

Stage Method: Best Acting Practices for Fame on the Stage features over 80 practical acting tips, techniques & secrets to help the aspiring actor gain fame on local stages and launch a serious acting career ahead of the rest.

**Stage Method:
Best Acting Practices for Fame on the Stage**
By David Tice Allison

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STAGE METHOD



**BEST
ACTING
PRACTICES
FOR FAME
ON THE
STAGE**

DAVID TICE ALLISON

Praise for David Tice Allison's *STAGE METHOD*

A rubber-meets-the-road book about being an actor who lives to be on stage.

"As a veteran television and film actor who cut his teeth on the stage, I'm drawn to the stage actor's experience. For years, I've been on a quest to find a book that addresses what goes through the mind of an actor as he or she stands on stage and delivers a performance. David Tice Allison's book *Stage Method* does exactly that, telling you what you need to know and, more importantly, what you're going to experience as you create and perform a role from start to finish."

Mark Atteberry, Actor
Los Angeles, CA

A book rich in lessons.

"Written from 50% experience, 50% passion, David Tice Allison's *Stage Method* is an excellent read for the emerging actor, a book rich in lessons on being thoughtful, present and generous in the craft of acting."

Craig A. Miller, Head of Directing
Assistant Professor of Acting and Directing ~ University of Idaho

An entertaining and irreverent combination of insight, observation, and laugh-out-loud moments.

"Taking the self-important air out of self-serving "acting texts," *Stage Method* is a refreshing peek behind the curtains, revealing what a successful actor does to bring a character to compelling, believable, vibrant life. It's less about theory and more about practical applications of the art and craft of acting."

Steven David Martin, Artistic Director
Raven Players; Raven Theater ~ Healdsburg, CA

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Barry Martin, Managing Director;
Lucky Penny Productions ~ Napa, CA

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"In creating a book that is as much fun to read as it is easy to understand, David Tice Allison transforms the intimidating act of stepping out on a stage into an array of attainable steps, amusing explorations, and deeply-rewarding excursions through the art, craft and magic of effective theatrical performance."

David Templeton, Playwright
(*'Mary Shelley's Body,' 'Drumming with Anubis,' 'Galatea'*)

... most useful for actors in the journeymen phase of their career.

"Not everybody has the time or the money to enroll in an acting workshop, but this book is an excellent substitute. The stories are interesting, the writing is clear, and most importantly the advice is valuable."

Rich Mehrenberg, reviewer for *Broadway World* ~ Lancaster, PA

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INTRODUCTION

You probably don't know me by name. My guess is you've never heard of David Tice Allison, theater actor and one-time resident of Northern California, but at least I'm in good company. When I first started out, I'd never heard of Uta Hagen or Sanford Meisner or Konstantin Stanislavski or Michael Shurtleff or Lee Strasberg.

I'm not comparing myself to these master thespians and teachers, mind you — I'm just saying I didn't know who they were until I discovered them. Thanks in part to many a good acting lesson gleaned from their books, I went from stumbling novice to seasoned professional in a relatively short period of time. It is my hope you'll uncover a host of noteworthy acting tips from *Stage Method*, even though its author only made a name for himself on local stages.

I'm like most every other actor working in theaters across the nation — an actor recognized on his home turf, yet a far cry from famous. I spent years in professional training and studied with some of the best acting teachers in the business. My dream was

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to chart a career as a character actor of some renown, to see my name in the opening credits in many a feature film, to recognize my face on television, a regular on some popular sitcom or drama. But I ended up on a different track. One could call it the “thin-skinned career path,” or that I took the “timidity trail,” and one would be correct in making either assessment; it was the route that avoided the brutality of “making it” in show business. Lacking the gene that allows some people to graciously overlook a surly attitude pushed in their face (*I guess that production assistant was just having a bad day ...*) or take cascades of disappointment in stride, I gave up on “Hollywood” and ultimately found my home, my place to practice my art, in the wonderful world of community theater.

So, who am I to be writing a handbook on acting? Who is this David Tice Allison, this guy you’ve never heard of before? To start, he’s a pretty decent actor, if he says so himself. He’s got a good deal of training and experience under his belt — about thirty years experience at this writing, and close to ten thousand dollars worth of training. He’s been nominated for awards and has taken one or two home with him. You could say he’s enjoyed his share of local celebrity. He’s had strangers walk up to tell him how much they enjoyed his work from some play in which they saw him perform. He’s even signed autographs — me, David Tice Allison, your average Joe Blow actor, signing programs in the lobby after a show!

