

# Acting Techniques

Remember... Techniques taught in acting schools are here to help you as an actor, not hinder your creativity. Each of the acting techniques listed have information on what acting problems they address, so if you're not sure where to start, read the part entitled "is this technique for you" for each technique.

We hope all this information on acting techniques available to you has giving you a sense of how each acting method will influence your acting training. A lot of schools mix acting methods. That's great! Rarely does one acting method work for all situations.

No matter where you pursue your acting studies, you should have a copy of one major book written for each of these techniques, so you're never out of resources when you hit a roadblock in your acting. Feel free to use the search box below to look for acting books...

## Choosing the right acting method

Reading about all these different techniques taught in acting schools can be overwhelming. How can you really know which acting method will work for you until you try it in acting class?

Well... You don't. You start learning one method, you use what works and leave the rest, and you do the same with every new acting technique you study until you feel you have your own way of working. That's how every accomplished actor does it. And the longer you do it, the more the training behind the work becomes instinctive and the more your craft (or technique) becomes art!

Good acting schools develop not only your acting skills, but your whole instrument. Make sure the acting school you pick offers not just acting classes, but also classes in movement, voice, speech, dance, stage combat, acting for the camera, Shakespeare and audition preparation.

No acting training replaces experience. There's no acting training like being on set in front of a camera or on stage in front of an audience. This is where you can test what you've learned and see which methods work for what situations.

To help new actors like you get started in the business, I wrote an e-book titled [Become an Actor](#). If you feel you need help to become an actor, [click here](#) to read more about what the book can do for you.

# Stanislavski

## Online Acting Classes

Here you'll learn about the Stanislavski system for actors through acting videos and sample Stanislavsky acting exercises you can try at home. This online acting class on Stanislavsky will help you decide if this is one of the acting techniques right for you.



### 1) What is the Stanislavski system?

Stanislavski developed a lot of acting techniques that are commonly used by modern actors today. Here are a few highlights of the Stanislavsky system you'll want to be familiar with as an actor:

#### The Magic If

What if what is happening to your character was happening to you? How would you feel? What would you do? From that simple question, an actor's imagination is stimulated into believing the imaginary circumstances his character is in.

You can also use the magic if to make up details about the props you use on stage.

#### The Use of Objectives and Active Verbs

Stanislavsky actors try to find the *super-objective* of the play (i.e. the theme or driving force of the play). Then, they break down the script into objectives (what the character wants to accomplish), obstacles (what's in his or her way) and actions (what are the different things the character can do to try to reach his objective). The *Through-Line* links all the units together into the super-objective. Using these acting methods helps you concentrate on the action rather than the emotion by making each objective an active verb.

For example, your objective could be...

To Defend  
To Destroy

To Understand  
To Seize  
To Convince  
To Seduce  
To Discover  
etc.

## **The Need to Release Tension and Concentrate**

Stanislavski believed that an actor cannot concentrate on the part if his body is tense. To demonstrate his point, he would have actors try to deliver lines or recall actions while lifting a heavy object. An actor should work on relaxation regularly so that he can limit muscular tension to what is needed to perform an action on stage.

In order to be relaxed and focused on stage, performers need to increase their capacity to concentrate. One way they learn to do that is by concentrating on a very small area at first and then widening the circle of concentration until it includes the entire stage. By practicing this exercise, one can deal with stage fright and avoid being distracted by the audience.

## **Emotional Memory**

Stanislavsky students learned to access their own memories to call upon emotions needed to play certain scenes and acting roles, but unlike *Method Actors*, Stanislavsky actors also work "from the outside in", accessing emotions through physical actions.

## **Character-building techniques**

Stanislavsky students learned how to find their characters' inner motives, but also how to explore the role from the outside through movement, voice, tempo, costume and make-up. For example, a student of Constantin Stanislavski would explore his character's rhythm through repetition (by rehearsing his lines over and over until he discovered the right tempo).

