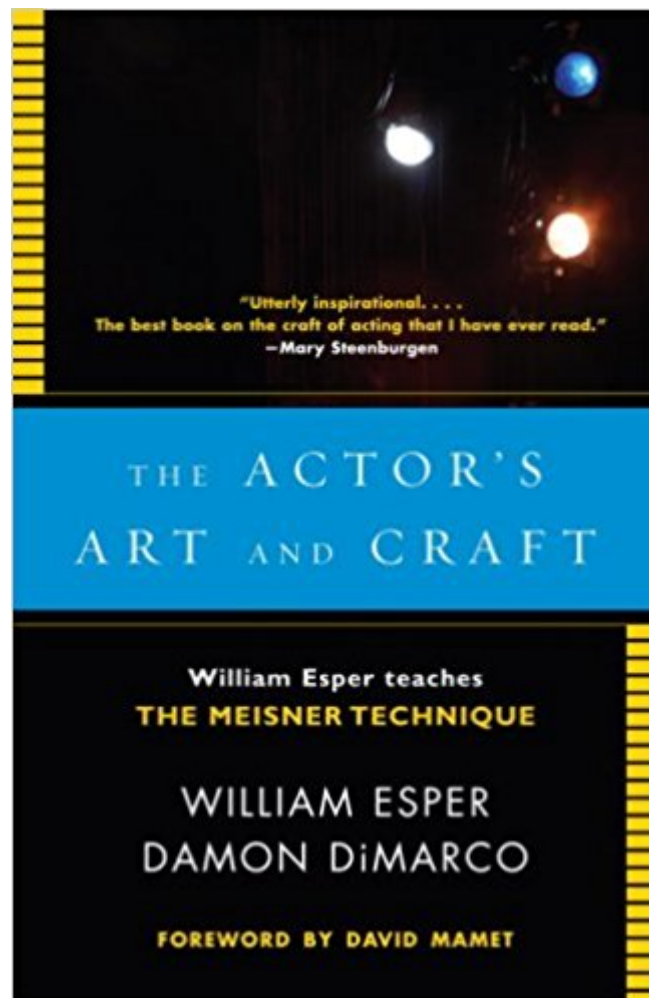




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# The Actor's Art And Craft: William Esper Teaches The Meisner Technique



## Synopsis

William Esper, one of the leading acting teachers of our time, explains and extends Sanford Meisner's legendary technique, offering a clear, concrete, step-by-step approach to becoming a truly creative actor. Esper worked closely with Meisner for seventeen years and has spent decades developing his famous program for actor's training. The result is a rigorous system of exercises that builds a solid foundation of acting skills from the ground up, and that is flexible enough to be applied to any challenge an actor faces, from soap operas to Shakespeare. Co-writer Damon DiMarco, a former student of Esper's, spent over a year observing his mentor teaching first-year acting students. In this book he recreates that experience for us, allowing us to see how the progression of exercises works in practice. *The Actor's Art and Craft* vividly demonstrates that good training does not constrain actors' instincts—it frees them to create characters with truthful and compelling inner lives.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Utterly inspirational. . . . The best book on the craft of acting that I have ever read." --Mary Steenburgen  
"As far as I'm concerned, there is only way to learn the craft of acting, and that is through the Meisner technique. And there is only one person to learn that technique from, and that is William Esper." --Patricia Heaton  
"The essence of this book is like William Esper himself: kind/clear, caring/generous, passionate/graceful, brilliant/profound. Inspiring. Invaluable." --Jeff Goldblum  
"A veritable magnum opus on acting from a Master Teacher." --Olympia Dukakis  
"Working with Bill Esper was an inspiring and unforgettable experience. . . . Every serious actor who dreams

of becoming a first-rate artist must read this book!" --Calista Flockhart

William Esper is a graduate of Western Reserve University and the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theatre in New York City. Bill trained as both actor and teacher under Sanford Meisner. Bill and Sandy worked closely together for 17 years, during which time Bill served as Associate Director of the Playhouses's Acting Department (1973-1976). Bill founded the William Esper Studio in 1965 and the Professional Actor Training Program at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts in 1977. These two schools are renowned for routinely contributing actors of the highest quality to the International stage and screen. Damon DiMarco earned his MFA from the Rutgers University Mason Gross School of the Arts under Bill Esper's tutelage. He has acted professionally on stage, screen, and TV and currently teaches acting and directing at Drew University. Damon's other books include, *Tower Stories: an Oral History of 9/11*; *Out of Bounds* (with Roy Simmons); and *Heart of War: Soldiers' Voices from the Front Lines of Iraq*.