With professional-level training, tempered with years spent performing on local stages, I wrote *Stage Method* ~ BEST

ACTING PRACTICES FOR FAME ON THE STAGE with community theater actors in mind. Equipped with the confidence of a seasoned actor, my mission has been to divulge everything I've come to know about working on stage — to offer a treasure trove of tips, tricks and techniques that can hone your acting skills to the brightest sheen and lead you to the heights of local celebrity ... and beyond.

True, I have yet to garner acclaim in film and television, but my years working in theater have produced a strong resume of credits and a taste of hometown fame to go with it. It's not fame in the glitziest sense of the word, but it is sweet recognition all the same. Local celebrity is intoxicating. "There he is!" a man exclaimed in a coffee shop one day. "There's the guy we love to hate!" He was referring to the fact I have found a personal niche playing villains and eccentrics. When all the heads in the cafe turned to see who this grinning, loud fellow was shouting at, I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't mortified, but one thing I can tell you for certain: the recognition didn't suck!

I haven't given up my dream of working in movies and TV. That's because I do not rate my resume of theater credits as a list with no value. I regard it, rather, as 24-carat gold. I may be a middle-aged man at this juncture in time, but because of my years spent in theater, I am far more capable of stepping into a professional acting gig now than when I was a kid — a kid with hardly a jot of stage experience to his name. It's never too late to succeed with big-time acting ambitions, and working in theater is an excellent way — the best way, I would argue — of honing your skills, in the

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meantime. Stage actors, in my opinion, make for the best actors in the world. And people get discovered off local stages all the time.

I wrote *Stage Method* to help theater actors shine on the stage, but it is a book equally beneficial to those focused on a serious career ambition in film and television. That's because, at its core, this is a book about acting — and acting is a universal medium; it's the same whether you're on stage, or in front of a camera, or standing before a microphone in a sound booth. *Stage Method* is a collection of short essays, each one covering a specific theme on the subject of acting. The chapters in this book span a modest range of topics, advancing a number of tips and techniques, along with a few inventive applications of the performance art process. I've endeavored to make my book an enjoyable read, accentuated with smart humor and wit, while at the same time delivering a collection of creative acting concepts that can boost your status on local stages or, if you have loftier goals in mind, launch your acting career ahead of the rest.

For those of you determined to one day leave home for the lights of New York City or the glitz of Los Angeles, let me assure you that even though the lessons in this book are derived from live theater productions, they can be easily applied to ambitious careers in movies and television. Again, all acting, in principle, is the same, no matter the venue.

Some of the lessons in *Stage Method* are bits of shared instruction — things I picked up from my fortunate years of pricey professional training — but mostly it's a library of subtle tricks and

techniques (and a few admonitions) that came to me organically over the years, as I advanced as an actor. Even though you may never have heard of this stage actor, David Tice Allison, I am confident you will come away having learned a thing or two from his book — a few inventive performance tips, a handful of methods for taking command of the stage, a sampling of secrets, a few smart techniques for memorizing your lines. *Stage Method* is also a beneficial handbook for actors living in urban parts of the country, where community theaters may abound but industry-level acting training is not readily available.

Before I set you loose, I should explain how I've structured the book. The chapters are laid out in a logical progression, in four parts:

- I. IN THE BEGINNING
- II. THE AUDIENCE IS WATCHING
- III. THE KID'S ACTING
- IV. GOOD CONDUCT

Essays about the rehearsal process come first and flow naturally into the next section covering performance. After that comes a section addressing bad acting habits (no acting book worth its salt would be complete without a few chapters on *this* subject), and following that are a few essays about proper conduct in theater. Finally, almost as an appendix entry, I've compiled a list of 16 tips and tricks for memorizing lines in a script.