## **2) What can you expect?**

### **•Work on relaxation and concentration**

Most Stanislavsky classes will start with a brief relaxation session, followed by some concentration exercises. A beginning actor may do general concentration exercises while a more advanced actor may be asked to do *sensory exercises* or *emotional memory exercises* that help him re-create the given circumstances of the play he's working on (for example, if his

character has just been outside in the snow before the scene starts, the actor may do a sensory exercise to re-create the feeling of the snow).

- **A lot of homework**

When you study the Stanislavsky technique well, you'll spend a lot of time using the *magic if* to create full bios for your characters and to make up scenes that took place outside of the play. You'll also spend a lot of time writing *subtext* for your scenes (i.e. breaking the scenes down into units and turning each unit into an action verb).

- **Some improvisation**

For example, you may be asked to improvise a scene that is not in the play but took place between your character and another.

- **Physical and vocal training**

Stanislavsky believed that acting starts with the actor's body. Through a series of exercises and an introduction to the art of costumes and make-up, you will find your character's physicality. A good Stanislavsky teacher will also teach you rhythm and tempo and recommend you take a speech class, a singing class and a dance class to support your acting training.

### 3) Sample Stanislavski Acting Exercises

- **Imagination Exercise:** Pick someone you don't know and observe them. What do they look like? How do they walk? What are their mannerisms? Start to write their bio, using your imagination to create a backstory for this "character", along with information on what they want, where they come from and where they're going. All this should come from your imagination but be inspired by what you noticed about the person, just like you would be inspired by what you read in a play.

- **Sensory Exercise:** Let's take the example of the snowy weather we mentioned earlier. The video below will guide you through a short sensory exercise to re-create through your 5 senses the feeling of what it's like to be outside in the snow. You can watch the video once and then close your eyes and go through the exercise.

### 4) Is the Stanislavski "system" for you?

Studying the teachings and methods of Constantin Stanislavsky is invaluable to a beginning actor because it will give you a lot of the basics you need:

- How to deal with stagefright and not be paralyzed onstage.

- How to avoid bad acting habits like faking emotion or overacting by learning how to be realistic onstage and on screen.
- How to create a character.
- How to understand and study other techniques (most modern acting methods are grounded in the Stanislavsky system).

The acting method of Konstantin Stanislavsky will help any actor get started, whether you want to do stage work or movie acting.

If you need help picking an acting school, you may find my new e-book, [Become an Actor](#), helpful. I encourage you to [click here](#) to see how this step by step guide can help you

## 5) Famous Stanislavski actors

Stella Adler, Gregory Peck, Marlon Brando.

## 6) Must Have Stanislavsky Books

1. An Actor Prepares
2. Building a Character
3. Creating a Role

## Stanislavski's system

**Stanislavski's system** is a progression of techniques used to train actors and actresses to draw believable emotions to their performances. The method that was originally created and used by [Constantin Stanislavski](#) from 1911 to 1916 was based on the concept of emotional memory for which an actor focuses internally to portray a character's emotions onstage. Later, between 1934 and 1938, this technique evolved to a method of physical actions in which emotions are produced through the use of these actions. The latter technique is referred to as Stanislavski's system. This approach was developed by [Constantin Stanislavski](#) (1863–1938), a [Russian actor, director, and theatre administrator](#) at the [Moscow Art Theatre](#) (founded 1897). The system is the result of Stanislavski's many years of efforts to determine how someone can control in performance the most intangible and uncontrollable aspects of human behavior, such as emotions and art inspiration. The most influential acting teachers, including [Richard Boleslavsky](#), [Vsevolod Meyerhold](#), [Michael Chekhov](#), [Lee Strasberg](#), [Stella Adler](#), [Harold Clurman](#), [Robert Lewis](#), [Sanford Meisner](#), [Uta Hagen](#), [Ion Cojar](#), [Andrey Vasilyev](#) and [Ivana Chubbuck](#) all traced their pedigrees to Stanislavski, his theories

and/or his disciples.

Although Stanislavski was not the first to codify a system of acting, he was the first to take questions and problems of psychological significance and directly link them to acting practices. When [psychology](#) was formalized, it influenced Stanislavski's system. Stanislavski attempted to create a system before psychology was widely understood and formalized as a discipline.

