ACTOR -- Goals
An actor’s goal is to communicate a character to an audience. This is the only necessary and defining aspect of theatre. All other artists, including the playwright, serve primarily to aid the actor in this central goal. At the Renaissance, commedia dell’arte actors improvised an full-length play with every performance, based on a framework of a plot, as in the picture. Secondary actor's goals are to entertain an audience and to function as part of an ensemble.

Audiences judge an actor’s performance by several criteria, all of which are dependent on theatrical and other social conventions. Today, in most kinds of performances, we say that an actor whose performance we enjoyed was “believable.” This means that his or her actions, movements, and voice were appropriate to the character, plot, and performance style of the play. When we consider virtuosity in acting, we tend to think of actors’ abilities to transform themselves, so that they appear substantially different from role to role. In some performance styles, virtuosity depends on other aspects of an actor’s performance; for example, a musical comedy actress such as Carol Channing does not transform herself significantly from role to role, but she delivers songs and dances that are tremendously entertaining.

The actor’s secondary goals are also important. First, an actor’s performance should draw audience members into the theatrical illusion being presented on stage. The energy projected by the actor begins the cycle of feedback described in the last section: the live audience responds to the actor’s performance and the actor in turn adjusts his or her performance in response to the audience. Second, since acting is usually a group art form, the actor must work within stylistic constraints established by the playwright and director, and the actor must work effectively with the other actors in the cast. We often refer to “chemistry” between actors or a “strong ensemble” when many actors work together effectively.

Tools
An actor’s tools are unusual among artists. Whereas a painter’s tools are his watercolors, brushes, and paper, and a pianist’s tool is her instrument, an actor has no tools but him or herself. An actor uses voice, body, and mind/spirit to create a character. Like the pianist or other performing artists, the actor is usually an interpretive artist, meaning that the actor is part of an interpretation of a primary artist’s work -- in this case the primary artist is the playwright. Because an actor is usually interpreting a role written by someone else, the play text is also a tool for character creation.

The actor usually begins with an analysis of the play: he searches for all clues about the character’s past life, present actions, relationships with other characters, and function within the plot. From there he can begin to create the character. Anything not supplied by the playwright directly is up to the actor’s imagination.

The actor then uses her own body, voice, and mind, adapting aspects of herself to become the character. The actor may alter her voice by varying her pitch range, dynamic range, timbre, and tempo or by speaking with a dialect.

The actor will also use his body in ways specifically chosen to express his character. He will select gestures, postures, and movement patterns that may be different from his own. Some of these physical aspects of the character may be determined by the customs of another historical time; for example an upper class, male character from the English Restoration may gesture with a handkerchief or fan for effect, carry a snuff box, and stand with his legs turned out at a ninety degree angle and the weight resting slightly into one hip. A woman, like this character played by Ann Bracegirdle, might carry a handkerchief of parasol, but her posture would be similar to a man’s.

The character’s mental processes are also important; these include thoughts, emotions, and psychological traits. Analysis of what a character says and does in the script of the play will be an important beginning for an actor in finding her character’s “inner life”.

Actor’s Processes
An actor’s process can be considered in two ways: 1. the general training process for an actor, and 2. the specific rehearsal process for a given play.

1. Most actors in the United States today have been trained to use a process of character creation called “The Method.” This process is based on the groundbreaking work of the Russian actor and director Constantine Stanislavsky (see image). The American Method is distinct from Stanislavsky’s work, however, mostly because of the difficulty publishing and traveling between the USA and the USSR.
during the early years of the Soviet regime. Therefore, American actors and acting teachers such as Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler created their own systems based on what they knew of Stanislavsky’s work and on their own experience.

Stanislavsky’s most revolutionary principle was simply that acting could be taught as a system; that it is not achieved purely through some mixture of talent, intuition, and inspiration. Stanislavsky spent the last few decades of his life altering and revising his ideas on acting, but several general principles are unchanging.

A. **Given circumstances** is the name given by Stanislavsky to the material given by the playwright in the text of the play that directly reveals things about the character’s life, action, relationships, and goals. Stanislavsky emphasized an actor’s duty to the playwright’s work.

B. An actor’s voice and body should receive thorough training so that voice and body are as responsive and flexible as possible. After all, these are the actor’s major communication tools. Further, an actor’s training is lifelong.

