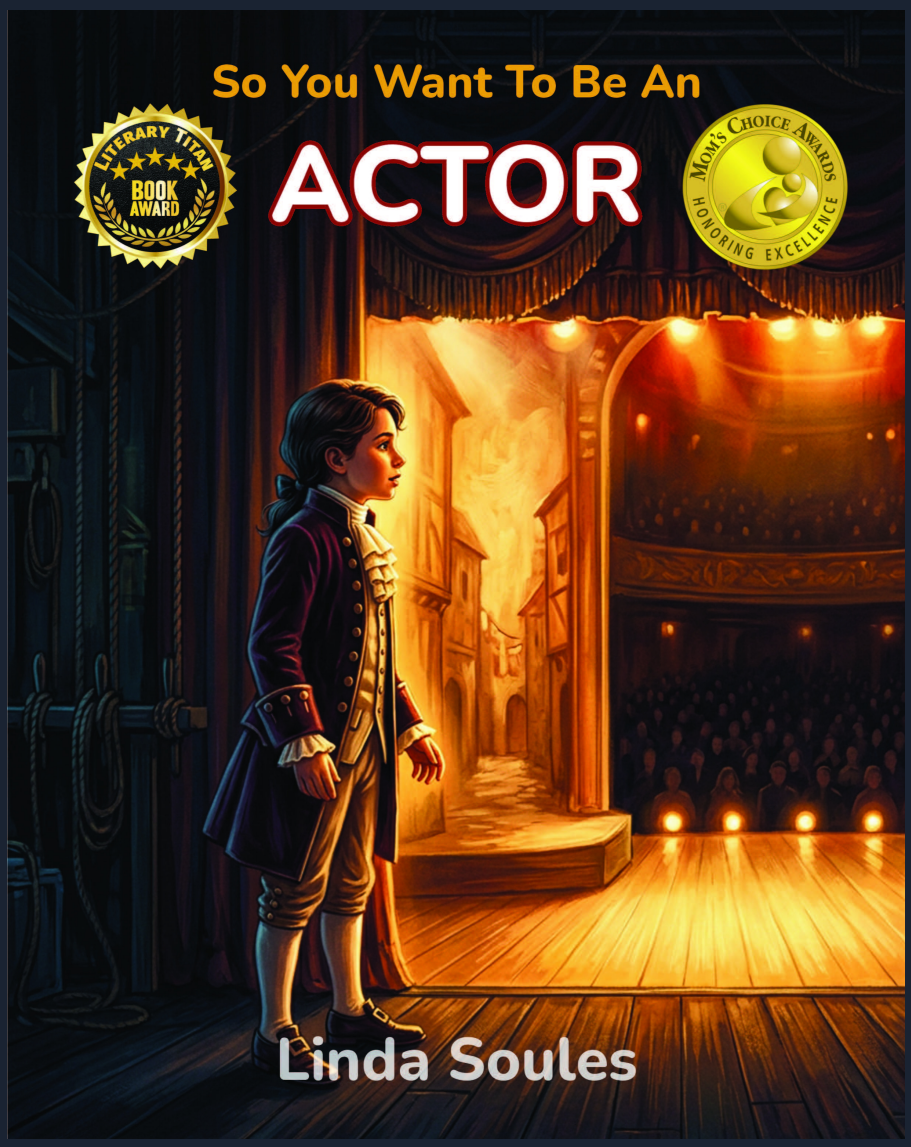


So You Want To Be An Actor

Linda Soules

BookGist Summary

So You Want To Be An Actor

by Linda Soules

Genre: Children's Nonfiction

Key Takeaways

• Acting is more than performing lines: it means researching a character, understanding what they want and fear, and creating a believable inner life.

• Most of an actor’s work happens before an audience sees the performance. Script analysis, rehearsal, memorization, physical preparation, and collaboration build the work.

• Empathy is an actor’s central tool: actors seek the internal logic of people whose lives and choices may be very different from their own.

• Theater and film call for overlapping but distinct skills. Live performance depends on reaching an audience in the room; film often rewards small, precise details that the camera can capture.

• Rejection, unpredictable income, and stage fright are persistent realities of an acting career. Resilience means continuing to prepare and work despite frequent noes.

