

What will I do today to be an actor?



*Contacts and calls
are as important as
technique and training*

By Kay Peterson

IT'S A TYPICAL day for Jennifer Estlin. As soon as she has finished her first cup of coffee, she starts in on her business—the business of being an actor. As she says, “When I get up in the morning, right away, I face my ‘office’—my living room, which contains my computer and my desk. I’m my own boss, so half the battle is getting myself in there every day. But to get myself going, I have this mantra: ‘What am I going to do today to be an actress? What *will* I do today to be an actress?’”

It’s a mantra that works. Estlin, who is thirty-four, hasn’t taken a day job in two-and-a-half years. She has survived first in Chicago and more recently in New York City supported by her work on stage, film, and television, including projects with Chicago’s Second City, appearances in national commercials, and a recurring

role on *Law and Order*. But her career is a work in progress, one that requires constant vigilance, a commitment to her artistic goals, and a keen sense of the business side of acting.

So how did she get to this point? How has she established herself in this industry when so many are overwhelmed by the odds? For Estlin, the key has always been clear-sighted self-assessment—an ongoing reappraisal of her skills, her goals, and her options—supported by an unwavering confidence in her own abilities. To her, being an actor is “not necessarily reflected in the amount of work that you’ve done or what you were last in. It’s a decision.”

An actor prepares

Estlin made her decision back in Ohio, as a student at Shaker Heights High School. That was where she was first introduced to



Film: Jennifer Estlin
in the 1998 independent film *The Stand-In*.

performing and, more importantly, to the idea that theatre could be one's work. Socializing with an upperclassman who was applying to college, Estlin asked, "What will you major in?" When the student answered "theatre," Estlin was blown away. "You mean you can study that? You can do that for a living? What a great idea!"

That revelation shaped the rest of her education. After doing all the theatre she could in high school—which was a lot—Estlin went on to Northwestern University. She completed a bachelor's degree in theatre and speech in 1987. One might think that a degree from a highly respected undergraduate theatre program like Northwestern would equip a young actor to take the theatre world by storm. But as Estlin learned, her education was just beginning.

In 1989 she landed her first professional role, a lead in a production at the Northlight Theatre, a respectable Equity house in Chicago. The experience was harrowing. When rehearsals started, Estlin expected to do the same kind of work she had done for her acting teachers in college: "I would just learn my lines, go to rehearsal, run through my scenes, and then wait for the director to tell me what's wrong."

But Estlin soon found this was not enough for professional theatre. She wasn't growing in the role, and couldn't help but notice she required more attention from the director than the other actors, something she wasn't proud of. "I probably frustrated the director a little," she admits. "I think he had to work a little bit harder with me than he wanted to."

Following rehearsal one night, she exclaimed to her boyfriend, "I just found something out today and it's horrifying. I don't have a technique! Four years of college and no technique!"

Estlin later admitted that this judgment was a little drastic, but she had stumbled onto a truth that would guide her career. She needed to take charge of her own training, to pursue her own course, and to determine what techniques, skills, work habits, and knowledge she needed in order to be the best actor she could be.

Estlin doesn't blame her previous teachers or her college program for whatever was missing in her background. Her training in college had been thorough and intensive, but it left her too dependent upon those around her. "I was used to a teacher pushing my buttons," she says. "If you have the same acting teacher for four years, that person gets to know you really well. They know what you need and how to get from you what they can. The problem is that the whole process is hidden from you. You don't know what works for you and why."

