



Working on her inner monologue: Gwyneth Paltrow in the feature film *Proof*.

# On camera

## *A lesson in film acting for students of theatre*

BY NANCY BISHOP

ACTOR TRAINING at the high school and college level has long been focused on theatre acting. Yet the vibrant images of film and television have a far more profound impact on our students' lives. Why should we introduce screen acting into the curriculum? First, because the study of screen acting excites and motivates students. I couldn't get my class interested in Shakespeare until we watched a modern film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Baz Lurhman's exhilarating images genuinely piqued their interest and made them want to leap onto the screen with Leonardo DiCaprio.

Second, studying film from the other side of the camera—that is, as an actor—fosters an appreciation for the subtle art of film acting. Despite the fact that we are estimated to have watched at least 20,000 hours of television by the time we graduate from high school (DePaul University studies indicate that the average child watches around four hours of TV per day), students have precious little opportunity to actually delve into this art form. Studying screen acting gives students the ability to manipulate the medium rather than being manipulated by it. Plus, there are students who simply soar in front of the camera. These may be the same students who struggle to project their performances into a large theatre space.

Finally, learning the basics of film acting will prove a huge advantage for students who are serious about continuing in the performing arts, because screen work composes a giant proportion of available jobs. Certainly, not all of our students will be film stars, but a career in screen acting is potentially more lucrative than one onstage. There is also a multitude of media jobs, broadcasting for example, that require on-camera skills.

In this article I suggest some straightforward ways to integrate the camera into the drama classroom. It's an ideal teaching tool, even if the focus is theatre performance. Since the camera picks up so much subtle detail, it is particularly useful in helping students discover inner focus. The camera also offers a unique opportunity for studying internal monologue, since we can observe the detailed nuances of inner thought processes much more easily onscreen than onstage.

When you begin to consider how a unit on film acting would actually work in your class, bear in mind that, with the advent of inexpensive digital camera and computer editing equipment, more and more students are pursuing film making on their own. An entire film acting course could easily be woven into a student produced and directed film project.

If you consider yourself a technophobe, don't worry. Operating a video

camera is as simple as snapping a photo. (For some basic camera tips and terminology, see page 21.)

### Making the leap from theatre to film

Generally speaking, a good theatre actor is a good film actor. Therefore, the main concepts studied in theatre apply to film acting as well: actors must play the objective of the character first, and they must ask the basic questions such as “Who am I?,” “Where am I?,” “Who am I talking to?,” and “What do I want?”

It’s impossible to comprehensively cover the vast subject of film acting in an article of this length, so here are three key points that can be taught in an effective introductory screen acting unit.

On-camera work can motivate students to:

- Develop a strong inner monologue.
- Approach acting internally, and express thoughts through the eyes. This helps actors find inner focus and eliminate extraneous and distracting gestures.
- Listen, and react. Listening (rather than speaking) is half of acting.

Before moving into these specifics, you might want to begin your film unit by asking the students what the differences are between theatre acting and film acting, and which form they think is harder. Some students will say that screen acting is easier since you get more than one take. They might be surprised when they get in front of the camera themselves and realize how difficult it can be. Conversely, others might believe that acting out of sequence (as films are rarely shot in sequence) makes screen acting harder. William Defoe observes, “I’m somewhat satisfied by saying that acting for film is like a musician playing in a recording studio and acting in the theatre is like playing live in concert.”

After you’ve established everyone’s perceptions of both kinds of acting, offer a basic overview of the differences. To wit:

In the theatre, the actor must project to the stalls in order to be seen and heard. In film, the actor lets the cam-



The author (behind the camera) and her students in a recent casting workshop in London.

era come to her. If the actor has a secret, the more interesting the performance becomes. Actor Michael Caine says it very well in his book *Acting in Film: An Actor’s Take on Movie Making* (Edited by Maria Aitken, Applause, 1990): “The camera doesn’t have to be wooed. It already loves you deeply.”

There is also a difference in focus. Often it’s said that theatre acting is “bigger” than film acting, or that film acting is “smaller” or “scaled down.” These terms are misleading. I generally find there are two opposite extremes in screen acting and they have to do with focus. There is over-acting and conversely there is what I call *dead face*, which I’ll talk about in detail in a moment. It just takes practice and time watching oneself on the screen for the beginning actor to find the right balance.

