



DIRECTING ACTORS

A Practical Aesthetics Approach

Lee Michael Cohn



“Lee Cohn, co-author of the essential *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*, has now written an equally important book exploring the director’s process in working with actors. Cohn cuts straight through the nonsense which too often pollutes the Director-Actor relationship, and provides clear, concise, and practical tools toward the cultivation of stellar, effective performances – the heart-and-soul of any drama. Reminding us that acting choices must always serve the story, he provides directors with a workable framework for script analysis, rehearsal preparation, performance vocabulary, and real-time direction designed to ensure exciting results. In simple, straightforward prose, Cohn demystifies the process, and offers a cogent roadmap for navigating any directorial endeavor. *Directing Actors: A Practical Aesthetics Approach* is a must-read for both beginning directors and seasoned professionals, and serves as a valuable addition to the exploration of this too-often slippery topic.”

Dr. Michael Peter Bolus, PhD, *Liberal Arts Department Chair, Los Angeles Film School; author; actor, My Name is Dolomite*

“*Directing Actors: A Practical Aesthetics Approach* is a must read for directors in film, television, and theater. A clear and concise breakdown of how best to use active language when directing actors. Refreshingly ‘no nonsense’ and to the point – Lee Cohn explains exactly how to get the most from your actors and craft grounded and truthful performances. Truly invaluable.”

Maggie Kiley, *director, Dirty John: The Betty Broderick Story, American Horror Story, Riverdale, and The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*

“Lee Cohn’s frank and logical methods for directors working with actors should be required reading for anyone who plans to direct theater, film, or television. Finally, a clear-cut guide for those entering the realm of directing.”

John Putch, *veteran film and TV director, Scrubs, Cougar Town, My Name is Earl, Poseidon Adventure, and American Pie Presents: The Book of Love*

“For anyone interested in theater, reading Lee Cohn’s book on directing is like having a private conversation with a brilliant director. This

remarkable book considers the director as interpreter of the script as well as collaborator with every artist involved in the production. The advice is practical, doable, and fun. It is a candid roadmap for how a production moves from the page to the stage, and everyone – directors, playwrights, actors, designers, audiences, and even producers – will learn from it.”

Evangeline Morphos, *producer; Professor, Columbia University (retired)*

“Many moons ago Lee Cohn decided to write a book with a few of our NYU classmates entitled *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*. Over the years I have either gifted or recommended said book to actors young and old. Lee’s teachings have always been one of the sharpest and most necessary blades I carry as an actor. Mr. Cohn now gifts us with his solo effort. Read it and watch your talent grow before your eyes! Buy this book! If you can’t afford it, steal it!”

Titus Welliver, *star of Bosch, Gone Baby Gone, and Deadwood*

“Lee excels at stripping away the nonsense and delivering a set of practical tools that will help any director take their craft to the next level. If you’re a director, or thinking of becoming one, then you should buy this book. I was lucky enough to have Lee as my teacher. And now, thanks to this book, you can too. Lee’s writing is clear, concise, and absolutely crucial for up-and-coming directors.”

Jeffrey Addiss, *Emmy-winning writer-producer, The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*

Directing Actors

Directing Actors: A Practical Aesthetics Approach is the first book to apply the Practical Aesthetics acting technique to the craft of directing.

Lee Cohn lays out a step-by-step, no-nonsense methodology for the director that includes a deep dive into the mechanics of storytelling, the rehearsal process, working with writers, and the practical realities of the director's job. Featuring end-of-chapter exercises, this book provides a clear and effective means of breaking down a script in order to tell a story with clarity, simplicity, and dramatic force and gives directors a clear working vocabulary that will allow effective communication with actors. The techniques in this book are applicable to any theatrical style and any media platform in which a director might work. Written in an accessible, conversational style, this book strips the process of directing down to its most essential components to explain how to become an "actor's director."

A must-read for students in directing courses and professional directors working with actors who prescribe to the Practical Aesthetics technique, as well as anyone interested in the process of working with actors, *Directing Actors* will help directors to get the very best their actors are capable of while approaching the work with a joyful, open spirit.

Lee Michael Cohn, MFA, is an internationally acclaimed, award-winning educator, writer, director, and filmmaker. He directed *Inside Private Lives (IPL)*, the hit show that was an *LA Weekly* Pick of the Week, was recommended twice by the *LA Times*, and received a rave review in *The New York Times*. *IPL* also placed in the top ten out of over 2,000 shows at the Edinburgh Theatre Festival. Lee is the co-author of *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*, a best-selling acting textbook (over 330,000 copies sold) that is required reading in hundreds of theatre programs all over the world. He lives in Los Angeles, but please don't hold that against him.



