

Screen Acting Skills  
Social Distancing  
Strategies

## Coping with Covid

### Some suggestions on adapting and using the *Screen Acting Skills* exercises in a time of social distancing.

This too shall pass. But *not* yet, and many of us are searching for ways to continue actor training whilst maintaining social distancing. These are challenges which, as we write, the film and television industries are both struggling with. In the months to come these issues may be resolved by using closed sets of tested technicians and actors or by effective vaccination programmes. In the meantime students' aspirations to enter the industry will be on hold but they will want to be prepared for the reopening of these arts, be they in the form of the old 'normal' or the new 'abnormal'.

Earlier this year *Screen Acting Skills* was published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama offering advice and approaches to students of screen acting, but also providing a whole range of exercises to be led by a tutor or workshop leader. These exercises assumed a studio environment where students could develop their skills together, working in close proximity. We don't know when such an approach will be safely possible again. It is probably the case that workshop leaders are already developing ways of maintaining training during this time. What we set out here are adaptations (where possible) to the exercises outlined in *Screen Acting Skills*. They presume that you are trying to work with social distancing within the studio environment, or that you are using technology for distance learning such as 'Zoom', 'Microsoft Teams', or Skype. It is worth noting that both Zoom and Teams programmes have a facility for recording sessions so that they can be played back, reviewed and even used as part of formal or informal assessment. We are assuming that students will have access to video recording technology, even if it is that available on their mobile (cell) phones. We suggest that they mark out the floor in their 'home studio' to show the parameters within they are working, clear or cover distracting background paraphernalia, and check the angle at which their device is shooting. We are all seeing far too much nasal hair these days.

It is ridiculous to maintain that working in isolation is a full substitute for the chemistry that occurs when actors are working together but we try, in these adaptations, to get as close to that experience as can be achieved under social distancing regulations. It may even be that new forms of filmmaking evolve to reflect the new reality of our lives in which case these approaches may be accurate training for the dystopia ahead.

In the list that follows, each exercise from *Screen Acting Skills* is listed and suggestions are made as to whether it could be adapted for socially distanced or online teaching. This is not always possible but, in the end, to learn about screen acting on screen does not seem too much of a leap. If a screen set up is used (see p. 3) it should be possible to socially distance the observing participants. The exercises are marked 'S' as being suitable in a Covid Secure studio and 'Ol' where online adaptation is possible. '(S)' or '(Ol)' indicate that significant adjustments to the exercise would be necessary. We hope that these suggestions will help you with the challenges ahead and inspire you to find further solutions.

Ex.	Page	Exercise Title	S/OI	Primary Skill focus	Suggested adaptation	Notes
1:1	28	The Watch	S OI	Discovering a truth of a situation outlined in a script	In the safe studio this can be played using social distancing. Record for each actor or with camera panning. Online actors play to each other. Remember that the usual rules of not looking directly into the lens of the camera (See Ex. 9:3).	
1:2	29	From Stage to Screen	S OI	Adapting from stage to screen	The simplest adaptation of this exercise would be to use a single actor instead of a duo and view the whole process on screen. Keeping the (stage) performance level the same, slowly zoom in and note the point at which the stage acting becomes inappropriate for the screen. Practise adjusting the performance for the different levels of 'camera intimacy'. Depending upon the sophistication of the recording device this exercise may be able to be carried out remotely.	This is also useful practise for understanding the different levels of intensity required when be filmed (for example) in a two-shot or a tight close up.
1.3	31	You do Know How I'm Feeling	S OI	Moderating facial expressions appropriately	This exercise works well in a situation where social distancing or technology is used.	
1.4	31	Getting Emotional	S OI	Internalising emotions for the screen	This exercise works well in a situation where social distancing or technology is used.	
2.1	43		S OI	Hot seating to develop backstory	This exercise works well in a situation where social distancing or technology is used.	
2.2	43	Clint Eastwood's Chair	S OI	Developing context and backstory	This exercise works well in a situation where social distancing or technology is used. If working on the exercise remotely the actor undertaking the task can be fed information from the rest of the class via Zoom, etc.	