• Fear can be turned into energy and focus rather than eliminated, while emotional self-care helps actors sustain vulnerable work over time.

• Actors work within a collaborative team that includes directors, scene partners, coaches, casting professionals, designers, crew, and audiences.

• Young aspiring actors can begin now: audition for local productions, read scripts aloud, observe people, watch performances closely, and practice monologues or self-tapes.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is best suited to young readers curious about acting, especially those around ages 10–14, along with parents, teachers, and mentors exploring creative careers with them. Aspiring performers will find practical first steps—auditions, script reading, observation, monologues, and self-tapes—alongside a candid account of rehearsal, collaboration, rejection, financial uncertainty, and emotional demands. Readers who are not sure they want to act can still take away useful ideas about empathy, listening, observation, and understanding other people. Unlike a narrowly technical acting manual, this is an inviting career introduction that connects the craft to its human purpose and gives a realistic picture of life beyond fame. It does not replace formal training or detailed audition instruction, but it offers a thoughtful starting point and points readers toward further resources. Its strongest appeal is to anyone who wants both the inspiration and the honest context needed to decide whether acting might be a path worth exploring.

Chapter Summaries

The Actor's Craft and Working World

The book presents acting as the creation of a complete person, not an imitation or a recitation of lines. Actors repeatedly study scripts to discover a character's history, desires, fears, and obstacles, then use imagination, research, emotional preparation, and physical choices to bring that person to life. Rehearsal is a process of experimentation: actors and directors test choices, discard what feels false, and look for moments when the character's thoughts seem to arise naturally. The performance may look effortless, but that ease rests on sustained preparation. The work changes with the setting. In theater, actors perform live, responding to an audience whose laughter, silence, and attention vary from night to night. In film, a small shift in the eyes or a pause can carry meaning because the camera sees details that a theater audience might miss. The actor's tools include the script and pencil, research, costume, voice, body, concentration, imagination, and empathy. Practical preparation—such as learning how a profession works or how clothing affects movement—helps make a character specific.

Rewards, Challenges, and Acting Methods

A central reward of acting is the moment when preparation gives way to genuine presence: the actor is no longer demonstrating a character but responding as that person might. Connection with a scene partner can create unscripted discoveries—a laugh, a silence, or a reaction that feels alive. The book also describes acting as a way to help audiences recognize feelings they may have struggled to name. A moving performance can make someone feel understood and less alone. The profession also demands a clear-eyed view of difficulty.

Actors commonly face far more rejections than job offers, and even experienced performers may feel nervous before stepping onstage. The book suggests learning to use that fear as energy rather than expecting it to disappear. Financial uncertainty is another lasting challenge; many actors combine performance work with other jobs, and a meaningful career does not necessarily bring fame. The discussion of Stanislavski distinguishes his technical approach—using circumstances, objectives, and scene beats—from Lee Strasberg's later Method, often associated with drawing on personal emotional memories. It also emphasizes that stage and screen acting are not identical disciplines.

A Day at Work and the People Around You

An imagined workday shows how much of acting happens away from the spotlight. An actor might read a scene aloud at home, research the sensory details of a character's life, attend a table read, work with a movement coach on an injury or distinctive walk, and run lines to ensure they can respond naturally from any point in the scene. The example of researching a 1970 marine engineer illustrates the goal: not to recite facts, but to bring specific, believable details into the performance. Acting is collaborative at every stage. Directors guide the production's vision; scene partners make the shared work possible; casting directors connect performers with roles; and dialect, movement, and costume specialists help shape a character. Teachers and acting coaches can identify habits an actor might not notice, while agents help represent them professionally. The audience is also part of the collaboration, meeting the performers' work with its own imagination. Trust between scene partners, built through rehearsal, can make a performance feel spontaneous and responsive.

Empathy, Character, and the Actor's Qualities

The book describes acting as a way audiences can safely encounter difficult emotions and unfamiliar lives. A story may help a child begin to understand separation, or give people a way to see experiences beyond their own. Theater and film can contribute to public understanding, communal grieving, or the processing of trauma. By repeatedly taking other perspectives seriously, actors also practice empathy as a life skill; acting is framed as "becoming human in front of other humans." The qualities that support this work include deep empathy, physical awareness, attentive listening, resilience, and an ego that serves the story rather than personal vanity. A character's body can communicate before the dialogue does, so actors learn to notice posture, gestures, and movement. Listening means allowing a partner's words and actions to change the moment instead of merely waiting to speak. Resilience means continuing to say yes to the craft after rejection, while artistic bravery includes being willing to look awkward, frightening, or unglamorous when that is what the role requires.

