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METHODS

A Journal of Acting Pedagogy



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***An Actor's Task: Engaging the Senses*
by Baron Kelly**

Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2015

Reviewed by Melissa Miller

Directors, teachers, and aspiring performers will find Baron Kelly's *An Actor's Task: Engaging the Senses* full of both innovative and familiar acting exercises. Though Kelly does not espouse one particular method, his detailed and manageable collection of warm-ups, group activities, and improvisational etudes explores a broad spectrum of actor training, synthesizing many commonalities among popular techniques. Kelly pulls from numerous foundational acting coaches including Constantin Stanislavski, Sanford Meisner, Uta Hagen, and Michael Chekhov. The result is a sort of "greatest hits" compilation, a handy guide to turn to when seeking inspiration or fleshing out lesson plans. Part performance manual, part instructor toolbox, *An Actor's Task* is a convenient reference tool for any theater practitioner.

In the preface, Kelly identifies his aim: to present a series of exercises "for students to develop a creative imagination, an ability to observe, to concentrate, and to communicate as well as to cultivate expressive tools, such as movement, speech, and voice" (xi). Delivering on this promise, Kelly presents over 100 neatly packaged and thoroughly explicated exercises for the actor. Complex concepts such as breath control, emotional memory, concentration, and imagination are explored systematically and succinctly. Exercises are grouped categorically into six distinct chapters. At the end of each exercise, Kelly poses what he refers to as "self-monitoring" questions to the performer. These guide reflections, encourage active engagement, and imply an aggregate accumulation of knowledge and skill.

Though *An Actor's Task* is primarily a collation of existing technique, Kelly's focus on self-monitoring sets his book apart from similar works such as *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*. A clear and concise focus on studio-style activities grounds Kelly's book in

its classic actor training style. This author describes his theatrical exercises in such a way as to be easily understood by the theater novice. At times, this tone establishes *An Actor's Task* as a bit basic or elementary to experienced artists. However, as a potential introduction to acting textbook or high school acting handbook, *An Actor's Task* could replace or supplement staples such as Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* or Hagen's *Respect for Acting*. Kelly has effectively repackaged the exercises popularized by the great acting coaches, eliminating outdated references to Laurence Olivier and Laurette Taylor (of whom very few students have heard in 2017), and instead, providing a methodical how-to outline of the actor's process.

Kelly's writing is most compelling when he allows his own philosophy on acting and actor-training to emerge. *An Actor's Task* is primarily an activity reference manual, codified by theme into brief chapters. Yet Kelly deftly includes his own opinion on what he deems to be the actor's task as well. Kelly speaks from a well-deserved place of authority as both an Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and the Director of the African American Theatre Program at the University of Louisville. He claims in the book's introduction that his is a script-centered approach to acting—the actor serves the playwright. His point of view on this subject is consistent, though the majority of the foundational exercises explored are technique-oriented and do not utilize script work. In his chapter on voice, Kelly describes the actor as a unique sort of athlete, requiring practice, training, and discipline. Later in the same chapter, he simplifies the performer's job: "In short, acting is about being affected and responding" (33). These brief insights into Kelly's own acting opinions and principles help bring voice to a book that would otherwise be an anthology of technique.

Though Kelly does well to interject his own thoughts into the material presented in *An Actor's Task*, the book contains very little in terms of concrete acting theory. Though this is helpful in keeping the tone of the book accessible rather than academic, the lack of context could leave newcomers with many practical applications, but

little background knowledge. While the brevity of *An Actor's Task* is appropriate, perhaps some additional narrative linking the studio activities to stage performance would enhance the applicability of Kelly's text.

An Actor's Task codifies the countless laboratory exercises rattling around in the brains of acting instructors. Having this book on the shelf will simplify the syllabus organization of any performance teacher. Kelly offers his readers a take-what-you-need approach to actor training, including suggestions for open scenes, improvisation self-starter templates, and modifications for exercises based on experience level and class size.

In some cases, these exercises would benefit from an explanatory video of examples, since multi-layered, multi-step exercises are difficult to articulate in writing (perhaps in Kelly's second edition, an accompanying DVD could be included). However, Kelly accomplishes his goal of creating an actor- and teacher-friendly workbook. *An Actor's Task* affords opportunities for actors both diving into initial exploration and those looking to enhance existing skill-sets. Kelly's book is engaging, informative, and thoroughly useful.