

## ACTING AND HOW TO BE GOOD AT IT

By Basil Hoffman

In past reviews, I've repeatedly expressed my view that it's next to impossible to teach acting – or any other craft – through the pages of a book. At their worst, acting how-to books can confuse and overgeneralize. At their best, they can introduce ideas, provide insight, or give fresh perspective to well-worn concepts. Basil Hoffman's new book does all three.

Although it's written in the form of a question-and-answer session covering key topics, such as training and character, the book goes beyond the typical and lightweight suggestions that pepper slighter texts, digging deep into familiar concepts. While at times Hoffman's points seem to thread the needle's eye (he delves into his definition of acting as "disciplined truthful behavior in contrived situations" as opposed to the well-accepted "behaving truthfully in imaginary circumstances" and stresses the importance of playing "purpose" rather than "objective"), it's obvious he knows his stuff. This leads to my only real criticism: At times it seems as if Hoffman is so knowledgeable about the bigger acting picture that he skims crucial topics, spending his energy

instead on the finer points. For example, the idea of conflict is covered in two paragraphs, while tips on "vocality" and phrasing dialogue are spread across 11 pages. Still, this attention to detail is almost entirely refreshing.

And it's in the details that the precise, highly literate Hoffman creates a book that reads like an attention-grabbing dissertation on a fascinating subject. He treats acting with a seriousness and respect it isn't often afforded. Like a university lecture, the book requires thought and attention to digest. Those who don't enjoy thinking should look elsewhere.

Hoffman elucidates many of his ideas with examples from his own professional experience, and it's clear almost immediately that he has earned the right, through hard practice, to preach. His often high-profile successes – and mistakes – make for informative, engaging reading. While reading a book might not make you a better actor, reading this book will make you a more informed one.

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paperback, 220 pages, \$19.95  
Reviewed by Jackie Apodaca