I should also point out, this is *NOT* a textbook on actual stage craft. In fact, the reader is presumed to know the core basics of

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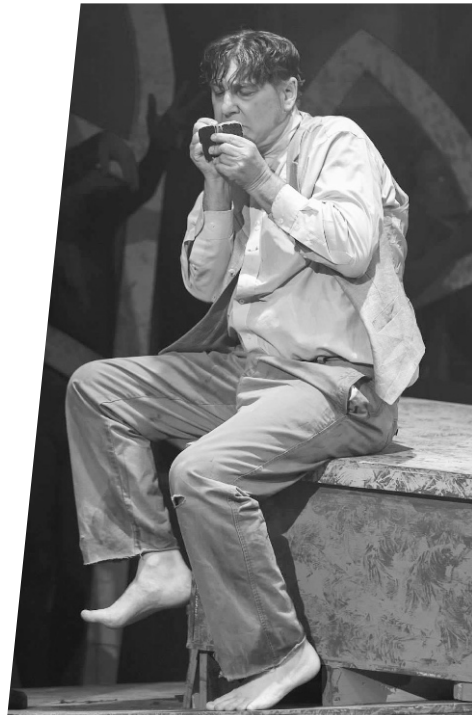
theater: the difference between stage left and stage right, for example, the difference between upstage and down.

On the stylistic end, I have opted for the grammatical choice of writing in the traditional, masculine person, mostly using the words *he*, *him* and *his* to represent personal pronouns. That duly stated, I have endeavored to equally employ the feminine *she*, *her* and *hers*, and you'll also note a dash of the common gender-neutral pronouns *they*, *them* and *theirs*.

The examples and techniques I share in *Stage Method* are pooled from a cross-section of stage plays in which I have participated in one fashion or another. In order to best illustrate the lessons in this book with helpful examples, I have cited instances of my own performances on stage, most of the time naming the very plays in which I had occasion to engage a particular tip, trick or method. You may notice I cite some of the same plays over and over again. Lest you think my actor's resume is sorely lacking in volume, the cross-sampling of stage plays merely represents my best work, the shows from which I was able to derive my best personal acting epiphanies — epiphanies I will share with you in the pages to follow. I should also note that even though the business of live theater broadly includes the production of musicals, and that one can easily adapt the lessons presented in *Stage Method* to those concerns, this book focuses exclusively on acting as it pertains to dramas and comedies — in other words, on acting as it relates to stage plays.

I guess I should also confess, I am a horror film fanatic and aficionado of the supernatural, as well as a long-time student of the science of mind. In this book, you will encounter more than a few allusions to classic horror movies, ghostly phenomena and metaphysics — all of these references having some kind of bearing on acting, of course. In tying up this brief introduction to *Stage Method* ~ BEST ACTING PRACTICES FOR FAME ON THE STAGE, I'll note that except for calling out the names of famous actors here and there in order to shore up a point, I have not mentioned the names of my theater colleagues — this, to protect their privacy.

And now, as Dracula spoke to Renfield, "I bid you welcome ..."



David Tice Allison as Renfield in "Dracula"
Photo by Ray Mabry

THE TRICK TO MEMORIZING TRICKY LINES

The best technique for tackling stubborn lines is the use of free association.

Let's say you're in a show and have a ten-minute monologue to deliver. Painstakingly rehearsed, all your lines memorized, you perform the monologue flawlessly on stage every night. Now, here's a question for you: why is it that you have no problem memorizing this three-page monologue but a tiny, no-brainer bit of dialog in a later scene — something like, “Kindly pass the butter beans ...” — refuses to embed itself into your memory banks?

No one knows why some lines are harder to wrap the mouth around than others. You might as well try explaining why some people pick up foreign languages easily and others do not. Fortunately, there are hundreds of creative ways to tackle lines that resist

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memorization. The most reliable technique I know is a free association technique.

When I was working my way through college, I signed up for a bartending school that used mnemonics as a system for memorizing drink ingredients. A mnemonic is a pattern of words that assists you in recalling a specific thing. For example, in this class, we'd link the popular liquor shot, Kamikaze, with the following word association: "Very Tragic Landing." The first letter of each word represents an ingredient: V for Vodka, T for Triple Sec, L for Lime.

The concept of mnemonics was the only useful instruction I took away from that bartending school, but it came in handy when I became an actor. In a scene from *Key Exchange*, my character, Philip, is giving his girlfriend a back massage. She complains about her shoulders being tense, full of knots. My line in response to her was: "You can't build up knots like these over night."

