Mise en Scène and Actors

Still from Inglorious Basterds. *(2009) ©Weinstein Company/courtesy Everett Collection*

Acting is all about honesty.
If you can fake that, you've got it made.
—George Burns

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Identify what the details of what we see in a scene tell us about the characters and the story.
- Recognize the dramatic and narrative impact of elements of the mise en scène, such as costumes, makeup, props, lighting, and set design.
- Explain how filmmakers use actors within the setting to reinforce the story, whether realistically or artificially stylized, and have a working knowledge of the actor's job and the sequence in which movies are shot.
- Recognize the difference between an actor and a character.
- Identify different types of acting methods and types of actors.
- Explain how casting shapes the outcome of a movie as well as audience expectations for it, and some of the processes involved in casting a film.
- Explain the collaboration between actors and directors.

5.1 What Is Mise en Scène?

The first few minutes or so of *Inglourious Basterds*, writer and director Quentin Tarantino's 2009 reimagining of World War II, establish a situation in 1940 Nazi-occupied France by showing scenery, props, actors playing characters in specific costumes using specific body language, and those actors moving through the setting, all with very little dialogue. We get our initial feeling about the characters and what might happen by seeing where they are, what their belongings are, how they are dressed, how they are lit, and how they react. What colors things are may also draw our attention to certain objects and people, as well as setting an overall mood. All the things we are looking at in the scene have been carefully chosen and placed there by the filmmakers to help tell the story to the audience in ways that do not require dialogue to explain anything. What we see is called the **mise en scène**, a French term borrowed from the theater referring to what is "placed in the scene." We will come back to this sometimes-misunderstood concept in more detail shortly. For many viewers, the most memorable parts of the mise en scène, and indeed what may be the reason they decided to watch a movie, are the actors and their performances.

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▲ A still of Christoph Waltz as Nazi officer Col. Hans Landa in *Inglorious Basterds* (2009). Critic Roger Ebert writes that Waltz and Tarantino created "a character unlike any Nazi—indeed, anyone at all—I've seen in a movie: evil, sardonic, ironic, mannered, absurd."

The rest of the 20-minute opening sequence in *Inglourious Basterds* consists mostly of one actor talking to another at a table inside a small farmhouse. The actor doing most of the talking is Christoph Waltz as Col. Hans Landa, a Nazi officer known as "the Jew hunter." He arrives

at a dairy farm in France to talk with its owner, Perrier LaPadite (Denis Menochet), whom he suspects is hiding a Jewish family. Landa is not physically threatening. Instead, he is charming, intelligent, and relentless, wearing the increasingly nervous LaPadite down until he confesses that the family is hiding beneath the floorboards. (Landa immediately has them shot.) He is alternately complimentary and repulsive; his one consistent quality is that he is compulsively interesting. His mannerisms as he speaks, the wry smile, the overwhelming confidence that he has the upper hand here and will get what he wants—he exudes that power. It is chilling, fascinating, scary, brilliant. The audience may be horrified by his behavior, but they are at the same time engaged, compelled—they simply can't look away. Col. Hans Landa is in no way a sympathetic **character**— the person Waltz is playing in the movie whose traits are created by the writer to help tell the story—yet we want to see more of him. That is no easy trick, but for a good actor, it is a necessary skill. Waltz won a well-deserved best-supporting actor Oscar for the role. But simply handing him a trophy doesn't really capture the magic going on here. Waltz's performance encapsulates what is in many ways the true magic of movies: He isn't just pretending to be someone else. He becomes someone else. And this is the magic of effective acting.

Acting can set the tone of a film and goes a long way toward establishing whether or not we will like it. Oddly enough, while this may sound contradictory, acting is also the last thing an actor wants to think about in the middle of a performance. The best actors inhabit their roles, as Waltz does in *Basterds.* Sir Ben Kingsley, himself an Oscar winner, talked about this while discussing working with Martin Scorsese in *Shutter Island*:

> The sinking feeling is if I do something between "action" and "cut" and I know I'm going to have to exaggerate this and demonstrate it, because I don't trust this director is seeing what I'm doing. And then you know what creeps in? Acting. I hate acting. It's marvelous to throw all the acting out on a film set and allow the director to film the behavior of the character, not me acting. (Goodykoontz, 2009a)

▲ This scene from *Prometheus* depicts the mysterious surroundings of a new planet and reflects the feelings of the characters as they explore their unknown, likely dangerous, environment. Mise en scène includes all the elements that film has in common with theater, such as setting, costumes, props, and blocking.

Acting is, to be sure, an inexact science. It is as much technique as feeling, Kingsley's protestations notwithstanding. Different actors use different methods, demand different things from directors, get to the emotional core of their characters in different ways. Performances are as unique as the people who give them. The best actors invite us into films, allow us to accompany them on their journey, while, like any good magician, never letting us see how they perform their tricks.

(A reminder about word choice: We will use the word **actor** to refer to both men and women. This is not gender discrimination. Instead, it has long been the preferred term when talking about the craft for both genders.)

5.2 Telling the Story Through Setting, Props, and Costumes

If we have established that actors are often what bring audiences to a film, we must also ask, what do they do once they have us there? Where does the director put them, and what does he ask them to do? Actors are critical in bringing a character to life for the audience by interpreting the intentions of the writer and director. But an actor is also a tool of the director, just one more part of the scene that helps to tell the story to the audience. A character's relationship to the story's themes, the plot developments, and the other characters can be suggested, emphasized, and intensified for the audience by the use of certain costumes, makeup, **props** (short for "properties"), and even position on the set (the placing of actors is referred to as **blocking**). These are all key elements of the mise en scène (see *Behind the Scenes: Mise en Scène*).

Put simply, mise en scène is WHAT the audience sees in a scene, and this includes the actors. The way characters are dressed, their physical appearance and the way they carry themselves, and the things they use and the spaces they inhabit all tell us something about their personalities and function in the story before the actors even say or do anything. Without a single line of dialogue, or any actions on the part of the actors, the mise en scène can convey a great deal of story information about the plot or character that might take pages to describe in a novel. The setting, the basic environment, with all its textures and attributes, patterns of lighting, props that are visible, even the weather—all contribute to what is going on in the plot at that moment, whether it's establishing the general mood, time of day, place in the world, era of history, or a character's current situation in life or state of mind.

Films from the silent era may use the mise en scène especially densely, not having recorded dialogue, narration, or sound effects to fall back upon, but the best sound era films use sound to reinforce and supplement what they show, not just as a substitute for showing information to the audience visually. Extended sequences may require close audience attention to the surroundings while actors are doing things without saying anything. The science-fiction thriller *Prometheus* and the original *Alien* films that inspired it are good examples of tension built simply by the viewer following a character through eerie and unfamiliar surroundings with the threat of danger around every corner. Even cartoons, such as *Despicable Me*, *Rango*, *Up*, *Ratatouille*, and others, make extensive and careful use of their mise en scène to help viewers understand the characters and the events of the plot, independent of the dialogue and the actions.

Many elements of the mise en scène may be symbolic, whether representing story themes or character attributes or social metaphors. The set decoration of a character's apartment, for example, can explain a complicated backstory and set up the present situation, as in the opening scene of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. The camera looks out the window of Jeff's apartment and then slowly pulls back to track and pan across various things in the room, from a thermometer showing a very hot temperature and the leg cast that has Jeff currently incapacitated in a wheelchair, to photographs on the wall and magazine covers (including one of his fashion-model girlfriend) that show he's a professional photographer who's been around the world on exciting assignments, to a spectacular racecar crash photo and a broken camera that imply how he got the broken leg. The leisurely lingering over the setting before any dialogue or action begins also reinforces how bored Jeff is at being cooped up and why he spends his time spying on his neighbors through his telephoto lens, trying to find something interesting to see.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Mise en Scène (What Is "Placed in the Scene")

Everything in the mise en scène is controlled, chosen, or at least approved by the director. The mise en scène is everything visible in the scene used for telling the story, before the camera is even brought onto the set. The mise en scène may be natural, semi-realistic, or heavily artificial and stylized. Mise en scène includes

- settings and sets (whether actual locations or custom-built in a studio)
- lighting
- colors
- props
- costumes
- makeup
- actors (including their positioning and movements)

In Debra Granik's Oscar-nominated *Winter's Bone* (2010), Jennifer Lawrence gives an intensely powerful performance as Ree Dolly, a teenage girl searching for her missing meth-cooking father so the family home will not be forfeited for the jail bond. But just as intense as her determined character, almost a character in itself, is the rural Ozark environment in which she lives. The film uses dialogue sparingly, mainly when the audience needs to know critical information, and what dialogue there is has a very low-key, matter-of-fact delivery. The surroundings we see provide at least as many details about the plot and characters as any lines of dialogue. This independent production was shot on location in rural Missouri using a number of

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▲ The cold, desolate Ozark setting in *Winter's Bone* is so palpable that it almost establishes itself as a character.

local nonprofessional actors, as well as a hand-built private home that served as Ree's house, actual former meth-lab locations, and numerous small props that give a rich textural detail to the scenes (see Neda Ulaby's 2011 National Public Radio feature "On Location: The Frozen Ozarks of 'Winter's Bone,'" http://www.npr.org/2011/08/18/139753185/on-location-the-frozen-ozarks-of-winters-bone). Cool bluish colors and drab earth tones contribute to the mood. We can almost feel the poverty and isolation these characters live with every day in their struggle to survive, and that drives them to act the way they do. Yet we also feel their neighborly compassion in those same surroundings as they share food and music performances together.

