



**FIVE MUST-READ BOOKS**  
*FOR*  
**COMPELLING PERFORMANCES**

*jc*

JAMIE  
CARROLL  
acting coach

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# ACTING IS IN THE DOING

BUT A LITTLE READING WON'T HURT

**Can reading about an art form make you great at it?**

No. Being great at anything is only in the doing.

So why am I recommending a reading list? Because doing without knowing what to do, how to do it, or why breeds stagnation. Getting started as an artist is hard. And once you've started, it can be even harder. Our natural tendencies get in our way. We worry about the wrong things. We get confused. We get lost.

Each of the five volumes included in this eBook has proved invaluable to me. Written by some of our most brilliant artists, they are a blueprint for creative excellence. And following their lead may be just the creative jolt that you need.

I love books. I am amazed that so many life-altering, enriching works exist. And they're available to anyone curious—often for less than the price of a burger and fries at Shake Shack. Or with a trip to your local library.

The five books included here have had the biggest impact on my artistic

growth. Reading and practicing the techniques and ideas expressed by these authors led me to:

- Book roles in TV, Film, and Stage
- Coach actors into new and courageous work
- Find a deeper sense of fulfillment in the craft of acting

I hope reading these books you find a similar feeling of inspiration and success.

Studying artists at the top of their game, a pattern starts to emerge. Difficult, tedious work often leaves them feeling bad about themselves. While deep in the struggle, it feels terrible. But it does get better. In fact, that difficult practice is also their key to achieving greatness.

The authors included in this eBook share this in common. Each of them strove for excellence—pursuing truth in their art, resolute in the face of failure. They are all doers.

You can't "think" yourself to great. You must be willing to work for it.

Be warned: there are exercises in each

of these books. I still struggle with exercises in books. I get in the bad habit of reading exercises, getting jazzed about doing them, and then letting them slide. Or worse, doing a half-assed version of them. My only solution is to schedule the time to train. I remind myself that growth is painful and incremental. Good habits build over time, compounding. And then one day, without realizing it's happened—you're a better version of yourself.

Can you read these books without doing the exercises? Yes. It will still give you a lens into the working craft of some master artists. But if you're interested in finding your true potential, I hope you'll dive in, do the work, and take the ride with them.

These five books forever altered the way I approach the craft of acting. They made me want to be better. And the words of these authors, put into practice, helped me get there.



**“ONLY BAD ACTING  
IS GENERAL;  
LIFE NEVER IS.”**  
— LARRY MOSS

**“GREAT MOMENT-TO-MOMENT ACTING TAKES PLACE IN THE NOW OF NOW AND IT IS THAT HYPER-FOCUSED ENERGY THAT MAKES THE AUDIENCE BELIEVE ANYTHING COULD HAPPEN.”**

**When renowned acting coach Larry Moss enters** one of his eight-hour Master Classes, his presence elevates the room. Larry’s instruction and demeanor demand instant respect. Asked about his specific teaching philosophy, he always says, “the work, works.”

All it takes is a quick glance at the actors he has coached to see he’s onto something:

- Helen Hunt in *As Good As It Gets*, (Academy Award)
- Hilary Swank in *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Million Dollar Baby* (Academy Awards)
- Sutton Foster in *Anything Goes* (Tony Award)
- Michael Clarke Duncan in *The Green Mile* (Academy Award nomination)
- Leonardo DiCaprio in most roles since *The Aviator* (Academy Award nominations)

Yes. His work, works.

Full disclosure: he’s also my coach for script analysis.

In *Intent to Live*, Larry lays out the elements you need to craft a compelling performance. Each chapter covers a different area of preparing and performing a role. He clarifies how to identify a character’s su-

per-objective. Stresses the importance of working with intentions and imagery. And even includes a fantastic chapter devoted to comedy.

There are a ton of exercises throughout the book. Some of the exercises will help you hone your script analysis skills. Others will fire up your creativity. His Monologue Workout and System of Wants are two of my favorites.

Far from strictly an acting manual, Larry weaves in stories that expand on his teaching. Larry draws from his own experience as a Broadway actor, as well as many examples from clients.