### **Approach to acting**

Stanislavski believed, throughout his life, the dictum that an actor should approach a role as directly as possible and then see if it "lives". If the actor connects with the role and the role is brought to life, then no technique or system is necessary. In this sense, the actor does not so much become someone else as he becomes himself.[4] This achievement in acting may only happen once or twice in one's life, so the remainder of one's performances require technique. Each individual actor, however, must decide whether or not an approach or technique to their acting "works" for them in their performance. In essence, his constant goal in life was to formulate some codified, systematic approach that might impart to any given actor with some grip on his "instrument", that is, himself.[*citation needed*]

Stanislavski was a great believer in formal (and rigorous) training for the actor. His interest in deeply analyzing the qualities of human behavior were meant to give the actor an awareness of such human behavior, and how easily falsehoods, or aspects of behaviour that an audience can detect, are assumed by an untrained or inexperienced actor in performance. Stanislavski once insisted that all actions that a person must enact, such as walking, talking, even sitting on stage, must be broken down and re-learned. For example, his book, translated into English as *Building a Character*, describes the correct way of walking on stage. He wanted actors to concentrate more on such rigours of re-learning.[*citation needed*]

### **Progression of the System**

Stanislavski's system is a method that actors use to produce realistic characters on stage. His original studies of techniques led to the use of *emotional memory* that required actors to trigger the emotions of their characters internally. This technique was based from a French psychologist Theodule Ribot's concept of 'Affective Memory'. Later in his life, Stanislavski realized that a shift in technique was needed for actors to produce more realistic emotions before audiences but he never discredited the use of emotional memory if used cautiously. This was underscored when his talented protégé [Michael Chekhov](#) experimented with emotional memory and had a nervous breakdown. A few months before his death he told his assistants that the path to glory can be found by working from the internal (the inside out) as well as the external (the outside in).[5] This



led to the 'Method of Physical Action'. The shift between concepts was a result of various observations made by Stanislavski. He observed that actors' mental preparations for their roles did not coincide with their physical performances on stage. They had spent most of their time reviewing their scripts and rehearsing their characters through internal and mental stationaries, but their character performances were lacking physical and emotional believability.[1]

### **The method of physical action**

On stage, if an actor experiences only internal feelings or only physical actions, then the performance is dead. The reasoning behind this goes back to the union of the psychological and physical. The two go hand-in-hand. If an actor attempts to portray a character by employing one aspect of the union without the other, then they are performing incompletely. Internal experiences and their physical expression are unbreakably united. Whether it is through a facial expression or the tapping of a foot, everything a human experiences psychologically is displayed through physical means. This is termed a psycho-physical union.

The correct physical action does not come automatically for every psychological response nor do they stimulate identical responses for every individual. Many times, actors need to experiment until they determine what best works for them and for the character they are trying to portray. The best way to experiment with this is through improvisation. The best improvisers are those who can intuitively act and behave onstage as though they are in a real situation.

### **Sections of the system**

Stanislavski believed that if an actor completes the system, the desired emotion should be created and experienced. One earlier technique used for the system involved a "round the table analysis", a process in which the actors and director literally sit around a table and put forward their thoughts on the script and the characters until a clear understanding is formed. This technique involved breaking the script into sections. For the system to work, the structure of the script should be analyzed and sectioned based on the different characters of the play. Later, this technique was changed to instead immediately begin rehearsals after the main idea of the play had been discussed, but the sections are still evolved even through this practice.

### **The Magic What If**

Stanislavski believed that the truth that occurred onstage was different from that of real life, but that a 'scenic truth' could be achieved onstage. A performance should be believable for an audience so that they may appear to the audience as truth. One of Stanislavski's methods for achieving the truthful pursuit of a character's emotion was his "magic if." Actors were required to ask many questions of their characters and

themselves. Through the 'magic if,' actors were able to satisfy themselves and their characters' positions of the plot. One of the first questions they had to ask was, "What if I were in the same situation as my character?" Another variation on this is "What would I do if I found myself in this (the character's) circumstance?"[6] The "magic if" allowed actors to transcend the confinements of realism by asking them what would occur "if" circumstances were different, or "if" the circumstances were to happen to them. By answering these questions as the character, the theatrical actions of the actors would be believable and therefore 'truthful.'[1]