A film like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) relies heavily on its dialogue to define its characters and further its plot, yet it uses the mise en scène just as intensely to reinforce characters and plot symbolically. The film takes place on the hottest day of the year from morning until night and the next morning. The lighting not only reflects the time of day by the position of the

shadows, but its warm colors, combined with the choice of bright reds, oranges, and yellows that decorate the setting, emphasize the heat—of both the weather and the characters' emotions. The positions of characters in the scene also reflect their position of respect in the community. The woman known as "Mother-Sister" is seen up in her apartment window, while the alcoholic old ex-baseball player known as "Da Mayor" is always seen below her, both literally and figuratively, until the end of the film, when they are on the same level for the first time.

Some films employ extremely understated acting, preferring to favor the mise en scène over extensive dialogue or action to tell much of the story. Even more reliant upon mise en scène to convey story information than either *Do the Right Thing* or *Winter's Bone* is Peter Webber's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* (2003). The opening shots show a young woman (Scarlett Johansson) slicing vegetables in a room dimly lit by indirect sunlight with unlit candles on the table, establishing for the viewer through the costumes and setting that this is a working-class girl in a past period (17th-century Holland, as it turns out). The pale bluish daylight gives a melancholy mood, contrasting sharply with the warm yellows and oranges and more natural colors seen later in the plot in a richer, happier setting. The girl's obvious care in arranging the food on the plate suggests both her diligence at her work and her innate artistic sense, foreshadowing what is to come when she leaves her home to work as a servant-girl for the famous painter Vermeer (Colin Firth). The director's use of the scenery, and staging of her

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▲ The inspiration for the mise en scène in *Girl With a Pearl Earring* can be attributed to Vermeer himself, a painter who reveled in depicting women in domestic scenes working in beautiful opalescent light.

moves through it, again reinforces what is going on in the character's mind as she is literally and figuratively looking for a new direction in her life (at one point near the beginning she even pauses on a large compass pattern painted on the pavement). In this film, much of the movie's action is going on inside the characters' heads rather than happening as a series of obvious events or explained through dialogue. In this case, the viewer may need to work to infer all that is happening, paying close attention to how the film packs information into careful and significant dramatic use of the mise en scène—setting, lighting, color, props, costumes, makeup, and actors' movements, instead of relying on what the actors are saying.

Each of these films just discussed has a generally realistic mise en scène, yet each is controlled by the filmmakers to serve the needs of the story. The location where *Winter's Bone* was shot is the most naturalistic of the group. The carefully reconstructed period settings of *Girl With a Pearl Earring* are also very realistic. In *Rear Window*, the apartment and view outside were constructed on a studio soundstage, and while they give the sense of surface realism, they have an underlying, somewhat larger-than-life artificiality. *Do the Right Thing* was shot on an actual city block, again presenting a surface impression of realism, yet the extreme control over the colors, traffic, extras, and cleanliness of the streets presents a stylized portrait of the neighborhood, eliminating certain natural details (e.g., litter, street people, or drug dealers) that might distract from the specific themes of the story. Other films may take stylization to an extreme, such as the German Expressionist classic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the films of Tim Burton (heavily influenced

by *Caligari*), or most digital cartoons, which make no pretense at presenting reality. Still others might reserve extremely stylized settings and acting performances for dreams or flashbacks, helping differentiate them from a more naturalistic main plot.

5.3 The Actor as Part of the Mise en Scène

Actors portray the characters who live out the story presented for the viewer through the plot. Those characters are written by an author. They are placed into the film's sets by the director, who also guides the actors' performances. So what do the actors actually bring to their roles? When we see a character move away from another character and look out a window during a line of dialogue, this action might well have been written into the script by the screenwriter (or have been part of the original story as a novel). However, the script might just as well have had no action indicated during the dialogue. The movement might have been the director's decision, whether to help convey character relationships or simply to add some action to the scene. On the other hand, it might equally as easily have been a movement the actor came up with intuitively when interpreting how the character should respond in a given situation. It may even have been improvised during rehearsals, and the director decided that the movement was the best choice for that scene. The director, usually working closely with the actors and following the demands of the script, determines what the actors will be doing, how and when, and where in the scene they will be at any given time. The director (and sometimes the actor) also gives approval on costumes, makeup, and props used by the actor. A strong director has final say on the performance, not only guiding it during shooting but manipulating it through editing (as will be noted later) or deleting it altogether. Again then, what does an actor really do?

On its face, what an actor does is simple: act. That is, he or she pretends to be someone else—the character he or she is playing in the movie. The actor brings a written character to life. In practice, it's much more complex. Perhaps it's easiest to start with what an actor *doesn't* do, or most of them, anyway. The actor does not write the script nor direct the film. Thus, even though the actor can influence the film, a role we will discuss in more detail later, he or she does not *create* it. Ask a television actor what the following season holds for his or her character, and you will likely be greeted with a look of puzzled bemusement: "I have no idea." This is typically followed by, "Ask the writers." Many fans are stunned to learn that their favorite characters are as in the dark as they are about what the future holds.

Out of Order

The same thing is true of film actors. While many stage plays may occur in a single set over a continuous time period, most movies are made up of numerous **scenes**—portions of the plot occurring in a single location for a single length of time—taking place at many different points in time. Movies are seldom shot **in sequence**; that is, they aren't made in chronological order. Because of scheduling demands, quirks of weather, illness, or any number of other reasons, a wrenching death scene might be shot on Tuesday afternoon. Then, on Wednesday morning, the same character will be very much alive, having dinner with his family and offering a toast to a happy, robust future. Also, various shots such as close-ups, medium shots, and long shots are typically filmed separately with the same camera rather than simultaneously with multiple cameras. Thus in a scene where first there is a close-up of one character, then a faraway shot of the character including scenery and other actors, then a medium shot of two characters, each part was probably filmed separately but edited to appear as if it is continuous.

Because of this, screen acting tends to be compartmentalized. Although an actor must keep the arc, or the overall story, in mind, for an effective performance he must remain in the moment, concentrating on whatever task is at hand for the character. On rare occasions, a director (or star) may have the power and the budget to shoot a film in sequence. A recent example is Roman Polanski's *Carnage*, adapted from a stage play and starring Jodie Foster, John C. Reilly, Christoph Waltz, and Kate Winslet. The plot unfolds in real time on the screen in a single set, a rarity in itself, so Polanski's choice to rehearse and film the script in sequence was a great aid to the actors in developing their character arcs. Sequential shooting is especially helpful when a plot chronicles emotional psychological character shifts as it progresses (*A Beautiful Mind* is another example), but shooting in sequence is highly unusual in film production.

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▲ Almost all movies are shot out of sequence. This saves time and money. *Timecode* is truly an exception. Director Mike Figgis shoots with four cameras in four locations operating simultaneously and continuously for 90 minutes. The four stories are shown in split screen to dizzying effect.