Larry’s technique is his own blend of craft—gleaned from the three Masters he spent years studying:

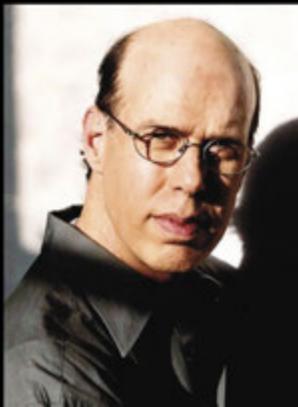
- Moment-to-moment experience from Sanford Meisner
- Script analysis and imagination work from Stella Adler
- Sensory perception and recall from Warren Robertson (a long-time devotee of Lee Strasburg)

Working with Larry makes you want to be a better artist, and his book has the same effect.

A renowned acting coach tells how to make characters live on stage, screen, and television

*The Intent to Live*

ACHIEVING YOUR TRUE POTENTIAL AS AN ACTOR



“A profoundly gifted, articulate teacher.”  
—Hilary Swank

LARRY MOSS

“WHEN YOU SEE A PERFORMANCE THAT RIVETS YOU, IT IS BECAUSE YOU BELIEVE THAT WHAT YOU ARE WATCHING IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING IN FRONT OF YOU.

WHEN THE CHARACTER ENTERS, YOU HAVE A SENSE THAT THEY ARE COMING FROM A LIFE THAT HAS BEEN LIVED FULLY PRIOR TO THIS MOMENT.”

**“THE AUDIENCE IS  
INTERESTED  
IN THE THING  
THE ACTOR DOESN'T  
EXPRESS.”**

— *STELLA ADLER*

# STELLA ADLER ON IBSEN, STRINDBERG, AND CHEKOV

“CRAFT IS WHAT FINALLY TRANSFORMS THE DEAD FACTORS INTO LIVING ONES—FROM “THEATRICAL” TO HUMAN, ARTIFICE TO ART—THROUGH THAT SECRET INGREDIENT: THE ACTOR’S IMAGINATION.”

**Seeing a play through the eyes of the legendary Stella Adler forever changed the way I look at scripts.**

Throughout the 1960’s and into the early 80’s, Adler’s script analysis class was the place to be for serious actors. Well over one hundred people would listen-in as she broke down a script.

In her classes, Adler would spend a month dedicated to the work of a single playwright. In fact, when analyzing Ibsen’s masterpiece, *A Doll’s House*, she spent over an hour on just the first few lines of stage direction.

Stella Adler taught a generation of actors how to bring “size” to the role. She did this by encouraging her students to bring their imaginations to *each line*. A few of her notable alumni include: Marlon Brando, Robert DeNiro, and Elaine Stritch.

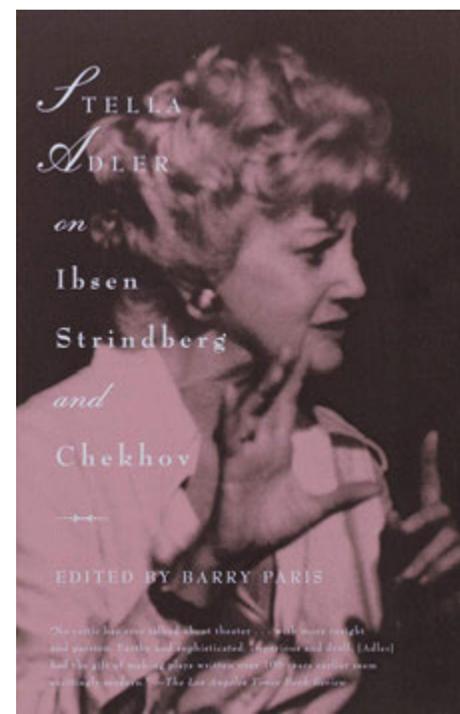
Adler was the master of specificity. In *Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekov*, she teaches you how to read through a script with a fine-tooth comb. For example, she focuses on a detail in August Strindberg’s, *The Father*. In

this play, the main character sets off to the post office to retrieve a letter. If you read the play through the lens of our era, this moment doesn’t read as a major dramatic detail. But in the late 1800’s, it very much was. A trip like this would be at least an hour each way. And in this play, you would ride in a carriage. In the middle of winter. In Sweden. That changes the height of the stakes a wee bit. And Adler teaches you to research and recognize this.

