



# The Acting Biz

*A Career Guide  
to the Twin Cities*

Beth Chaplin

Kirk House Publishers  
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# The Acting Biz: A Career Guide to the Twin Cities

by Beth Chaplin

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# Dedication

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In fond memory of Roger Klemmer, founder of Voice Plus.  
Rog was a true professional in front of a microphone and as an agent.  
He was one of the first people in the business  
to take the time to answer my questions and offer valuable advice.  
It is in that same spirit that I offer this book.  
Thanks, Rog.  
We miss you.

In loving memory of Maureen Dunham,  
my dear aunt, who shared her wisdom, sharp wit,  
and humor in abundance.





# Preface

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**"It takes a lot of courage  
to show your dreams to someone else."**

**Erma Bombeck**

Just about everyone who wants to be an actor is pursuing some kind of dream. Actually diving in takes courage. Congratulations for taking the plunge! (Or at least congratulations for thinking about it!) Whether you are already working as an actor or your "inner actor" has yet to make a public appearance, I'm glad you have found this book.

When I left my full-time teaching job in 1990, I auditioned all over town and sent my headshot and resume to agents, trying to get a foot in the door—any door. Some doors opened to interesting opportunities, some doors led nowhere, some simply slammed shut, and still other doors led to people who wanted only my money. However, I found no one who would or could answer all the questions I had about the acting world in the Twin Cities. My learning was strictly by trial and error.

I swore to myself that if I ever figured it all out, I would share what I had learned with whoever needed it. That vow of eighteen years ago has finally resulted in this book.

Lots of folks in town could have written this book. I am not the only expert; however, I am writing from a unique vantage. In the past eighteen years, I have learned all about this business from a variety of perspectives:

- As an actor in hundreds of commercials, industrials, and voice-overs.
- As an actor on a handful of Twin Cities' stages and in a few independent films.
- As an acting student with over a dozen local acting teachers.
- As an agent interviewing and auditioning new talent, directing on-camera and voice auditions, and booking actors for jobs.





- As a teacher and coach in classes on the business of acting, on-camera acting, ear prompting and voice-overs.
- As a documentary video director and producer.

I have also answered thousands of questions from new actors. It is amazing to me that I can now answer the same questions I was asking almost two decades ago.

In New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, it is easy to find resources with all kinds of information for actors. Some of that information will apply to the Twin Cities; much of it does not. This is a thriving market, but it is quite different from the acting world in the three biggest markets. That is what makes this book unique. There never has been one single reference book that will answer questions about how the business really works here in the Twin Cities. I hope this book will do that for you.

As you read, I hope you will feel free to contact me with any questions that I have neglected to answer. I also welcome differing opinions and perspectives. I will try to include them in subsequent versions. I welcome any and all feedback! (beth@actingbiztc.com)

I wish someone had written this book decades ago. It would have saved me time, frustration, and money. I know that some lessons must be learned the hard way in this business—being an actor is not easy. There is no instant road to success, but there are definitely some paths to avoid! I offer no guarantees, only suggestions. I hope this book will illuminate your path and help you avoid some of the unnecessary obstacles. Chase your dream, and let this book help you plan the chase.

Break a leg!







# Introduction

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## How to read this book

It may help you to view this as a reference book. Feel free to read from beginning to end, or simply skim the sub-headings to find the answers to your particular questions. Each chapter contains numerous sub-headings in a short topic or question-and-answer format. It has been shaped by hundreds of questions from past students. Where you are in your acting journey will determine the most useful information for you.

The appendices contain some of the most important information in the book. It is a listing of who's who, what's what, where they are, and how to find them. If I have left any question unanswered in the text of the book, someone listed in the appendices can certainly provide an answer.

This book is about the business side of the acting world, not the artistic side. It is about where the work is and how to best go about getting it. While there is no overall emphasis on stage acting, Chapter 10 discusses theater in the Twin Cities, and Chapters 7 and 9 discuss auditions and training for the stage. The primary emphasis of this book is the *business* of acting in the broadest sense—in other words, getting work: agents, auditions, unions, commercials, industrials, voice-overs, video shoots, finances, etc.

One of my editors suggested that I occasionally take a negative tone in the book, while another editor complained that I occasionally use too many superlatives. (“It is *so* great, *so* wonderful. . . .”) They are both absolutely right. I am attempting to walk a tightrope between encouragement and reality. Rather than thinking of me as acting coach or cheerleader, consider me a business advisor. I will not present a view of the acting world through rose-colored glasses, but I will try to encourage you to pursue your dreams despite some of the challenging realities. My goal is to give sound, honest advice.