Now let’s move on to our three lesson areas (two of which are illustrated in the exercises on page 22).

#### The inner monologue

While “less is more” is often a good adage, directing student actors to do “less” sometimes leads to the opposite extreme. In film acting, I use the term *dead face*. While over-acting is the

camera’s worse nightmare, dead face is, well, deadly. Dead face is a face with no expression, because the actor is not thinking in character and the mind is not engaged; in other words, there is no inner monologue.

Over-acting occurs when an actor mugs (makes faces) and uses excessive gesture. It means that the actor is trying to “show” the audience what a character is feeling. This performance is not grounded in truth and believability, and is poor acting in both film and theatre.

The way to avoid both dead face and over-acting is by developing and concentrating on the inner monologue of the character. The concept of an inner monologue is immediately recognized once students have the opportunity to see themselves on screen. I teach a class on casting technique for film. One of the best examples that I show is a casting tape in which actor Patricia Netzer auditions for the role of Sophie Gerlich in the TV film, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil*. Sophie Gerlich is the wife of imprisoned and later executed Nazi critic Fritz Gerlich. The scene is set in a church. It is her wedding day, and her husband isn’t there. She’s waiting for him. The camera stays on her face while she waits, and we clearly



Acting with the eyes, with little or no dialogue: at left, Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson in *Lost in Translation*; above, John Cazale and Al Pacino in *The Godfather*.

see her thoughts. She is focused on a specific inner monologue: “*Where is he? Will he come? Damn him! He’s always late. Well, of course he’ll come, but why must he embarrass me? Is this the way it will always be? Work before me?*”

Because she is thinking in character, her mind is active, and her thoughts are engaged. It works the same way in life—when we are concerned, it shows on our face. We don’t always know what someone is thinking, but we ask “a penny for your thoughts” when we can see the wheels turning in someone’s head.

Actors Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson must make use of the inner monologue technique constantly in the film *Lost in Translation*. Entire scenes go by with little or no dialogue. The film opens with Bob (Murray’s charac-

ter) in a limousine in Tokyo. He looks out the window and takes in the scene. We don’t know exactly what he’s thinking, but he reacts specifically and with variety to the sights of Toyko. Scene after scene, the camera focuses on Murray when he has no dialogue. He lies in bed, he watches TV, he sits in the bath.

Similarly, Johansson’s character, Charlotte, is introduced not with words but in a silent scene. She sits in the window of her hotel room, looking out on Tokyo. She watches her husband sleep. She tries to wake him up. Charlotte and Bob don’t even have dialogue together until halfway into the film. Much of their acting leading up to their meeting has been in silent scenes where they develop the inner thoughts of the characters. Feelings of emptiness, loneliness, and dissatisfaction with their spouses bring them together.

The film *Proof* also opens with a moment of inner monologue. The camera is on Catherine, played by Gwyneth Paltrow, as she is watching TV. Her face fixes in a troubled stare. We soon learn that she is not watching TV, but rather mourning her father’s death. Paltrow must keep an active inner monologue, as she plays a woman who sees the ghost of her father. She is constant-

ly on the edge of mental breakdown, and contemplating her own sanity.

Sometimes the inner monologue runs counter to the character’s lines. For example in *Proof*, Catherine mopes in the corner while her sister Claire (played by Hope Davis) socializes with old friends. While Claire’s dialogue is friendly, we know she is not even listening to her friends’ banter. Claire’s gaze flits to the corner, where her disturbed sister lurks. Claire’s inner monologue fixates on concern for her sister. In her mind she is thinking, “*Is Catherine okay? Why does she mope in the corner? It’s so typical that she doesn’t mingle with the guests.*”

The internal monologue is a technique that theatre actors must employ as well, but the camera acutely registers the character’s thoughts in great detail. In a film closeup, for example, all the actor has to do is *think* it and the viewer will know; the camera exposes all. Michael Caine summarizes as follows: “A film actor must think his character’s most private thoughts as though no one were watching him.”