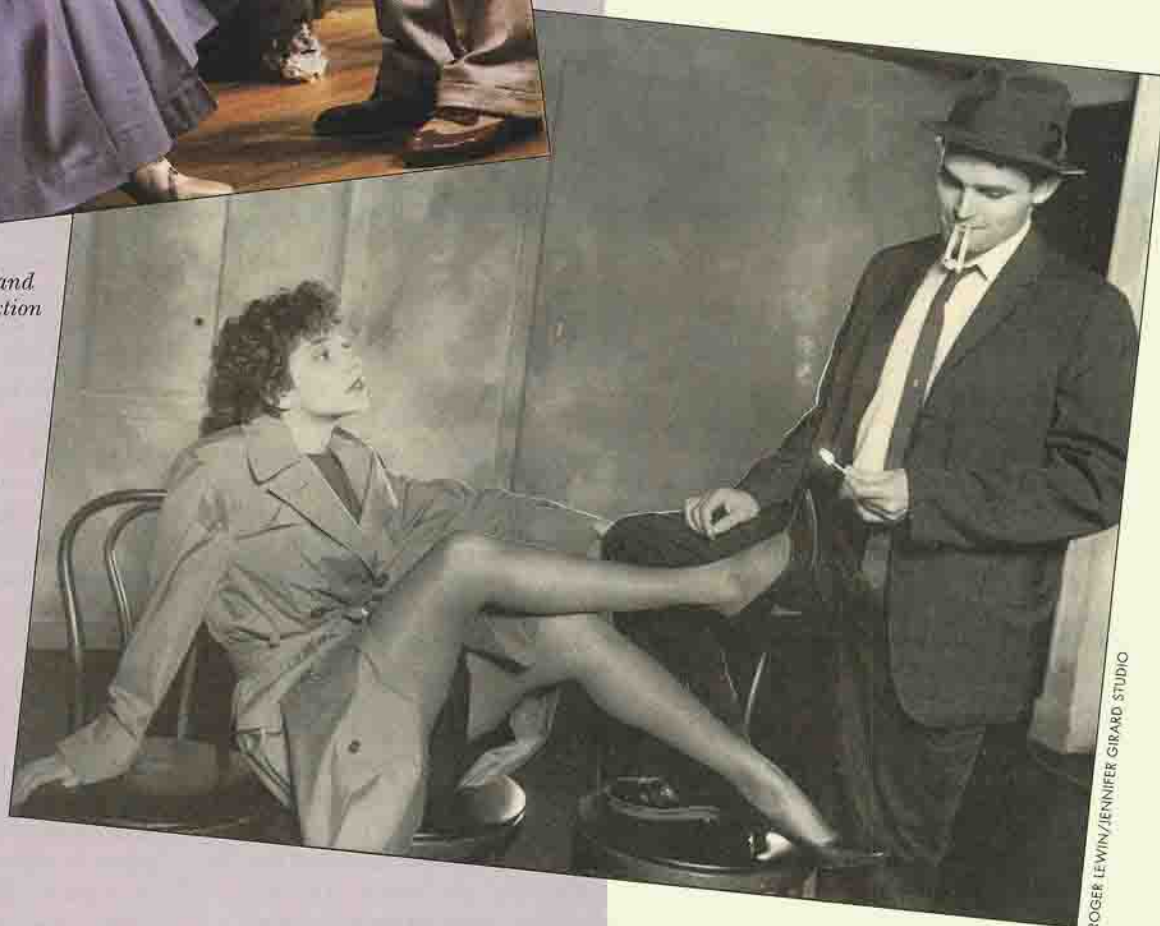
Professional theatre held completely different expectations. "When you begin to work professionally, with a director whose job isn't to be teaching you, who doesn't know you by heart, and who is expecting you to come in with a technique, you find yourself a little lost. At least, I did." Estlin found that despite her skill and background, she was lacking an actor's most basic asset: the ability to come to rehearsal with something to offer. "I wasn't doing my 'homework' between rehearsals. I wasn't using that time to explore the role, the choices I wanted to make, and the methods I would use to implement those choices." And hardest of all, she found she didn't know how to start doing that work.

Though frustrated during this period, Estlin was not defeated. Instead, she observes that her difficulties motivated her to take control of her own technique—the methods she could rely upon to create her performance—through a self-imposed, self-directed course of study. "I think that the hardest thing is to find out what you don't



Stage: Estlin in the Cleveland Play House's 1996 production of The Front Page.