Colleges and universities generally teach the art of acting and the history of the theater; however, too many neglect to teach an actor how to actually get work. This book fills that void in an actor's preparation. There is work for actors in the Twin Cities, if you know where and how to look for it.





## CHAPTER 1

# The Biz in the Twin Cities

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*Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and then us!*

### **Are there really a lot of acting opportunities in the Twin Cities?**

Yes! The Twin Cities market is said to be the fourth largest video production market in the country, trailing only Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. Thousands of actors have made money in commercials and industrials (non-broadcast programs) in the Twin Cities. Some have made good money. And thousands of actors work on stage here—some are paid, many are not—but the opportunities are abundant.

This is a great place for actors!

### **Before I begin searching for acting opportunities in the Twin Cities, what should I know first?**

A note of caution: You do not need to spend a lot of money to try your hand at acting! However, you do need to know the following truths about the industry:

- Do not give money to anyone who promises you work. No one can guarantee that you will get legitimate work as an actor.
- Do not give money to anyone who promises they can help you “be discovered.”
- Do not pay an agency to represent you. Agents get paid when you get work.
- Do not pay anyone to put your photo in a book or on a website until you know that they have lots of clients who hire actors.
- If any person or organization wants a check from you the first time you ever meet them, rest assured they are far more interested in your checkbook than your acting career.

Be careful about paying anyone for anything in this business! Ask around and do some research first. Trust me on this. People who want to be actors and models (adults and children alike) are often too eager to





launch their careers, so they will often believe anyone who tells them they are talented because they want it so badly.

I put this statement front and center so that even if you are skimming this book and you are about to put it back on the shelf, you will at least be warned!

To those who plan to keep reading, I am glad you found this book. I want you to enjoy your acting pursuit in the Twin Cities and to avoid being cheated in the process. This book is a great place to begin your journey.

**New actors will often jump at the first opportunity that they think will help them become an actor. Unscrupulous people know this and will prey on you if you do not do your homework first! Those people exist, even here in Minnesota-nice-land.**

### **What kinds of work can an actor find in the Twin Cities?**

- Stage work for both professional and amateur actors.
- Student films, low-budget independent films, and the rare major motion picture or made-for-TV movie. (The leading roles in major movies are almost always cast in the bigger markets. Smaller roles are sometimes available for local actors.)
- Commercials for radio, TV, and the internet, to broadcast locally, regionally, and nationally.
- Industrials (the commonly used term for any video or audio production that is not for broadcast, typically for training, marketing, or educational purposes).
- Voice-overs for radio and TV commercials as well as industrials. (See Chapter 12 for details.)
- Live industrials. (Companies hire actors to present their products and messages at trade shows and corporate events or to entertain at conventions.)
- Modeling and print advertising. (See Chapter 14 for details.)
- Jingle singing (though this work primarily goes to established vocal performers).
- Every possible variation and combination of any of the above.

### **What exactly do you mean by “actor”?**

We all define the word actor in different ways. In this book, the term describes every kind of actor—from trained, experienced stage actors to total beginners who yearn to give acting a try.





You may be training to be a serious stage actor. Or you may have your sights set on New York or L.A. to chase the dream of working in TV and film. (You may even be here to *escape* from New York or L.A.!) Perhaps you are already a seasoned stage actor trying to figure out how to get into the world of commercials and industrials. Or you may be brand new to acting, and may simply want to act in community theater or make some money on the side doing a commercial or two.

Whatever your goals may be, welcome to the art and craft of acting. Please recognize, however, that others may define the term “actor” quite differently. Acting can only be mastered with a lifetime of dedication and commitment. I have twenty years of experience, and I know how the business of acting functions here in the Twin Cities; however, when it comes to the art of acting, I feel more like a novice than a master. My level of experience and dedication pales in comparison to the most experienced and talented actors in the Twin Cities. I am proud to call myself a professional actor; yet, to those more experienced and gifted actors, I tip my hat in respect.

In the Twin Cities, opportunities are available for beginning and experienced actors alike, but to be successful you will need to be dedicated. You eventually will be competing with and working with incredibly talented actors who have been working and training for years. Regardless of your level of experience and training, welcome to the profession.

### **“I wanna be a star!”**

Sorry, you are in the wrong town. There are no million-dollar contracts here. No names in lights, no press clippings that will launch your career. This is a great place to be an actor, and it is a great place to gain some experience and training before moving on to a bigger market; however, star-making vehicles do not travel by way of I-35W and I-94.