But I simply could *not* get the damn line down!

Ninety-nine out of one-hundred actors would have absolutely no problem with that line, but for me it was agony. Thinking back to my bartending days, I gave the mnemonic word trick a go and hallelujah! It worked!

My personal method of using mnemonics to remember vexing lines isn't proprietary. I'm sure other actors have come up with the same kind of idea, but here's how my own process works: when you come across a line that refuses to roll trippingly off the tongue, or rejects your efforts to memorize it, clear your thoughts and allow

your mind to feed you a free word association. In other words, let your mind serve you up a mnemonic.

Now, here's the *trick* to the trick — don't think something up, let something be thought up for you. Then, accept the very first association that pops into your head. When I used a word association for the problem line in *Key Exchange*, the first image that bubbled up in my mind's eye was the face of the iconic comedy actor, Don Knotts. And the very next association my mind spun up was a tableau: that of a Hollywood agent working to *BUILD UP* the acting career of Don *KNOTT'S*, because you *CAN'T BUILD UP KNOTT'S OVERNIGHT*.

Pretty strange, wouldn't you say? I certainly thought it was, but the mnemonic worked like a charm, and perhaps on some sublime level it *was* a charm. The next time I went up against that troublesome line, the freaky word association popped up in front of me like a Post-It note in my mind's eye, and I delivered it flawlessly.

Then the perfectionist side of me entered the picture. I found this "Build up Knotts Overnight" abstraction a bit too corny for my stuffy tastes, so I began toying with different word associations, things that would garner the same happy result without sounding too silly to my ear. I tried out a number of more-stylish, more-poetic word associations and soon discovered they didn't work anywhere near as well as my original mnemonic. In fact, they pretty much failed. The only thing that *did* work dependably was that crazy Don Knotts inference. I went back to it, lesson learned, and experienced no more problems on stage from thereon out.

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Since that day, whenever I use a mnemonic to help me over the hump of a stubborn word or line, I go with the very first thing that comes to mind, no matter how ludicrous it seems. For some reason, the first word association to come through turns out to be the one that works best, even if it's the craziest damn thing you've ever had sail through your head. Leave the original mnemonic alone, just leave it be. Let it be weird. Resist the urge to gussy it up or make it more stylish. Sometimes — often times, actually — weird is better!

ACTING HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH WORDS

Emotion can be expressed in more ways than just the spoken word.

Boris Karloff was once asked if he ever regretted playing the monster in the 1931 classic horror film, *Frankenstein*. It was a role which made him famous but also type cast him to play villains for the rest of his days. He answered in his soft, gentry English voice which carried just a touch of a lisp. “Certainly not,” he replied. “I love the monster. The monster gave me a career.”

Another interesting bit of Hollywood trivia actually feeds into the subject of this chapter: it was Bela Lugosi, later to be immortalized as Count Dracula, who was first offered the signature part in *Frankenstein*, but he turned it down. Why? Because the monster had no speaking parts.

I studied with the respected acting teacher, Ed Hooks, for a number of years. It was Ed who pointed out one of the most vital

truths I've ever come to know as an actor. Acting has very little to do with words. This holds true for everything, even stage work, a province that relies on the spoken word to drive the story.

The way I came to learn this lesson was, in a word, humiliating. Ed had assigned my scene study partner and me a scene to rehearse and present the next week in class. I was irked to discover my part had only a few lines, all of them umbrella reactions like: "Yes, I know," or "Okay, I will." My scene partner, on the other hand, had plenty of lines to deliver and a nice monologue to chew on! I openly bitched about this seeming injustice, and Ed Hooks scolded me in front of the class for my hubris. "Acting has very little to do with words," he remarked.

I smile now, thinking that had Ed been around in 1931 to advise Bela Lugosi on having been offered the role of *Frankenstein*, Mr. Lugosi would have found himself on the business end of the same rebuke: "Acting has very little to do with words, Bela," he would have told him. Ironically, Lugosi eventually *would* play the Frankenstein monster, though it would be in a silly, down-market franchise flick called *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman*. Perhaps it was kismet that Lugosi didn't take on the original *Frankenstein*, as he wasn't very good at playing that kind of role. It didn't match his character blend, something I discussed at length in an earlier chapter.

