Laurence Olivier, Meryl Streep, Daniel Day-Lewis, Marlon Brando, Judi Dench, Paul Newman ...

The list of actors goes on and on, but what do they all have in common? Each of them started as a stage actor but is better known for being an Academy Award-winning film actor. Clearly, using these actors as examples leads to the conclusion that the acting skills learned in the theatre can translate to film. Put another way, acting is acting, whether you are on stage or in front of a camera.

However, there are key differences between the stage and the screen that need to be understood. Moving between theatre and film can be equated to a painter who moves between acrylics and watercolors. The painter is still a painter, but the medium has changed and, therefore, the process will change.

For an actor, knowledge of the difference in the environment, venue, and script between theatre and film is crucial to becoming a double-threat.

**Environment: The Theatre and the Film Set**

Theatre is a nurturing art form. The best of theatre productions have adequate rehearsal time, cast bonding, and time to experiment with the director before opening night. Stage actors become familiar with their roles slowly and by the time they perform publicly, they have practiced dozens of times.
In contrast, film sets are chaotic places packed with specialized, high-paid artists. For an actor, this presents several challenges. For one, you will receive very little, if any, rehearsal time. For another, depending on the size of the role, you may not receive any direction. Films hire actors under the assumption that they will come to set performance-ready.

Preparation is vital in both theatre and film, but the process of preparation is vastly different. In addition, the pace of filming pressures actors to hit their performance quickly. Theatre actors, especially, may find the pace of a film set to be jarring, so be extra prepared and flexible when new to film.

**Venue: Where’s the Actor? Where’s the Audience?**

The literal difference in physical location between theatre and film is one of the greatest obstacles for actors who are transitioning into a different medium. It is often said that theatre actors are “big” and film actors are “natural.” This is a result of the venues in which the actors perform.

In a theatre, actors and audience are separated by a distance ranging from a few feet in a small black box to hundreds of feet in a large auditorium. Everyone in the audience needs to see the action and hear the dialogue on stage, so theatre actors must exaggerate their movements and speak loudly to bridge the gap.

Films, on the other hand, use a camera to eliminate the distance between performer and observer. The presence of the camera, lights, microphones, special effects, and music all serve to enhance a film actor’s performance, so no embellishment is needed. Cameras pick up every twitch, inflection, and subtle pause that an actor has and on film, the actor’s goal is to replicate reality. Speak to the other actors as you normally would and gesture as you normally would.

**Script: Shakespeare Doesn’t Write Movies**

When audiences attend a play, they know what to expect because plays are performed repeatedly and scripts are publicly available to read. Think about how many times *Romeo and Juliet* has been performed around the world; thousands upon thousands of times, to the point that the story is a cultural icon. Such knowledge creates an expectation in the audience. They want to see and hear the story that they are familiar with and they will tolerate very little change.

The beauty (and difficulty) of film and television is that the scripts are being produced for the first time. There are no past performances to be compared to and the audience has no preconceived notion of what the characters should look and sound like. This gives film actors more freedom in performance. No one knows if you flub a line or forget some blocking. The only thing that matters on camera is a realistic performance.

Many of the best actors started in the theatre and made the switch to film and television later in their careers. The techniques, skills, and experiences garnered as an actor in one medium can translate nicely into the other. However, understanding the unique characteristics that distinguish the stage from the screen is necessary to guarantee an actor is prepared.