On the other hand, if you are an accomplished stage actor, you can certainly earn tremendous respect from the acting community. That is the closest thing to stardom you will find in this town. There are a lot of very talented, experienced, highly-trained actors who work on stage here. Many of these actors could compete in the bigger markets, but have chosen to forego the more “glamorous” acting opportunities in order to retain the quality of life they have here in the Twin Cities.

You really will not find any stardom being a commercial/industrial actor—except perhaps a little respect from a few of your peers and agents. It is professional, well-paid work, but you will receive no big kudos for it.

If you are certain you are already a big star, this is not where you need to be. A “diva” attitude does not go over very well here—I doubt it goes over





well anywhere. Successful actors here are working actors. If you waltz in with a big ego and starry eyes, you will stick out like a sore thumb!

On the other hand, team players get along really well in this business—both on stage and in the commercial world. If you are not worried about your own spotlight and you are ready to collaborate with fun, creative people, you will be welcomed with open arms.

### **Stage work vs. commercials and industrials**

Let's make a quick distinction. Stage work is quite different from commercial/industrial work. Stage acting involves the art and craft of acting. Commercials and industrials have less to do with art; they have everything to do with marketing, sales, and business. When you work in a commercial or industrial, you will be using your acting talent and skill, but the ultimate goals of the work are to sell a product or to train employees.

Some actors do both commercial and stage work, and do them well. Some actors do only one or the other. If you are a trained stage actor, you may be able to easily make the jump to commercial work. The pay is a good way to support or supplement your stage habit. (Stage actors are rarely highly-compensated, to say the least!) You may need specific training in order to make the transition to the camera, but your stage acting knowledge and skill will serve you well.

If your only experience is in commercials and industrials, you will probably need some work and training to make the leap from commercials to stage. Stage acting requires very different skills. It all depends on your goals in the biz. The concepts in this book apply to all actors, no matter what your pursuit.

A good portion of this book will apply to commercials and industrial work; however, particular attention is given to stage work in Chapters 7 and 10.

### **The term “talent”**

For commercial and industrial work, you will commonly hear actors referred to as “talent.” Talent is the term that names the function of the actor on the commercial set. “Actor” refers to your profession and your art; “talent” refers to your function in the commercial world. The term “talent” simply refers to the human(s) who will be seen or heard in the spot or program. You do not necessarily have to *have* talent to *be* talent—but often that's the case!

### **What exactly is an “industrial”?**

An industrial is just about anything in the biz that is not for commercial broadcast. It can be a training DVD or CD, an interactive computer





program, an internet or intranet corporate training program, or anything on any format for training or marketing purposes. Actors are hired to be the “on-camera talent” or “voice talent.” The purpose of most industrials is to train, teach, or inform; however, the variety is unbelievable. Here is a short list of industrial topics I have done, just to give you an idea. If you are hired to do an industrial, you might be the face, the body or body part, the voice, or all of the above:

- Programs for schools, DVDs to accompany textbooks.
- Programs for school teachers.
- New-employee orientation or explanations of benefits packages.
- Safety procedures for countless processes: proper handling of chemicals, emergency evacuation procedures, glass installation in cars as well as high-rise buildings, proper techniques to deal with infectious substances in medical settings.
- Sales techniques for insurance policies, retail products, computer equipment.
- New product introductions for health spas, recycling companies, toys.
- Phone systems or on-hold messages.
- Kiosks at retail locations and trade shows—any display where you see a person on screen or hear a voice telling you about a product.
- Product demonstrations—from vacuum cleaners to games, tractor repair to craft products.
- Business ethics discussions or demonstrations: sexual harassment situations, ethical conduct for management, understanding cultural differences.
- Medical procedure demonstrations for doctors, nurses, or patients.
- Substance abuse or domestic violence counseling dramatizations.

An actor has been hired to talk about or demonstrate almost any product or process you can name.

### **What’s a live industrial?**

Often when you are booked for a live industrial, you will be the presenter at a trade show. A trade show is usually held in a huge convention center. Companies rent space on the convention center floor to set up a booth. Actors are hired to give the same presentation at regular intervals throughout the day. Normally, it is an eight to fifteen minute show you repeat every twenty to thirty minutes. If you are lucky, it is an entertaining





presentation that you get to do with other fun actors. Sometimes it is just you. The purpose is sometimes to entertain, sometimes to inform, sometimes to simply project the company's image, and often to draw people into the booth so the salespeople can get leads.

