello, tension. I know you're there. Everybody's looking at me expectantly and I feel like I should do something. That lump in my stomach tells me to do something quick. But I don't have to do anything." That's BEING. Whatever is, is. All right, how do you feel?

E.J.: Confused. Totally confused.

Eric: Good. I see that.

E.J.: What's good about being confused? The way I feel right now I couldn't say three lines in any script.

Eric: That's okay. For right now. But you're better off now instrumentally than when you got on the stage.

A Being class.



E.J.: What's that supposed to mean?

Eric: All right, let me be a little presumptuous, E.J., and say that had I given you a piece of material when you first walked up on the stage, you would have read it *well*. But this is not a reading class. I am convinced that I would have been able to predict every movement, every sound, every expression you made. However, if you were to continue the life that's going on now in you and *include* it in that piece of material. I'm sure I wouldn't be able to begin to predict or anticipate what you would do.

John: Yeah, but Eric, if she went with the life that is right now in her and the

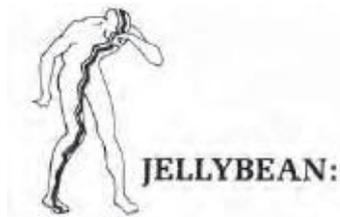
obligation of the material was to be confident, maybe secure, demure, the perfect hostess, wouldn't the existing life be wrong for the material?

Eric: Sure. But that's the point at which you *begin*. That doesn't mean that the life she's experiencing is right for the material, but from this state of confusion, she can work for a choice stimulating the reality that would make her feel the way she wants to feel for the material. This confusion, this anxiety she's feeling, is the bedrock here-and-now reality. It can be changed to another kind of here-and-now reality, whereas the state she assumes is an unaffordable state.

E.J.: Oh! So this is just getting ready? Preparation?

Eric: Exactly. Acting is almost all getting ready, because if you're ready and prepared to act, then you can.

BEING EXERCISE CRITIQUE



Before Acting Must Come Being

The BEING exercise you have just read, whether the actor does it by himself or in a group, is different each time because each actor's true state of BEING and the things he does to avoid BEING are unique. The success of the exercise as demonstrated by E.J. and me depends on the skill and experience of the teacher or director. The BEING exercise could become a mind-manipulating weapon in the hands of a teacher or director who does not fully understand the work and who has not himself experienced it. I take responsibility for manipulating E.J., second-guessing her and leading her into certain areas because, after fifteen years of teaching experience, I am able to ascertain the difference between creative manipulation and destructive manipulation. The motives of the teacher and his perception of knowing *what* to say and *when* are crucial factors and make all the difference.

The craft of acting is the art of BEING and there are many techniques and literally hundreds of exercises to help you accomplish this state of BEING. We hope that in the following chapters you will be able to learn and use these exercises and include them in your own approach. It's not something that happens overnight. You have to practice daily. You have to find a system that works for you. That happens by experimentation, by looking around, going to different teachers, and testing the techniques for yourself.

Most actors learn to act by imitating other actors. By the time you've had fifteen or twenty years of watching actors on a screen or stage, you've acquired a whole unconscious repertoire of mannerisms and things to do. We usually emulate those we

admire, but this kind of emulation is dangerous for actors, because you end up externally doing things that come from other actors and these imitations rob you of finding out who you are and what you have to contribute. You're as individual as your fingerprints and individuality is what you have to contribute. You are not only the best thing you have, you're the only thing you have.

Unfortunately, among actors and actresses, there's a stigma against hard work. Many cling to the myth that they can get by on their talent alone without knowing their craft—the delusion of theatrical immortality. Others believe that to study the craft will actually spoil their talent by interfering with “natural instincts.” Others depend precariously on rabbits' feet, making the sign of the cross before going on stage, never whistling in the dressing room, vitamin B-12 shots, honey and hot lemon juice, uppers, downers and grass. Some of these things may make you feel good, but none of them help you to act.

An actor must take a stance somewhere. He must decide at what level of creativity he wants to function and then use his time at the cost of success for a while, if need be, and in the face of ridicule. He must find and apply a craft until he makes it a habit, and a very dependable one. Most of the exercises have become vital techniques for *acting* therapy. Acting problems are often life problems. If you have difficulty exposing some aspect of yourself offstage, you'll have even greater difficulty exposing it on stage. Often an acting problem cannot be solved without changing something in the actor's life.

People come into the profession of acting crippled by all the taboos of our society, rules made by parents, schools and churches. All of these restrictions are anti-BEING: “Children should be seen and not heard...Don't talk back...Stop daydreaming, you're wasting time ... Be nice...Men don't cry...Nice girls don't do that...” And thousands of other instructions which insidiously corrode your freedom. As an actor you must spend the bulk of your time in the training process finding and freeing yourself.

What stops us from BEING? Consequences. Fear of ridicule. Rejection. Violation of our “image.” Longevity and position (“I've been acting so long I should be able to do more than I'm doing right now, so I have to promote the image that I'm better off than I am”). Age (“I'm too old for this experimental stuff”). Fear of failure.

Loosely defined, talent is the ability to be affected by an enormous number of things and to express imaginatively the fullness of everything you feel. But because of social pressures, we as actors have learned to accept only the positive elements of our talent and deny the negative elements. And you must not do that. As a creative instrument you cannot say, “This is okay and it's all right for me to feel that and expose that, but this other thing is not okay and it's not all right for me to expose that.” You can't do this because what happens is that you short-circuit your instrument. If you sit there and say to yourself, “I'm not going to show anybody what's going on underneath,” you've put a capper on everything you do. One expression leads to another and the minute you stop any one impulse, the flow of your BEING stops. Most people fail at the opening gun. I can tell if an actor is functioning in ten seconds, as soon as he gets up from where he's sitting. One can see either the inclusion of what's going on or the suppression of it, either the presence of life or the absence of life. Most actors are in