Besides shooting scenes in a different order than they appear in the script, directors typically shoot several versions of a given scene, then construct the final film from the best of these elements. Good actors will offer variations on their performance, giving the director several options from which to choose. In some ways, this takes incredible skill. Imagine what it must have been like to perform the harrowing scenes in *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire* in which first-time actor Gabourey Sidibe is physically and verbally abused by her mother, played by Mo'Nique. At one point, Mo'Nique's character throws a television at Sidibe. Now imagine working through that and the director yelling, "Cut!" and then asking you to do the same thing again, only a little different this time from the last four or five times.

Understanding how actors must act out of order makes it easier to understand how making a movie works—a series of scenes will be put together in coherent form later by the director in an editing room. Yet this also shows how isolated a part of filmmaking acting can be. In an interview, Robert De Niro was asked about some of his more famous roles, such as Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*, Vito Corleone in *The Godfather: Part II*, or Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*. Surely in such iconic performances he could tell that he was doing great work in great films, right? Wrong, De Niro said—he was concentrating on his performance, offering the directors as many good options as possible. Beyond that, everything else was out of his control, he said. "I really don't think you can tell how it's going to be received. You just never know. If you think it's going to be received well, you're deceiving yourself" (Goodykoontz, 2009c).

But if actors like De Niro aren't the ones putting the building blocks together (though De Niro has directed), they are the ones who provide the raw materials. That's the actor's job.

Learning Your Lines

The most basic skill an actor must possess is a good memory. He or she must learn a character's lines, and remember when who says what—all while making the words they're reciting sound

like natural conversation. Stories abound of shortcuts—George Clooney writing out his lines on scraps of paper and taping them to sheets and pillows when working on *E.R.* and the like. But for the most part actors do indeed memorize their lines, so that they might deliver them as genuinely as possible. This may mean taking a few liberties with the script, not delivering the lines word for word, but interpreting them in their own words while still getting the main point across.

However, most directors insist upon a fairly close reading. That is, unless the director is open to **improvisation**, coming up with your own lines that capture the spirit of what the writer and director are trying to accomplish in a particular scene. Even though this can lead to creative performances (especially in films featuring talented stand-up comedians accustomed to ad-libbing before live audiences, from Bob Hope to Chevy Chase to Jack Black), the director must strike

a difficult balance between allowing actors to improvise and maintaining control of the set and the scene. Improvisation during the actual shooting can also complicate the editing process later on. Because of this, some directors encourage improvisation only during rehearsals so that an agreed-upon version of a scene is finally "locked down" before shooting.

Certain directors are famous for their use of improvisation. Robert Altman, who directed such classic films as *M*A*S*H*, *Nashville*, *The Player*, and *Short Cuts*, allowed his actors to improvise freely, explaining in general terms what he wanted to achieve in a scene and allowing them to find the means to do so. His confidence in his actors and in his ability to piece the story together resulted in some of the finest dramas ever made—dramas that feel natural and realistic, like genuine conversations between people instead of dialogue recited

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ John Cassavetes is the father of independent American filmmaking. His ensemble films, such as *Shadows* and *Opening Night*, were created in an atmosphere that depended on improvisation to create and sustain an impression of reality caught on the fly.

by characters, because at some level that's what they are. Christopher Guest does much the same thing in the films he directs (and often stars in), including *Best in Show*, *Waiting for Guffman*, and *A Mighty Wind*. By employing brilliant improvisational comic actors, such as Fred Willard, John Michael Higgins, and Jane Lynch, he is able to let scenes unfold as the characters play off one another, then choose the best (and funniest) bits to construct his films.

Mike Leigh, meanwhile, who has directed such films as *Life Is Sweet*, *Secrets & Lies*, *Happy Go Lucky*, and *Another Year*, uses an even more elaborate method with his actors. He will take up to six months in rehearsal, allowing his actors to get to know each other, to create their characters and learn to relate to one another, all before a single frame is filmed and without using a traditional script of written dialogue. This may sound like a feasible option for contemporary fictional stories set in modern times, but Leigh has followed this process even when the film is a biographical true story about real people set in an historic time period like *Topsy-Turvy*.

5.4 | Types of Acting

Memorizing lines and repeating them in a believable fashion is the essence of acting; however, actors use different methods in their performances. Which method they use often depends upon the film, or the role itself. A serious drama lends itself to one type of acting, a raunchy comedy another, and a highly stylized, symbolic film yet another. Some actors stick with one method, for the most part. Others move easily from one to another. There is not any one necessarily "right" way to act. Instead, it's just whatever the role and the story call for.

Stylized Acting

Stylized acting is used when actors and directors want to call attention to the fact that the actor is, indeed, acting. While this is generally not desirable, sometimes it is. In the Coen brothers' 1987 movie *Raising Arizona*, Nicholas Cage plays a former criminal who marries a former police-woman (Holly Hunter). They can't have children, so they hit upon a novel notion: They kidnap a baby from a family that's just had quintuplets. The dialogue, the actions, the performances are all highly stylized—that is, they draw attention to themselves by being intentionally unrealistic. Consider this exchange between Ed (Hunter) and Gale and Evelle, played by John Goodman and William Forsythe, respectively, who have shown up at Ed's trailer-park home:

>**Ed:** You mean you busted out of jail.

>**Evelle:** No ma'am. We released ourselves on our own recognizance.

>**Gale:** What Evelle here is trying to say is that we felt that the institution no longer had anything to offer us. (Coen & Coen, 1987)

Now, it's unlikely that a couple of convicts on the run through rural Arizona would actually talk that way; only Ed's dialogue sounds genuine. But the stylized dialogue serves two purposes. It tells us that the Coen brothers' facility with language, the tricks they can play with words, are serving to make larger points. Plus, it's hilarious when delivered by actors who get the point. But not everyone thought so. In his review, Roger Ebert wrote, "I have a problem with movies where everybody talks as if they were reading out of an old novel about a bunch of would-be colorful characters. They usually end up sounding silly" (Ebert, 1987).

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▲ In *Anger Management*, Jack Nicholson gives an over-the-top performance based on his irascible reputation. Compare the self-parody in *Anger Management* with his more nuanced performance in *Chinatown*, for example.

That's one of the dangers of stylized acting: If you go too far over the top with it, it doesn't just draw attention to itself, it can pull the audience out of the movie. Yet for a film like *Sin City*, not just based on a graphic novel but made to look as if you've wandered into one, it's impossible to think of any other method. With a heavily stylized mise en scène that looks like comic books, and characters who bend, twist, and strangle reality to the breaking point, no other type of acting would be right. The story and the sets demand that the actors'

performances go over the top; otherwise, they would be lost among the clutter. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films provide a good example of how a movie can blend extreme stylization with a surface realism, a technique we will discuss next. While Keira Knightley and Orlando Bloom give reasonably naturalistic performances as the romantic leads (as do many of the supporting and background players), Johnny Depp and the actors playing the various other pirate characters deliver stylized, over-the-top performances that exaggerate their outlandish personalities and situations to the extreme. Of course, this stylized acting is part of the fun in such a fantasy adventure.

Realism

Realism, as opposed to stylized acting, can also be thought of as naturalistic. This is acting that doesn't draw attention to itself but instead gives the impression of genuine human action and reaction. What is considered realistic and natural, however, can change over the years and in particular situations. Performances considered powerfully realistic on stage often appear contrived and exaggerated on film, and filmmakers may need to coach actors into giving performances suitable for the intimate close-ups that appear gigantic on a movie screen. Yet viewers accustomed to live theater may still feel that somewhat "theatrical" acting is more realistic, and that performers intentionally tailoring their performances for the camera may be "underacting."

It depends partly upon the appropriateness of a performance to a specific character, but general styles of screen acting vary from one generation to the next. One generation's realistic performance may appear highly mannered, stylized, or heavily overacted to later generations, while one generation's underacting may be praised as naturalistic by another. "Method" acting, discussed later, was once considered extremely realistic, compared to classical acting. Today it may appear to have an artificial intensity.

Evaluation of acting realism may be tied closely to the plot, the staging of the actors, and how the actors deliver the dialogue. Films with a great deal of improvisation often are considered *realistic*. Robert Altman is a director whose films play out almost like slices of life the audience drops in on. Conversations start, stop, start again—just as a real conversation might. Obviously this technique wouldn't work in an

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▲ *Casa de los Babys* (*Baby House*) is about the complexity of Americans trying to adopt infants in Guatemala. Director John Sayles has built a reputation based on his ability to tell believable stories about ordinary people facing difficult choices.

action film or a horror movie, but in something like this, a character study in which we are invited to observe realistic behavior (albeit somewhat heightened; if *something* interesting doesn't happen, there wouldn't be much of a movie), it's quite appropriate, and it adds to the enjoyment of the movie. That said, it takes a talented actor to make realism interesting. The casting in Altman's films tends to be spot-on, with actors who gained his trust, so that he could let them develop the story as they went along.