I spent three months reading the works of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekov. Using this book as my guide, I read about the author’s lives and what effect their lived experiences had on their plays and essays. It changed the way I read a script. And I am forever grateful.

As Adler says, “each playwright writes in his or her own time.” Stella Adler puts it to the actor to research and know that time. This leads to knowing the full life of the character, which is much more than only the lines.

“Understand the way of life and the words will disappear.”



**“A PLAY  
GIVES ONLY  
RESULT:  
THE WORDS SPOKEN.  
YOU MUST  
FIGURE OUT  
THE MOTIVATION  
AND OBSTACLE  
THAT LED TO  
[THEM]...”**

– DAVID BALL

**“A MOTIVATION NOT SET AGAINST THE  
ENERGIZING RESISTANCE OF AN OBSTACLE  
RESULTS IN WORDS DELIVERED SLACKINGLY,  
AUTOMATICALLY, SLICKLY.”**

**A script is a series of events—and** you can see the connection best if you read through it backwards.

This is the theory David Ball posits in *Backwards and Forwards*.

Ball recommends that you read a play once. And then read it a second time, backwards, if you want to understand why the events unfold as they do.

I tried it first with Sam Shepard’s play *Fool for Love*. I can’t believe how much I discovered. A line I had glossed over when reading it forwards was now an obvious catalyst, setting off the next beat. I only spotted it because I was able to connect the dots moving backwards.

At less than a hundred pages, this tiny book is dense with information. You will need at least two reads to appreciate it.

The book divides into three parts:

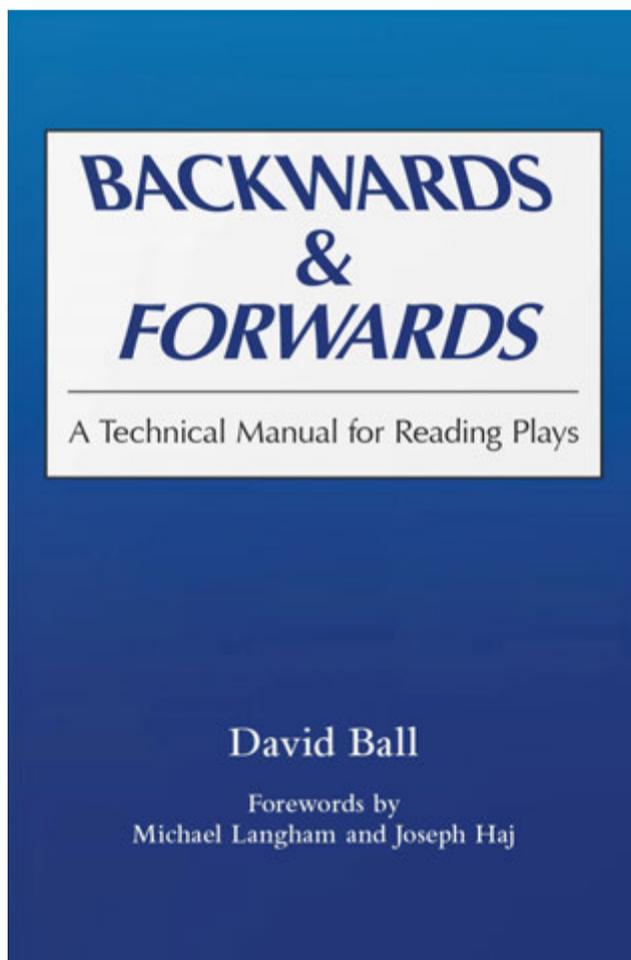
- Part One defines the shape of the play, breaking the text into

several distinct parts, focusing on “What Happens”

- Part Two takes us through what Ball calls “Methods”, or what is happening “beneath” the text of the play
- Part Three covers the little details, both in the text and *not*, that fill out the world of the production

Ball advocates getting your hands on biographies and documentaries about the writer. He recommends researching the era and artistic environment the writer may have experienced. He also suggests reading any other play, screenplay, or essay written by the author.

As Ball says, “Leave no stone unturned, for you never know what treasure of understanding lies beneath it. It’s a lot of work, and no one holds a gun to your head to make you do it. But why deliberately aim for mediocrity by saving effort, by ‘being efficient?’”



