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LAUNCHING AN ACTOR'S CAREER:  
NAVIGATING THROUGH THE FILM INDUSTRY

By

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A capstone project submitted for  
Graduation with University Honors

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## Abstract

The arts is complex tough field to navigate. Through training, an actor learns the history of theatre, acting techniques, and how to portray believability just as those with other interests in the arts learn to master their crafts. However, providing the steps to make one's passion a sustainable reality is much neglected or forgotten. Mastering one's craft is essential but cannot lead to success without the missing steps and experiences guiding one to get there.

My documentary, *Launching an Actor's Career: Navigating Through the Film Industry*, will serve as a helpful, educational tool for actors and those in the arts field unsure of the next steps to bring their dreams and passions to fruition. Providing an understanding of how the industry works not only sparks interests in other opportunities within the film industry it also supports the flourishing and success of students in the dramatic arts field. Through many interviews of industry professionals, questions will be answered and advice will be shared in order to positively contribute and aid in a successful career path of aspiring actors.

## **Topics of Discussion**

1. Background
2. Introduction
3. Training and Techniques
4. Auditioning
5. Casting
6. Interview Questions
7. Rejection
8. The Actor's Iceberg
9. Interview Questions Continued
10. Headshots
11. Talent and Skills
12. Motivation
13. Closing Remarks

**Background:**

As a student majoring in theatre, film, and production (emphasis in acting) my classes consist of general requirements outside of my major and technical classes within my major. Gaining experience in Hollywood outside of school has been my primary source of knowledge regarding the film industry and how to travel through it. Because of this gap of focus, I decided to create a film in order to provide new outlooks for goal-oriented actors wishing to understand and navigate the industry. These interviews and the content of my film not only will help students with the same major and career goals, but it also helped me as an individual, as an actor and student. Acting is a clear passion of mine. Learning anything and everything about my craft is important to me as it is anyone wanting to become successful in their field of work.

My wish is that everything learned within my capstone contributes to the success of other students who have felt lost or confused in pursuing a career in the arts especially on the business side of it all. I hope that this serves as positive encouragement and adds newfound knowledge to those who wish to seek it. Interviewing working actors has opened my mind to new possibilities and ways of thinking and planning my career path. This has been a positive experience that I am happy to share amongst others.

## **Introduction:**

The approach for my project involves the important factors of making an engaging documentary. According to widely known documentary filmmaker, Michael Moore, “a great documentary must incorporate stories of interest, new information, and grasp the attention of others”. My documentary will represent a specific audience, and express information contributing to dramatic arts. It will especially interest those needing a sense of direction to move forward in their career field of acting, while further interesting those longing to gain an understanding of the key components of the film industry.

New outlooks achieved through my documentary will inspire actors and filmmakers to explore industry wide fields of study while keeping their passions alive. Through intricate and detailed interviews, I will open the eyes of others and allow untold truths, experiences, and lessons to be shared with and benefit actors and students majoring in the arts.

The creation of my documentary provides a platform to share meaningful information with those seeking to gain awareness and knowledge. Because I have a passionate interest in acting and the dedication to learn the specifics of the business, I am sure my documentary will reflect my utmost admiration for this intricate field. I have focused on the most important parts of my interviews and compiled them into a shorter video in order to grasp and maintain the attention of viewers. I plan to continue adding to my documentary in order to share more insight from more actors in the future. After all, the more one learns from others, the more well rounded and educated he or she will become.

Providing experiences of actors, directors and writers in my documentary gives students the opportunity to relate to professionals and understand dramatic arts as a business, while incorporating how acting careers are perceived in the business. Many scripts are often written for

specific actors. It is believed that once an actor no longer has to audition, he or she has truly *made* it, such as award winning actress Regina King. My documentary seeks to answer questions including:

How does one develop a pathway leading to an adequate level of success?

What are the key business skills and actor needs to develop?

How can one actor stand out from the rest?