C. Actors should have keen observation skills; characters should begin from the actor’s observations of life.

D. Actors must translate the playwright’s ideas and their own ideas into living theatre by undertaking real actions on the stage. He taught actors to find a character’s objective, or goal, and to undertake real actions to achieve the objective.

E. Actors must be fully engaged in the stage illusion. Stanislavsky observed children playing and held them up as a model for how actors should be completely immersed in the fictional world of the play. This complete concentration allows actors to appear as if the events of the play are happening for the first time in spite of the facts that the play was rehearsed and that it is repeated nightly.

F. Each thing an actor does on stage must have an inner justification; it must spring from a character’s emotional, psychological, or intellectual need.

In developing “The Method”, American teachers tended to focus on this last principle, finding an inner justification. They emphasized Stanislavsky’s idea of “emotional substitution” for finding a character’s emotional state; in this technique an actor substitutes events from his own life that really trigger the emotions the character is supposed to feel in the fictional circumstance of the play. Because of this emphasis, Americans tend to act “from the inside out”, meaning they find the character’s inner life first, and then work to make the inner life communicate to an audience through body and voice. In some other countries, such as England, actor training tends to be “from the outside in”, meaning that acting students receive a great deal of training to develop their voices and bodies, and then work to justify character choices with appropriate mental states. This has led to some disagreements about the degree to which an actor “becomes” a character. For instance, must an actor “really” feel everything that the character feels? While the arguments are interesting, the final answer must be that it does not matter, as long as the actor achieves her goal of communicating the character to the audience.

2. In the rehearsal process, an actor develops a character interpretation that fits with the director’s overall vision for the production and that meshes appropriately with the other actors’ interpretations of their characters.

An actor will typically know the play before auditioning for a role, and, once he has been cast in a role, study the play prior to the first rehearsal. At the early rehearsals, which are typically “read throughs,” the director will give the actors basic information about the style and emphasis of the production. For example, it is common to set a Shakespearean play in an entirely different time and place; for an actor, this means he will use his knowledge of Shakespearean verse but must use a different vocabulary for movement, and possibly a dialect, that will be appropriate for the director’s vision.

Throughout the next rehearsals the actor refines her interpretation of her character, develops the character’s relationships with the other characters, discovers blocking and business, and learns her lines. **Blocking** is a term that means where an actor moves on stage when, and **business** is the term for the gestures and use of hand properties executed by an actor. Actors are often given a date by which they must be **off-book** or have all lines memorized.
Once actors are off-book they enter a third stage of the rehearsal process. Now relationships, blocking, and business can be refined because actors are no longer looking at scripts but at each other and have both hands free to work with hand properties. If the costume an actor will wear is substantially different from what he wears every day, he will normally begin to work in a rehearsal costume by the time he is off book.

Technical elements are added to the performance in the final stage of rehearsals. During technical rehearsals the actor works on the actual stage setting using actual properties, and he learns how the sound will be integrated and how and when the lights will move. Finally, at dress rehearsals, the actor adds costume and make-up.

The final element for the actor to integrate into her performance is the audience. Plays, especially new plays, will often have previews before the opening night. During these preliminary performances the actor learns what parts of her work are achieving her goal of audience communication, and what needs to be altered by opening night.

Historical Conventions
Acting styles are set by the public taste of the time and place. For centuries critics have used the terms “real” and “life-like” and “nature” to describe good acting, but it is a relatively recent phenomenon to value acting that could literally be mistaken for life. Today, good acting on small stages or on the screen is often so “realistic” that, if not for the artistic context, it could be life. Before the artistic movement called “Naturalism” in the mid-Nineteenth century, acting was always regarded as an art form with artistic laws quite distinct from life. These artistic “laws” also varied from culture to culture.

In ancient Greek theatre, actors wore masks that covered their full heads and enlarged their stature. They spoke in a chant-like manner and frequently broke into song and dance. Only three actors participated in each play; if more characters were required by the script then the actors changed character and costume as necessary to fill the roles. In the Golden Age of Greece, in the 5th century B.C., acting was a highly regarded craft and actors competed for annual prizes along with the playwrights.