Improv: The Second City Northwest's revue It Ain't Over Until the Fat Lady's Done Watching the O.J. Trial.



ROGER LEWIN/JENNIFER GIRARD STUDIO

know, and then from there to take the necessary steps to fix the problem.”

Enrolling in courses at a number of schools in the Chicago area, Estlin tried a variety of approaches to performance, some of which she liked and some of which she didn't. It was a process of selection and assimilation, as she combined new skills with old skills in her attempt to build her own way of working. Describing the course of her training, Estlin stresses that she did not merely absorb every technique that crossed her path. “The important thing is to go to class with an open mind,” she advises. When learning about a new method, she tries to accept and embrace it without judgment. It's only later, after the class is over, that she thinks critically about what worked for her and gave her something she could use later. “You may appreciate what a certain method is trying to do, but it just doesn't work for you,” she explains. “But once you

know about it, you can bypass it and get to what it's trying to do another way."

For example, she found the Meisner technique of repetition helps her connect with her scene partner and her emotions, but it's not something she'd take into performance. "What I'm feeling 'in the moment' may not be appropriate for the character." By using that method in rehearsal, she can access the emotion, pay attention to how it manifests itself in her facial expressions, gestures and voice, and then reproduce it later for an audience. Sometimes, what ends up working can be more mechanical than the "emotionally authentic" techniques she'd use in rehearsal. Emotional recall can give you a lot to work with, she explains, but sometimes something as simple and mechanical as breath control is more effective and reliable for creating a mood or emotion in performance. "You do what you need to do to convince the audience."

A brush with fame: Jennifer Estlin's 'Law and Order' gig

Among Jennifer Estlin's many professional roles is a recurring character on NBC's Law and Order. Estlin recounts her "blissful" experience of being cast on that show and filming three episodes.

I got called by my agency to audition for a very small role; it was a one-line thing. I went in and read, and the director and the casting director began whispering to each other. Finally, they said, "Would you mind reading another role: Kathy? It's out on the table." Would I mind? Oh, my God! And I said, ever so casually, "Oh, yes, I'd be happy to." So I went out to the table where the sides were, and I looked at it—it was about seven pages long, instead of my one little line! After preparing for about ten minutes, I went back in and read it.

This process of experimentation and assimilation has led her down some unexpected paths. Having exhausted all the ways she could think of to expand her traditional training, Estlin pursued training in improvisation with Chicago's nationally-renowned comedy

"Anything that you can do to affirm that you are an actor is a good thing to do."

troupe Second City. This training gave her "a whole new power base" that "made being on stage a million times easier." Knowing how to improvise took the fear out of acting. "You know you can handle yourself in any situation because you can work on the fly," she explains. Faced with dropped lines or mis-



Actor for hire.

They seemed to like it: "That was great, fantastic. Okay, that's all we need." I was left with that half-soaring, half-defeated feeling—where you're already disappointed because you know you'll be crushed if you don't get it.

After two excruciating days of waiting, they finally called. I got the part! My role was as the daughter of Jerry Orbach's character. I was so excited. Jerry Orbach is like a hero to me. The day I got the role, I think you could hear my shouts of joy all over Manhattan.

The experience of filming the show was great. First of all, Jerry Orbach was a

placed props, she now knew how to deal with the challenge: "I say to myself, 'I'll just work it out,' and then I work it out. I change my blocking, or I say whatever I need to say to make it work, and it's fine."