One can become successful and admired for living their passion. The unbeknownst and mysterious pathway of success leading to positive acknowledgement of an actor needs honest exploration. My documentary is a visual medium allowing students with the goal of becoming an actor to explore questions, learn from them, and open their minds to develop a career plan of action.

Advice given from professionals will demystify the film industry and tackle the idea that an actor needs to be “discovered” by an agent. The discovery process has shifted from being recognized in person to being admired on social media. Although social media is considered a phase, my film will be true to emphasize that an actor must have longevity to be considered a legend in the business. Individuals are often misguided believing the avenue of social media is the ultimate route to success in the entertainment industry. It is an option to help add to one’s success; however, it is not the *only* option.

My documentary of *Launching an Actor's Career: Navigating the Film Industry* will explore different avenues of success leading to new expectations, hard work, and understanding of actors roles in the industry. After gaining knowledge of the presented research, domestic, and international film, and hearing the experiences of industry professionals, one will gain a better

sense of direction in launching an acting career. Each viewer will obtain insightful reflections and ponder new perspectives of the film industry.

As an actor many things are left unsaid and up to your own interpretation and devices to discover, figure out, and obtain information. The business side of acting is ultimately considered one of the most wondrous and mysterious aspects of the film industry. The questions often asked and answered in this film include:

“Where does one start?

How do you build your resume?

When should you find an agent/ manager?

What’s the best way to network?

How do you avoid scams?

How important is training?

There are many scams to be aware of and many loop holes an actor has to look out for. However, before this part, the world of training and mastering the craft of acting becomes most prominent and of focus. The basic concepts of acting consist of techniques such as Stella Adler, Meisner, Stanislavski and more. Often times actors use one method or a variety of methods to *create* the perfect character or *transition* into that character. The techniques vary and offer a different outlook and character development process.

Training and expertise are essential to get to the next level in any career. It is especially something that is focused on within the acting field of work. As a child, it has always been my dream to act. Becoming a character, and telling a story was often interesting and a passionate way to express my creativity and desire to act. But, how does one bring their desires, passions, and interest to the screen, to work and exhibit professionalism?



This a concept often misguided, misunderstood and not presented. Exploring agency after agency in order to find work and put one's craft to use is often a common struggle for most actors. A guide to the business, question and answers is something that should be taught as it is needed by those interested in the industry especially parents guiding young actors in the industry.

If lucky, someone will meet another actor or entertainer in the industry offering them guidance or direction. If not so fortunate, they are often left to their own way of finding their success within this complex and changing industry. What happens if someone is new to the business and does not have the privilege of having a mentor or someone more experienced to help them? Do they remain lost and unsure despite seeking information? The thought of one being lost and confused with a deep passion unsure how to use it, left me wanting to learn more and share more knowledge.

Gaining professional perspectives opens up smoother pathways to success. By having the privilege to interview working actors. I was able to gain an understanding of how they maintained their accomplishments, and what specific factors greatly impacted their careers.

Furthermore, interviewing writer, Stu Krieger, allowed me to gain an outside perspective of the roles of actors and *how* as well as *why* they are chosen for specific roles. Insight on what happens in the audition room is of great value. My documentary consists of educational value pertaining to the outlook of an actor's career and contribution to the film industry. The interviews in my documentary answer detailed questions serving as guidance to actors lacking insight and key elements to begin their careers.

Ultimately, my documentary aims to focus on expertise, experience, education, newfound discoveries and in return diminish the significant mystery of how to truly become a successful *working* actor in Hollywood.

I developed my creative project, *Launching an Actors Career Navigating through the film industry* with a vision of creating awareness and increasing knowledge for those passionate about acting and unsure where to start. I asked actors as well as screenwriter and professor, Stu Krieger, author of *The Land Before Time*, *Smart Horse*, many Disney films and more, the following questions to help actors gain better insight into the industry.