## **Motivation**

Through the use of system, an actor must analyze their character's motivations. Stanislavski believed that an actor was influenced by either their mind or their emotion to stimulate their actions, and the actor's motivation was their subconscious will to perform those actions. Therefore, motivation has been described as looking to the past actions of the character to determine why they completed physical actions in a script.[1]

## **Objectives**

The objective is a goal that a character wants to achieve. This is often worded in a question form as "What do I want?" An objective should be action-oriented, as opposed to an internal goal, to encourage character interaction onstage. The character doesn't necessarily have to achieve the objective, and the objective can be as simple as the script permits. For example, an objective for a particular character may simply be 'to pour a mug of tea.' For each scene, the actor must discover the character's objective. Every objective is different for each actor involved because they are based on the characters of the script.

**Units and bits** are the division of the script into smaller objectives. For example, the entire section of a scene during which the character searches for a tea bag would be a unit. When he decides to call on a neighbour is called a bit. The purpose of units is that they are used as reference points for the actor because every individual unit should contain a specific motive for the character.

A super-objective, in contrast, focuses on the entire play/scene as a whole. A super-objective can direct and connect an actor's choice of objectives from scene to scene. The super-objective serves as the final goal that a character wishes to achieve within the script.

Obstacles are the aspects that stop, hinder or pause a character from achieving an individual objective. For example, while the character searches for tea bags to make the mug of tea, they find there are no teabags in the tin.

Tools or methods are the different techniques a character uses to surpass obstacles and achieve an objective. For example, the character searches around the kitchen, they walk to the shops, or they call on the neighbour so they can make the tea.



Actions are referred to as how the character is going to say or do something. More specifically, it is an objective for each line. Actions are how a character is going to achieve their objective. For example, a line in the script may read, '(whilst on the phone) "Hello, Sally. It's Billy from next door. You wouldn't happen to have any spare tea bags, would you? I know how well-organized you are." The Action for this line may be 'to flatter' in order to achieve the Objective of collecting the tea bags. Actions are different for every actor, based on their character choices.[1]

## System vs Method

Often, Stanislavski's system is associated with [Method acting](#). The latter is an outgrowth of the American theatre scene, particularly in New York, in the 1930s and 40s. Method acting appeared when actors and directors like [Elia Kazan](#), [Robert Lewis](#), [Lee Strasberg](#), first in the Group Theatre and later in the [Actors Studio](#), applied the Emotional Memory technique from Stanislavski's system. This technique made its way in American theatres because it was taught to Strasberg at the [American Laboratory Theatre](#) in the 1920s to the particular psychological needs of the American actor of their time. It has been suggested that Strasberg had access at that time only to *An Actor Prepares* and that if he had perhaps waited until he had also read *Building A Character*, which was published much later, then he might not have developed such an extreme 'method'. Other American actors, however, did not follow Strasberg's Method, like [Stella Adler](#) who visited and was taught by Stanislavski himself.

The 'system' and the Method are often confused because one technique of the Method is similar to and uses Stanislavski's 1911 concept of Emotional Memory in acting. The most controversial technique of The Method teaches drawing emotions for a character from past experiences and remembrances of the actor. Strasberg renamed Stanislavski's earlier technique to 'Affective Memory' and continued to teach it as a proper acting method long after Stanislavski discredited it as a useful acting method. Possibly the main difference between the Method and the system arose as Stanislavsky's ideas changed over his life, and Strasberg didn't necessarily incorporate these changes. To illustrate the difference between the two methods, Stanislavski has the actor ask himself, "What would I do if I were in this circumstance" while Strasberg adopted a modification, "What would motivate me, the actor, to behave in the way the character does?" Strasberg asks actors to replace the play's circumstances with their own, called a "substitution". [6] Stanislavski had, throughout his life, no single focused project. Instead, he thought of his system as a table of contents from which the working actor can constantly draw, depending on what problems might occur from play to play.[1]

Stanislavski's emphasis on life within moments, on psychological realism, and on emotional authenticity, seemed to attract these actors and thinkers. While much work

was done with the works of playwrights like Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams, the Method was eventually applied to older works like those of William Shakespeare. Indeed, controversy remains contesting the appropriateness of a Method approach to pre-Modernist plays, for while the system and Method share many characteristics, they differ immensely.