Unexpected Skills and Stories from Acting History

A career in acting requires skills beyond performance. Auditioning is its own craft: performers prepare short pieces, make choices quickly, and present themselves through headshots and

reels. The book advises actors not to dismiss the business side of the profession, since artistic ability alone does not guarantee steady work. Physical understanding of emotion also matters: fear, for example, affects breath and posture, and a convincing performance often begins in the body rather than in a displayed facial expression. Observation is another form of ongoing training. Watching how people hold a cup, move through a room, or hide a feeling gives actors a growing store of human behavior to draw on. Brief profiles of Viola Davis, Charlie Chaplin, and Meryl Streep illustrate different paths and strengths: Davis's acclaimed career and public voice, Chaplin's ability to tell stories through movement, and Streep's meticulous preparation. Historical and popular facts add context, from early Shakespearean actors working with only their own lines to the theater ghost light and the importance of voice acting.

Getting Started and Exploring the Career

For readers who want to try acting, the book recommends starting with accessible opportunities: audition for a school or community production, read scripts aloud while playing every role, and keep imaginative play alive. Watching performances with an actor's eye can turn entertainment into study: notice how a performer uses voice, face, body, and timing to shape a response. A people-watching journal and regular reading can help build a store of observations and characters for future work. The closing sections invite readers to consider whether they enjoy stories, attentive listening, emotional openness, and the challenge of entering another person's perspective. A glossary explains practical terms such as audition, callback, blocking, cold read, motivation, and rehearsal. Further suggestions include memorizing a monologue, recording and reviewing a self-tape, and working backstage to understand the full production. The author's note also stresses emotional care: actors need to learn to visit intense feelings for a role without remaining trapped in them, making self-management part of a sustainable career.

Notable Quotes

> *"The performance — the part the audience sees — is the smallest part of an actor's work."*

> *"The secret isn't getting rid of the fear; it's learning to use it."*

> *"Fame is the exception. The craft is the career."*

> *"The listening is where the acting lives."*

> *"The actors who last are the ones who keep saying yes to the work even when the work keeps saying no."*

> *"At its deepest level, acting is not performance at all. It is empathy made visible."*

"Taking care of the person inside the performer is not a weakness. It is what makes the work sustainable across a lifetime."

Full Summary

Acting begins long before the audience sees a performance. The visible moment may look spontaneous, but it is built on research, imagination, physical preparation, and emotional work. An actor does not simply speak lines convincingly or copy someone's mannerisms. The task is to create a whole person, with a history, inner life, desires, and fears, and to make the words seem to come naturally from that person.

That process starts with reading the script repeatedly, approaching it almost like a detective. Who is this character? What do they want most? What are they afraid of? What happened before the story began? Actors examine the circumstances surrounding each scene and look for the intention beneath every line. They rehearse for weeks, working with a director and fellow performers, testing choices and discarding those that do not feel true. They decide how the character moves, speaks, gestures, and breathes. Memorizing the lines matters, but the deeper work is learning the character's thoughts and making them available in the moment.

Rehearsal is where much of a performance is made. The cast explores scenes, tries different approaches, and discovers what gives each moment its particular life. Sometimes, after many repetitions, something shifts: the actor's posture changes without conscious effort, or a familiar line suddenly carries its full meaning. A scene partner responds; the director leans in. For a moment, the actor seems to disappear and the character arrives. That experience cannot be forced, but preparation makes it possible.

The search for a character also requires empathy. Actors try to understand the internal logic of people whose choices may seem foreign or even incomprehensible to them. The goal is not to imitate a character from the outside, but to inhabit that person's perspective and discover why they behave as they do. Across a career, this repeated effort to imagine other lives can deepen an actor's understanding of the wide range of human experience.

The work changes with the place it is performed. In theater, an actor plays before a live audience, and each performance is different because the audience's response changes. A laugh may arrive unexpectedly; a sudden silence may make the room feel as if everyone is holding their breath. There is no screen between performer and audience, and that immediate exchange is central to live acting. The backstage world has its own routines and atmosphere, from costumes and makeup to stage management calling cues.