**“SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS OF ACTIONS IS MOST USEFUL  
WHEN DONE BACKWARDS: FROM THE END OF THE PLAY  
BACK TO THE START. IT IS YOUR BEST INSURANCE THAT  
YOU UNDERSTAND WHY EVERYTHING HAPPENS.”**

**“A MAN STEALS:  
CONFLICT.**

**HE IS PURSUED:  
RISING CONFLICT.**

**HE IS CAUGHT:  
CRISIS.**

**HE IS CONDEMNED  
BY THE COURT:  
CLIMAX.**

**TRANSFERRING HIM  
TO PRISON  
IS THE  
CONCLUSION.”**

*– LAJOS EGRI*

**The Art of Dramatic Writing** is a book meant for writers—but it’s a goldmine for actors. Lajos Egri outlines the structure and elements needed to write a compelling character. And it contains helpful guideposts for actors creating one.

Egri says that shapes have three dimensions: depth, height and width. He elaborates, human beings have an extra three dimensions: physiology, sociology, and psychology. And “without knowledge of these three dimensions we cannot appraise a human being”. Adding, “it is not, in your study of man, to know if he is rude, polite, religious, atheistic, moral, degenerate. You must know why.”

How does a character’s appearance influence their outlook? What happens if you were born in a basement? How does it distinguish you from the kid born in a mansion? The physiology and sociology are what determine the last element: the psychology.

This book boasts a useful step-by-step guide to creating a tri-dimensional character. These steps can help ignite your cre-

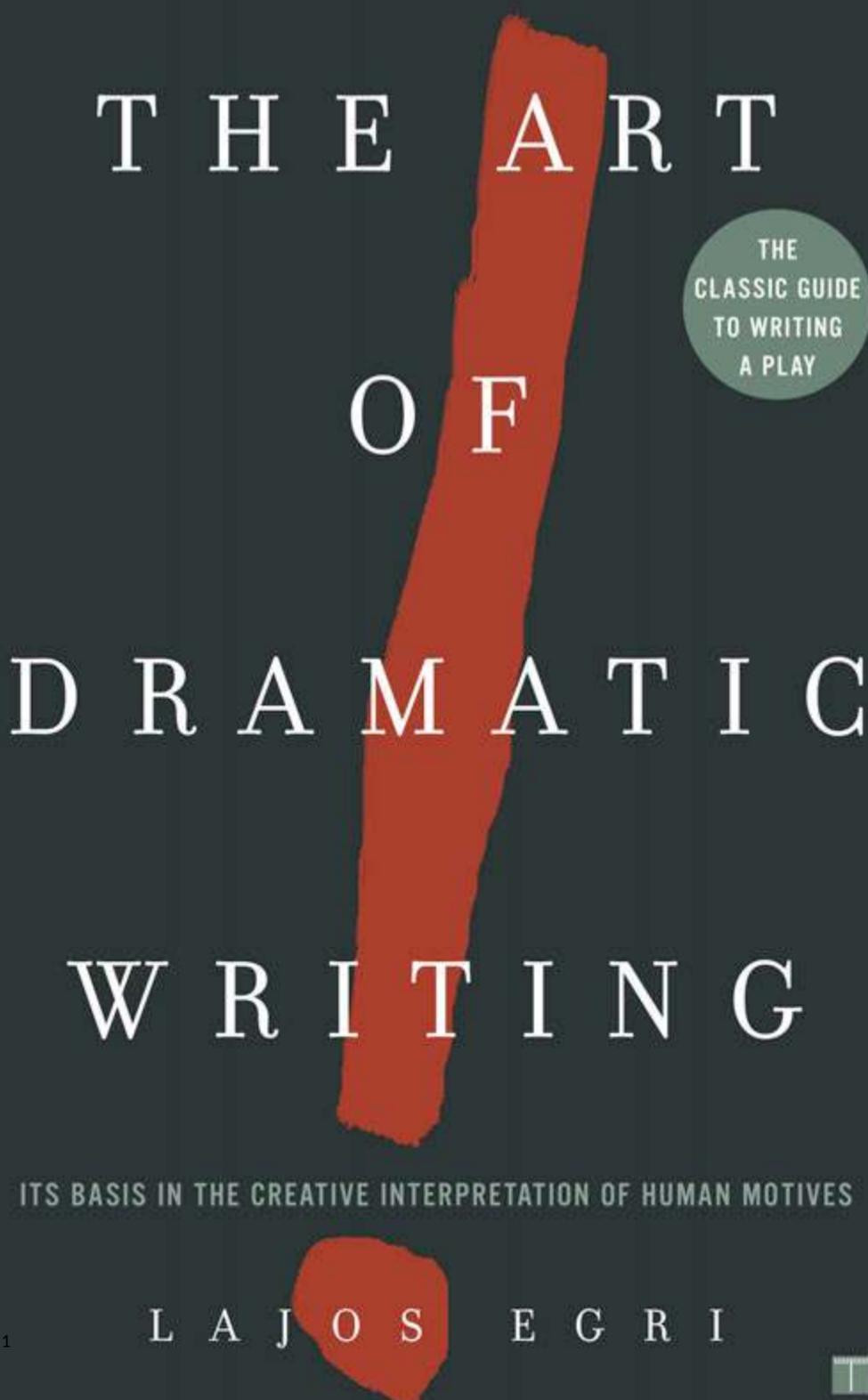
ativity and get you thinking beyond the page.

