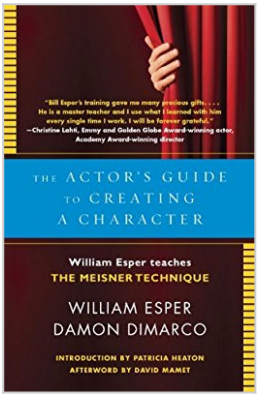

The Actor's Guide to Creating a Character: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Technique

By William Esper, Damon Dimarco

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William Esper, one of the most celebrated acting teachers of our time, takes us through his step-by-step approach to the central challenge of advanced acting work: creating and playing a character.

Esper’s first book, *The Actor’s Art and Craft*, earned praise for describing the basics taught in his famous first-year acting class. *The Actor’s Guide to Creating a Character* continues the journey. In these pages, co-author Damon DiMarco vividly re-creates Esper’s second-year course, again through the experiences of a fictional class. Esper’s training builds on Sanford Meisner’s legendary exercises, a world-renowned technique that Esper further developed through his long association with Meisner and the decades he has spent training a host of distinguished actors. His approach is flexible enough to apply to any role, helping actors to create characters with truthful and compelling inner lives.

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Editorial Review

Review
“Bill Esper’s training gave me many precious gifts. . . . He is a master teacher and I use what I learned with him every single time I work. I will be forever grateful.” —Christine Lahti, Emmy and Golden Globe Award-winning actor, Academy Award-winning director

“Simple, straightforward, inspiring and invaluable. . . . This book reminds me of how incredibly fortunate I was to have been taught by Bill Esper.” —Timothy Olyphant, Emmy and SAG Award winner

“Reading this book brought me back to Bill’s classroom. His vast experience and joy of the craft resonate on every page. Studying with Bill was an amazing time of discovery.” —Gretchen Mol, *Boardwalk Empire*

“My time studying with Bill Esper left me feeling like a completely trained actor and a more honest, grounded person. Training and studying with him has informed all the stand-up, acting and writing I do. I am forever grateful.” —Amy Schumer, Comedy Central’s *Inside Amy Schumer*

“Anyone serious about acting ought to read this excellent book and then run to New York to study with Bill. He is the real deal—insightful, generous, uncompromising, and endlessly inspiring.” —Stephen Adly Guirgis**,** actor, playwright, artistic co-director of LAByrinth Theater Company

“I read Bill Esper’s first book with total glee because it reminded me of all the guidance he gave me not only as a beginning actor, but as a person hungry to live a full artistic life. His words not only illuminate the Meisner technique brilliantly, they also serve as a beautiful rumination of how to live a creative life. He was and is my teacher and spirit guide. Bill Esper is a national treasure and he has generously shared his wisdom and effervescent soul through these books and I am eternally grateful.” —Patricia Wettig**,** *Thirtysomething, Prison Break, Brothers & Sisters*

About the Author
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 M.F.A. from the Rutgers University Mason Gross School of the Arts under Bill Esper's tutelage. He acts professionally on stage, screen, and TV, and teaches at Drew University. Damon's other books include, *Tower Stories: an Oral History of 9/11*; *Heart of War: Soldiers' Voices from the Front Lines of Iraq*; and *My Two Chinas: The Memoir of a Chinese Counterrevolutionary* with Baiqiao Tang, which features a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

ONE

Welcome Back—and Back to Work

“As you reach your goals, set new ones. That is how you grow and become a more powerful person.”

—Les Brown

Bill walks into the studio and the class falls silent. I let my eyes roam over the sixteen faces I see in the bleachers. Everyone looks excited to begin working again. It’s been only four months since the end of the first year’s work, but these students have changed. The effect is subtle, hard to put a finger on. Suffice it to say that these students seem like clearer versions of the people they were before. They laugh a little louder, and more readily. They smile a lot. And they listen well. They really listen.

Each time I look into a student’s eyes, I see something new—or perhaps that’s not right. Perhaps it’s really something old, an original part of him or her that was there all along, but pushed to the back and hidden. Now that part has stepped to the fore. It was always ready. All it needed was permission to come forth and shine.

But there’s one face I don’t recognize.