However, taking improvisation and realism to an extreme in film can backfire. The films of John Cassavetes, with their intense improvised character interactions, have as many detractors as fans. Jonathan Demme's *Rachel Getting Married* (2008) is designed to look almost like a home movie

recording an actual family and its relationship problems, but even though some critics praised its performances for their raw realism and true-to-life emotion, others disliked the film because it was embarrassingly self-indulgent, uncontrolled, and as uncomfortable to watch as a home movie. Some had similar reactions to Robert Altman's similarly themed *A Wedding*.

Method Acting

Method acting (often known as "the Method") is perhaps the most famous type of acting, and the most often ridiculed and parodied. Based on the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavsky and popularized by Lee Strasberg, the Method requires that actors draw on their own memories and experiences to reach the heart of a character, so that they more genuinely feel the emotions they're portraying instead of just pretending to. The technique started in theater and was adopted by film actors. Peter Flint, in his 1992 *New York Times* obituary of Stella Adler, another Method proponent, described it like this: "The Method revolutionized American theater. Classical acting instruction had focused on developing external talents, while Method acting was the first systematized training that also developed internal abilities, sensory, psychological, emotional" (Flint, 1992). Strasberg, who headed the Actors Studio until his death in 1982, rooted his view of the Method on what Stanislavsky had stressed in his early career, that the actor should perform extensive "affective memory" exercises, improvising and conjuring up "the conscious past" to convey emotion: for example, dwelling on a personal tragedy to show anguish.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ In his brief career, James Dean personified the struggle to come of age. A student of Lee Strasberg, Dean is best remembered for his roles in *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* (pictured here).

Many famous actors have employed the Method technique, including Marlon Brando, Robert De Niro, Daniel Day-Lewis, Dustin Hoffman, Ellen Burstyn, Paul Newman, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean. Often actors who employ the Method are criticized for taking their roles too seriously; some proponents of the technique, for instance, don't "break character" on set, meaning they continue to behave—to the extent that they want to be called by the character's name—as if they were still acting. (This is not part of the teaching of the Method; it is just an example of how far some actors are willing to take it.) Although some of the criticism is justified—it's easy to take such things to ridiculous extremes—many Method actors have given some of the greatest performances ever captured on film. It's not a requirement, by any means, but when done well, it can lead to astonishing results.

Stage vs. Film Acting

Acting is central to both film and theater, but it is a different discipline in each art form because the forms themselves are so different. Even though we tend to think of theater as the more intimate form, that is not necessarily the case. In fact, the opposite may be true. Yes, when we see a play, we are in the same room as the actors, watching them perform right in front of us.

And we might see a film in a giant multiplex completely lacking in personality and charm, watching the story unfold on a screen. But the actors' jobs are quite different, and not entirely interchangeable.

In the theater, we are at a distance from the actors and from the action. There are no close-ups, no changing points of view. It is left up to the actors to provide the different perspectives that we are used to seeing. Also, because they're playing to a large room, the actors' mannerisms and expressions tend to be broad and big, the acting being much less subtle. They must emote more, or express their feelings in a more showy "theatrical" way, so that the emotions and feelings they are trying to impart aren't overlooked by audiences at various distances from the stage.

© Miramax/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ A scene from the movie *Doubt*. John Patrick Shanley adapted his own prize-winning play *Doubt* into a film whose four major stars (Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, and Viola Davis) would all be nominated for Oscars, yet some critics felt their performances were often too "theatrical," except perhaps that of Davis.

In films, on the other hand, cameras can capture even the smallest gesture, a nod, the raising of an eyebrow, so that the acting doesn't have to be as broad. An effective screen actor must know how to adjust a performance for extreme close-ups, for medium and long shots, and for extreme long shots with the camera farther away than any theater audience would be from the stage.

5.5 Types of Actors and Casting

Just as there are different types of acting, there are also different types of actors.

Impersonators

The term **impersonator** is considered somewhat demeaning in the acting world, suggesting that the actor has simply copied the manner, dialect, and behavior of a character, instead of *creating* the character. There are times when such a skill is useful—when a filmmaker needs a portrayal of a recognizable historical figure, for instance, but doesn't want to distract the audience by casting a recognizable actor in the role.

Better still are the actors who can play a famous character and yet go beyond a mere impersonation. Think of the late Philip Seymour Hoffman in *Capote*, in which he convincingly played author Truman Capote, right down to the trademark lisp. Yet he was also able to bring something of himself to the role (for which he won an Oscar). The physical resemblance helped, of course, as it did for Helen Mirren in her role as Queen Elizabeth II in *The Queen*; for David Strathairn, who played famed television reporter Edward R. Murrow in *Good Night, and Good Luck*; and for Daniel Day-Lewis as Abraham Lincoln in *Lincoln*, in which Strathairn also appeared, as Secretary of State William Seward. But it's not essential. Anthony Hopkins looks nothing like Richard Nixon, but he brilliantly captured the former president's essence in *Nixon*—the paranoia, the self-doubt, and the political brilliance. Hopkins likewise only vaguely resembled Alfred Hitchcock in *Hitchcock*, but he conveyed the famous director's personality so effectively that reproducing his exact physical appearance did not matter. More often than not, actors who can be called

"impersonators" are equally adept at a wide variety of character roles and may be termed "wild card" actors. See Table 5.1 for current examples of impersonators and other types of actors.

Table 5.1 Types of actors and some actors who fit each category

Impersonator	Philip Seymour Hoffman, Helen Mirren, David Strathairn, Meryl Streep [Note that each of these actors can also handle numerous character roles of fictional characters besides impersonating real people, and might fit into almost any of the following actor types.]
Interpreter	Anthony Hopkins, Laurence Olivier, Kenneth Branagh, Robert De Niro, Leonardo DiCaprio, Alec Guinness, Forest Whitaker
Personality	Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, John Wayne, Cary Grant, Humphrey Bogart, Jack Nicholson, Keanu Reeves, Tom Cruise, Bruce Willis, Denzel Washington, Jennifer Lopez
Wild card	Meryl Streep, Dustin Hoffman, Johnny Depp, Kevin Spacey, Brad Pitt, Helen Mirren, Rosie Perez, John Leguizamo, Daniel Day-Lewis, Jennifer Lawrence
Character	William H. Macy, Chris Cooper, Robert Duvall, Kristin Scott Thomas, Emma Thompson, Sam Anderson, Harry Dean Stanton, Jim Broadbent, Steve Buscemi, Viola Davis

Interpreters and Commentators

While Hopkins was some form of an **interpreter** in *Nixon*, this description more typically refers to actors who take material and put their own stamp on it. Often this involves actors interpreting well-known roles. There have been countless portrayals of the title character in William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, for instance, but the performance of Laurence Olivier in the 1955 film version that he also directed is so iconic that it's almost difficult to imagine another actor in the role. Kenneth Branagh's overall performance in the title role of the 1989 version of *Henry V* (which he directed as well) isn't as strong or as searing as Olivier's, but when he delivers the famous St. Crispin's Day speech before leading his men into what seems an almost suicidal battle ("We few, we happy few, we band of brothers"), he manages to give the lines a contemporary feel; he has made the role his own.

© Roadside Attractions/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Amy Acker's performance in Joss Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing*, coupled with the modern home setting, revitalized Shakespeare's play, making it relevant to a new generation.

In another example, Director Joss Whedon's 2012 *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which he filmed a black-and-white version at his own home over the course of two weeks, Amy Acker puts a contemporary spin on the character of Beatrice while using the original language from Shakespeare's play. This is a familiar play, with well-established characters, and one might argue that the sharp-witted Beatrice is one of Shakespeare's more contemporary characters to begin with. But Acker, with the help of Whedon's setting the play in such an unusual place, makes the language, the phrasing, and the context at home in the present, even while retaining the intricate wordplay with Benedick (Alexis Denisof). Denisof and the rest of the relatively unknown cast do an outstanding job of interpreting Shakespeare's words through both vocal inflections and physical

mannerisms, so that modern viewers can follow the plot without needing an annotated dictionary of Elizabethan English. The same might be said of the star-studded cast interpreting the same characters in Kenneth Branagh's 1993 film of the play, although it was set in a time and place closer to Shakespeare's original (and some critics have issues with Keanu Reeves's performance).