The link to my film can be found here:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kbiP\\_LHwEl69gbGHxZtx1EY1LxB\\_MmVb/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kbiP_LHwEl69gbGHxZtx1EY1LxB_MmVb/view?usp=sharing)

**Interviewees(actors)**

**Film/Television credits:**

**Faithfulness Adebayo-Ige-** *Mixed Boy Joy, Nike Commercial*

**Mark Anthony-** *The Neighborhood*

**Sharon Desiree-** *End of the World*

**Juliette Jeffers -** *All rise, Martin, Fresh Prince of Bel Air*

**Colin McCalla-** *Into the Dark, Crazy Fast*

**Sallieu Sesay –** *The Rookie*

There are many questions an actor usually has such as:

“How does one become SAG?”

“What is SAG Eligible?”

“When should an actor get an agent or manager?”

“How do you get discovered?”

“What are the best agencies?”

“Scams actors should avoid?”

“Should I do background work?”

These questions are often googled and answered. However, questions that go more in depth into the industry and personal experiences are often hidden gems and not as accessible. These questions are sometimes more specific and personal to each individual. I asked seven individuals in the film industry for their answers on the questions below:

**“When preparing for an audition what is your process?”**

Most actors explained that auditioning requires a greater understanding of the character and a confidence to express that character in the room. Preparing for an audition by practicing in different ways helps because the casting director may ask for an actor to perform something a completely different way or just a slightly different way. An actor has to be well rounded and able to express himself or herself in more than one method.

**When submitting a self-tape audition what advice would you give?**

All of the actors interviewed mentioned the importance of having good lighting, sound, and a good camera. Some actors use their phone if it is pretty up to date. A ring light is also very common to use in regards to filming from a phone. I personally recorded my first self-tape audition on my laptop using my web camera on a mac. I was sure to have good lighting and did not show the script in the shot. Low and behold I booked the role. Not being as nervous helped me as well because I would have not done my best if I was too worried about making it perfect. Getting into character trying your best and not letting nerves, anxiety, and fear take over is one of the most important things in this career.

Actors also emphasized the importance of not having too much head space. The camera should clearly show your face and not be focusing too much on a wall behind you. Also, investing in quality equipment such as a tripod and editing software is helpful in the long run.

**“What is something you wish you had known before starting your career?”**

Most actors explained that putting a time limit to their success was something they wish they would not have done. “It could take two years, it could take fifteen.” Sallieu explained. Setting a time limit to your success as an actor limits your focus and adds more pressure to your career as if there is not enough at hand. What happens if you could have booked a lead role in a week, but you quit a month too soon? Never give up is not just a saying. It is a belief especially in this field.

### **How do you deal with rejection?**

Rejection was a topic that often came up in my interviews. Despite it not being a main question that I originally thought of, it proved to be a significant factor all actors have to deal with. There are many more No’s before there is one yes. But, all an actor needs is that one yes to change their life and career in a positive way. Actor, Mark Anthon, known for his role on the network show *The Neighborhood*, explained the importance of having other things you are passionate about in life in order to enjoy other aspects of life. He explains focusing on just acting and booking roles can take a toll on one’s mental health because of the amount of rejection one receives in this field. Learning to deal with rejection is important and ultimately, a huge part of the industry. The advice of having other outlets of joy and happiness other than just one’s career was brought up by more than one interviewee further emphasizing and highlighting the importance of this. Hopefully more actors and those in the entertainment industry will take this advice into consideration.