## Method Acting

Are you wondering what Method Acting is all about? Here you'll find basic online acting classes on the acting method developed by Lee Strasberg and practiced at the Actors Studio and many film schools in Los Angeles.

You'll also find out what to expect from a method class, along with sample exercises and other information to help you decide if this is one of the acting techniques you want to study.

### 1) What is "The Method"?

Lee Strasberg's Method is derived from the work of Stanislavski and his own work at the Group Theatre and *The Actors Studio*. Its main goal is to help the actor create real thoughts and emotions under imaginary circumstances. "The Method" is one of the most popular acting techniques around, and was the method of choice for film and television actors in Hollywood. You can study Lee Strasberg's method at the *Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute* in New York and Los Angeles.

Here are the basics of this acting method:

#### Relaxation

Lee Strasberg was convinced that a relaxed actor can enter a role and focus on a scene much more than an actor who is tense, so removing tension from the body is a big part of this acting technique. Actors concentrate on one part of their body at a time, moving and releasing it until it is free from tension.

#### Sense Memory and Concentration

Method actors use sense memory to connect to the given circumstances of the play - or movie - and their characters. Have you ever smelled or tasted something that brought you back to a time in your life where that smell was present or where you tasted that same food? That's what sense memory is all about.

Actors use their senses to recreate an experience, like being in the rain or feeling sick. Beginners work on simple exercises like the feeling of drinking coffee, while more advanced students learn to combine several sense memories at a time to create a character.

Method actors use sense memory to explore a range of experiences. For example, the place exercise has actors create a place for their characters through what they see, hear, touch, smell and taste. One very popular exercise for working on emotional scenes is the personal object exercise, where a student uses his or her senses to explore an object that has great emotional value to them. Another helpful Lee Strasberg exercise is the private moment, which allows actors to feel private in public and avoid stage fear by re-creating that experience through their senses.

The method acting exercises that involve sense memory are particularly useful to film actors who need to recreate the same emotions take after take.

## **Emotional Memory**

In The Method, actors can use their own experiences to connect with their character's emotional state. In order to do that, method actors use sense memory to recall an emotional memory from their past. For example, if an actor is trying to connect with a character who feels loss, they will try to recall an experience from their past when they felt loss by re-creating what they saw, tasted, smelled, heard and touched that day.

Emotional memory work is not for beginners in The Method. Many actors feel overwhelmed at first by the emotions they experience with this exercise, so it requires the guidance of a trained teacher and experience with simpler sense memory exercises.

Once an actor has worked on an emotional memory long enough, they can connect with it very quickly as a simple smell or sound can trigger it.

## **Characterization**

One of the strangest things you'll see in Method acting class is actors walking around the classroom as animals. Lee Strasberg's animal exercise is a very useful tool for actors to explore their characters. Students spend some time watching the animal, then recreate not only how the animal moves, but it interacts with the outside world through its five senses. Actors use sense memory to explore what the animal sees, smells, hears, etc. Eventually, the actor stands his animal up and start to incorporate it with his human character.

## **Script Analysis and Scene Work**

Method acting is not just about sense memory. Actors learn how to break down a script, look for character clues and find the objective of a scene. Students learn to explore a part through improv techniques and substitutions, where actors substitute a relationship in the play for a relationship they have in real life, helping them relate to the conflict and their scene partner.

## **Other Method Acting Exercises**

Lee Strasberg was focused on solving acting blocks and actor problems, which led him to develop a lot of unique exercises that do just that. The most popular are the *moment-to-moment* exercise, which helps the actor get out of his head and be in the moment, and the *song-and-dance* exercise, which helps the actor break habits.

## **Method Acting Exercises**

Check the method acting exercises below and learn what to expect in a method acting class at the Strasberg Institute or at any acting school that teaches Method acting. You'll also discover sample acting exercises from this acting technique.

