

WHAT IS METHOD ACTING?

From the Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute

THE METHOD

Lee Strasberg often described Method Acting as what all actors have always done whenever they acted well. What Lee Strasberg meant was not that The Method™ had always been around, but rather, The Method came into being as a way of giving an actor the means to achieve the type of results that had moved and captivated audiences across time. Lee was in pursuit of a way of training that would consistently produce the moving results of these great performances – performances where it appeared the actor was authentically re-experiencing the life implied by the given circumstances of the story.

HISTORY OF THE METHOD

The Method as developed by Lee Strasberg was a means for training the actor to achieve this type of truly moving performance, infused with a vibrant inner life, and experienced on stage as if for the first time.

Legendary American actor, Laurette Taylor, writing in 1914, described the work of the talented actor both brilliantly and simply:

“You see a queer little child sitting in the middle of a mud puddle. She attracts you and holds your interest. You even smile in sympathy. Why? Simply because that child is experiencing her creative imagination. She is attributing to mud pies the delicious qualities of the pies which mother makes in the kitchen.” - Cole and Chinoy, *Actors on Acting*, p. 596

And even earlier than that, Roman educator and rhetorician Quintilian (c. 35 – c. 100 AD), in describing the great Greek and Roman performances, attempted to describe the actor’s process:

“The great secret...for moving the passions (in others) is to be moved ourselves” [using visions or experiences from life] “whereby the images of things absent are so represented to the mind that we seem to see them with our eyes, and to have them present before us.” - Archer, *Masks or Faces*, p. 106

Both Laurette Taylor and Quintilian were intuitively articulating one of the core principles of The Method — using one’s own life experiences as the seed of the creative imagination; and as a result, these experiences, sewn to the life of the character, form the foundation for (re)experiencing on stage. This is what actors have been doing instinctively for many centuries, but prior to the work of Stanislavsky and then Strasberg, this work was just that, intuitive. Acting, unlike other art forms, lacked the kind of systematic approach to developing and training the fundamental components of an actor’s toolbox—his sensitivity and imagination. There existed no methodology that trained the faculties required to repeatedly deliver inspired performances. And so the great teachers went to work.

INSPIRATIONS OF LEE STRASBERG

Lee Strasberg Method Acting

As a young actor, Lee Strasberg became enamored with the great performances and curious about the source of their inspiration. In both Lee Strasberg and Stanislavsky, this inquiry inspired a lifelong passion for training actors and demystifying what had, until then, been superficially explained simply as “divine inspiration.”

When the Moscow Art Theatre, under the direction of Konstantin Stanislavsky, visited New York City on a tour in 1923, Lee Strasberg was astonished by the acting of the company. Their performances were alive, their behavior real and effortless, the company’s vision deeply human. It was as though they were experiencing real thoughts, desires, sensations and emotions on stage. For Americans, it achieved a degree of creative reality unlike anything they’d ever seen; for Lee Strasberg it was a revelation. Two actors from the Moscow Art

Theatre, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, opened The American Laboratory Theatre in New York City and for the first time brought to the United States the pioneering work of what Stanislavsky called “The System.” It was in their classes that Lee Strasberg grasped the seminal contribution of Stanislavsky and began his own investigation into solving the central problems of the actor.

When Lee Strasberg, along with Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford, started the Group Theatre in 1931, they sought to recreate the kind of theatrical organization of the Moscow Art Theatre, but one adapted to the cultural norms of the United States. With the Group Theatre, Lee Strasberg implemented the type of systematic training of the actor he had learned with Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya. This included sensory exercises that developed an actor’s imagination and emotional life, relaxation exercises that liberated an actor’s mental and physical tension, script analysis to understand the character’s motivations, actions and logic, and improvisation to discover natural behavior and the subtextual objectives of characters. All these elements were key parts of this early work. Lee’s direction inspired a whole cohort of luminaries that would later contribute to the American Theatre, including Elia Kazan, Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, and Robert Lewis.

At the heart of Lee Strasberg’s work and his training of the company was the use of “affective memory,” which called upon actors to recapture and relive a singular “once in a lifetime” type of event from his or her past and to use those truthful feelings to rise to an explosive moment, at will, in a scene. The affective memory exercise, along with others he developed over the course of his life, challenged actors to use experiences from his or her own life to motivate a character’s emotional or physical behavior. For Strasberg, it was never enough to recreate emotion on stage— one had to relive it.

Following the success of the Group Theatre, Lee Strasberg continued to hone his work, building on the achievements of Stanislavski, and using his own experiences and insights as teacher and director to further develop exercises that addressed the creative demands placed upon the actor. As he moved into the role of Artistic Director at the Actors Studio, his ability to cultivate talent and train a new type of actor-artist garnered great attention. Lee’s work with actors began to transform the American Theatre and American film, populating both with a distinct level of authentic performance. As more and more actors began to delve into his systematic approach to actor training, his technique was given a name—The Method—and its practitioners labeled “Method Actors.”

SO WHAT IS METHOD ACTING?

At its core, Method Acting is therefore a systematic approach to training the living material that is the actor’s “instrument,” as well as a means for preparing a role. The use of Lee Strasberg’s exercises both develop the content of the actor’s talent and provide a roadmap to the individual’s creation of a character. The use of one’s own life experiences in the creative imagination infuses each choice with genuine thought, desire, sensation, action and feeling resulting in psychologically in-depth behavior. It builds upon the work of Stanislavsky, and as Lee believed, accomplished what Stanislavsky set out to achieve.

The Method trains actors to use their physical, mental and emotional self in the creation of a character and stresses the way in which personal experience can fire the actors imagination. It eschews clichés and pursues individual authenticity and a reality deeply grounded in the given circumstances of the script.

So what is Method Acting? As Lee Strasberg said, Method Acting is what all actors have always done whenever they acted well. But The Method—it’s how you get there.