

# Many of Flavors



BY LAURA WAYTH

Colleges serve up a diverse menu of actor training approaches

STANISLAVSKY  
System

Meticulously prepared

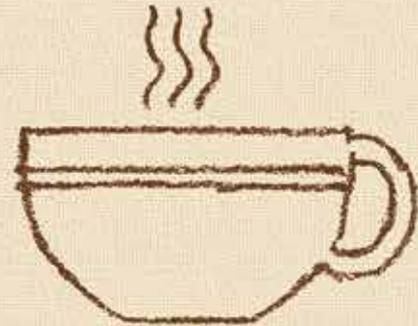
Michael  
CHEKHOV  
Reality and then some

the  
METHOD

Emotionally Truthful

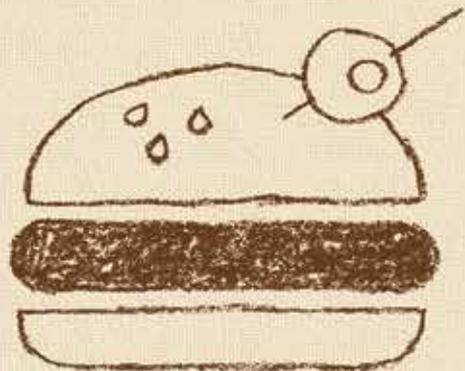
SANFORD  
Acting  
is Doing  
WEISNER

# Practical Aesthetics



## VIEW POINTS

*Space and time*



YOU WANT TO study acting in college, and like a good student, you are doing your homework—reading websites and combing through glossy brochures to get a feel for what it would be like to be in each program. You see phrases like “building your toolkit” and names like Strasberg, Chekhov, and Meisner.

But what does it all mean? What can you expect from these different schools? The search can be overwhelming, and figuring out what your experience might be like can get confusing. Let’s break it down and talk about some major actor training methods and what they involve, so you have the best chance of finding the right one for you.

First, most B.F.A. programs will train students in speech and movement as well as in acting, since developing the voice and body is as critical as performance classes are. It is important to know that along with this mix of physical, vocal, and studio work, there will often be a mix of training methods. You can expect to be exposed to different ideas about acting and different tools of your craft—some that will click with you, some that will not.

Once upon a time, this was not the case. Schools taught the system of a single practitioner like Sanford Meisner or Lee Strasberg. The beauty and downfall of such training is that you do not have to synthesize your own process: terrific when every aspect of that method resonates with you, problematic when it does not feel authentic or complete enough to you.

Although a few programs still focus on one practitioner's ideas, the trend is to mix it up.

The advantage of mixing it up (of "building your toolkit") is that you get to try many different dishes from a plentiful and hearty buffet, learning what you like and what you want to keep going back for. Each school's array of components will vary, with a little more of this system and a little less of that one. After being exposed to a variety of different approaches, you can develop your own way of working that speaks uniquely and directly to you as an individual artist.

But what might these different dishes be? Here is an overview of the most popular methods that you are likely to encounter.

## The Stanislavsky System

Konstantin Stanislavsky is the most important name in actor training. He is the father of modern practice, and his ideas form the foundation for almost every other method.



Konstantin Stanislavsky

Stanislavsky (1863-1938) sought to develop an acting style that was more truthful and less presentational than what was common on the Russian stages of his time. The Moscow Art Theatre, where he worked, became his laboratory. While we call his work the Stanislavsky System, it was not his intention to create a rigid prescription for actors to follow. He sought instead to develop a series of principles to guide actors in the creation of believable characters.

Stanislavsky thought that an actor could not rely on imitation alone but must find a way to connect with the character. At first, he believed the actor needed to recall personal experiences (which he termed Emotional Memory) to make that connection. He later came to see that transferring one's personal experience was unreliable and sometimes destructive. He moved away from

emotional experience and toward physical action as a way into connecting with the character and the circumstances of the play. His later work emphasized the importance of concentration, observation, relaxation, and careful text analysis.

Stanislavsky, as taught today, focuses on what the actor is *doing* rather than how the actor is *feeling*, on what the character wants and the many specific ways he will go about getting this need met. Stanislavsky training will involve careful observations, exercises to strengthen memory and awareness, tools to increase physical expressiveness, and detailed text analysis. Expect Stanislavsky's ideas and exercises to form the backbone of most theatre programs.

## The Method

Most of us have probably heard of Method acting, which refers to the teachings of Lee Strasberg at the Group Theatre, an ensemble he co-founded that staged several groundbreaking plays. The Method focuses on Stanislavsky's earliest ideas about Emotional Memory, in which the actor seeks to create the character's experience by recreating a similar personal experience.

Strasberg believed that when Stanislavsky moved away from an emphasis on emotional life toward physical life

Lee Strasberg



on stage, he lost the essence of good acting. For Strasberg, truthful acting was dependent on the actor being immersed in personal emotions comparable to those of the character. He believed that revisiting memories was the only way to generate realistic behavior on stage and the only way to illuminate the truth.

