

Who was Stella Adler anyway, and why is she such a big deal?

From Backstage by Alex Ates

Stella Adler was born into one of the most popular acting families of New York's Yiddish theater scene. She was onstage at an early age and what talent she didn't genetically inherit, she learned and earned through experience. For the Adler family, the lights and applause of the stage were as familiar to their daily lives as reading the paper or grabbing a cup of coffee. Stella Adler demonstrated some distinctive early traits that would ultimately light her path into the DNA of American acting. She was not only considered a legitimately skilled actor—earning her cachet—but she was also a fierce intellectual. It was this combination of professionalism and proficiency, coupled with her sharp intellectual prowess, that primed Adler for being one of the great—and most respected—gurus.

In the 1920s, actors who trained with Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre arrived stateside to tour Russian productions and lead classes for eager American actors. The status quo for acting in the States was rooted in big, broad gestures and elastic expressions. So, when Stanislavsky's actors arrived and demonstrated a more fragile, intricate, and naturalistic style of acting, Americans were as gobsmacked as they were desperate to learn.

For intellectually curious actors in New York like Adler, the arrival of the System was a bolt of lightning—Americans had been struggling with what it meant to be an actor. The System plopped an entire technique into the laps of artists who were thirsty for a language to describe an actor's work. And—most importantly—the technique made sense in theory and in practice!

Adler began studying with Russian actors Maria Ouspenskaya and Richard Boleslavsky at their American Laboratory Theatre in New York. Adler's family made fun of her for doing the training, but the Russian model of intellectualized theater fed Adler's academically inclined brain. Because of her experience growing up on the stage, Adler was the most advanced student in the school and was invited to join the Group Theatre, which was co-founded by Lee Strasberg, the founding artistic director of the Actors Studio.

The Group—and its Stanislavsky-inspired acting style—distinguished it as a revolutionary ensemble, and to this day, its work is considered historic. However, Adler was discontented and frustrated with the direction and teachings of Strasberg. Strasberg, who had never met Stanislavsky, insisted on the correctness of his

interpretation of the System, which emphasized “affective memory” (or emotional recall). Adler felt that the practice of delving into lived memories and experiences to display truthfulness onstage was not only unnecessary but torturous. And because Adler was one of the most experienced actors in the ensemble, she believed the emphasis on re-creating the stimulus of lived memories onstage was manipulating younger and more naive actors in the Group. So, what did Adler do? She went across the ocean to interrogate Stanislavsky himself—and prove Strasberg wrong.

At the time, Stanislavsky was in Paris, and Adler approached him pronouncing that she loved the theater until he came along—now, she hated it. This blunt testimonial intrigued the ever-curious Stanislavsky, and he invited her to train with him. In Paris, Stanislavsky not only clarified his teachings but shared with Adler his evolution of thinking. Stanislavsky was always refining his techniques, and by the time his students from the Moscow Art Theatre were teaching in America and his books were translated into English, an outdated version of the System had already taken root stateside. The primary source of outdatedness? Affective memory, or emotional recall—Stanislavsky had moved away from it altogether! The father of the System vindicated Adler.

Despite the clarification, the crux of the System remained the same: Actors should behave realistically in unrealistic circumstances by emphasizing the character’s circumstances and finding actions within those circumstances to complete seriously onstage. But where would the motivation for these circumstances arrive if not from the actor’s own life? Adler insisted on the imagination—and Stanislavsky agreed! An actor is an artist, after all, and an artist’s greatest tool is the ability to imagine. So, Adler returned to the States and began professing her Stanislavsky-approved theories. Thus, Adler became the only American acting guru who actually studied with the creator of the System—and had his blessings.

American actors clamored to study with Adler upon her return to New York. For the years remaining, often sitting in a throne-like chair, Adler zapped students with challenging instructions, blunt observations, and sermons on the dignity of acting as a lifestyle, and actors loved it.