Personality Actors

As with impersonators, there is sometimes a negative connotation to the term **personality actor**, which is odd, in some ways, because acting depends so heavily on a strong personality. But relying on it too much is thought of as a crutch, as a substitute for skill and technique. Personality actors are, at some level, playing themselves (or at least that is the perception). Films with strong personality actors can make it difficult for audiences to differentiate between the actor and the character. In a film starring Clint Eastwood or Sylvester Stallone or John Wayne, how often do you use or even remember the names of their characters when discussing them with friends? Actors with distinctive personalities who manage to click with audiences often wind up playing similar characters in film after film. Keanu Reeves, for instance, seemingly has been saddled with roles that virtually require him to utter "Whoa" after becoming famous as a dim-bulb teenager, even though Reeves has been a grown (and thoughtful) man for some time. Some actors become so famous that their personalities become a kind of shortcut, allowing them to relate certain things to an audience simply by showing up on screen. Jack Nicholson, for instance, has such a strong presence and such idiosyncratic mannerisms and tics that we know what he is trying to convey simply by watching him raise an eyebrow, one of his signature moves. Even though his personality dominates his films, Nicholson's performances remain impressive, as evidenced by his 12 Academy Award nominations and three wins. And actors like Humphrey Bogart and Cary Grant remain popular personalities more than half a century after their heyday. But a lesser talent who relies too much on personality risks not having staying power. Will audiences 50 years from now recognize the strength of personality? Or will it simply seem mannered and curious, a distraction instead of a beloved trait?

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ John Wayne (shown here in *Sands of Iwo Jima*) was among a number of Hollywood actors, including Ronald Reagan, who linked their on-screen all-American images to their political viewpoints.

Stars

To define a star, think about a personality actor, only more so. A **star** is a distinctive screen persona who is well known and popular with the moviegoing public, often to the point that some avid movie fans become deeply curious about the actor's private life. Hollywood has had a century-long love affair with stars, since the days of Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford. Stars are actors who are simply famous on screen and off, personalities so magnetic that we are interested not just in their movies, but in their personal lives as well. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are both talented actors. But they're also famous stars, celebrities, so much so that tabloids and gossip sites endlessly speculate on their relationship, their children, and every other aspect of their lives.

Obviously, this has been taken to almost absurd extremes today, where websites breathlessly report the content of text messages between actors and their mistresses and the like. Nevertheless, the attachment of any famous star to a movie project is invaluable in attracting financing, distribution, and viewers, whatever the film's ultimate dramatic or artistic value turns out to be. Being a star does not guarantee being a great actor, and any number of major stars (especially in action films) routinely get savaged by film critics. On the other hand, many great actors never become stars who are household names. The entire cast of Joss Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing* is an excellent ensemble of strong actors, and while many have had some television acclaim, none has much name recognition (if any) among moviegoers.

Wild Cards and Character Actors

Some actors exist outside traditional, easily defined categories. How could we describe Meryl Streep, for instance? She is a star, certainly; her 16 Oscar nominations are the most in history (she's won two). She's not a mimic, yet her portrayal of Julia Child in *Julie & Julia* relies heavily on aping the famous chef's quirky mannerisms. She certainly interprets roles and often brings a distinctive personality to the screen. So which category does she fit into? One way to look at it is that she defies such categories—she is a **wild card**, an actor who is difficult to classify as one certain type, often because he or she can play a wide variety of characters equally well without becoming typecast. Other actors are able to fit invisibly into a wide variety of disparate characters, adapting to the needs of each script and director they work with, known as **character actors**. Because they are so effective at this, they often are not immediately recognized by the public and may take years to achieve "star" status, even though they are constantly in demand. Critically acclaimed actors such as William H. Macy, Chris Cooper, Kristin Scott Thomas, John C. Reilly, and others (including Philip Seymour Hoffman, Helen Mirren, and David Strathairn, noted under "Impersonators") bring their talents to both big-budget Hollywood films and low-budget

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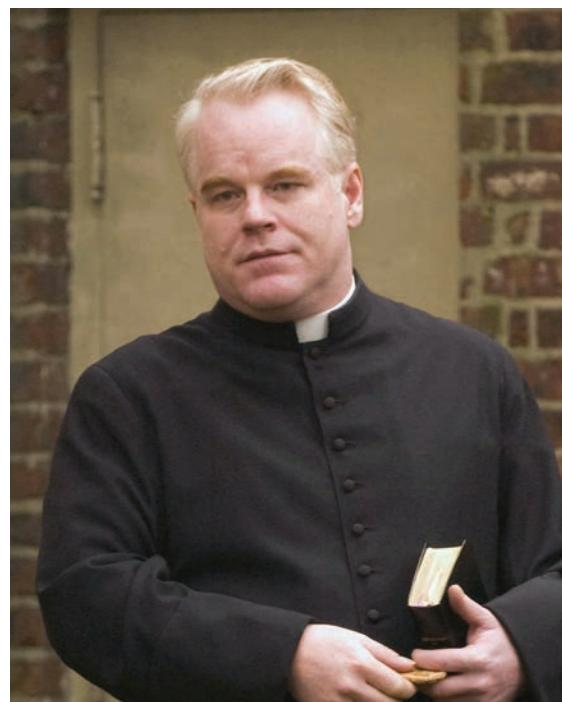
▲ Could Philip Seymour Hoffman's portrayals in *Pirate Radio* (left) and *Doubt* (right) be more different?

independents. But average moviegoers may be only vaguely aware of them because each of their roles is so different from the other that they see only the characters rather than the actors. Their versatility makes them invaluable as character actors. On the other hand, young character actress Jennifer Lawrence appeared in some obscure but well-received independent films, gained major critical recognition with her Oscar-nominated performance in *Winter's Bone*, and then became a popular star with her roles in major action sci-fi films such as *The Hunger Games* and *X-Men: First Class*. Yet she returned to a strong character part in the relatively low-budget *Silver Linings Playbook* and won the Academy Award for Best Actress. In 2013, she co-starred in the sequel to *The Hunger Games* as well as the popular and critical success *American Hustle*. Will she become the next Meryl Streep and avoid becoming typecast?

While Streep is a star and major box office draw, most character actors tend to get starring roles in small-budget films, but mainly supporting roles and even uncredited **bit parts** in major films. (A "bit" part is a short character appearance with few or no lines, rarely more than a day's work for the actor, if that, yet sometimes these roles can become memorable with the right actor.) Occasionally, major stars turn to character roles as they grow older and may accept smaller but perhaps more challenging parts, either for the money or just for fun. Some even seek out bit parts in projects by director or actor friends. Think of Tom Cruise's flamboyant but uncharacteristically short role in Ben Stiller's *Tropic Thunder* or Bruce Willis's brief appearance in Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror*. Robert Altman's *The Player* is crammed with numerous appearances by famous stars, many playing themselves, some for just a few minutes in the two-hour-plus film, others for mere seconds of screen time.