A film set, by contrast, may contain dozens or even hundreds of crew members, while the actor works within the small, specific space framed by the shot. Film often depends on tiny moments: a glance, a pause, a slight movement of the eyes. The camera can catch details a

theater audience may not see, so screen acting calls for truth and precision on a very small scale.

Actors' tools include both practical techniques and inner capacities. A script marked in pencil becomes a working document: actors underline important words, note intentions, and identify the beats where something changes. Analyzing what a character wants and what obstacles stand in the way is a technical skill developed through practice. Research also matters. Someone preparing to play a doctor, soldier, or historical figure needs to learn the particulars of that life. Costume can help too: wearing a character's clothes may change an actor's posture, movement, and sense of who they are.

The voice and body are essential instruments. Stage performers use breath work, articulation, movement, and projection to make a performance reach the back row. Actors pay attention to how a character walks, holds their hands, and uses their eyes, because the body can tell a story before dialogue begins. Imagination, emotional memory, and concentration help an actor live inside the role rather than merely pretend. These internal tools develop over a lifetime and are never completely mastered.

For many actors, the greatest reward comes when preparation fades and they find themselves living inside a scene. The character is not someone to display but a person to discover, somewhere in the actor's own experience or imagination. When the actor's truth connects with the character's, audiences may forget they are watching a performance. That connection can make a stranger feel recognized and less alone. Actors also value the discoveries that happen with scene partners: an unexpected response, a silence that lasts longer than planned, or a moment that grows out of genuine attention to one another. The excitement lies partly in what cannot be completely rehearsed.

The difficulties, however, are persistent. Rejection is a defining feature of many acting careers. For every part offered, many capable performers hear no, and an actor may need to prepare seriously, audition fully, receive rejection, and then keep going. Stage fright is common even among people who have performed for decades. The aim is not to eliminate fear but to carry it onto the stage and use it as fuel, turning nervousness into energy, focus, and presence.

Unpredictable income is another reality. Only a small portion of people pursuing acting work regularly, and even established performers may go through long stretches without a job. Many professional actors have other work alongside their careers. A great many build meaningful lives in regional theater, touring companies, educational theater, or voiceover, without becoming famous. Fame is unusual; the craft itself is the career. Anyone considering acting needs to understand the financial, scheduling, and psychological uncertainty that comes with it.

One surprising part of the craft is how often acting methods are misunderstood. Konstantin Stanislavski, the Russian director whose ideas shaped much Western actor training, did not teach actors simply to “become” their characters. His approach offered a careful, repeatable process: identify the given circumstances, or facts of the scene; define the character’s objectives; and break the scene into units and beats, smaller sections in which something changes. The American Method associated with Lee Strasberg was a particular adaptation, not the same technique Stanislavski taught. Strasberg encouraged actors to draw on real feelings from their own past—perhaps grief or heartbreak—and bring them into a role. Some performers went further, remaining in character away from the set or changing their bodies to pursue authenticity.

Film acting has its own demands, and the most successful screen performances do not always come from the approaches taught in acting schools. The camera rewards subtlety and can reveal minute expressions that would be invisible in a theater. Some compelling film actors have had little formal training but are naturally truthful in front of a camera. Theater and film share important foundations, yet they ask for overlapping rather than identical skills.

A working day makes the actor’s preparation concrete. At nine in the morning, the work might begin at home with a script and a scene. The actor reads it aloud, then reads only their own lines, then only the other character’s, noticing where their character listens as closely as where they speak. Listening is not empty time between lines; it is part of the performance, because what a character receives can alter what they say next.

At eleven, research can take the actor into a life far from their own. If the character is a marine engineer in 1970, two hours might be spent learning the particular details of that work: what it smelled like, what the tools weighed. The point is not to gather facts to announce in the scene, but to find sensory details that can make the character’s world tangible. At one-thirty, a table read brings the actor together with the director and two cast members. They speak the lines slowly, listening to how one voice meets another and where the scene moves—or seems to need something more. Notes are made in pencil, ready to change as the work develops.