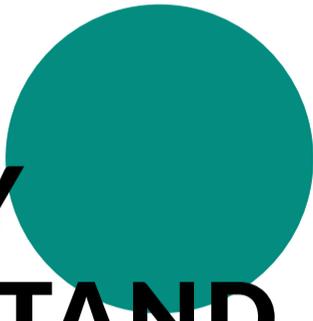
I find it helpful to consider a performance I’ve watched and loved, and look at it through the lens of Egri’s guide. In a rich and layered performance, you can see the impact Egri’s three elements have on the character.

The responsibility of the actor is to interpret the script. Understanding the writer’s process can only enhance your performance skills. Egri’s *The Art of Dramatic Writing* makes that possible.

“WHATEVER A CHARACTER DOES, OR DOES NOT DO, WHATEVER HE SAYS OR DOES NOT SAY, REVEALS HIM. IF HE DECIDES TO CONCEAL HIS IDENTITY, IF HE LIES OR TELLS THE TRUTH, IF HE STEALS OR DOES NOT STEAL, HE IS FOREVER REVEALING HIMSELF.”

**“IT IS SIMPLE ENOUGH TO RECOGNIZE A STORM AS A CONFLICT, YET WHAT WE EXPERIENCE AND CALL “STORM,” OR “TORNADO,” IS ACTUALLY A CLIMAX, THE RESULT OF HUNDREDS AND THOUSANDS OF SMALL CONFLICTS, EACH BIGGER AND MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE LAST, UNTIL THEY ARRIVE AT THE CRISIS—THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM. IN THAT LAST MOMENT THE DECISION IS MADE, AND THE STORM EITHER MOVES ON OR BREAKS IN ALL ITS FURY.”**





**“THE ONLY WAY  
TO UNDERSTAND  
ANY CHARACTER  
IS THROUGH  
YOURSELF.  
EVERYONE  
IS MUCH MORE  
ALIKE  
THAN THEY  
WILLINGLY ADMIT.”**

— ELIA KAZAN

“A TRAGEDY IS WHERE  
A CHARACTER IS DOOMED BY THE  
INEVITABLE CONTRADICTION  
IN HER CHARACTER.”

**Elia Kazan was a contentious figure, no doubt.** And when Larry Moss recommended this book to me, it came with a warning about the coarse language employed. I relay this same warning to you (along with a warning about Kazan’s questionable behavior).

Kazan is a portrait in persistence. In *Kazan On Directing*, we see a creative artist trying, failing, and ultimately succeeding beyond expectation. About himself, Kazan says: “I’ve come to believe that everything worth achieving is beyond one’s capacity—or so it seems at first. The thing is to persist, not back off, fight your fight, pay your dues and carry on.”

Kazan’s work changed the landscape of the modern theater. He directed both *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of A Salesman*. They hit Broadway within eighteen months of each other in December of 1947 and February of 1949. Both productions are still talked about today. This book takes you behind the scenes of these shows and many others that Kazan directed.