5.6 Casting: Stars, Actors, Non-Actors

Casting just the right actor to play a character is sometimes considered half the task of directing a successful movie. But before Clint Eastwood was able to become the iconic "man with no name" in *A Fistful of Dollars*, which made him a star and established his screen persona for the rest of his career, he first had to win the role (which had first been offered to and refused by Henry Fonda, James Coburn, and Charles Bronson). In retrospect, with successful films, it's easy to think how naturally and how well an actor fits a role. It's impossible to imagine anyone else but Ben Kingsley in the title role of *Gandhi*, but what if director Richard Attenborough had gone with a different actor? The entire film would have been changed drastically. Before becoming a star, Jennifer Lawrence had auditioned for the role of Bella in *Twilight*, but she lost it to Kristin Stewart. Even such beloved classics as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Casablanca*, and the 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon* originally had other actors planned for several leading roles that now seem inseparable from Judy Garland, Humphrey Bogart, and others. It can be instructive to watch a film and two or more of its remakes to see how different actors interpret the same roles. We'll take a brief look here at the methods of casting, as well as some of the pitfalls.
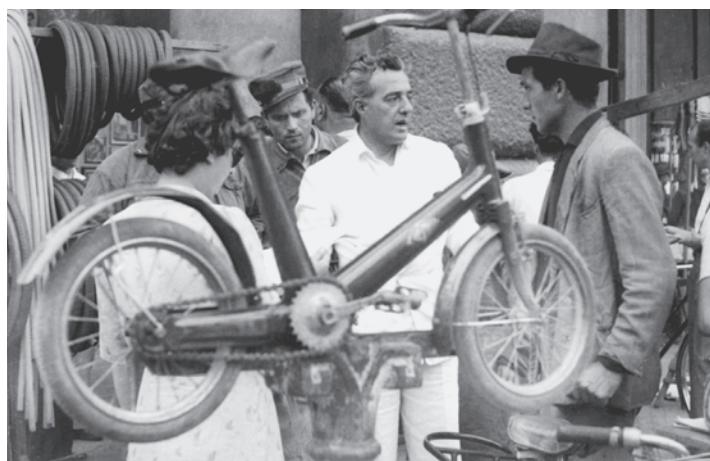
Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Still from *The Bicycle Thief*. Sometimes the best casting is casting from life. Before *Slumdog Millionaire*'s unknown children, neo-realist Vittorio De Sica pioneered the use of non-professional actors in *The Bicycle Thief*.

Auditions

An **audition** occurs when an actor is invited to try out for a part, in front of casting directors, producers, and perhaps the director of the film as well. It's no different than trying out for a high school play, really, though the stakes are usually somewhat higher. Sometimes a director or casting director will also do a screen test, in which an actor is filmed doing a scene from the script, often with another actor who has already been cast. A number of DVDs, *Juno*, for example, include bonus features showing some of the audition tapes or screen tests, letting the public see other actors who were not cast, as well as early, sometimes different interpretations by the actors who were cast.

Some actors, after achieving a certain level of success, no longer wish to audition for a role; some flat out refuse to. Instead, they want to be cast on the basis of their previous work, their reputation, and their talent. But it takes a while to get to this point, and it's typically reserved only for the biggest stars or distinguished character actors (some of whom will submit to an audition anyway). No one but Clark Gable was seriously considered to play Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind*, but numerous famous stars tested for the role of Scarlett O'Hara, and the part finally went to Vivien Leigh, who was virtually unknown outside of England at the time.

A process called **open casting** is when a public invitation is issued for people to try out for roles, rather than casting directors contacting actors' agents about available roles. The popular television show *Glee*, for instance, conducted a nationwide casting call for actors for its second season. Sometimes aspiring actors are asked to submit audition tapes, and casting directors call back the most promising for in-person auditions. Open casting calls require determination and luck on the part of the actor; tens of thousands of singers attend open castings for *American Idol*, for instance.

© Sony Pictures/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Will Ferrell in *Stranger Than Fiction*. Comedians typically have a hard time branching out from typecast roles. Will Ferrell's comedic charm actually lends itself to his role in *Stranger Than Fiction*, where he plays the straight man placed in an absurd situation in which he is able to hear a voice narrating his life.

Typecasting

Sometimes a relatively unknown actor will achieve success in an early role—and then be doomed to repeat the same type of role again and again over the course of a career (as noted earlier in the discussion of personality actors). A famous example of this **typecasting** in television is Gary Burghoff, who played Walter "Radar" O'Reilly in the television show *M*A*S*H* (as well as in the film). Often a comedic actor, such as Jim Carrey or Adam Sandler, becomes so well known for humorous roles that it is difficult for audiences to accept them in dramas, even when they are outstanding in the other roles (both have been). Sandler specializes in broad, crude slapstick comedy, yet he impressed critics with his dramatic range in *Punch Drunk Love* and *Reign Over Me*. Neither film did well at the box office, however. Carrey's serious turn in *The Majestic* received mixed critical response and bombed theatrically. Funnyman Will Ferrell had a seriocomic role in the offbeat *Stranger Than Fiction*,

which found modest box office success but grossed only a tiny fraction of his *Anchorman* films and other wacky parodies he is noted for. Robin Williams, who grew to fame as a stand-up comic and television star, then went on to a successful career in comedies, was able to break the mold, winning an Oscar for a dramatic role in the film *Good Will Hunting*. Leslie Nielsen went the opposite route, starting as a serious character actor, supporting player, and leading man and later switching to comedy, spoofing the very types of roles he'd previously played straight. Now viewers may find it difficult to take his earlier characters seriously! Like popular stars, character actors also (much to their frustration) may become typecast if they are particularly successful in one type of role.

The Star System

In old Hollywood—that is, in the first half of the 20th century—films were the products of studios that owned all their own production resources, including vast stages and prop warehouses, film labs, equipment, and the services of in-house production crews, writers, directors, and actors. Stars were their major assets because producers knew their appearance in a film would sell tickets, and the popularity of stars with the public meant prosperity for the studio. Studios relied on stars, signing them to long-term contracts and casting them in one movie after another.

While this star system offered steady employment for the biggest stars, it also created a system in which studios would invent out of whole cloth images and personalities for their actors. Rock Hudson, for instance, was a closeted gay man, but the studio went so far as to arrange a marriage to a woman to prevent his fans from knowing the truth about his sexual orientation. The studio-based star system was largely abandoned by the 1960s, though some of its trappings remain, as stars and their publicists carefully cultivate public images to give the public information—just enough, not too much—that will be beneficial to an actor's career.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Humphrey Bogart (shown here with Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*) was an American icon—hardboiled, with a soft spot for "dames."

Miscasting and Lucky Breaks

Like any creative endeavor, casting is prone to mistakes and happy accidents. Sometimes, despite the best instincts of the people making the film, as well as tools such as marketing research, an actor will still be miscast in a role. One example is the casting of George Clooney as Bruce Wayne and Batman in *Batman and Robin*. Clooney is a well-loved major star but an underrated actor (though he once won an Oscar). Yet many viewers concluded he was the absolute wrong choice for this film, feeling his innate charm came off more as arrogance. On the other hand, Michael Keaton, at the time noted as a comic actor, seemed like a terrible choice for the role in *Batman* and *Batman Returns*. Despite the doubts of many, Keaton proved to be a very capable Batman, satisfying most fans and critics alike, and he went on to more dramatic roles. Harrison Ford was a bit actor who got a lucky break with *Star Wars*, going on to become a major action star and later a respected character actor.

How Stars Affect Movies

It's sort of like the all-squares-are-rectangles-but-not-all-rectangles-are-squares principle: All stars are actors. But not all actors are stars. The differences may be subtle, or they may be pronounced. But they're there, and they affect the way audiences perceive movies—and whether they show up to them in the first place.

Casting a star in a movie guarantees certain things. One thing it guarantees is attention. If Brad Pitt is even considering making a movie, it's news. Some believe that any publicity is good publicity; however, immense star power has a downside—it can overwhelm the film itself. Weak directors can also use star power to make up for a weak script (think of any of the later *Rocky* movies, for instance, which coasted on the image and fame of Sylvester Stallone). To enjoy a movie, an audience must employ suspension of disbelief, or the ability to convince ourselves that something our rational mind knows isn't true—for instance, that Robert De Niro is an unbalanced cabbie in *Taxi Driver*—is really happening. The moment we begin to think of the actor on screen *as an actor*, the magic is lost, and so is the movie. Yet paradoxically many viewers will avoid movies that feature actors they've never heard of, gauging their probable enjoyment more by star familiarity than by story content.

Frequently, established stars will do what is known as *playing against type*, or playing a role of a type that audiences are not used to seeing them in. As mentioned earlier, comic actors such as Adam Sandler and Jim Carrey will occasionally take on dramatic roles. Indeed, Tom Hanks, who would win two best-acting Oscars, started his film career in goofy comedies such as *Bachelor Party*. His career is often used as an example for actors hoping to break out of a particular mold, though in truth he is more the exception than the rule.

Some actors, once they become stars, gain the power to choose more challenging roles that can demonstrate their acting ability—star power in service of acting power. Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt began as attractive but generic and typecast romantic leads. Bruce Willis is often considered an action hero. But now that they are successful stars, they are unafraid to play characters fans might not expect from them, occasionally even supporting or unadvertised bit roles. Johnny Depp started as a disposable hero in the original *A Nightmare on Elm Street* but now thrives on quirky performances of quirky characters in quirky scripts for quirky directors. George Clooney gained fame by playing suave, self-confident characters, often with a comic edge, which is what makes his performance in *Michael Clayton* so fascinating. Clooney is such a good actor that we are able to believe that this person is in fact a troubled man whose life is spinning out of control, and who may be powerless to stop it.