### **2) What can you expect?**

“ Method “ What you are going to expect.

#### **1) A little "madness"**

If you're going to study "The Method", you'll have to forget about your inhibitions. A lot of the work you'll do in class is about breaking through habitual social behaviors and can seem ridiculous or "crazy" to the untrained eye.

#### **2) Up to an hour of relaxation at the beginning of every class**

A Method Acting class usually starts with the students sitting in chairs spread throughout the room, doing a relaxation method exercise. Students are encouraged to use movement and voice to relieve extra tension. Often an actor will start crying or laughing during relaxation, because a lot of emotions are locked up in tense muscles and get released during the exercise. So if you walk in a class at the Strasberg Institute during relaxation, you may be a little bewildered by what you see.

#### **3) Up to an hour of sense memory exercises**

Once the actor is relaxed, he usually segues into a sense memory exercise assigned by his teacher. More advanced actors may work on other Method acting exercises such as an emotional memory exercise or an animal exercise.

At this point, all the students usually work at the same time on their different assignments, although sometimes a student may be asked to perform an exercise (for example, a *private moment*) in front of the whole class.

#### **4) An emotional journey**

A lot of Method acting exercises can trigger strong emotional responses. You'll want to make sure you pick a responsible acting teacher who teaches you how to be in control of your craft and not let your training overwhelm you.

#### **5) Scene work**

The second part of a method acting class is usually used for monologues and scene work. You may be asked to redo the scene several times, incorporating different sensory exercises.

#### **6) A lot of homework**

Mastering sense memory takes time and hard work. The more you practice at home, the quicker you'll be able to re-create sensations and call on emotional memories in your scene work. For example, most method teachers would recommend you work a minimum of one hour a day on your sensory exercise on top of scene work.

### **3) Sample Method Acting Exercises**

These few exercises will give you an idea of what this acting technique is all about and what kind of exercises you would be doing at the Strasberg Institute or in another acting classes that teaches The Method.

**Method acting exercise for Relaxation** : Sit in a chair and let your body go limp like a rag doll, relaxing your neck against the top of the chair and letting your head fall back. Now, lift one arm up to the side to check for tension. You can move the arm around to check for tension in different muscles and then let the arm fall back, relaxed. Move on to do the same for the other arm and both legs, then release tension in your back, torso, face and neck. You can access the facial muscles through grimacing and check your neck by gently rolling the head from side to side. Also try to release tension in your throat and tongue. If you feel yourself tensing up even more or if you feel an emotion swelling up, take a deep breath and release a long "ah" sound, making sure you keep your throat relaxed.

- Continue to release the emotion through sound, so you don't tense up again. If you are a beginning actor who has never studied Lee Strasberg's acting method before, don't try this Method acting exercise without being supervised by a method acting teacher. It's hard to identify tension at first

and you want to make sure you're in a relaxed position where you won't hurt your neck or upper back.

## **The Strasberg Method**

Here's more online acting classes on the Strasberg Method.

Here you'll find more acting exercises from his acting method, including one on video. You can also read the names of famous method actors who studied at the Actors Studio and see a list of must have Strasberg books. Finally, you can read remarks to help you decide if this acting method is right for you.

### **3) Sample Method Acting Exercises (continued)**

- **The coffee cup exercise**

This is one of the most basic of the Strasberg method exercises and often the first exercise assigned to a new student. This short acting video will give you an idea of what it entails.

This is just a short introduction to get you started. As a beginner, you would spend an hour on a sensory exercise like this one. If you practice every day with the real cup, you'll soon be able to re-create the sensations of the cup within seconds.

- **The Gibberish exercise**

This is a fun acting exercise. Take a scene or monologue you've been working on. Keep the intentions and circumstances, but instead of speaking the lines, speak gibberish. You'll notice how much can be communicated through body language, tones and looks. This exercise will also help break a rhythm you've fallen into and help you discover new things about the scene or monologue.

### **4) Is "The Method" for you?**

- The Strasberg Method is particularly effective for film acting. When you have to do 10 takes of a crying scene with little to no warm up, using sense memory can work wonders. On the other hand, since method acting is mostly about working from *the inside out*, you may want to complete your studies with more traditional theater training if you want to be more than a movie actor.