Other live industrials involve entertaining in some way at a corporate function. Some actors are hired to emcee corporate events. I once portrayed a ditsy legal secretary in a murder mystery sketch for a convention of attorneys. There were four actors in full costume and make-up. Our scenes occurred at different times throughout the three-day conference. The scenes served both as comic relief and as a way of introducing different segments of the program. That particular live industrial was great fun.

Whatever form a live industrial takes, it should pay well: \$500 to \$1000 per day or more.

The subject matter for live industrials varies. No matter what the message, you rarely need prior knowledge or training in the subject; you simply need to learn or ear prompt the script. (See Chapter 3 for ear prompter information.)

### **The good news and the bad news.**

The Twin Cities area offers an abundance of opportunities for actors: on stage, in commercials, and in industrials. Just as in any city, there are no guarantees that you will achieve great financial success as an actor, but this is a great place to give acting a try. You will work with creative, interesting people. You will be challenged and rarely be bored. And many actors can and do make money along the way.

The bad news is that there are far more actors than acting opportunities. Lots of folks want to get into this game. Even the folks who are already in the game want more playing time. Thus, it can be very difficult to get a foot in the door and even more difficult to stay in. This book will give you both the good news (the opportunities and where to find them) and the bad news (the potential roadblocks and frustrations you may encounter along the way). Perseverance is important!

*"There's nothing else I want to do as badly as I want to keep trying to make it. So, I say yes to everything, keep my expenses low, and every few months ask myself if I'm still happy. And, if you do decide to take a break for a while, that's okay. This business isn't going anywhere—and if it is truly what you want to do, you will be back."*

*—Greta Grosch, Plymouth Playhouse, Comedysportz, Hey City*





## Can I make a living as an actor?

It is tough to count on acting as a living. Some Twin Cities' actors make a comfortable living, but those actors comprise a minority of all actors here. Even for those actors, it may have taken a while, perhaps years, to build a stage network or commercial client base large enough to sustain a living. Still others who have made their living for a period of years may experience slow times and drops in income.

On the brighter side, there are indeed actors who make a living in the biz. Some are successful stage actors. Others are professional voice and/or on-camera talent. Many who make their living work all sides of the business.

When you are starting out, you will definitely need to have another income stream. In other words, don't quit your day job! The majority of local actors have a "real job," or at least some kind of supplemental income. However, it is possible to make your living as an actor. Professional actors do not just sit home waiting for the phone to ring, they work at it.

Successful actors have to be diligent and creative in their art and in their business. If you want a shot at making a living as an actor, you cannot wait for the business to come to you. You have to go out and get it.

## What are my chances of getting commercial/industrial work?

You are entering a business in which you will be selling yourself as a commodity. The demand for your particular product is nearly impossible to predict. Once you are established and clients know who you are and what you can do, there might be more demand for your product. However, when you are starting out (depending on your look and personality), the demand for you is low to moderate at best.

There are hundreds, even thousands of actors trying to get work here. Headshots and resumes pour into agency offices every week. Your headshot can become lost in a sea of new faces for quite some time; you may become frustrated and give up long before anyone even notices that you exist.

However, there is a constant need for fresh faces. Actors who have been around for a while can become over-exposed, so clients need to select

"Every day is different. I don't just act. I work part time in the box office selling tickets and doing accounting work. I direct and choreograph. I do commercial work. I teach at drama camps. And if I have to, I temp to supplement my income."

—Megan Kelly, Actor's Theater of Minnesota, Bloomington Civic Theater, Theatre L'Homme Dieu, Chanhassen Dinner Theatres







new talent. Further, when an actor leaves the biz—to get a “real” job, move to the coast, raise children, etc.—new opportunities open up.

Here are a few suggestions to help you determine what your chances might be here in the Twin Cities. On stage, the better your talent and training, the better your chances will be.

For commercial and industrial work:

- If you have a non-Caucasian, ethnic look, you may have slightly better odds of getting work. It is the simple law of supply and demand here in Minnesota.
- If you are male instead of female, your odds are slightly better. Just listen to the radio and watch TV. How many male faces and voices do you see and hear as opposed to female faces and voices? Though it is changing, it is still a man’s world. Sadly for women, the acting biz reflects that world.
- If you have either an attractive or an interesting face, your odds are better. This business is all about your “look.”
- If you are age twenty to forty, you are in slightly higher demand. (However, there are so many twenty-somethings trying to get into acting, the odds may not be as favorable as you would like!)