2.3	45	What do you mean?	S Ol	Forcing oneself to address issues of backstory on a deeper level	This exercise works well in a situation where social distancing or technology is used. The actor's prepared speech is interrupted by the rest of the group either in a socially distanced studio or online.	If working in a studio use a camera on the actor to enable social distancing to take place.
3.1	58	I Know What I Like	S Ol	Building group trust and self confidence	The function of this game can be maintained in a studio where social distancing can be applied. Online the tutor will need to invite each student to make their comment. Try to maintain the relaxed atmosphere of the studio and encourage the use of dimmed lighting.	To ensure every member of the cohort is included in the comments the tutor may wish to select both the commentator and the object of the commentary (possibly randomly).
3.2	59	Say Again?	S Ol	Exploring different interpretations of text	This exercise works well in a situation where social distancing or technology is used. In a studio situation the dialogues can be carried on at a one or two metre distance (though we recognise that some interpretations would benefit from a closer proximity). You can also experiment with having the paired actors respond to each other online, though technological delays may make this less satisfactory.	Online you could experiment with getting the students to 'buzz in' with a new impetus to the line and invite others to 'buzz in' with their appropriate response.
3.3	59	Pretexts for Changing Subtext	(S) (Ol)	Exploring different interpretations of text	This exercise is not possible to carry out in the way in which it was designed. However, the actors can be divided into groups of three and allowed to work on	A different approach, which loses the screen

					<p>their interpretation online. When they present the work to the rest of the group this could be done with some nimble jumping between the actors as if the piece was made up of three sets of close-ups (which, in effect, it will be). Each trio can present their prepared work in this way.</p>	<p>elements of the training but maintains the exploration of subtext would be, in a studio setting, to treat the text as a radio play keeping the actors socially distanced. This could also be filmed for subsequent analysis of body language as part of the subtextual interpretation.</p>
3.4	61	Can You Talk and Act at the Same Time?	S Ol	Maintaining subtext whilst involved in an activity	This exercise works well in a situation where social distancing or technology is used.	
4:1	74	Face Off	S Ol	Responding quickly to new information about a character	This exercise works well in a situation where social distancing or technology is used. Online the tutor can send the picture or cutting to the student who then prepares the backstory before responding to the questions fired at her.	The recording device needs to have the face of the actor in close-up. Remember not to look directly into the lens except for particular effect.
4:2	75	Hook Up, Make Up,	(S) (Ol)	Avoiding using text in an obvious way –	This will take some ingenuity. It is hard to say ‘I love you’ and mean it whilst standing two metres away from	We don’t see a very effective way of

		Break Up		fighting back against the stereotype	each other – but maybe you can use that? It will be worthwhile challenge to attempt this exercise in a studio session whilst maintaining social distancing. For example, can the actors find a plausible situation for the first exchange of these words which doesn't involve close contact? After the 'first intimacy' perhaps the actor is seen getting dressed as s/he turns to the other and says the precious words? Treat the obstacles as a challenge.	undertaking this exercise online, though you may find that another simple dialogue offers opportunities for a range of subtextually different interpretations. Eg: A: I've always trusted you. B: Yeah, you've always trusted me.
4:3	77	Look At Me When You're Ignoring Me!	(S) (Ol)	Portraying trust (or not) with another character	You can re-think this exercise in terms of a Skype, Messenger etc. dialogue between two actors that the rest of the group observes on line. Assume that the dialogue given comes at the end of longer online conversation. The actors need to make decisions about the backstory/motivation/intent behind these final exchanges. The actors should experiment with making the scene truthful for their partner and for the observers. How do the observers read the interaction and does it coincide with what the actors intended. In the studio the exercise can be carried out within social distancing guidelines.	Head and shoulders shot works best for this 'Skype call'.
4.4	79	Here's Looking at You, Kid	S Ol	Reading the eyes of the other actors and for the audience	This exercise works well in a situation with social distancing is in force or online. As with 4:3 two actors communicating online whilst	This exercise and the variations included (pp. 79-80)

