HOW TO AVOID THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR

AN EDITOR'S ADVICE FOR ON-CAMERA ACTORS

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CHAPTER 6

WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL:
YOUR TECHNICAL SKILLS

Great acting is not easy; anyone who says it is, is either shallow
or a charlatan. And one of the hardest things about acting
is admitting that it is hard.

— Robert Cohen

By mastering your technical skills, you can avoid the mistakes that force us to cut actors out.

Know your lines. If you're saying the wrong words, I can't put you on camera. And you will grievously offend the writers, who are the most powerful people in television, the ones with the power to say to me, "Get rid of that actor."

Every line has a carefully crafted meaning, and when you garble the words, the meaning is lost. When you forget words or sentences, important ideas or linkages are lost. Even if they seem unimportant in this scene, the lost words may set up future conflicts and interactions. If you add new words, you dilute the clarity of what's been written. Some actors think it's permissible to improvise as long as they get close to the meaning of the line. No way. When you go off book, there's a potential for huge problems. Your rewritten line might not include the phrase that your scene partner responds to, so now his line doesn't make any sense. Intentional or not, your rewrite could completely change the meaning of the scene,

or alter the previous given circumstances. It might not sound right coming from the character you're playing, because you've changed the character's voice. It could introduce extraneous ideas that distract from the central idea of the scene. Worst of all, it could leave out an important detail that makes the story work, or confuse the plot of the whole story. In short — stick with the script!

If you absolutely can't get a line out because the grammar just won't come out of your mouth, politely sidebar with the director and they'll talk to the on-set writer about changing it in a way that keeps the intended meaning.

If you don't know your lines, your performance will probably be hesitant and you'll be adding pauses where there shouldn't be any. You're likely to be adding "um"s and "uh"s, which I will need to cut out because they make your character look uncertain. Then I'll be asked by directors and producers for a take where "the actor looks like they know their lines." Most of the audience doesn't realize which pauses are caused by an actor forgetting their lines and which pauses are for dramatic effect… but editors, directors, and producers are all very attuned to the difference. We will cut away from you to remove pauses. Please don't make us do that!

How does the editor get around the mistake of an actor saying the wrong lines? Unfortunately, every solution requires taking you off camera:

Option 1: I can try to "Frankenstein" the correct line together by combining bits of your dialogue from different takes. Hopefully I'll end up with a reading that sounds like a real sentence. But to cover my audio edits, I will have to cut to another actor during your line.

Option 2: If Frankenstein-ing doesn't work, then I'll record myself saying the correct line in my editing room. I'll cut that temp audio in, and we'll bring you in to an ADR booth later in the process to re-record your dialogue for real. But to cover your new audio, I'll have to cut to someone else so the audience doesn't see that your on-camera mouth doesn't match what they are hearing. Recording your ADR costs the production time and money, which doesn't make anyone happy.

Option 3: My final choice is to cut your line out altogether because your wrong words don't make any sense. If the scene works without your dialogue, then that becomes the easiest choice.

Note that all of my options result in the audience watching someone else when they should be watching you. Not ideal for your or me.

If you flub your line, where should you restart your dialogue? If you mess up a line in the middle of a take, that's OK. It happens. Often when an actor flubs her line, she will say in the moment, "I'm going to take that again, from when I stand up," or she'll say to the other actor, "Give me that [cue] again," and all the other actors understand what's about to happen. They hold their emotional space and the flubber does the line again (hopefully, this time saying the correct line). Everyone knows what it's like to mess up and nobody wants to make the other actor feel bad.

If they say a wrong word, many actors will correct themselves by immediately saying the right word, and then pressing on. For example, Elaine is supposed to say "anything" but flubs and says "anybody" instead, so she corrects herself in the moment and it sounds like "my life doesn't have anybody... anything to do with you anymore." Unfortunately, this instant fix doesn't help me, because the actor has restarted in the middle of a sentence, which means I have to cut away to cover her restart. I want to keep your complete thought and action on camera — ideally including the emotional moment that led your character to say the dialogue — so I'd like you to start from the beginning of the sentence, or maybe even the beginning of that block of dialogue.

On set, the director will usually yell out where to restart from if they see you are having trouble, but if you

are restarting yourself, then please remember — start back at the emotion that led to this beat.

After Elaine hears Joe say, "I own you," she stands up and says, "You bastard, you've ruined my life. You pushed and pushed and now I don't have a choice." Then she shoots Joe. If Elaine forgets her dialogue halfway through "You pushed and pushed," it's best if she starts over from the last beat of the sitting position, because I want to show her decide to stand up and say her dialogue without having to cut away from her.

Don't restart from here.   Restart from here.

If returning to the previous physical position is not possible, then Elaine should start from the very beginning of her line when standing — "You bastard".

When you restart in the middle of an idea, it reduces my choices.

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WHAT STEPS CAN AN ACTOR TAKE TO AVOID BEING CUT OUT OF A TV SHOW OR MOVIE?

Emmy -winning editor Jordan Goldman, A.C.E. takes you inside the cutting room and pulls back the curtain on how and why directors, showrunners, and editors decide whether your performance makes it to the screen. He explains the key things actors should do — and shouldn't do — to avoid getting cut out.

"Whether you are just starting to break into the film and television industry, or you're already working and want to refine your on-camera technique, How to Avoid the Cutting Room Floor is a must read! I wish I'd had a book early in my career that gave me a fraction of the insights and advice that Jordan provides here. Grab this invaluable book by one of the television industry's most talented and respected editors."

– Michael Chiklis, Emmy & Golden Globe winning actor

Jordan Goldman, A.C.E. has worked for over 20 years in Hollywood. A coveted editor for top-notch cable and streaming dramas, he has cut more than 100 episodes of television, including landmarks like the finale of *The Shield* and the pilot of *Homeland*.

His work has earned him an Emmy, an American Cinema Editors Eddie, and a reputation as an editor with a keen eye for story and performance.

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