Acting, at its core, is a demonstration of emotion, and emotion can be expressed in more ways than just the spoken word. One needs look no further than Showtime's *Ray Donovan* for a great example

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of this lesson. Liev Schreiber plays the title role of a Boston-raised street thug turned problem fixer for celebrity big shots. It is a rare occasion, indeed, when Ray needs to explain himself with more than one or two words. Usually, he gets his point across just by saying, “Sure.” *or* “No.” *or* “Touch her again, I’ll break yer fuckin arm.” Schreiber is superb in his role. He doesn’t need a lot of lines to convey his intentions; they are easily discerned in his eyes and in the way he carries himself.

True, it is classic internalizing for the camera, the technique by which an actor working in movies and television condenses his emotions for the all-seeing camera lens. But the film actor still must be connected to the scene. If he isn’t taking things in, if he isn’t allowing his feelings to envelop and influence him, if he isn’t making choices and formulating intentions, there’s nothing to capture on film except vapid facial expressions, no matter how fancy the Arriflex lens package.

In the stage production of *The Grapes of Wrath*, I played Connie, young husband to Rose of Sharon. In terms of stage time, I was in just about every scene for the first half of the play, but as for actual lines, I only had a smattering, and most of them were simple utterances composed of five words or less — things like, “I’ll get ‘er done!” and “You got to!”

I’d be a liar if I said I wasn’t discouraged when I read the script for the first time and noted how little Connie was given to say, but the censure I received in that long-ago Ed Hooks scene study class

still rang clamorously in my ears. Determined to put this principle into practice for the first time, I accepted the role, and over the course of the show discovered an oasis of interesting motivations, activities and reactions for Connie to swim in — all without saying a single word. The role of Connie was technically an ensemble part, when you considered how few lines were written for him, but my work in *The Grapes of Wrath* remains one of my prouder moments, mainly because I found dozens of creative ways to prove the great performance moral I learned years before, that acting has very little to do with words.

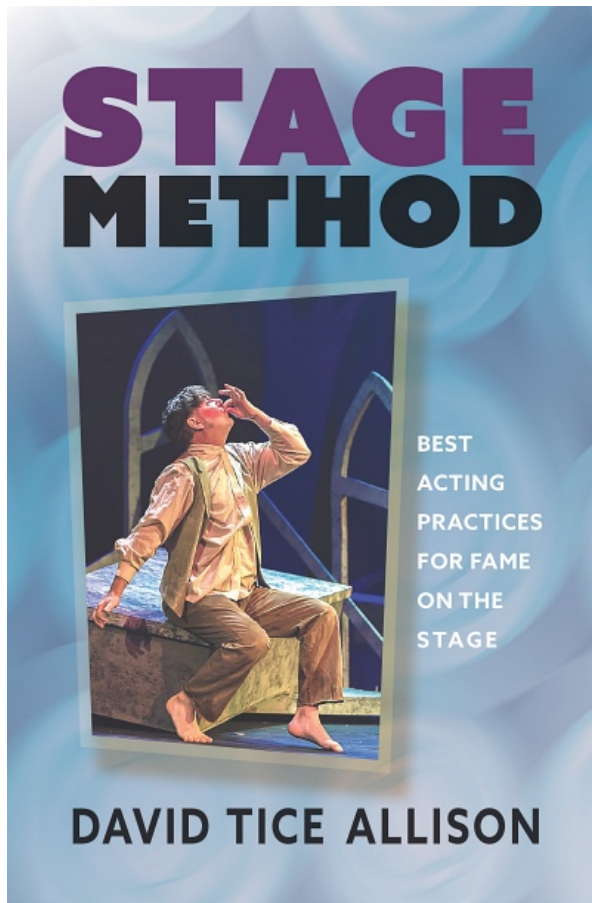
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Tice Allison is an American author and actor with decades of stage experience and years of professional acting training. He is the author of the acting handbook, *Stage Method*, the metaphysics titles, *Zen of the Absolute Nobody* and *The Prove Me Now Principle*, and the collection of humorous essays, *Is It Good?* An accomplished photographer and graphic designer, Mr. Allison lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.



CHECK OUT THE AUTHOR'S OTHER BOOKS
www.DavidTiceAllison.com





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