					others observe will work.	can also be explored online. In group approaches, treat the interactions as a series of close-ups. When reviewing one can try to identify which reaction was a response to which.
5:1	87	The Confrontation	S Ol	Listening and reacting in the moment	This exercise can be carried out straightforwardly in a studio setting. It is also possible online. The actor sits and listens to the improvised dialogue fed to them online. The camera should take in the whole of the actor so that body language can be observed.	The moment when the actor looks at the speaker could be played to an imaginary character OOV or, in this case, played directly to the camera.
5:2	89	The Letter	S (Ol)	Responding to information in the moment	In a Covid secure studio this exercise will work without alteration. Online the stimulus could be offered via email or text ('You Have Mail') and the letter replaced with a phone or electronic device.	The sample stimuli suggested on p. 89 will not all be appropriate and others may need to be developed.
5:3	91	Learning to Drink	S (Ol)	Conveying truthfulness and using memory and previous circumstances	Ensuring that fresh cups are used each time, this exercise can be carried out in a studio setting as laid out on p. 91. Online, using Zoom or similar, suggestions can be made to the actor as to the nature of the drink.	The variation offered (concerning weight) can similarly be shared online or even practised by the

						actor alone, recording and assessing their own performance.
5:4	93	'This Is My First Time' Duos	S (Ol)	Truly listening to your fellow actor. Avoiding anticipation	In the studio this exercise can be undertaken unchanged, though it may be useful to have two cameras; panning between the two actors could create a bit of a 'Wimbledon effect'. Online the two actors can give and respond to lines as if in a 'Skype' conversation with others observing.	
6:1	104	I Was Just Sitting There	(S) (Ol)	Responding to real or imagined sounds	This exercise can be attempted in the studio maintaining social distancing. For example the actors could be hiding separately but still share their reactions and responses to the sound stimulus. Online this would not work, though you could experiment with solo actors reacting to a sound (real or described) given by the tutor.	Online it might be fun to allow the actor a final moment of looking directly towards the camera.
6:2	105	Scary and Shouty	S (Ol)	Avoiding the obvious interpretation	In a studio this exercise can be carried out as described on p. 105, though rules on social distancing may limit the number of physical permutations. Online you can experiment with the two actors working together as if performing in the same space, but it may be more satisfactory to allow the students to offer different subtexts to the lines individually rather than as part of a dialogue.	Online experiments should bear in mind that direct address to the camera is not generally appropriate (see Ex. 9:3, 9:5). It might be fun to explore this though!
6:3	107	The Corpse at the Funeral	(S) (Ol)	Group dynamics, backstory and truthfulness	This is a difficult one! At the time of writing social distancing is being practised at funerals and you could experiment with playing the scene (p. 107) using	Whilst many of these adaptations seem artificial, it is

					<p>distancing but with eye contact between the mourners. What sets them off?  Online (and we haven't tried this) with a Zoom call, you could also experiment with this infectious giggle.</p>	<p>not unusual for actors to have to play scenes without the stimulus of fellow actors or location. (See chapter 9 where we discuss 'green screen').</p>
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As we start to move towards more ensemble scenarios, the ease with which exercises can be re-imagined to be Covid Secure becomes more challenging, especially if one wishes to restrict oneself to single camera, which is what we have tried to do. Many of the following exercises face this problem and you, like film and TV directors everywhere at the present time, will be struggling to find acceptable solutions. These solutions – in a simple studio location – will not generally appear as polished professional performances. It will be necessary to focus on the efforts of the actors and the achievements of their skills. A single camera, chasing lines, actions and reactions by panning will provide a dizzying effect at times but hopefully you and your students will be able to cut through the technical limitations to the quality of their contributions. If more than one camera and (even) editing facilities are available then outcomes of such exercises can be enhanced technologically. What will frequently be hard to achieve online is the studio protocols from 'Quiet on set' to 'Cut' (see pps 54-6). Try to use these whenever the camera operator is other than the performer. They must become second nature.

6:4	109	Good News/Bad News	S	Listening and responding to other actors. Carrying on an activity whilst doing this	In the studio this exercise can be carried out by either setting it within a Covid Secure scenario or by inventing a situation that would naturally involve the separation of the characters either because of the location or because of tensions within the group. A Zoom discussion could also be experimented with.	
7:1	120	Getting In On the 'Action'	(S) (Ol)	To learn about the processes of filmmaking	Clearly this is not directly possible since filmmaking processes are currently not 'normal'. However, students can still carry out this exercise in their own Covid	