Like Stanislavsky, Strasberg stresses imagination, concentration, and

relaxation. Unlike Stanislavsky, Strasberg demands that the actor revisit memories and experiences no matter how deep or painful they may be. The Method was once the most popular system in the United States, but it is not as prevalent today, most likely due to the many who feel that it can be too invasive or introspective, that it can go where perhaps even a qualified therapist might not. However, for those who embrace this approach, it can often lead to extraordinary work.

## Practical Aesthetics

If the Method is driven by personal experience, then Practical Aesthetics is driven in the opposite direction.

Emotion has no place in Practical Aesthetics. As developed by playwright David Mamet and actor William



David Mamet

H. Macy for Atlantic Theatre Company, this no-frills, intellectually driven, and playwright-centered approach is all about action—what the character is literally doing to the other characters to effect change and to drive the story forward.

The bible for this technique is *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*, which presents a concise and direct course that can be easily mastered by any actor. The book itemizes nine criteria that the actor must meet to find an action that can be played effectively.

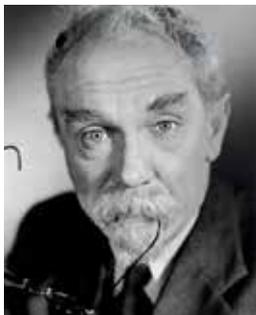
Believing that the playwright, and not the actor, is the chief creative force behind the play, Practical Aesthetics relies heavily on text analysis. It resists metaphor and relies on a literal breakdown of the play's components.

Practical Aesthetics shares many similarities with Stanislavsky—it distills his basic principles of character creation and text analysis—and it often functions as a nice complement to traditional Stanislavsky work. Ex-

pect a highly practical, non-mystical, straightforward system that demands you get down to the nitty-gritty of script, story, and action.

### Michael Chekhov

Michael Chekhov was one of Stanislavsky's most brilliant students, but he began to reject some of his teacher's core principles. An independent thinker, Chekhov found Stanislavsky's preoccupation with realism to be limiting.



Michael Chekhov

He felt good theatre was not a replication and reflection of life but something greater and more inspiring—not reality but heightened reality.

While Stanislavsky believed in the intellectual work of script analysis, Chekhov thought that the intellect should not be the focus of good acting. He believed the best place to begin creating a truthful performance was the imagination, which he contended was not only an innate gift but also a tool that could be strengthened and trained. He thought that the greater the actor's imaginative powers, the more compelling the character.

Chekhov believed the body and the mind are interdependent and inseparably linked, and his approach to acting is psychophysical. The actor's physicality influences psychology, and psychology influences physicality in an endless loop. Chekhov believed that if the actor creates an outer movement, it affects her internal psychology far more than analyzing the script or recalling personal events would. By harnessing the imagination, the actor has access not only to conscious thoughts and experiences but also to the unconscious and to larger universal truths, which is far more powerful for the audience than the replication of mundane experiences.

Chekhov technique is very popular right now. Expect it to be physical

and visceral and to call upon your highest imaginative and creative powers.

### Meisner Technique

Sanford Meisner often said, "Acting is doing," which may be the clearest way to sum up his technique. While a member of the Group Theatre, Meisner began to take issue with what he saw as Strasberg's over-reliance on Emotional Memory. He saw a disturbing trend of actors being drawn further toward personal psychology and their own interior lives and away from interaction with their fellow performers and the immediate action of the moment.

Meisner's work is based on bringing the actor back to instinctive responses, believing that all good acting comes from the impulsive reaction of the heart. It is the actor's job to access that impulse, to get past the traps of intellect, and to move toward one human heart in conversation with another. He believed that actors needed to learn (or to relearn) how to live in the moment.



Sanford Meisner

This technique involves a sequence of interdependent exercises in a specified order, each one laying the foundation for the next, through which actors are called upon to tear down their habitual mental and emotional roadblocks. Only when the actor is able to strip away habits and defenses can she emerge as an honest and open instrument.

Structured improvisations, many involving simple exercises of listening and repeating, allow the actor to harness the critical skills of observation and attention, and Meisner training is a powerful tool for building concentration. The process may feel slow at first, since the exercises are precise and structured, and it may

require patience on your part, but the results can be transformative. While the vocabulary that Meisner uses may seem different from Stanislavsky's, the mission and principles are much the same.

### Viewpoints

Viewpoints technique blends many aspects of theatre: it is a director's tool for rehearsal, an actor's tool for exploration, and a general tool for physical training. It is not a system in the same sense as some of the others that we have looked at so far. It does not provide the tools for analysis or a set of steps for analyzing and understanding a script.

The best way to describe Viewpoints is as a vocabulary, as a way of working or, perhaps more specifically, of discovering theatre. It helps the actor and the director to explore concepts like space and time, as they encounter and develop a play together. It helps actors to return to visceral connection with instinct rather than with intellect.