In Shakespeare’s time, in Elizabethan England, the business of public theatre was just beginning. Actors were formed into sharing companies; with each full member getting one vote on all matters of company policy and one share of all profits. Companies changed plays with great frequency and little rehearsal, so each actor had to have a quick memory and retain many roles in his head at once. While use of language and vocal qualities were highly prized, many audience members enjoyed the farcical behavior of clown characters. Many actors specialized in one kind of role or another; Richard Burbage was the leading tragic actor in Shakespeare’s company, while Will Kempe was the favorite clown, later replaced by Robert Armin, pictured to the right. Companies were all male, therefore, women’s roles were played by boy apprentices. Music and dance were often featured in comedies, though they were less integral than in ancient Greece. Elizabethan theatres had very little scenery, therefore actors had to fill out the environment for the audience with their text, voice, and bodies. Actors did not generally hold a respected position in Elizabethan society; without an aristocratic patron for their company, actors could be thrown in jail as common vagabonds.

The Christian Church participated in the prejudice against acting and actors. The Roman Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity and forbid performances, many of which had grown highly decadent in the early centuries of the Christian era. Throughout the Middle Ages, acting as a profession continued to be actively discouraged by the Catholic Church. Actors pretend to be what they were not, which is the same means used by the devil, argued some Christians. Even by Molière’s time, in 17th century France, actors were forbidden all sacraments of the Catholic Church, the Church refused Molière burial in sacred ground when he died in 1673.

In the late 17th century in Europe, the organization of acting companies began to shift from the older sharing system to a salary system, in which actors are hired by managers for a set period of time at a set annual salary. In France, the first national theatre, the Comédie Française, was formed by King Louis XIV in 1680. Although it was supported by the King, the Comédie Française was organized like the older sharing companies.

The 18th century saw the rise of the “star system” among actors. Actors who became audience favorites were dissatisfied with their annual salaries. These “star” actors were very important in drawing large audiences and demanded special consideration from managements. The first concession was to grant star actors benefit performances, at which ticket prices were higher and the star actor received all profits from the evening’s performance. Later in the century, star actors began to demand higher and higher
salaries. By the 19th century, many stars organized their own productions of shows, with themselves in the leading roles, and took them on tours. In such cases the actor received the profits of the tour. Touring was greatly facilitated by the development of railroads across Europe and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.

One of the first great American actors, often considered the best ever, was Edwin Booth. He was noted for his performances of Shakespeare's tragic heroes and was one of the first American star actors to successfully tour in Europe. 19th century Americans saw him as a symbol of the triumph of American culture as distinct and separate from European culture, and, especially, that of England. He also built the Booth Theatre on Broadway, which introduced such innovations as a fan shaped auditorium, elevators in the stage floor, and an enormous fly loft to New York; the Booth Theatre is still an active Broadway theatre located just west of Times Square.

Around the turn of the 20th century the acting profession underwent major shifts in aesthetic goals, which were cemented when Stanislavsky's system became standard actor training in the United States. In the late 19th century the artistic movement called Naturalism began to demand absolute truth to life on the stage as in other art forms. Actors until this time had usually spoken much of their text directly to the audience, but the new aesthetic demanded that they focus on their stage environment and the other characters more intensely. The term fourth wall is used to describe a staging style in which three walls are represented on stage and the audience is seated along what the actors imagine as a “fourth wall” of the fictional room. Naturalism also encouraged ensemble playing among actors; since actors no longer addressed the audience directly, the relationships among characters on stage became more important. 19th century star actors were reluctant to embrace these new aesthetics of acting because their high salaries depended on their energetic connections with audiences and they feared to lose their star status if they played too equally off of other ensemble members. Thus, the new style of acting begun with Naturalism was slow to spread across Europe and the Americas.

Actors in America today are usually members of unions; Actor's Equity is the union for live theatre actors, Screen Actors’ Guild for film, and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists for TV and radio drama. Actors hire agents who get them auditions for parts in stage or screen work, and, if hired, they sign contracts for the length of that specific job. This is called the “contract system.” Today in the United States acting is an overcrowded profession: only about 15% of union actors are working at any given time, and young actors often work for years before gaining admission to a union. Remnants of the star system still exist: popular actors like Tom Cruise or Julia Roberts command very high salaries in their film contracts because film executives know that stars are required to make big profits at the box office. But for every star earning millions in the acting industry there are hundreds of actors barely earning a living or supplementing their acting income with “day jobs”.