By four, the preparation may be physical. If the character has an injury that affects their walk, an hour with a movement coach can help the actor build that physical reality into their body. The aim is to make the choice available without having to think through every step the next day. At six-thirty, a memorization run-through tests not whether the lines have been learned, but whether they are instantly accessible from any point in the scene, in any direction. Then it is early to bed, because the next call time is five-forty-five in the morning. The audience may see only the finished moments, but behind them are hours of attention, practice, and adjustment.

No actor builds those moments alone. A director holds the production’s vision and helps shape each performance in relation to the story as a whole. Fellow cast members are scene

partners, and the quality of the work between them may matter more than what either actor can do in isolation. A casting director helped bring the actor to the role; dialect and movement coaches can help locate the character's voice and body; and a costume designer can offer another route into the part. An acting teacher or coach may remain a resource across a career, noticing habits the actor cannot see and naming something they did without realizing it. An agent represents the actor, finds auditions, and advocates for roles.

In the daily life of a performance, though, the scene partner is often the person who matters most. Two actors who trust each other can take a scene somewhere neither planned. A laugh may arrive unexpectedly; a silence may last longer than it did in rehearsal; both performers may become so present that they forget the camera is there. That trust takes days of rehearsal to earn and can be spent in seconds. When the exchange is alive, the audience does not have to choose which actor to watch. Its attention can move between them, following the relationship as it changes.

The audience, too, is a collaborator. Its imagination meets the actors' work and helps complete the story. In a theater, people may laugh at a moment the performers did not expect, or hold a silence so fully that the actors feel the room listening. Each audience brings its own response, and the performance becomes an encounter rather than a delivery. The story is made in the space between those showing it and those receiving it.

That encounter can matter well beyond the room. People arrive carrying the ordinary burdens of their lives: work stress, worry, or a recent argument with a friend. For a while, they enter someone else's troubles. When the lights come back on, their circumstances may be unchanged, but their perspective may have shifted. A play or film can give audiences a safe way to approach emotions before they meet them in their own lives. A child watching a character say goodbye to a best friend who is moving away can, in a small way, practice for a parting of their own.

Stories also open a path into experiences audiences might otherwise never encounter. Plays and films have helped change public opinion by making unfamiliar lives emotionally immediate. Theater has helped soldiers process trauma, communities grieve, and children understand difficult feelings through fictional situations. An actor's work can let someone recognize a feeling they had carried without words, and feel less alone with it. Acting is not only the creation of a character; it can be a way of making human experience visible to other people.

Empathy is therefore more than a useful quality. It is the ability to inhabit another person's experience rather than merely imitate it. An actor needs to understand a character's history, fears, and reasoning well enough to make that person feel present and particular. The character's choices may be unlike anything the actor would choose, but the task is to search for the logic that makes those choices possible from inside that life. Empathy does not mean

approving of every action. It means taking seriously the inner world from which the action arises.

The actor also needs complete physical awareness. A character begins telling a story before speaking: in the way they walk, hold their hands, or use their eyes. Movement training develops a wider physical vocabulary, while close observation of real people helps the actor notice how different lives shape the body. The aim is not to decorate the dialogue with gestures. It is to let the character's physical presence carry meaning of its own.

Listening is performance, too. A scene feels real when the actor is genuinely receiving what the other person says, rather than waiting for a cue to deliver the next line. Being changed or surprised by a scene partner allows the exchange to keep unfolding in the moment. The actor's attention must stay on the other person and on what is happening now.

And then there is the long yes inside the daily no. Most acting lives involve far more preparation and auditions than booked roles. The actor must be able to work seriously, perform fully, hear no, and still walk into the next audition room ready to try again. The actors who last keep saying yes to the work even when the work repeatedly turns them down. Just as important is an ego that serves the story rather than personal vanity: the willingness to look unglamorous, ridiculous, or frightening when that is what the character requires. That willingness lets the performance serve the truth of the role.

That commitment to the story depends on skills an actor may not expect to need. Auditioning is its own craft: an actor may have two minutes to make an impression on strangers who decide quickly. Headshots must communicate something before the actor speaks, and a reel must show a range of work. Treating the business side as beneath the art can make it difficult to find work; mastering both helps sustain a career. Actors also learn to read emotion physically. Fear alters breathing, posture, and pace; joy changes the body in other ways. Finding an emotion in the body, rather than merely displaying it on the face, can make a performance feel lived rather than demonstrated. And ordinary life becomes research. Watching how someone holds a cup, how a couple disagrees without raising their voices, or how a teenager walks differently when friends arrive builds a storehouse of human behavior. The most attentive actors keep adding to that storehouse, while reading widely gives them more imagined lives to draw upon.