As an actor I'm always interested in reading good books on the craft of acting, learning about different techniques, and seeking ways to improve my work. The last word, "improve", is perhaps the most difficult to quantify as that improvement necessitates both an objective method of judgement and a standard toward which "improvement" can be made (something that might seem fairly hard to come by when discussing the arts, and perhaps most especially the art and craft of the actor). But when it comes right down to it, it's really not all that hard to understand what makes acting good or bad. To paraphrase Esper, "No one comes out of a play or movie saying 'Wow, those actors were so good! I didn't believe a thing they said.'" Therefore we can say that in all most all contemporary contexts "good acting" is acting that is indistinguishable from truly living and doing. To paraphrase Stella Adler in a different book: "You must never appear to be acting". So if we say that good acting is acting that appears to be real and genuine living and doing, than a book that promotes Stanford Meisner's famous statement that "acting is living truthfully under imaginary circumstances", or Esper's version that clarifies "living" as "doing", and transports you into the midst of a group of artists seeking to learn how to do it must be a pretty good place to start when seeking out improvement or a strong foundation. I have taken a short (i.e. less than one year) Meisner based acting class before, and left feeling as if I had experienced only minimal success, learned only a little bit, struggled...and perhaps not in a good way, and ultimately felt confused. I wondered if maybe the Meisner technique, although wonderful for many people, was perhaps just not for me. Then I read *THE ACTOR'S ART AND CRAFT* and I saw everything differently. William Esper's

fictional acting class is so CLEAR and inspiring! Reading this book helped me understand everything about the Meisner technique that had seemed so ambiguous and down right illogical before! I want to state very clearly that this book "pinched" me (to use a Meisner term) in and of itself and has inspired me to try and get back into Meisner training again. This is one of the best books of the craft of acting I have ever read. If you want to act the way I have described at the beginning of this review then hear this: This is precisely the hope provided by the Meisner technique and I suggest that there may be no one better than William Esper to learn it from. The book is very well written and engaging. The content is truly first rate. Five stars!!! Highly recommended to actor, directors, or anyone wanting insight into the acting training process!

This book came around at a strange time in my life...which I suppose is still happening. Although I was never part of the BFA or MFA program at Rutgers, I did take a few acting classes there as well as get involved in some college theatre. Bill Esper was an icon even back then but I completely took for granted what it is he did and more importantly, who he is. Since getting out and pounding the pavement for some real work, I've had moments of brilliance, some of which has garnered me a handful of (minor) speaking roles on notable television shows. Gradually, I began to regress in my preparation and in my respect for the craft because in my mind, I didn't see it as a necessity anymore. After all, who needs an applicable technique when you've booked work on Law & Order, Fringe, etc.? I became increasingly arrogant and felt entitled to success, all because I've had a little taste of it, probably from luck or what have you. In the past two years or so, I've been making big investments on casting director/agent workshops, all designed to get you seen, as long as you're willing to pay the price. One night, not too long ago, we had to watch our playback auditions at one of these "classes". I was certain I had nailed it because I "felt good" about what I did. I was in for a rude awakening when I saw my work. I was stiff, lacking life...natural perhaps but uninteresting. In the past, I would always respond by preparing harder the next time and I would continue to take more acting seminars. This time, for whatever reason, I was willing to admit to myself that whatever technique I had was unfocused. That I was easily assuaged by complimentary notes by casting directors and peers so that I can move on with my life. I believe it was a good friend of mine who recommended me this book. And now I realize how naive and foolish I've been these past couple of years. The Actor's Art and Craft taught me that while commercial success should be commended, it's not worth sacrificing your very being for it. After a while, from audition to audition, you start to make choices that you THINK people want to see, regardless of how inorganic. But like all forms of art, one must be dedicated in his/her pursuits and strive for the perfection of the craft. I've read a