					Secure environments and share the outcomes with others in the group either in a studio or online.	
7:2	121	Are You Listening? Really Listening?	S Ol	Listening and reacting without dialogue	This is an exercise that would benefit from the previous approach. Actors can work (distanced) in pairs. The camera stays on the listener whilst the speaker tells their story.	
7:3	122	Fewer Words, More Listening	S	Trusting and using silence	Within distancing rules, this exercise can be carried out in a studio setting given the appropriate choice of situation. Most of the list of possibilities offered (p 122) can be used.	
7:4	124	Mini-dialogues	S	Exploring possibilities of text	As with the previous exercise the careful choice of location (this can be set as one of the parameters of the game) can facilitate this exercise being carried out in the studio. These two-way conversations online can also be explored with the other pairs in the group offering their own interpretations of the text in turn.	
7:5	127	Did I Hear You Right?	S	Interpretation of text	We would not recommend this as an online exercise, though with careful choice of location (a task for the actors) it can be carried out in the studio.	
8:1	142	Life Story in Six Pictures	S Ol	Character and chronology	This exercise can be carried out as described in the book. For the actor it is a matter of determining the key moments and considering how they link together.	You can also experiment with the actor deliberately showing the 'stills' out of order with the group trying to identify the correct chronology.
8:2	142	Mafia Map	S	Backstory and chronology	Can be studio based with social distancing or the group	

			OI		can watch the film independently and discuss Kay's backstory online.	
8:3	143	Time warp	S	Coping with out-of-sequence performance	Not really possible online unless pairs/small groups of actors are able to work together in a safe environment outside the class and then record and play the results to the group. Consideration can be given to the possibility of shooting the scenes as a series of close-ups. Certain choices of material could also be developed safely in a studio setting.	
8:4	144	'The Tell-Tale Heart'	S	Making a film – unifying your skills	Not an online exercise unfortunately! In the studio, with careful planning and relying on close-ups you can achieve a version of this exercise. Competent camera and editing work will enhance the final product.	
9:1	154	You're Sitting On My Lap	(S) (OI)	Cheating physical proximity of the camera	Perhaps you have 'couples' in your group who would be permitted to sit this close to each other. If not you will find this difficult in the studio or online.	One outrageous possibility would be to use a dummy – perhaps someone has a sex doll to lend? - to play one of the roles!
9:2	157	On Your Marks	S (OI)	Walking into shot – finding your mark	In the safe studio this exercise can be carried out as described in the book. If the actors are working from home they can practise 'finding their mark' on their own. They should set up their recording device for a satisfactory and well-framed final shot and then enter the room and walk into position on the mark. Try this with a chair and table too; the chair may have to be moved in order to sit but should be exactly placed for the planned for framing.	Recording from home can of course be shared with the whole group and the tutor. Encourage the students to try this multiple times at home, assessing

						and improving on their own work and accuracy.
9:3	159	Is there anybody there?	S Ol	Working without the other actor/s present	As will already be clear, the ability to ‘imagine’ your fellow actors’ presence is going to be crucial in many of these exercises and, quite possibly, in professional practices of the future. Once again we must remind ourselves that looking directly into the lens of the camera – whilst normal for a Skype chat – should only be used in screen acting for very deliberate and planned effect. With this in mind, exercise 9:3 can be carried out in a Covid Secure studio or online. Online the feed lines can come from another actor of the group.	Recording at home, the student actors may have fun with responding and reacting to an attack by imaginary monsters (green screen fashion). Best warn the neighbours!
9:4	161	Fancy a Quickie?	S Ol	Avoiding the lens	This exercise can be carried on in the studio or in the privacy of the student’s own home.	At home the student can have as many attempts as she likes, recording the attempts and playing them back
9:5	161	The Eyes Have It	S (Ol)	Focussing on non-present items	This exercise can be adapted to the safe studio with actors observing social distancing. Online try this variation. Ask the actor to imagine a range of objects in their imaginary space. Let us say they are on a bus. They might choose the bell button, the shop windows passing by and the strange hairstyle of the passenger six feet away. As they ‘travel’ their attention fluctuates between	When working on this exercise at home it will help the actor if the space is as uncluttered as possible.