The history of acting offers striking examples of what preparation and observation can make possible. Viola Davis grew up in extreme poverty in Rhode Island and became one of America's most celebrated actresses, winning an Emmy, an Oscar, a Tony, and a Grammy. She has spoken publicly about race, poverty, and Hollywood's responsibilities, while commanding the stage. Charlie Chaplin also came from poverty: as a child in London, he spent time in the workhouse. He went on to become the world's most famous performer, creating the Little Tramp, a poor but graceful and dignified man struggling to survive in a world

that keeps knocking him down. Chaplin made audiences understand the character through gesture and movement, even when they did not speak the same language.

Meryl Streep has received more Academy Award nominations than any other actor in history. She has played real and invented people, in comedy and tragedy, and in multiple languages. To portray a Holocaust survivor, she learned Polish phonetically; native speakers on set reportedly could not tell that it was not her first language. The depth of such preparation can look like effortless talent, but it is the result of sustained work. A very different story concerns Dustin Hoffman, who stayed awake for three days to portray an exhausted character. His co-star Laurence Olivier reportedly asked, “Have you tried acting, dear boy? It’s much easier.”

Other bits of acting history reveal how the craft and its customs have changed. Shakespearean actors in the 1500s often received only their own lines, along with cues, rather than the full script; the word “cue” is said to come from a Q written in the margin. The first Academy Awards, held in 1929, lasted just fifteen minutes, unlike today’s ceremony, which runs for hours and reaches tens of millions of viewers. The body itself can carry history: performers portraying people from another era may spend months learning how armor changes a knight’s walk, or how a 1950s secretary might sit and hold a cigarette. Acting also extends far beyond the visible screen. Frank Welker, a voice actor, is identified as the highest-grossing actor in history, with animated films earning an estimated eight billion dollars worldwide. And in theaters, a single bare bulb called a ghost light is left burning on the empty stage overnight so no one will trip in the dark. Legend says it also lights the way for the ghosts of past performers.

For someone curious about acting, the first step does not have to be grand. Audition for a school play, drama class, or community theater; show up even if nervous. Read scripts aloud, trying every part, and ask of each character what they want and what they fear. Play make-believe, invent stories, and act out scenes: imaginative play exercises the same muscles professional performers use. Watch plays, films, and television with an actor’s attention, noticing how a face, voice, or body creates a feeling. Keep a journal of people observed in daily life, and read stories widely; each character can become part of the actor’s store of experience. Fear before a first audition is ordinary. The important thing is to go anyway.

Other small exercises make the work more concrete. Memorize a sixty-second monologue so it is ready when an audition calls for one. Record a scene on a phone and watch it back; self-tapes are common in film and television auditions, and seeing oneself can reveal what the face is actually doing. Work backstage on a show, helping with props, lights, costumes, or a quick change. Actors who understand the work around them can better appreciate the whole production. Students can also explore the International Thespian Society, including its Junior Thespian groups, and find nearby open auditions through the American Association of

Community Theatre. The Dramatics student website and Theatrefolk's free acting materials offer exercises and advice; the American Theatre Wing's documentaries show performers, directors, and crew describing their work. Books about young actors, theater productions, and acting history can provide another way to explore.

The questions an actor returns to are simple but demanding: What does this character want most, and what are they afraid of? How can this moment feel real after a hundred rehearsals? What is true about this person that can be found within me? A person drawn to stories, attentive to other people, and willing to be emotionally vulnerable may find acting worth pursuing. The work can teach a person to understand what someone else is feeling, but that openness needs care. Repeatedly entering grief, rage, or fear can leave an actor raw; the skill is to visit an emotion without moving in, and to close the door carefully afterward. Protecting the person behind the performance is not weakness but part of making the work sustainable. The stage asks an actor to bring a whole self, and in return offers a place to make human experience visible to others. Somewhere, a ghost light still burns on an empty stage, waiting for someone to step out and give the darkness a story.

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