Although Estlin speaks glowingly of her training and would encourage every actor to take charge in this way, she is quick to note that classes have their limits. "You can't let your training take the place of your performing," she warns, "or worse still, let it put you in the frame of mind where you are always searching for your own faults." Ultimately, you need to trust that training, and to trust your ability to access it. At that point, you learn from your work. Too many actors, she stresses, train themselves always to doubt their own acting, and the habit of taking more and more classes simply feeds that inner doubt. "After a while there has to be something in you that just makes the

prince to work with. The man could not have been more generous—he was just as selfless as he could possibly be. My first day, we had a really emotional scene to play—one of those "held-back" emotional scenes. The father and daughter have been estranged, but now she comes back into his life . . . Well, he was very kind to me and did everything he could to make me comfortable. He took me out between set-ups, we got bagels, anything he could do to put me at ease and allow us to get to know each other. It was the same with the rest of the crew. They were all wonderful. It was just such a great learning experience. I felt they treated the actors with the utmost respect and care. I couldn't have been happier. I feel like I floated home after each day of shooting.

After my first episode, they brought my character back the next season. I got to do two more episodes. But then my character died. So that was the end of that!

—K.P.

decision: "I am doing this right and if I don't get cast it's not because I'm doing it wrong, it's because I wasn't the right person for the part."

The business of acting

Estlin employs the same take-charge attitude in the business end of her career. She believes that being an actor is like running a small business. To run that business effectively, the actor must strategize, keep records, and always plan ahead. Agents, she notes, are your allies in the job hunt, but they are there only to negotiate the contract for the work that you find for yourself. "My pet peeve is actors who get an agent and then just sit and wait. They seem to think, 'Well, I have an agent. I should be getting work now.' But that agent has fifty or maybe a hundred other clients. What makes you think they are sitting around worrying about you all day?"

So how does an actor find work? Judging from Estlin's experience, it involves a bit of trial and error and a lot

of self-assessment and motivation. Most of all, it requires a commitment to making the connections that build a career. This commitment encompasses not merely the desire to be an actor, or even the training to be a *good* actor. It requires the actor to take practical steps to find work, and to structure one's life around that business. "Looking for work is a full-time job," she says. "Every day you have to be doing something to generate work."

Take, for example, Estlin's insistence that her living room is her office. Lacking the structure of a day job, she creates her own internal structure—a daily regimen that includes regular business hours and a commitment to following through on plans and procedures. When she's not working or auditioning, Estlin spends her day on the phone, talking to people she knows are working, making follow-up calls to agents and casting directors, or just talking to her friends in the business.

It's sometimes a delicate balancing act to maintain her "business" while

feeding her art. "I don't usually set a strict schedule," Estlin admits when talking about how she manages the split between business and performance. "It usually follows the law of supply and demand. If I'm in a production or going to a lot of auditions, I'll spend less time on the business side." The key, she says, is always to look ahead. "Even if I've got a job, that job will end, so I have to be working to find a new job all the time." She tries to keep things on an even keel by devoting at least two days a week to her business work during busy performance times, and much more if she's between jobs or auditions.

So what kind of business work does her career require? The objective, she explains, is to "put it out there" every day and in as many ways as she can. This includes reviewing and updating her contact list, keeping records on who she knows, how she knows them, and what kind of work they can offer. Similarly, a lot of her time is spent on the internet, checking casting notices or just updating her knowledge of what she calls the "lay of the land."

This business model is not accidental. Estlin based her approach on the skills she learned from one of her early survival jobs. While working at a career planning agency, she began to see how the kinds of techniques she offered to her clients could also be applied to her own search for theatrical work. "I thought, 'This is not *that* different. It's all about how you are presenting yourself, how you can track your progress, and what you can expect.'"

The business side of acting has fascinated her ever since. Like her acting training, these business skills have come as a result of a self-directed course of study—and in some cases, a good deal of canniness. For example, when she wanted to know more about tax deductions available to actors, she asked to help with Equity's volunteer income tax assistance program. While being trained to help Equity actors prepare their income tax returns, she learned how to make the most of her *own* tax returns, a first step toward making an acting career financially feasible.

Making contact

Estlin offers these steps for creating your own professional theatre network.