### Acting in the eyes

If there is one trick in film acting, it’s to keep the acting in the eyes and not in the face. It’s amazing how little a

proficient film actor expresses in the face or forehead. The acting is in the eye, which can become as large as eight feet wide on a big screen. More and more I find myself coaching actors with the instruction to “keep the acting in the eyes and not in the face.” You might be asking at this point, “How *does* an actor keep the acting in the eyes and not in the face?” It sounds like a ridiculous direction, but as a piece of side coaching I find that it works. If the actor concentrates on communicating with his eyes, then it follows that he will. Getting the brow unfurled is only a slight adjustment and it’s about awareness. If there is any physical tension, actors will see it immediately when they watch their scene played back.

For an example of active acting through the eyes, take a look at *Silence of the Lambs*. Jodie Foster finds a calm stillness when she portrays Starling, but you can see the fear in her eyes even in the movie stills. Once students have watched their own work a few times, they will quickly realize that camera acting demands a different physicality than stage acting. To start with, they will have to squeeze together artificially close. A grown man wouldn’t think of sitting on another man’s lap, but in order to get both characters into a single camera shot, that is practically what he must do. Observe, for example, the shot of Al Pacino and John Cazale in *The Godfather* on the opposite page. If they cozied up together

so much in real life, we’d think they were life partners.

An actor is often working in a very confined space, limited by an even more confining camera frame. In a close up, even a blink registers as a ten on the Richter scale. So there is a certain amount of stillness required in film acting, especially in a closeup. During a Jackie Chan Kung Fu sequence, the camera naturally pulls out to encompass the action. For dialogue scenes, the camera moves in and, if the actor moves his head, he could easily pop right out of the shot.

### Listening

While listening is important in theatre acting, I would argue that it might be even more crucial in film acting since

## Tips for using the camera

### Setting up the shot

Before you do anything, pick a good spot to do all or most of your shooting. Rule of thumb: shoot in a quiet, carpeted room, with a solid-colored wall as background.

I find that the best way to shoot actors is in a medium, over-the-shoulder, two shot. In a nutshell, what that means is a two-actor scene in which the camera shoots from behind Actor B’s shoulder onto Actor A. In other words, we are essentially looking at Actor A from Actor B’s point of view. The photo at right illustrates this shot.

Medium refers to the shot size, of which there are three:

- Closeup—shows only the face.
- Medium shot—taken from the waist up and shows half of the actor’s body.
- Wide shot—taken from far away and shows the actor’s whole body.

You set the medium, over-the-shoulder shot up by having Actor B sit or stand at eye level with his head very near the camera lens. Actor A then talks to actor B and we have the best three quarters view of Actor A’s face. Then we turn around and shoot the scene the

other way, over Actor A’s shoulder so that we can see Actor B.

While the over-the-shoulder two shot is effective, shooting every scene this way can get boring, and in truth, you wouldn’t shoot a whole film this way. There may be students in the class who want to play with the camera angles, pans, and moving shots, etc. This kind of experimentation is great for a more finished and edited project if you have students interested in completing an entire film but for the purposes of teaching acting, the two shot works best because it displays the actor. To get a better feel for how the two shot will work with your students, check out the third exercise in the sidebar on page 23.

### Lighting the scene

Many principles of theatre lighting apply to “gaffing” (the technical term that just means lighting) a film shoot. To eliminate shadow, use two light sources which cross one another, set on the subject. The sources are best when they are slightly diffused with a simple filter (or a white reflective umbrella works too).



LOUISE BOLTON

Film 101: An example of a medium, over-the-shoulder two shot.

### On sound

Unless you have a fairly advanced camera, you will probably need an external microphone that plugs into the camera. Set the mic on a stand near the actor. If an external mic is not available, bring the camera very close to Actor A (the featured actor) so Actor B’s voice doesn’t take over the scene.

### Playing the scenes back

All you need is a TV monitor. There is a simple cord that plugs into the camera and connects to the TV monitor. Any TV that can connect to a VCR can also connect to a camera with an adaptor. Make sure you test your equipment before class, of course.

—N. B.

# Three film acting exercises

## Exercise one: Listen to the story

This exercise de-emphasizes the importance of speaking and helps the actor develop an inner monologue. It also demonstrates the power and effectiveness of listening, and orients actors toward working in front of the camera, easing them into feeling comfortable onscreen.

*Step 1.* One actor stands off camera and tells a story (see the example below). The camera shoots the actor who is listening. The featured actor does not speak, but merely listens and reacts silently. The featured actor need not “show” that she is listening, or “show” her reactions. If she is truly listening and thinking, the camera will pick it up. Note that the more specifically the listening actor reacts to the story and the more variety of responses she offers, the more interesting the performance becomes.

