SOFTWARE & TECH

Acting One Robert Cohen

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Introduction to Acting One by Robert Cohen

For decades, aspiring actors have turned to **Acting One by Robert Cohen** as a foundational guide to the craft. This respected textbook, now in its fifth edition, has become a staple in university drama programs and independent acting workshops alike. Cohen, a distinguished professor emeritus at the University of California, Irvine, brings decades of teaching experience and practical insight into every chapter. The book is designed not just to teach technique, but to instill confidence, creativity, and a deep understanding of the actor's process. Whether you are a complete beginner or a seasoned performer looking to refine your approach, *Acting One* offers a structured, accessible pathway into the world of performance. In this article, we will explore the core principles of the book, its unique methodology, and why it remains an essential resource for acting students worldwide.

The Core Philosophy of Acting One

Robert Cohen's approach in **Acting One** is grounded in the belief that acting is both an art and a craft—one that can be learned through systematic practice and thoughtful exploration. The book emphasizes that acting is not about pretending to be someone else, but rather about revealing authentic human behavior under imagined circumstances. Cohen introduces the concept of "acting as doing," where the actor's primary task is to pursue specific objectives in every scene. This action-oriented mindset helps actors move away from self-consciousness and toward genuine engagement with their scene partners.

Key Concepts: The GOTE Method

One of the most distinctive features of **Acting One by Robert Cohen** is the GOTE method—an acronym that stands for Goal, Obstacle, Tactic, and Expectation. This simple yet powerful framework helps actors break down any scene into manageable, actionable components. Let's examine each element:

- Goal: What does your character want in this scene? The goal must be immediate, specific, and playable. For example, "I want to convince my partner to stay for dinner," not "I want to be loved."
- Obstacle: What stands in the way of achieving that goal? The obstacle creates dramatic tension. It could be another character's resistance, an internal conflict, or a physical barrier.
- Tactic: How will you overcome the obstacle? Tactics are the specific actions you use to get what you want—such as pleading, accusing, teasing, or seducing. Changing tactics keeps the scene dynamic.
- Expectation: What outcome does the character foresee? Expectation drives the character's emotional journey. When expectations clash with reality, powerful moments of discovery occur.

The GOTE method aligns perfectly with Stanislavski's system and Meisner's repetition exercises, yet it is presented in a format that beginners can grasp quickly. Cohen encourages actors to write down their GOTE analysis for every scene, making the abstract process of character building concrete and repeatable.

Structure and Content of the Book

Acting One by Robert Cohen is organized into 16 chapters, each addressing a fundamental aspect of acting. The progression is logical, moving from basic principles to more advanced techniques. Early chapters cover relaxation, concentration, and sensory awareness—building the actor's instrument. Mid-chapters delve into script analysis,

character development, and scene work. Later chapters explore improvisation, vocal production, and physical movement. The book also includes a generous selection of scenes and monologues for practice, drawn from both classic and contemporary plays.

Notable Chapters and Their Highlights

Chapter 4, "The Actor's Instrument," is particularly valuable for its practical exercises on breath control, vocal resonance, and physical alignment. Cohen emphasizes that the actor's body and voice are the primary tools, and they require constant maintenance. Chapter 7, "Playing Actions," expands on the GOTE method by teaching actors to choose strong, playable verbs for their tactics. Instead of "be sad," an actor might choose "to mourn" or "to withdraw." This shift from adjective-driven acting to verb-driven acting transforms performances from passive to active.

Chapter 11, "Working with a Scene Partner," addresses the collaborative nature of theatre. Cohen stresses listening, responding, and adapting—skills that many beginners overlook. He provides exercises for building trust and spontaneity between partners. Chapter 14, "Rehearsal and Performance," offers practical advice on how to prepare for opening night, from blocking to costumes to handling nerves. Throughout the book, Cohen includes "Try This" exercises that invite readers to immediately apply the concepts.

Why Acting One Stands Out Among Acting Textbooks

There are many acting textbooks on the market, from Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* to Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*. What makes **Acting One by Robert Cohen** unique is its accessibility. Cohen writes in a conversational, encouraging tone that demystifies the craft without dumbing it down. He uses examples from his own teaching career to illustrate common pitfalls and breakthroughs. Moreover, the book is designed for a classroom setting—each chapter includes discussion questions, recommended exercises, and objectives for instructors. This makes it a favorite among teachers who need a clear, structured curriculum.

Integration of Diverse Techniques

Rather than advocating a single "system," **Acting One** synthesizes multiple approaches. Cohen draws from Stanislavski, Meisner, Chekhov, and even Eastern performance traditions. He acknowledges that different actors respond to different methods, so he presents a toolkit rather than a dogma. This eclecticism is refreshing and practical, especially for students who may go on to work with various directors and coaches. For example, the chapter on character includes both external approaches (costume, voice, posture) and internal approaches (emotional memory, subtext).

Practical Applications for Actors in Training

One of the most valuable aspects of *Acting One* is its emphasis on application. Every concept is accompanied by exercises that can be done alone or with a partner. Many of these exercises are designed to be performed in a class setting, but they can also be adapted for self-study. For instance, the "GOTE Analysis Worksheet" at the end of the book provides a template that students can photocopy and use for every scene they work on throughout their training.

Using Acting One for Self-Study

Even if you are not enrolled in a formal acting class, **Acting One by Robert Cohen** is an excellent resource for self-directed learning. The book's structure allows you to progress at your own pace. I recommend reading one chapter per week and spending the rest of the week doing the exercises. Find a monologue or a short scene from the

book's appendix, then apply the GOTE method to it. Record yourself performing and evaluate honestly. The key is to practice consistently, just as you would practice a musical instrument.

For those with access to a scene partner, the collaborative exercises in Chapter 11 are exceptionally rewarding. They teach you to listen actively and respond truthfully, which are the foundations of naturalistic acting. Many actors report that working through **Acting One**with a partner accelerated their growth more than any other single experience.

Critiques and Considerations

No book is perfect, and **Acting One by Robert Cohen** has its limitations. Some advanced actors may find the content too introductory—the book is, after all, intended for first-year students. The scene selections, while diverse, favor Western dramatic literature, and there is less emphasis on film and television acting techniques. Cohen also does not delve deeply into emotional recall or psychophysical approaches, which are covered in other texts. However, these are not flaws so much as boundaries of scope. *Acting One*is precisely what its title promises: a first course. It lays the groundwork for further study.

Another consideration is that Cohen's method, while practical, may feel somewhat mechanical to actors who prefer a more intuition-based approach. The GOTE method structures creativity, which can be either liberating or constricting depending on your personality. I advise reading the book with an open mind and adapting whatever works for you. Cohen himself encourages this: "Take what is useful and leave the rest."

Conclusion: The Enduring Value of Acting One

Acting One by Robert Cohenremains a cornerstone of acting education because it combines rigorous technique with genuine warmth. It demystifies the art of performance without stripping away its magic. For the beginner, it provides a clear roadmap. For the instructor, it offers a reliable curriculum. For the seasoned actor, its exercises can serve as a refreshing reset when you feel stuck in habitual patterns. The GOTE method alone is worth the price of the book—it has liberated countless actors from self-indulgent choices and directed them toward truthful, dynamic storytelling. If you are serious about learning to act, or if you want to deepen your understanding of the craft, start here. Read a chapter, do the work, and discover why generations of actors have trusted Robert Cohen to guide their first steps onto the stage.

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