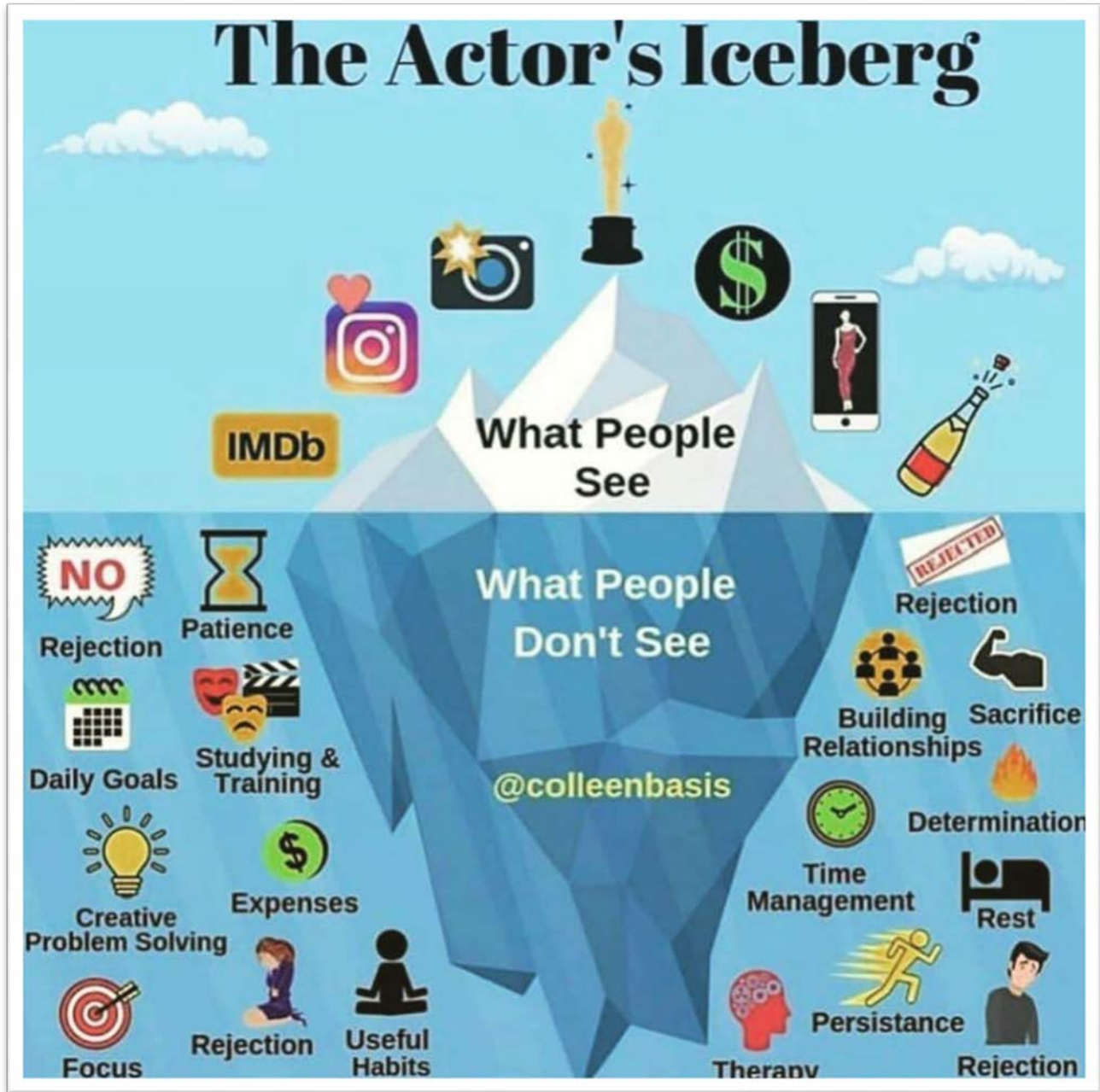
Furthermore, actors discuss the goal of perfection and bringing their best to every audition. An Acting teacher once told me to treat every audition like a performance rather than making it a make it or break it situation. Auditions are the opportunity to showcase your talent and to tell a story by becoming someone else. In other words, use your opportunity to perform as

a way of bringing someone's story to life. The casting director may pick someone else because they are taller, shorter, skinnier, bigger, smaller, or just because they like their personality, resume, or voice better. It does not always mean that the person who was chosen instead of you was a better actor or most importantly a better person.