© Warner Independent Pictures/courtesy Everett Collection

▲ George Clooney made his reputation as a leading man following in the tradition of Cary Grant and Clark Gable. In *Good Night, and Good Luck* (shown here), he takes an unusual role in a biography of Edward R. Murrow. As director and co-writer, Clooney brings his social conscience to bear. Audiences sense an identification between Clooney's portrait of Fred Friendly (co-producer with Murrow of *See It Now*) and Clooney's personal views.

Box-Office Clout

The economic impact of stardom is sometimes lost in the *People* magazine style of coverage. There is a reason that stars with the stature of Will Smith or George Clooney are paid tens of millions of dollars to make a movie: They can "open" a film, or bring a large audience to it for the all-important first weekend and guarantee future video sales.

But a star's reach extends beyond the box office. Richard Kind, a character actor—that is, an actor who typically does not play starring roles, but instead plays smaller-though-crucial characters—is friends with Clooney. He compared his lot in life to that of his pal's, saying "I'm allowed to fail . . . If he fails, his next project is affected . . . the perception of career . . . If I fail, some seats are not going to be filled . . . If he fails, the loss is in . . . millions of dollars" (Goodykoontz, 2009b).

How Actors Affect Movies

Without the benefit of extensive media coverage, studio hype, and star power, smaller films are more dependent upon telling a good story than blockbusters are. If a movie is well made and well acted, it may still find an audience. Some actors made their name playing choice roles in small films; some actors never leave that world. Actors such as Daniel Day-Lewis and character actors mentioned previously try to submerse themselves in their roles. The characters they play are more important than any star persona associated with them. Sometimes, as with Peter Sellers (*Dr. Strangelove*) and Alec Guinness (*Kind Hearts and Coronets*), they may flex their act-ing muscles by playing multiple and very different parts within the same film. Less famous character actors and supporting actors may even base entire careers on their ability *not* to stand out to audiences, blending in effortlessly to whatever story, period, and character in which they are cast. They carefully avoid cultivating a star persona.

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Daniel Day-Lewis is well known for his hard work to stay in character. For *My Left Foot* (shown here), playing Christy Brown, who was born with cerebral palsy, Lewis insisted that the crew spoon feed him on the set. He learned to paint holding a knife with his foot. As a result of the weeks he spent bent over in a wheelchair, he broke two ribs. He won an Oscar for this portrayal.

Some actors get their start in smaller roles, gradually gain prominence and move up to supporting roles, and then become stars able to carry a film to success. As they get older, they may shift to character roles and smaller parts, but their fame continues to add prestige and increased box office potential to their films. A few actors have enough charisma and star power to continue to handle leading man or leading lady roles far beyond the norm for people their age (such as Harrison Ford, Meryl Streep, Cary Grant, and Katharine Hepburn). Other actors shoot to stardom because they manage to touch a public nerve with the right role at the right time, but after brief careers of extreme popularity, they may fade into obscurity in minor films or give up acting altogether. Still others die tragically young near the height of their fame (e.g., James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Heath Ledger, and Brittany Murphy).

Non-Actors in Films

Certain directors, especially for independent productions dealing with slice-of-life situations, prefer to avoid casting not only familiar stars, but also any professional actors. They may still hold auditions, but they will search for people who naturally look and act like the characters they have in their scripts, people without the trained polish of an actor performing a role. They cast people who can essentially be themselves within the context of the story, delivering a performance, often partly or entirely improvised, that looks like real people in those situations rather than actors pretending.

This practice gained some popularity in Italy during and immediately after World War II with a filmmaking movement known as Italian Neorealism, and it continued to some extent with the French New Wave during the 1950s and 1960s and the growth of the American independent filmmaking movement from the 1950s through the present. It is rarely used on major Hollywood movies except sometimes for bit roles, but it is not uncommon in independent films like *Winter's Bone* or *Mud*, which cast unknowns and nonprofessional actors for major supporting roles but professionals as the leading characters.

5.7 The Actor's Role in Shaping a Film

Despite their visibility, actors do not, as we have discussed, have as powerful a role in telling the story as the audience might believe. The actor's role is still crucial, obviously. If the actor doesn't create the story, he does interpret it—and some successful actors have power beyond that, as well, choosing their own scripts and directors, or even writing or directing their films themselves.

An actor's performance, however unique and individual it may be to that particular actor, can be strongly shaped by the director through choices of camera angles, and even more drastically through editing, as noted near the beginning of this chapter. A performance that literally never existed on the set can be built in the editing room because a scene is shot (or "taken") more than once from the same and different angles. By using bits and pieces from various **takes**, inserting reactions by other characters, lengthening or shortening pauses between lines, and cross-cutting between other scenes, the director can get exactly the line readings he or she wants, change the pacing of line delivery, rearrange or delete lines of dialogue, and more. New dialogue may even be recorded to dub over the picture. This can change the audience's perception of the performance to something entirely different from what may have been filmed, and it may be especially necessary in "indie" films using nonprofessional actors. Some film actors may come to rely upon editing for their performances, as it means they need memorize only a few lines of dialogue at a time, at most a few pages of script, unless they're working for a director who prefers long, uninterrupted takes. Stage actors, on the other hand, have much more control

Courtesy Everett Collection

▲ Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann in a scene from the film *Persona*. Ingmar Bergman had a reputation for extracting emotionally devastating performances from his actresses, several of whom he became romantically involved with, including Andersson and Ullmann.

over their performances, but they must memorize an entire two-hour play and perform it before a live audience without the benefit of "retakes." The stage actor has an advantage over the screen actor in playing a character's experience chronologically from beginning to end. Stage actors thus may be intimidated by filmmaking's segmented process. A film actor may not have to remember the entire script at once but does need the special skill to act small moments numerous times (for different camera setups) and out of sequence (to accommodate production schedules), all the while giving the impression of a consistently developing character in continuous time after it's all edited together.

Collaboration

Films are a collaborative process among writers, directors, and actors. Sometimes, as with Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*, Spike Lee in *Do the Right Thing*, or the films of Charlie Chaplin and Woody Allen, the same person takes on all three roles. But in most cases, three people must work together to create the finished film, and while the actor may not have much say in which aspects of his performance the director chooses, he does have a say in the performance itself.

In other words, while the notion for a character's behavior originates with whoever creates the story and is brought to life by the director, who must bring the behavior to the screen in a believable way (if believable is what the story calls for), it falls to the actor to bring the behavior to life. A good actor may get to know his character better than the director or even the writer and can come up with important actions, props, additional dialogue, and line interpretations that never occurred to the writer or director. A good actor literally becomes another person on the screen. But audiences must always keep in mind that *actors* are playing *characters* created by the writer and staged by the director.

Unless the actor is also directing the film, he or she rarely has much say in choosing which performance a director will use. (Note that as with anything else in entertainment or in life, this doesn't apply to the biggest stars, who sometimes have as much or more power than their directors.) This doesn't mean that the actor doesn't have strong opinions about the material or how it should be performed. There are stories of disagreements between actors and directors—supposedly Dustin Hoffman clashed often with director Sydney Pollack on the set of *Tootsie*, for instance, and that's hardly the only example—but the best performances come from a collaboration between actors and directors. Of this collaboration, Ben Kingsley has said:

> Acting, as you know, is completely collaborative—the actor–director collaboration, the director–[director of photography] collaboration, the actor–actor collaboration, all of it is collaborative. And it's how, with skill, you are able to put these jigsaw pieces together. And you know how a jigsaw piece works—one bit pushes outward and docks into a bit that curves inward. So I think it's to do with individual need, some comforting psychological need. (Goodykoontz, 2009a)

How Actors Prepare for a Role

Many actors conduct extensive research into the characters they play. If they are playing a fictional character, perhaps they will create what is called a **backstory**, or an unwritten, imaginary history of their characters' lives. Or perhaps they will spend time with someone who does something similar in real life. In *Brothers*, for instance, Natalie Portman plays the wife of a Marine Corps officer who is often overseas, leaving her at home to raise their children. To prepare for the role, Portman visited a military base, spending time with real-life military wives and mothers.