- **Start with your school.** Take an interest in the work being done by your fellow students and your instructors. Ask about the projects people are working on and volunteer to help. When you start a new project, let others know about it.

- **Get familiar with your local theatrical community.** Attend plays. Figure out which companies are doing work that you like. Make these theatres part of your own network by volunteering to help out: for example, become an usher, or sign up for an internship. Even just showing up regularly for performances can get you noticed.

- **Tap into alumni networks.** Once you've arrived at college, check with your school's alumni association or

theatre department for a list of former students. Work up the nerve to call, and ask if you can take them to lunch in exchange for the chance to pick their brains. Don't be intimidated: people love to talk about how they've gotten where they are.

- **Once you've got an "in," continue to develop it.** Talk to people, and ask them about your work. If you're serving as an intern, ask for an informational interview with members of the staff at your theatre. Or if you're working more informally, strike up conversations while you work. "I'm interested in what you do" is a good way to start. And don't forget to include people working in all aspects of the theatre—technicians, designers, office staff, directors. Anyone who can give you information should be part of your network.

—K.P.

Surviving step by step

In some ways, Estlin's businesslike approach to her work seems counter-intuitive. Theatre is often represented as a place of inspiration and chance, an activity that confounds planning and concerted effort. But for Estlin, a sound work ethic is essential to success in the theatre: It constitutes the only way to seize command in a situation that all too often is beyond an actor's control. As she says, "If I can't be the person who decides whether or not I get the job, what *can* I have control over? Basically, I can assure that I feel some sense of self-worth and accomplishment."

To illustrate this, Estlin often refers to what she considers one of the most basic emblems of her professional status: her business card. In the practical sense, her business card is indispensable. Furthermore, she explains, the card packs an extra psychological wallop: it asserts and solidifies her professional identity as an actor. She feels it is this firm sense of self, this pride in her work, that gives her the emotional stamina to continue in her profession. It's a kind of confidence that too many actors lack. "It's funny how many actors are embarrassed at the idea of having a business card. They think it's weird to have a card that says 'actor.' My response to that is, 'It's what you do. Why is that weird? Get over it!'"

The business card is only the first step. Estlin suggests a number of small tasks that can help any actor to create this sense of control. For example, follow through on your plans. While you cannot control whether you will get cast in a play, you can control whether or not you made all the phone calls you needed to make, or went to all the auditions that you planned on taking. Only you can control whether you write a letter, or keep up contacts you've made. These little things seem like busywork, but they are actually *business* work, seeds you plant now that will bear fruit later.

Estlin is quick to note that these steps have value beyond whatever concrete benefits they may produce. They can give your day-to-day life a structure. She suggests that the best way to start is

to set small, attainable goals and give them a deadline. What do you want to accomplish in the next three months? In the next year? In the next five years? "You don't want to give yourself the goal of winning the Oscar in year one," Estlin laughs, "because you'll probably fail! Start with 'I'm going to call ten agents this week.' Start by setting up goals like that and then *do* them!" While these goals can change, they are still useful because they act as markers that allow you to chart your progress. And by setting and achieving these manageable goals, an actor can create a throughline that will become the foundation of a career.

Finally, Estlin advises, the need to establish a sense of control extends to the kind of community you build around you. Once you've decided to become an actor, form a network of allies. See lots of theatre and try to get involved with groups whose work you admire. Offer your services or become an intern, Estlin suggests. Make sure that you become a helpful presence—not

necessarily the star, but a useful person to have around. Once you've established this community, maintain it by helping those around you. "I think the biggest mistake that an actor can make is in hoarding information," Estlin explains. "The best thing that you can do is to be open and share information and leads with other actors. If someone asks you a question, help them. We are each others' best resources." By creating this community, you not only give yourself a support system but also generate the work that will support you in the future. "Almost always, what gets you work is how you have interacted with other people. You can answer all the audition ads in the world, but what keeps getting you work is how you are to work with. Things just keep coming back around."

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