“Having a side job, another way to make income is imperative. Over the years, I developed my seamstress skills and am now able to be an independent contractor working from home. This is ideal because I can arrange a full load of projects when I know I’m not getting a lot of acting income — and where I do have an acting gig--say a steady theater job--I can scale down my sewing time. In addition, working from home allows me to be able to set my own hours, which means I am available for any and all commercial or voice-over auditions/gigs.”

—Seri Johnson, AEA, Old Log Theater, Chanhassen Dinner Theatres

- If you are a well-trained, experienced actor, your odds are better.

During my first few years in this business, after auditioning for one of the biggest agencies in town, I asked the agent that very question: “What are my chances?” Her response: “If you’re good, you’ll work.” I wanted a more specific answer! The truth is, no one can answer that question. They can theorize based on your look and current skill level, but any one person’s





opinion is totally subjective. Some very talented, experienced actors can go out on twenty-five commercial and industrial auditions and get nothing. Some new, totally green actor can show up and be booked on a job right away. Training and experience can definitely increase your odds of getting work, but there are no guarantees. If you ask an agent about your potential, you want to hear a wonderful, positive answer. You can still ask the question, but they may not be able to tell you what you want to hear.

### **So how do I know if I have talent?**

Do not worry about it! If acting is your passion, just do it. Your talent will emerge.

Acting “talent” is difficult to define. I believe acting talent is the same as musical talent, artistic talent, and athletic talent. To be blunt, some have it, some do not. For example, I could take voice lessons for the rest of my life and still never be able to belt out a Broadway tune or sing opera (outside of the shower). I could run and train for years and never run a six-minute mile. I just do not have that kind of talent.

The same is true for acting. There are actors who are simply gifted; their work seems effortless. There are others with a little talent who work hard to maximize what they have. There are some with little talent but loads of personality, charm, and charisma to carry them through. It is impossible to know where you fall in that spectrum. We actors are not very good at being objective about ourselves.

You cannot define or quantify acting talent, nor can you control how much talent you may or may not have. If you have the desire to act, simply dive in and try it. Follow your passion, bring your unique talent forth, and make the most of it through training.

**“I started acting because it was a childhood dream. I loved the idea of being somebody else and escaping into the great beyond. I stick with acting because I am getting better at it and am able to truly create that imaginary world my characters exist in. (Plus, my reviews are getting better and better, and my ego likes that!)”**

—Lori Neal, *Penumbra*, *Jungle Theater*, *Frank Theatre*, *Mixed Blood*, *Theatre Unbound*, *Children’s Theatre*, *Pillsbury House*

### **Cold hard facts: Will I find work?**

A dose of reality is often a healthy thing. If you understand what you are up against as you enter the acting world, your ego may better survive some of the harsh blows of reality.





Many people enter this business with wide-eyed optimism. A few experience relatively speedy success. For most, it is tough to get a foot in the door. As the months pass, the rejection—or worse, total lack of response—can quickly turn optimism into frustration, anger, and defeat. The best thing to do is arm yourself with as much knowledge as possible, combine the optimism with realism, gather your patience, and dive in!

Some of the realities:

- Like every actor in town, you will be rejected more often than you will be cast. Compare it to the feelings you had in grade school physical education class, lining up and picking teams. You may often feel like the last kid, standing alone, still waiting to be picked. Prepare yourself for this reality.
- You may never make a consistent living in the biz.
- A significant proportion of the work, particularly in industrials and voice-overs, goes to the same small circle of actors. If clients find an actor they like, they use that actor over and over. It is possible to break into that circle, but it may take a while.

**"My husband says I became an actor in my 40s—10 years ago this year—because 'I had something to say.' And I have never found a better answer. And now that I have found my theatrical voice and am not yet tired of sharing it, I still do it. . . . I work not for the pay (so I'm unusual in that regard) but for the exhilaration of performing . . . . We humans all need to tell stories to one another to talk about our place in the world . . . some of us do it with painting and sculpture, some of us dress up in clothes and pretend to be other people."**

—Linda Sue Anderson, Torch Theater, Theatre in the Round, Workhouse Theatre

### **What are the other “down sides” to being an actor?**

Being an actor provides: No paid days off. No paid vacation. No paid maternity leave. No paid bereavement leave. No 401k plan. No employer-provided health insurance (unless you are a successful union actor). And the worst possible job security you can imagine. It is not an easy business!

### **How many actors make money in the biz? How much?**

It is nearly impossible to know the statistics for the Twin Cities. To my knowledge, no one keeps stats. To get a vague idea, let's look at some nationwide statistics from the Screen Actor's Guild (SAG):