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A Practical Aesthetics Approach

Lee Michael Cohn

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**This book is dedicated to my daughters, Danielle (“Don’t mention the war”) and Ava (“Git ’er done”) Cohn.
You are the very air that I breathe.**



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And last, but by no means least. . . Stacey Walker for championing this book and getting it in the door.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Whatever the medium – live theatre, film, television, or the latest technological marvel beaming content directly into our brains via computer, cellphone, or micro-implants – good acting is good acting, and the director's job regarding actors is pretty much the same.

This book is intended to lay out a useful, practical approach to help directors gain a deep understanding of the text and then, based on that understanding, give the actors simple, clear, and helpful instructions. You'll find many examples throughout the book taken from theatre, film, and television; the default medium is theatre, but please remember that the techniques and processes outlined herein are universally applicable. It's tiresome to write, and even more tiresome to read, constant reminders and references to every format with every example in the book. When appropriate to differentiate the needs of a particular format, I will do so, but in the main, everything in this book is adaptable to whatever medium you are working in.

Working with actors is great fun and very rewarding. I hope this book helps you achieve your creative goals with clarity and joy.

Lee Michael Cohn
Los Angeles, CA
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PART I

PREPARATION



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1

INTRODUCTION

Thanks for checking out this book. It is my hope that you find it useful, hopefully as a cut-to-the-chase guide to directing actors that will save you a lot of wasted time and energy and keep your therapy bills to a minimum. Time is your most precious commodity, and I hope this book helps you use it wisely.

So, let me answer the question that you're going to ask at some point, if you haven't done so already: *do we really need another book on directing?*

At the risk of sounding a tad immodest, I think maybe we do. At the very least, as the members of my tribe are wont to say, "Couldn't hurt."

There are a lot of very good books on directing, many of which have been in print for decades. Not to knock my predecessors – we all stand, in some way, on the shoulders of giants – but many books on the craft lean far too heavily on a theoretical/academic approach, and thus, the process often becomes complicated, cumbersome, and most importantly, *impractical*.

Actors are, in the main, very smart people; if directors lay a bunch of useless crap on them in rehearsal, they will usually nod politely (nobody wants to get fired), say something like "I see what you mean," and then, finding the direction to be vague, unhelpful, and beside the point, will go on about their business, doing the best they can to craft their performance in spite of the director's *unactable* instructions. So, we begin and

end with the fundamental idea that any piece of direction must be doable in *real time*, within the physical reality of the scene. Seems like a simple concept, no? Then why do so many directors struggle to find a way to clearly articulate the behavior they require in a given scene and, further, to help the actors create it?

Most directors simply do not grasp the fundamental aspects of the actor's craft, a condition compounded by the fact that there are so many, often competing, schools of thought on how an actor should, you know, act. (A lot of those schools of thought are, by the way, utter nonsense, but that's a topic for another day.) Directors with a theatrical background tend to fare a bit better, but most young directors coming out of film schools have neither a deep understanding of nor a genuine appreciation for what an actor goes through. (If you really want to walk a mile or two in an actor's shoes, take an acting class. It will rock your world.) Great actors always make it look easy; I assure you, it isn't.

So how does a director communicate with actors quickly, efficiently, and effectively? In order to answer that question, which indeed forms the foundation of this book, the director needs to create a working vocabulary that *any* actor can process, whatever their training and experience, and that vocabulary must arise from an understanding of the mechanics of not only acting as a singular craft but how human beings process information.

The final arbiter of good direction begins with a simple question that must be constantly, relentlessly reiterated: *is this actable?* For the less experienced director, it's sometimes hard to draw that distinction; one's brilliant literary and psychological insights into a story and the characters who populate it do not necessarily help the actor when it comes down to the nuts and bolts of actually playing a scene, and sometimes those well-intended ideas actually prevent actors from doing their best work.