Rejection is a recurring theme in this field of work. Most careers you stick with a job and go to work every day not worried about what's next. Acting is constant movement. If an actor books a job next week but not a month from now he or she may be constantly worried about what was done wrong. Am I not as good anymore? or Where is my next check coming from? Acting has seasons of ups and downs such as life. It is important to cherish the best of it rather than dwell and worry about the future and what's next, as competitive and as hard as it is.

The Actor's Iceberg is a perfect example of what goes on behind the scenes of this career field. Some may see actors as an overnight success, but many people fail to realize the amount of work that was put in in order to achieve such greatness for years.

# The Actor's Iceberg



(<http://www.perform.edu.au/blog/the-actors-iceberg-whats-an-actors-life-really-like>)

This diagram expresses the success and hardships of actors that those outside or even inside the industry may or may not see.

Moreover, the importance of the business of acting is not often discussed in a university setting. Training is extremely important and so is understanding how to navigate the industry as a whole. A separate class for the business of acting and entertainment would be increasingly helpful for students to understand. Many of the actors I interviewed mentioned the importance of networking. Networking helps most actors navigate the business. For example, having a mentor has helped me immensely and allows me to better understand certain aspects of the business.

Finding someone who is open to sharing experiences, honest advice and opinions is one of the most helpful and comforting things about having a career in the arts. Having someone who truly understands the field you're in will ultimately help you to relate and focus on your path with more confidence and less fear. This is something every actor needs especially starting out. The importance of having a mentor opens up new outlooks, new opportunities, and new understanding that will further aid in the positive development of a successful career.

Investing in an acting career is also important. During many of the interviews, most actors expressed having professional headshots, reels, a correctly formatted resume, and paying for great classes and training all pay off in the long run. One actor paid hundreds for his headshots and booked a commercial paying even more. It goes to show how important investing your craft is. **Headshots** are what sells an actor. Below is an example of good headshots and unprofessional ones. Many agents and casting directors can immediately tell the difference and a bad headshot can definitely hinder your success as an actor.

### Bad Headshot Examples:



(<https://bonniegillespie.com/bad-headshots-good-headshots>)

First, it is important not to crop out too much. Casting directors want to see an actor's face as this is what first represents you for the role. Secondly, a general rule is to look natural. Don't wear too much make up that it overpowers your look.



**Good Headshot example:**



My headshot is the example above. I got my headshots taken from Melrose Headshots. They are industry approved and well recommended. It is important to have great recommendations in order to get industry standards and approved shots. It is important to have a theatrical and commercial headshot as well. Having a variety to choose from is always best.

Many actors also spoke about being multifaceted. Having a variety of talents to show case such as sports, roller skating, cheerleading, or even gymnastics can come in handy when it comes to casting. Often times, casting directors look for actors with certain talents and that's what sets them apart from others. Having a reel showing your variety of talents will improve your chances of being cast, help you stand out and book more work.

Furthermore, having a mentor to walk you through these steps is very important. A mentor and a coach will help improve your craft and understanding of the business at hand. Actor Sallieu Sesay explained, athletes train why wouldn't actors? Practice may not make perfect as there is always room to learn and improve in regards to acting; however practice definitely makes better.

Continually, finding work can be the hardest part of acting. La Casting, Actors Access, Backstage, and Casting frontier are all sites that allow actors to submit for work. An agent has more access to jobs and can send actors out to audition for more projects. Getting in contact with an agent is always hard getting a response. Referrals are the most prominent and successful avenues of getting signed with an agency, of course if the actor is professional and prepared as well.

In conclusion, preparation, networking, and training are key to a successful career. Surround yourself with positive people that encourage, motivate, and provide good company.

Learn from others and share with others. Most of all, remain passionate, inspired and dedicated.  
Be willing to put in the hard work needed to create a career of a lifetime.

Below are some photos featuring the actors I interviewed. I hope this film and information given provides clarity and an increase of understanding the world of acting.



Faithfulness Adebayo-Ige and Journée McMillan





Sallieu Sesay and Journée McMillan



Sharon Desiree and Journée McMillan

All photos taken at *JGV Studios*

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