Bill takes a seat at his table, which, like the student bleachers, looks out on the studio’s playing space: two beds, some chairs, a table, and shelves full of odds and ends that the students can use in rehearsal. Bill opens his roll book and thumbs to a page. “Ray?” he says. “Where are you?”

The man with the face I don’t recognize holds up a hand, and all eyes turn that way. He appears to be about forty. He has a compact build, thinning hair, and a plain, handsome face with eyes the color of winter skies that shift from blue to gray. There’s something about his manner that suggests a man of the earth, someone who works long hours with his hands. A farmer or a rancher. Maybe a cabinetmaker or carpenter.

Bill turns to the rest of the class. “Everyone, this is Ray. He did the first year’s work in another class here at the Studio. He’ll join us now for the second year’s work.”

Everyone waves to Ray and says hi. Ray, who seems shy, waves back.

“So,” says Bill. He closes his roll book and looks around the room. “Before we begin, I want to tell you a story from my distant, ignoble past.”

The class laughs, and Bill smiles.

“I went to college at Case Western Reserve, which is in Cleveland,” Bill says. “I had always wanted to study acting, so I enrolled in the program there, but my first year was disastrous. I was very young and, when I acted, I didn’t have a truthful bone in my body.

“Fortunately, a woman named Nadine Miles was my acting teacher. She had once played on Broadway with Sandy Meisner in a production of Eugene O’Neill’s Marco Millions. This woman was merciless with me. She kicked my butt, metaphorically speaking, up and down campus. It took me a while, but eventually I figured out that I didn’t know much of anything about acting. That was the beginning of my education.”

One glance around the room and I can tell that Bill has struck a chord with this group. All eyes are on him, the students rapt.

“So this is what I did,” Bill says. “I went to the main branch of the Cleveland downtown library where they

had a small collection of theater books. The titles all looked the same to me. I didn't know which were considered seminal works, which would make an impact on me, which were regarded as must-reads—I was like a babe in the woods. So I picked up the first book on the shelf and I started to read. When I finished that book, I read the next one, and the next, and the next, until I'd read right through the shelf. Doing that turned my work around. I can't say I became a great artist overnight, but I can say I began to appreciate what important art is about.

"It's funny how life works. Years later, I was studying at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Sandy Meisner assigned us oral reports on famous figures in the theater. Sandy felt then the way I do now: most actors don't have enough knowledge about the great artists who have preceded them. He assigned me to report on Edward Gordon Craig, and I already knew all about him. I had read Craig's books during my spree in the Cleveland library.

"Among other things, Craig was a set designer. He designed a very famous production of Hamlet that Stanislavsky directed featuring giant screens that shifted continuously in the background. It was a brilliant idea, but it wasn't practical. The screens were big and cumbersome. Every time somebody tried to move them, they fell over. After endless attempts to keep them upright, Stanislavsky, in despair, ordered them nailed to the floor of the stage.

"I confess, my report disparaged Craig somewhat. I compared him to another designer of the time, Adolphe Appia, who is credited with breaking away from the two-dimensional painted set pieces that dominated the late nineteenth century and constructing the first three-dimensional sets. Appia built environments that worked with light and shadow in ways that were more natural to life. His constructions were always practical; Appia never built a set that fell down. And by crafting a three-dimensional set, he was, in fact, granting actors the license to behave in three-dimensional ways. Actors could walk on Appia's sets. Climb on them. Sit on them. Really live.

"In my report I said that, in my opinion, Edward Gordon Craig was a dreamer, while Adolphe Appia was more practical-minded. But Sandy took issue with this. 'Aren't dreamers important?' he asked. 'Don't we need people who dream?' He had a point, of course. Ultimately, Craig fell short of presenting his vision of Hamlet. But as with all visionaries, his true gift was the ability to change our perceptions of what is possible, to push our horizons further into what we consider the unknown.

"I admitted to Sandy that the relationship between dreamer and pragmatist is often closer than we first imagine it to be. Dreamers contribute something essential to society and especially to art. In fact, I said, dreamers are more important than pragmatists; you can't obtain any far-reaching goal until you've conceived of it in the first place. Sandy seemed impressed by that. In fact, I think that was the moment that sparked our long collaboration. Years later, he would say to me, 'Do you remember the talk we had about Craig and Appia?' Of course I did! And—just so I'm being clear on this point—the whole thing started from reading those books!"