This book is loosely structured like the rehearsal process. You, the director, gets hired to direct a play. (Or a movie. Or a TV show. Or a whatever. Doesn't matter. The principles herein are universal.) Whoo hoo! So first, you need to break down the material so you are prepared to begin rehearsals. You need to understand every character's *intention*, every character's *relationship* to the other characters in each scene, and how each scene fits into the overall journey of the narrative. Then, you

will sit day after day in a room with the actors, and it is your job to make sure that they supply the behavior necessary for each scene to function dramatically. *So, your understanding of the material informs every moment of the process, from the first table read to the final dress rehearsal.*

Here are a few first principles to bear in mind as you digest the information in this book:

1. *The story rules everything.* All direction to the actors, indeed all the choices made by a director, must serve the needs of the story. The director's preparation revolves around understanding the overall intent of the story and then parsing each scene into a dramatic conflict that serves that idea. (More on this. . . a lot more on this. . . to come.)
2. *The director must understand every character's intention in every scene.* If directors do not understand why each character is in a given scene and what they want, then they cannot direct the scene.
3. *Everything comes from action.* Everything – from what to tell the actors, to how to stage a scene, to costume choices – stems from the actions being pursued by the actors within the imaginary circumstances of the scene. *Everything.*
4. *Every scene must have a conflict.* Some scenes are more confrontational than others, but every scene must involve opposing forces fighting for what they want. Even in a poorly written scene, it's the director's job to tease out as much conflict as the scene will organically support.
5. *An actor can only perform an action.* All direction must ultimately be reduced to a simple, *playable* action, that is, the pursuit of a clearly defined goal. "To get a favor," "to offer an apology," and "to correct a false impression" are *common tasks* that an actor can actually perform. You can do any of them *right now*. Go ahead, give one a try. Now, actions like "to make the world a better place" or "to convert a clam into a seahorse" are notactable. Go on, knock yourself out. See what I mean?

Years ago, a teacher of mine put it like this: if you're moving into a new house, you can give the movers instructions like, "Be

careful with the big mirror” or “Put the couch against the wall and the love seat by the window.” They are simple and clear. But if you say something like “Please make me feel happy in my new home,” the movers would probably stare at you like you’re from another planet and try to get out of there as quickly as possible. Acting choices work the same way. They have to be doable *right now*, otherwise they are useless.

6. *An actor cannot perform a psychological or emotional state of being.* Any direction that asks the actor to portray a state of being will lead to self-consciousness and *indicating*. All bad acting can ultimately be reduced to indicating, which simply means that the actor is *showing* the audience what they think the character should be thinking and/or feeling. An actor’s job is to *always* pursue a singular goal (action) in each scene, not to pretend to feel or think something. Don’t ever ask an actor to “be” something; directions like “be happy,” “be angry,” or “be confused” will lead the actor to counterfeit behavior akin to their basic understanding of that particular state of being. Rather, tell the actor to *do* something. “Get a friend to wise up,” “stand up to a bully,” or “demand clarification” are much better ways to get the intended results from the actor because they are simple, outwardly directed tasks.
7. *Good direction is free of jargon.* Directors often get caught up in technical mumbo jumbo. Also, usually with the best of intentions, directors often try to speak to each actor specifically from the vantage point of that actor’s training. This often creates a “Tower of Babel effect” wherein what makes sense and is useful to one actor may be complete nonsense to another. For instance, the use of sense memory or emotional memory might work well with Method actors but be completely counterproductive with an actor steeped in Practical Aesthetics or classical British theatre training. Part of the goal of this book is to help the director create, in essence, a universal language that any actor can easily process. (For my fellow *Star Wars* geeks, the directorial equivalent of Galactic Basic.)

8. *BE PREPARED!* The rehearsal process must always contain room for the birth of new ideas and happy accidents born of the actors' spontaneity. It's important to enter into each rehearsal with a spirit of openness and exploration, but the director *must* identify the nature of the conflict in the scene and have a clear idea of what each character wants from the other. If the director doesn't understand these things, they haven't done their job, and thus they are not ready to direct the scene. Now, as Hank Williams said, "The good Lord willin' and the creek don't rise," as a director watches a scene come to life, they might have an insight that will take things in a new direction. But the director **MUST** begin each rehearsal with a clear agenda and an understanding of the mechanics of each scene.
9. *Good direction is invisible.* I once directed a show that got numerous excellent reviews and went on to win a bunch of awards. I was not mentioned in many of the reviews, so naturally, my ego was a bit bruised. *I worked my butt off on this thing*, I thought. I wanted to see my name in print adjacent to superlatives like "genius," "brilliant," and "we ought to erect a statue in Mr. Cohn's honor." And then it finally occurred to me: the fact that I wasn't mentioned actually meant that I did a good job. If an audience is thinking about the direction – the actor's performances, staging, pacing, use of theatrical elements, you name it – you messed up, my friend. The seams are showing. The audience's attention should *always* be on the story. If they are thinking of your direction, however brilliant, it means that the audience is now aware of the artifice. They've stopped dreaming the dream of the play. They've stopped living vicariously through the characters. In short, they've checked out.

And finally. . .

10. *Don't be a jerk.* Treat the actors, and everyone else, with respect. Period. Be polite and keep your hands to yourself.