Viewpoints work breaks into nine primary components of space and time. Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, who developed Viewpoints, define them as follows.

#### *Viewpoints of time*

- **Tempo:** the speed at which an action is performed. It can be performed quickly, slowly, or any tempo in between.
- **Duration:** the length an action is allowed to continue. Duration identifies a specific action's beginning, middle, and end points. It describes when one action needs to close and another action needs to open.
- **Kinesthetic response:** a spontaneous physical reaction to physical movement that occurs outside of one's self.



Anne Bogart

- Repetition: recurring movements, gestures, tempos, or shapes of others.

#### *Viewpoints of space*

- Spatial relationship: the distance between people in the space.
- Topography: the physical landscape of the space, for example, a grid like a checkerboard. Topography of both vertical (height) and horizontal spaces.
- Shape: a body as it appears in a space.
- Gesture: including literal, behavioral gestures (such as scratching your head) and expressive gestures that express concepts or ways of feeling.
- Architecture: the tangible components of the space, such as a doorway, platform, or window.

Bogart and Landau feel that the Viewpoints offer a different and much needed approach to creating theatre, since conventional actor training emphasizes psychological motivation over physical motivation. They believe the danger in relying on psychology rather than physicality is that the actor often attempts to generate a predetermined emotion or to replicate a moment of previous success, while Viewpoints allows for spontaneous and organic responses.

Viewpoints has gained in popularity over the years. For those who are physically adept, it can be a wonderful entry point to acting. For those who are less physically aware, it can serve to connect and open them in ways that movement class alone may not be able to.

#### **A word about B.A. programs**

While my focus has been on those pursuing a B.F.A., do not dismiss the power of a B.A. program. The major difference is that the acting B.F.A. offers a conservatory environment focused on performance more than technical theatre, while the B.A. provides a broad array of training in performance, design, and technical elements.

Whether you choose a B.F.A. or a B.A., every school will approach

the craft of theatre from a different vantage point, just as each system I have described here has its own distinct elements. However, the goal of all training is the same: to help the actor find a way to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances.

Like you, every program is individual and unique, and until you are fully immersed in school, you may not know what tools will work for you. But by being armed with a little information and by knowing more about the tools available, you can not only ask the right questions of what a program may offer, but you can also find the combination of tools that works best for you. ▼

### **What kind of actor are you?**

Most actors benefit from a wide range of training techniques—which is why, as Laura Wayth points out in her article, most actor training programs strive to expose students to many different ways of working. Still, in conversations with faculty and current students, you'll likely hear a preference for one approach or another. How might you fare on a campus where, say, the Viewpoints prevail, based on what you know about your personality, your acting strengths and weaknesses, what's worked well for you in the past, and what new tools you might need to grow in your craft? Here's a highly unscientific, deeply debatable quiz to get you thinking.

1. When learning something new, I...
  - a. Am patient and methodical; I like to follow a series of concrete steps.
  - b. Want to know the shortest distance from Point A to Point B.
  - c. Immerse myself totally, sometimes to the point of becoming an expert in the subject myself.
  - d. Let my imagination guide me as far as it can.
  - e. Like to experiment; I learn best by trial and error.

2. Friends admire the way I...
  - a. Listen.
  - b. Think.
  - c. Feel and express myself without fear.
  - d. Inspire others with my creativity.
  - e. Collaborate (“plays well with others”).

3. I consider myself most successful as an actor when...
  - a. I am fully present in the moment.
  - b. I have a precise understanding of the material and my place in it.
  - c. I have engaged my deepest self and have absolute trust in my scene partners.
  - d. I can feel it in my gut.
  - e. Instinct and the ensemble take over, and I become part of a whole much greater than myself.

4. My biggest frustration as an actor might be...
  - a. My tendency to self-edit; I often feel “stuck in my head” and can't respond freely.
  - b. Having to work on material I can't respect, or with collaborators who don't get it.
  - c. So much of the work seems superficial.
  - d. Too much sitting around analyzing.
  - e. I wish I felt more at home in my own body, within the stage space.

5. Someday I dream of playing a role...
  - a. That forces me to break through my mental and emotional road blocks.
  - b. Rich in contradictions, in a masterfully written play.
  - c. That transports me completely to another world, another life—but one with profound connections to my own experience.
  - d. That ignites the imagination, period.
  - e. That challenges me in ways I can't define yet.

#### **Scoring**

Again, this is highly unscientific... But if you answered mostly a's, you might be a Meisner disciple; mostly

b's, you might be more at home with Practical Aesthetics; mostly c's, you'll do well with the Method; mostly d's, you'll be inspired by Michael Chekhov technique; mostly e's, we see Viewpoints in your future. And if your answers were all over the map, congratulations! You'll enjoy the mix of approaches you're apt to find in most B.F.A. actor training programs.