The class laughs. Bill grins, but then his face grows sober again. "Why do I mention this story? Because I have always hated dilettantes. I simply don't understand people who don't have passions, who aren't insatiably curious, and who don't want to know absolutely everything about their chosen profession. And of course this applies to you, right now. Because whether you know it or not, you find yourself at a crossroads."

Now the class grows sober as well.

"Not everyone is a character actor," Bill says. "The talent some actors possess lies in straight acting. They

may be marvelous at it. Certainly, for many it's sufficient to get them work and allow them to have a career. Even if you're not a character actor, there's a great deal to get from this second year's work. Though I warn you all: The second-year work will push you to the very limits of your talent. Will that be a problem for anyone here?"

None of the students move. None so much as flinch. Bill appears satisfied.

"Good," he says. "Then let's review what you learned last year."

Amber answers. "The reality of doing."

Bill nods. "Practice the reality of doing when you work and you almost can't go wrong. What else?"

"Acting is really an improvisation." This is Adam speaking. "You learn your lines mechanically, without interpretation. You pin down certain meanings, then you set about rehearsing. Your scene won't happen the same way twice if you're working from moment to moment."

Bill smiles. "That was a mouthful, but it's all correct. Acting is most exciting to watch when it's a ping-pong game of impulses between you and your partner. If you lose the moment-to-moment work, it's like you've missed a swing with your paddle. The ping-pong ball flies off the table and the game comes to a screeching halt. Let me ask you: Where should your attention always be placed when you act?"

Melissa says, "On your partner. Or on your activity."

"Very good," Bill says. "God forbid that you keep your attention on yourself. There's nothing more uninteresting to watch. Trevor? Can you add something?"

"I think so." Trevor holds up one of his famous notebooks. Last year, he was always taking notes. He went through five whole notebooks before Christmas. "I wrote this down, like, a hundred times last year: Don't do anything unless someone or something else makes you do it."

Bill nods. "I'm glad you wrote that down so often. It's one of the most important concepts in acting, and yes, it'll certainly come up this year as well. Yes, Dom? What is it?"

Dom tilts his head thoughtfully. "Everything has to be personal," he says.

Bill nods. "Could you more specific?"

"You can only work from things that really and truly motivate you. Like with daydreams, for instance. A fantasy that sparks behavior in me might not bring Melissa or Reg to life. Their fantasies probably won't inspire me. Crafting has to be personal. It has to be unique to you, based on the things that activate you and you alone."

"Very good," Bill says. "By drawing your work from the well of yourself, you create a performance which is not only truthful, but inimitable. We've all seen actors with no inner life. They're awful to watch, cardboard cutouts of human beings. You and you alone know the things that make you tick. Last year, you spent a lot of time using Independent Activities and Emotional Preparations to create an emotional life."

Trevor has started leafing through another notebook. He raises his hand again. "Bill? I also wrote this down a

lot: Be specific. Never be general."

"Yes," Bill says. "But what does that mean?"

"Things that are specific have meaning," says Donna. "Whereas general things do not."

"That's true," Bill said. "Most people walk through their lives without closely examining anything. They don't dig down to the heart of things, they stay on the barren crust. An actor can't afford to do that. In truth, nothing general happens in nature, so nothing general should happen in your acting."

Each student in class brings up a point that struck him or her from last year's work. Cheryl says she often thinks about coming to the door in the early phases of the exercise. She talks about entering the room and letting yourself stand there, open and ready to be affected by your partner.

"Vulnerability," she says. "It's everything when you're acting."

"Yes," Bill says. "No one wants to watch an actor who's wearing a Kevlar vest over his emotions. The actor's job is not to fancy himself superhuman. We must open ourselves to every moment and live it out fully in a way that audiences only dream about doing. Invulnerability has as much place in acting as a sledgehammer has in the art of glassblowing. When you come to act, you must tear down your walls. Allow yourself to be free."

"Like a feather in the breeze," Reg says. "That was how you described it last year. Or a cork bobbing on ocean waves. Allow yourself to go in any direction the current takes you."

"Yes," Bill says. "Exactly."

Users Review

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