It is important to do the exercise without rehearsal. Shoot the first take so that it's fresh.

It is best to choose a story that will impact the actor who is listening. Here's an example: Actor A (the featured, listening actor) is a nightclub owner and Actor B is the manager.

Actor B (this can be improvised), says, “I'm sorry, but I have to tell you something difficult and I'm glad you're sitting down. Last night at your nightclub there was a loose wire behind the DJ equipment, and it caught on fire. We tried to use the fire extinguishers but the fire still got out of control and by the time the fire department came... well, it was too late. You've lost everything. The club is gone. The good news is that no one was hurt.”

*Step 2.* Now go a step further. Actor B will tell the same story, but this time Actor A will react differently because Actor A will have a

secret. Actor A can choose the secret, or the teacher says: “Now you react differently. You are overjoyed by the fire. You hated the club, and you're so happy to be rid of it and to be able to collect insurance, but you don't want Actor B to know you feel this way.” (It can be even more fun if the instructor whispers these instructions to Actor A so that later the class can guess the secret.)

*Step 3.* Here's an even more complex twist to our story. The teacher informs Actor A that she *started* the fire. But she needs to hide the fact from Actor B.

The entire exercise is completed without the featured actor speaking. It can go on ad infinitum, with different internal responses each time. It can also be filmed at different distances to see the difference in what the camera picks up in closeup as opposed to wide angle. Now look at the takes and watch.

The teacher can ask the class the following questions:

- What was effective about this performance?
- Was she really listening?
- Was she acting in the eyes?
- Was the actor thinking in character?
- Was there a strong inner monologue?
- Could we see what the character was thinking? (It's not actually important that we know exactly what she was thinking but that we see the wheels turning in the head.)
- Did the actor have dead face? (No inner monologue.)
- Did she have a variety of specific responses?

## Exercise two: “Over There!”

This exercise is intended to help actors practice and develop their ability to communicate feelings with the eyes.

The now defunct theatre group, New Crimes of Chicago, pioneered a very distinct, commedia dell'arte performance style, wherein the actor would face off directly with the audience, looking straight into an individual spectator's eyes. Their training sessions challenged actors to express strong levels of emotions, direct them through the eyes, and send them to the audience. The New Crimes commedia dell'arte was a highly physicalized form of theatre, accompanied by a thumping rock and roll drumbeat. It seems strange that this style could be useful for film actors. Yet many of the New Criminals, such as John Cusack, Jeremy Piven, and Tim Robbins, have gone on to have fantastically successful careers as film actors. Why? Because they learned how to communicate with their eyes. (Raw talent and hard work has something to do with it too.)

In the New Crime training sessions they embraced the four primary emotions—sadness, anger, happiness, and fear—and pumped them up to an optimum high intensity.

In this style of theatre, the actor must at all times be in a heightened state of one of these emotions.

I developed this approach into a film acting exercise called “Over There” and it works like this:

Set up the camera and mark a spot next to it at eye level. The actor you shoot points at the spot and says “over there.” She does this four times, once each for the four emotions listed above. The first time she is pointing to something that is incredibly sad. She must imagine something that is the saddest thing in the world to her, a dead child, a burned down home, etc. The second time it will be something that makes her incredibly happy like her soldier husband, thought dead, returning home safely. The actor continues through this process, point-

ing to something that makes her angry, then something that prompts fear.

It is fun to have the class line up next to the camera, come onto the screen once, say “over there,” then go around behind the camera again, each time choosing a different emotion until everyone in the class has circled around the camera, appeared in frame and said “over there!” four times with the four different emotions. Watching the results is often amusing or moving.

Here are some questions that you can ask:

- Were the actors at a heightened state of emotion? If you were measuring on a scale of one to ten, was an individual all the way at a ten?
- Did the actors communicate clearly with their eyes?
- Was it clear what they were feeling?
- Was it interesting to watch and was it effective?
- What do actors need to work on to improve communicating with the eyes?
- Which emotion was the most difficult to express?

As a follow up, repeat the exercise but with an objective instead of an emotion. For example, instead of expressing sadness, an actor can choose to play the objective “I want to kill you” with his eyes.