Photo by: Mary Evans/Ronald Grant/Everett Collection

▲ Robert De Niro gained 60 pounds to play an aging Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*.

Some actors are known for their elaborate preparation and devotion to roles. In director Martin Scorsese's 1980 film *Raging Bull*, for instance, Robert De Niro played the boxer Jake LaMotta at different stages of his life. The problem was that LaMotta gained a considerable amount of weight after his boxing career ended. Rather than reflect this through the use of makeup and prosthetics, Scorsese first shot the scenes with the younger, fitter LaMotta character. He then stopped production on the film for weeks so that De Niro could gain weight, whereupon he filmed the scenes of the older, fatter LaMotta. The transformation on screen is astonishing, almost as if two different actors were playing the role. (De Niro won an Oscar for his performance.)

This level of devotion is unusual, however, and typically associated with Method actors who immerse themselves into roles on and off the set. Many other actors merely study the script, come up with a characterization (with the approval of the director), and fall easily into and out of character as soon as the camera starts rolling or the director says "Cut." In some cases, actors may not even get their script until the first day of shooting, whether because they are last-minute replacements for other actors or because a director may not want actors to see the script for any scenes they are not acting in. Some actors rely upon directors to explain character motivations and even give specific movements and gestures to them. Others are the exact opposite and prefer the director to let them do their jobs as actors. Likewise, some directors prefer absolute control over every aspect of their actors' performances, while others rely upon the actors to interpret the characters more or less on their own, so they can devote more time to the numerous other aspects of a production.

Summary and Resources

Chapter Summary

In a well-made film, the things we see on the screen are not merely random and are more than just actors playing characters doing things. The mise en scène—what the audience sees on the screen—is the most visible part of a film, the things and people we see in the scenes. The sets, costumes, makeup, props, colors, lighting, and placement of the actors can tell much of the story even without dialogue, conveying both mood and key plot information, and often symbolic thematic content. Mise en scène and acting styles may strive for naturalism or may be intentionally artificial and unrealistic, or "stylized." The actors are a major element of the mise en scène, and for many viewers they are the most memorable thing about a movie, bringing the characters to life. Yet their job is more than just memorizing lines and reciting them in front of a camera. It is a collaborative process between actors and directors that requires several takes of the same scene, as well as a tremendous amount of preparation and the ability to appear consistent in scenes shot out of sequence.

There are many methods an actor can use in his or her performance; some actors use more than one, depending on the film. There are also different kinds of actors, who may be cast in their roles

for different reasons, be it star power, screen persona, ability to disappear into different characters, or untrained naturalism. A technique used by certain actors and directors is improvisation. While the actor does not typically have final say in which performance a director will include in the final film, he or she does have the option of providing many different versions and discussing how best to approach each scene. When the actor and director work well together, the performance can be the most magical part of a movie.

Questions to Ask Yourself About Acting When Viewing a Film

- What and how much story information is the mise en scène telling you that you are not getting from the performances of the actors?
- How do the ways the actors are placed and move around in the settings contribute to your understanding of their characters and of the story?
- Who are the actors and what kinds of actors (impersonators, interpreters, personality actors, stars, wild cards, character actors) are present in the film?
- What type of acting is present (stylized, realistic, method acting, stage acting vs. film acting, untrained natural acting)? Also, how realistic or stylized is the mise en scène, and how does it complement or contrast with the performances?
- How do the actors convey the story's meaning by the way they interpret their characters? How much of their performances might be attributed to the director, camerawork, or the editing?

You Try It

1. Think of the films you've seen that tell you something about the characters through the use of props, costumes, makeup, or their placement in a setting, *before* the actors start to talk or do anything. Can you remember any elements from the mise en scène that you feel are symbolic in some way about a certain character? Do any characters' later actions in the plot fulfill or reverse your initial expectations implied by the mise en scène? Consider, for example, the scene in *Dracula* where Renfield meets Dracula. Go to www.movieclips.com and search "Dracula" to view this scene:

    "Renfield Meets Dracula"

2. Recall scenes or significant sections in any film that use no dialogue, that rely instead upon a combination of the actors' movements and various other elements of the mise en scène to tell the viewer what is going on. How did the mise en scène help you understand what was occurring in the scene? Perhaps no example of this is more famous than the shower scene in *Psycho*. Go to www.movieclips.com and search "Psycho" to view the following clip:

    "The Shower"

3. Who is your favorite actor? Now think more about *why* this is so. Is it because the performance is believable? Funny? Sad? What does the actor do to make it that way? In how many of the actor's films do you remember him or her primarily as an *actor* and in how many do you remember primarily the *character* he or she played? Does your favorite actor play the same or similar characters from film to film?

4. Think of an acting performance that you especially like and one you dislike. Which type of acting does the actor use in each case? Would another type have been more effective in the one you disliked?

5. Come up with examples of each type of actor below and explain why you think they fit those categories.
    - Impersonator
    - Personality actor
    - Star
    - Wild card
    - Character actor

Key Terms

actor A person who plays a character in a film or play, interpreting a character that a writer has created, under the guidance of a director.

audition The process of an actor "trying out" for a role, performing short scenes to let a director or casting director see how well he or she can do; an audition can be accomplished either by submitting tapes or by trying out in person.

backstory Elements of a film's story that do not appear in the plot. Actors often try to imagine what happened to their characters before the plot began, creating an elaborate backstory (which may or may not be based on the writer's original ideas), and may research similar real-life people to help them understand a character's motivations.

bit part A short character appearance with few or no lines, rarely more than a day's work for the actor.

blocking The placement and planned movements of the actors through the sets, usually determined by the director.

character A (usually fictional) person whose traits and actions are fashioned by a writer to help tell a story to the audience through the course of a plot.

character actors Actors who specialize in playing a wide variety of characters, most often supporting or minor roles rather than leading roles.

impersonator An actor who attempts to impersonate actual people for a role, such as in historical and biographical stories.

improvisation A process used by actors in which they make up dialogue and actions "in character," after discussing the characters and plot motivations with the director. Some directors allow actors to improvise in rehearsals to develop scenes that will appear more natural for each actor than what may have originally been written. Others may even allow actors to improvise while the camera is running for an unpredictable, spontaneous feeling.

in sequence A rare method of shooting a film so that the scenes are shot in chronological order, the same order in which they appear in the story. Most films are shot out of sequence for scheduling convenience due to actor and location availability.

interpreter An actor who tries to put his or her personal stamp on roles, often playing characters that have been done by others.

method acting Often known as "the Method." An approach to acting that originated with Konstantin Stanislavsky. Teaches actors to draw upon their own experiences to portray what a character experiences, even to the point of going out and experiencing something just for the role or remaining "in character" on and off the set.

mise en scène The physical things we see in a scene, including setting, props, costumes, actors, makeup, lighting, colors—anything that would be on the set before the camera is even brought in.

open casting An audition that is open to anyone interested, rather than requiring a special invitation or solicitation by an agent.

personality actor An actor whose own personality tends to define all the characters he or she portrays, so that the actor's name alone lets audiences know what the screen character will be like.

props Short for "properties"; the things in the scene that are used by the characters or that decorate the set indicating the sort of location in which a scene is taking place.

realism A style of acting that appears to viewers to be "realistic" rather than artificial. Conceptions of what is realistic often vary from generation to generation and from medium to medium (stage to television to film).

scene A portion of a film that takes place in a single location over a single continuous period of time, usually numbered in the order they appear in the script. A *setup* is a different camera position used to shoot the same scene (closer, farther, alternate angle, etc.), typically adding a letter to the scene number to differentiate it.

star An actor, often with a distinctive screen persona, who is well known and popular with the moviegoing public, often to the point that some avid movie fans become deeply curious about the actor's private life.

stylized acting Acting done in a style that is intentionally unrealistic for dramatic or symbolic purposes.

take The portion of a scene recorded from the time the camera is turned on until it is turned off. Each camera setup in each scene will have one or more takes until the director and actors are satisfied with the performances.

typecasting Casting actors based on their physical appearance or on the types of characters they've most often played in the past, rather than on an audition that might reveal an unexpected acting range. Casting against type gives actors the chance to demonstrate whether they can successfully play more than one type of character.

wild card A term applied to an actor, usually a star, who is difficult to classify as one certain type, an actor who can play a wide variety of characters equally well without becoming typecast.