					these three foci.	
9:6	163	Look At Me and Say That		Keeping your focus steady	This exercise will be very difficult to shoot at home (unless you have couples co-habiting) but in the studio it can be carried out using a camera with a decent zoom facility.	Studio scenarios should be designed to allow social distancing.
9:7	164	Turn the Sound Down: I can't Hear Myself Act	S (Ol)	Finding vocal levels for a noisy environment to be added post production	Again, with careful selection of locations and situations this exercise can be carried out as set out in the book. A variation for online distance work would be for the actors to submit short bursts of dialogue as if in a noisy environment that are then re-edited with the noise added. To practice <i>receiving</i> dialogue in a noisy environment the actor can pause, straining to hear, before taking up the dialogue again having imagined what he heard or tried to hear.	
10:1	175	They're Playing Our Song	S	Bringing the different aspects of the training together	In essence this exercise can be carried out in the studio as described, adapting locations and relationships to take account of distancing. Whilst the loss of the ensemble nature of the performances would be regrettable, it would also be possible for the individual characters to prepare and record their work separately and for the pieces to be, even roughly, edited together and then shared back with the group.	Group work can lead to the best ensemble work, creativity and ownership. We regard these adaptations very much as second best but it should be remembered that such techniques have always been part of the screen process and maybe

						more so in our state of new abnormality.
10:2	176	Poetic Licence	S (Ol)	Creating work from a poetry stimulus	The comments on 10:1 apply here too. In the studio most of the shoot could be made up of individual shots. A tight two-shot may not be possible but this can be cheated by shooting at an angle from the side disguising the space between the actors and perhaps signifying the emotional distance between them. If editing is available then, using individual shots only, actors could record their own shots that are later pasted together.	
10:3	177	Hemingway's Shoes	S	Creating work from a single stimulus	Probably not suitable for online performance recording, but in the safe studio the exercise can be carried out observing distancing. However, this will place limitations on the relationship between the characters (if distancing is maintained).	It will be necessary for the actors to address the question as to <i>why</i> the characters keep their distance from each other.
10:4	178	Pick a Genre, Any Genre	S	Tackling a script in different styles	Again, not an online contender if you wish to create a decent short film, but perfectly suited to a safe studio, as the characters should be able to develop the scene maintaining social distance.	
10:5	180	Street Meet		Tackling a script in different styles	We don't feel that this scene can be satisfactorily played without breaking social distancing rules, nor is it a candidate for online and edited performance.	If you find a way, let us know!
10:6	182	Not a Word	S (Ol)	Heightening awareness of film as a visual medium through creation of a 21 <sup>st</sup> century silent movie	This one is up for experiment! Careful choice of subject matter may allow for safe studio or online recording/editing. Consider perhaps a horror theme where the atmosphere can be heightened through	

					characters' isolation.	
11:1	197	I'm On The Phone	S Ol	Creating a phone call with subtext and imagination	This exercise can be safely carried out in the studio or online with each actor being observed by the group.	
11:2	199	Next!	S Ol	Responding to direction in an audition	Safe in the studio and also can be undertaken online with the group feeding instructions to each actor in turn.	
11:3	200	Don't Phone it In	S (Ol)	Sight reading in auditions	This exercise is suitable for a Covid Secure studio or can be adapted so that the second reader is feeding the text online.	
11:4	200	Why?	(S)	Watching out for stage directions when sight reading	The text given can work in the studio, but the 'slap' in the stage directions would have to be replaced if social distancing is in place. The moment could be replaced by the breaking of an object or an obscene gesture by A. Alternatively you can create your own short dialogue with different stage directions altogether. We do not think this exercise will work in its present form online.	
12:1	212	Reading Between the Lines	Home S Ol	Practising sight and cold reading	This exercise is designed to be carried out by the students at home though it can be turned into a game in the safe studio or online. The idea is to build competence and confidence though it can be developed into a game is so wished.	For example, the student can be given, or take from the shelves, any play. A page number is called out and the actor has to sight read without preparation.
12:2	213	Cold Reading the News	Home S Ol	Cold reading whilst maintaining eye contact	This exercise lends itself to online or studio work, though the student is encouraged to develop these skills at home and hone their own technique there.	In this exercise students are allowed to break the 'no looking at

						the lens' rule.
12:3	214	Speak <i>and</i> Act?	Home Outside	Maintaining text and character whilst dealing with an activity	This exercise can be practised at home but also shared in an outdoor environment, using the natural ambient distractions.	
12:4	214	I Wasn't Expecting That!	(S)	Dealing with direction and adjusting preconceived ideas	This exercise can be carried out in a studio situation providing the material selected allows for social distancing.	The solution may lie in the careful choice of location. For example, a prison cell block, a shoot-out stand-off, a job interview, an interrogation, etc.