### Exercise three:

#### Movie scenes in two shot

It’s important that fledgling film actors learn how to create a strong human relationship in the intimate frame of the camera. A good way to do this is to let your students choose actual movie scenes written for two actors. It’s best to choose scenes with very little action, where the emphasis is on human relationships. Many screenplays are available in bookstores or online. The most effective way to shoot these scenes is the over

the shoulder medium two shot (explained in the camera tips sidebar). Shoot one actor, then turn the camera around to shoot the other, so when you play the scene back, the class is only watching and evaluating one actor at a time. If you decide to shoot two actors simultaneously in the same shot, they will need to cheat toward each other in a way that might feel very unnatural for anything other than a love scene. If they sit at a normal (non-intimate) distance apart on a couch or across a table, they will seem miles away from each other on-screen.

When preparing the scene the actors should ask the following questions:

- Who am I? (Notes about the character.)
- Where am I? (It makes a difference if they are outside or inside. Are they in an intimate place or on a busy street?)
- Who am I speaking to? (Usually one character needs something from the other.)
- What do I want? (Play the objective of the scene.)

For critique purposes, I usually watch the scene all the way through and give the actor the chance to self-critique first. Encourage the students to find positive aspects of their performance, as well as at least one item they would change to strengthen the work.

Here are some evaluation questions:

- What was the character’s objective?
- Was he playing the objective clearly and directly?
- Did the actor make strong choices? Surprising choices?
- Was the actor playing subtext?

–N. B.

there is less text. Theatre tells the story with words; film narrates with images. Ask students to pay attention to this in the movies they watch: *How often is the camera on the person who is listening rather than the person who is speaking?* Listening is interesting. Ask your students if they can listen with their eyes. Listening and reacting in character is at the heart of effective screen acting.

Patrick Tucker in *Secrets to Screen Acting* (Routledge, 2003) notes that “The viewer does not want to know how the [speaking] person feels about something she has just said. They want to know what the other person feels about it... this is the unknown in the scene.”

An actively listening performer does not have to worry about dead face. As a casting director, I have many times witnessed a common phenomenon; an actor speaks very animatedly but listens like a zombie, simply waiting for the other actor to finish her lines. The camera is particularly unforgiving of this error. Students instantly grasp the importance of listening in camera work. Their progress as listeners will carry over to their stage work as well.

I’ll return to the example again of the TV movie *Hitler: The Rise of Evil*. We chose Patricia Netzer for the role of Sophie Gerlich almost exclusively because of her superior listening skills. In her casting tape, she simply listened and silently reacted to a page of dialogue spoken by Hitler and Gerlich. The director knew he’d always have a place to put the camera.

### Potential problems with the camera

The camera presents some potential problems that your students will have to overcome. It may not be a fast friend. Expect plenty of self-conscious screams: “I’m so fat!” “My face looks like an asteroid hit it!” High school students and young adults may approach the camera with trepidation. Warn your students beforehand by reminding them of the following:

First, the camera does in fact amplify. The old adage that the camera adds ten pounds is true. Second, unless the scene is especially well lit, the camera may enhance skin imperfections. On a

professional set, cinematographers and gaffers are hired specifically to make actors sparkle and shine with magic lighting. Post production artists sometimes even tune up shots digitally, removing unattractive lines and dark circles that the make-up artists miss.

There are actually people who look better on camera than in life, but mostly it's the other way around and the students will feel better if they realize this. Try to get your students focused on the work itself and *not* their appearance.

A second problem with working with the camera is more theoretical: How does it affect students' acting

when they watch themselves from the outside? Will it make them unnecessarily self-conscious? If you've spent the whole semester trying to get students to let down their inhibitions, will a brief unit in film acting just counteract your efforts?

The camera does make actors conscious in a new way. It helps them realize how they hold their face, and the way the tension finds its way into a wrinkled brow or twitchy nose. To cultivate this awareness is a positive step for a beginning actor. It's useful to become aware of mannerisms and ticks that might be getting in the way of effective work—that annoying little eye-

brow raise, that twisted mouth, etc. Film acting is not appropriate for all classes, of course, so use your judgment. I think you will find that most students share a great enthusiasm for the medium. And once they experience acting in front of camera, they'll never watch a film the same way again.

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