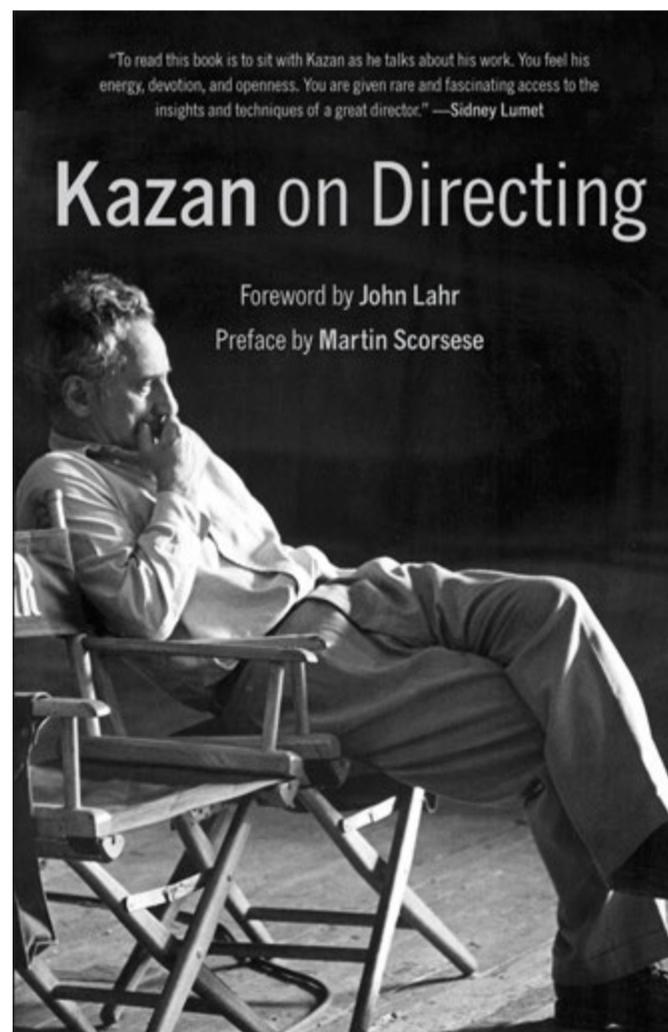
“INDIFFERENCE IS NOT  
THE ESSENCE OF DRAMA.  
TO THE CONTRARY,  
DRAMA BY ITS NATURE IS  
PARTISAN.”

Large sections of the book appear right from the journals he used to bring his productions to life. Kazan breaks down how he discovers what the characters need from each other. How he unlocks the theme for a given play or film. And presents a series of letters between himself, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller.

Even if you skip the rest of the book, reading the section “*On What Makes A Director*” is worth the purchase price. Everything Kazan says in this part applies to actors as well as directors. He focuses on what to study, how to sharpen your eye, and enhancing your sensory abilities for stage and film.

Kazan says “talent is often the scar tissue over the wound.” In this book, you see the talent, the wounds, and the effort it took to realize a visionary career.

“THE SURPRISE IS THE THING.  
PLAY FOR IT.  
FUCK UP IF YOU HAVE TO.  
SURPRISE YOURSELF!”



“SENTIMENTALITY IS THE ENEMY  
OF DRAMA. IT WATERS DOWN THE  
CONFLICT. IT IS THE SISTER OF  
SELF-PITY.”

# DO THE WORK

AND ENJOY THE PROCESS

I've read hundreds of books covering all areas of performance. But none of them resonated with me as much as these five books. Each of these authors made a habit of doing the difficult-work. And from those habits, greatness emerged.

One overarching value I've learned from the wisdom they've shared: we don't have time to rush.

Take the time. Make the effort.

Putting in both, is everything.

WHERE TO FIND THESE BOOKS

***The Intent to Live***

by Larry Moss

[Amazon](#) | [Barnes & Noble](#)  
[Independent Bookstore](#)

***The Art of Dramatic Writing***

by Lajos Egri

[Amazon](#) | [Barnes & Noble](#)  
[Independent Bookstore](#)

***Stella Adler on Ibsen,  
Strindberg and Chekov***

by Stella Adler and Barry Paris

[Amazon](#) | [Barnes & Noble](#)  
[Independent Bookstore](#)

***Kazan On Directing***

by Elia Kazan

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***Backwards and Forwards***

by David Ball

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