handful of other acting books, but none as engrossing as this one. It covers the first year of Meisner and that includes repetition work, activities, criminal action problems, having an objective. The format is such that you feel that you are in the classroom with Bill and the company he teaches. There are characters you can easily identify with because you probably know them in real life. Some of the students are new to the craft, others have been pursuing the arts for a while. For me, though, the highlights of this book are the beautifully simple yet poetic words from William Esper himself, his notes to the class, his views on how important it is to LIVE. Really LIVE. It surprised me that at times I was brought to tears by some of the quotations because they were really moving and cathartic. One in particular had to do with how disconnected our modern society can be, what with all the iPods, gadgets, social networking sites etc. Nobody lives in the moment anymore. Esper and DiMarco have put together a wonderful book that attacks the myths of what the Meisner technique can do for someone. It's not about emoting, it's about doing as well as being. You can't control how you feel, however you can allow yourself to be AFFECTED by what is going on around you. He talks about the importance of the precipitating circumstance: the one event that causes the two (or more) people on stage to come together in this time, in this place. Of course, before all of that, he teaches the importance of being yourself, to unlearn what society has taught you, to empty the garbage so to speak. Only then can you truly be free to follow your instincts. There is so much more I'd like to talk about in detail as far as specific exercises but I suggest you read it yourself if you're serious about learning the craft, or even reinvigorating your passion for it. When you're out in the real world, you'll hear people throw around the word "Meisner" and "objective" as if they really understand what it all entails. Many of them probably do and that is commendable. But there is a large majority who don't REALLY get it. I was one of them. I hope to continue my studies now that I've been humbled, and I hope to acquire practical skills and technique that's based on higher principles. If you're as jaded as I was, you may be rolling your eyes at this gushfest. But I know what I want from all this: when I'm on stage or in front of a camera, I want to feel truly alive. When I'm NOT on stage or in front of the camera, I want to realize how remarkable it is to BE alive. This book is my first step towards my own salvation and my admission of cynicism and laziness. I hope to study with him one day.-----Update: It is February 20th, 2011. I'm currently in my 2nd year at the Esper Studio. Although I haven't had Bill as a teacher, I've had the pleasure of being taught by other inspirational instructors there. I'm grateful for all that this training has given me, especially with respect to my life. I believe one of the biggest things I've learned is "don't be afraid to ACT"! My current teacher David says that a lot. You see, while I was auditioning for on-camera projects, I became convinced that the only thing required to impress a casting director was to "be natural", to

be capable of "conversational reality". It is only recently that I realized that it's not enough to say the lines as if you'd "say them in real life" if there is no life or behavior behind it. That's the path to generality. Many actors are afraid to act and commit to their actions fully for fear of over-acting or being untruthful. Much of this perception, at least from where I stand, probably comes from this modern indie faux-indie film culture. I've seen many of those kinds of films: critics rave about the movie where the actors don't really do much but just throw away their lines, while most of the stylistic touches are provided by the director and editors. Looking back, that was what held me back the most when I was auditioning. I never fully got behind the circumstances or even bothered to understand the specifics of the moment before and what everything meant to me in the scene (which can only come alive from your body, not your mind).

This book follows a class of beginning students for their first year of studies. The students are composites of many individuals. Through exercises and assignments they advance through the development of the tools for what he calls straight acting. His comments on the performances in the class are illuminating and revealing. These composite students illustrate common problems of talented beginning performers as well as flashes of brilliance. Well described and very accessible, this is an excellent guide and a great read.

This is without doubt a book for actors, but it's also an important resource for those aspiring to enter an art form that is little understood by outsiders and often only sketchily understood by those struggling within it. William Esper is clearly a tough taskmaster, as those at the top of our profession need to be, and he has no time for the 'amateur' or the 'dilettante' no matter how enthusiastic. I love the way he works and DiMarco's commentary is invaluable in highlighting the importance of the techniques used and the impact they have on the actors involved. This is a raw, unflinching method of developing the actor's skills without which there is no truthful performance to bind the audience to their seats, completely unaware of the extraordinary techniques needed to make it all seem so effortless and lifelike. If you are already an actor (especially one still struggling for recognition), or a drama student, or even an amateur (in the true sense of the word) who wishes to excel in your chosen hobby, read this book. It won't turn you into the next Brando, Pitt, Dench or Streep, but it will surely and soundly point you in the right direction.

A must for actors!

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