- This acting method is also a good choice if you want to be an actor but feel your creativity has been stifled by too much discipline (for example, if you have a hard time accessing your emotions). Dancers who want to act also benefit from a method that breaks habitual body language. On the other



hand, if you're a very instinctive actor who connects to the material easily, you may find the sensory exercises more a hindrance than a help. Also, sense memory can distract you from relating to the other actor, so if you've been told as an actor "to be in the moment" more, the Meisner Technique is probably a better choice for you.

- "The Method" is not for actors with unresolved emotional issues. Although a lot of the things you experience in method acting class can be cathartic, this remains an acting method and not therapy, and method acting teachers are not qualified to deal with personal problems.

## 5) Famous American Method Actors

The list is long (many studied at the Actors Studio)...

Anne Bancroft, Marlon Brando, James Dean, Robert De Niro, Robert Duvall, Sally Field, Jane Fonda, Dustin Hoffman, Steve McQuenn, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, Jack Nicholson, Al Pacino, Geraldine Page, Sidney Poitier and Christopher Walken

...to name a few.

## More About Method Acting

In the dramatic arts, **method acting** is a group of techniques actors use to create in themselves the thoughts and feelings of their characters, so as to develop lifelike performances. Though not all method actors use the same approach, the "method" (sometimes capitalized as Method) refers to the methods used by actors, which are based on the teachings and concepts of Constantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski's ideas were adapted by teachers such as Stella Adler, Robert Lewis, Sanford Meisner and Lee Strasberg for American actors. Strasberg's teaching emphasized the practice of connecting to a character by drawing on personal emotions and memories, aided by a set of exercises and practices including sense memory and affective memory. Stanislavski's system of acting was the foundation of Strasberg's technique. Rigorous adherents of Strasberg's technique are now commonly referred to as "method actors".

Method acting has been described as having "revolutionized American theater". While classical acting instruction "had focused on developing external talents", the method was "the first systematized training that also developed internal abilities (sensory, psychological, emotional)".[1]

## Origins

It was derived from the "system" created by Constantin Stanislavski, who pioneered

similar ideas in his quest for "theatrical truth". This was done through his friendships with Russia's leading actors, his collaborations with playwright [Anton Chekhov](#), and his own teaching, writing, and acting at the [Moscow Art Theatre](#) (founded in 1897).

Strasberg's students included many of the best known American actors of the latter half of the 20th century, including [Paul Newman](#), [Al Pacino](#), [George Peppard](#), [Dustin Hoffman](#), [Marilyn Monroe](#), [Jane Fonda](#), [Jack Nicholson](#), [Mickey Rourke](#), and many others.[2] Using the method, the actor also recalls emotions or reactions from their own life and uses them to identify with their character

## Technique

"The method" refers to the teachings of [Lee Strasberg](#), to [Group Theatre](#) colleagues, including [Stella Adler](#), [Robert Lewis](#), and [Sanford Meisner](#), and to other schools of acting influenced by [Stanislavski's system](#), each of which takes a slightly different approach.

Generally, method acting combines the actor's careful consideration of the character's psychological motives and personal identification with the character, possibly including a reproduction of the character's emotional state by recalling emotions or sensations from the actor's own life. It is often contrasted with acting in which thoughts and emotions are indicated, or presented in a clichéd, unrealistic way. Among the concepts and techniques of method acting are [substitution](#), "as if", sense memory, [affective memory](#), animal work, and archetype work. Strasberg uses the question, "What would motivate me, the actor, to behave in the way the character does?" Strasberg asks the actor to replace the play's circumstances with his or her own, the substitution.[3]

[Sanford Meisner](#), another [Group Theatre](#) pioneer, championed a closely related version of the method, which came to be called the [Meisner technique](#). Meisner broke from Strasberg on *sense memory* and *affective memory*—basic techniques espoused by Strasberg through which actors access their own personal experiences to identify with and portray the emotional lives of their characters. Meisner believed this approach made actors focus on themselves and not fully tell the story. He advocated actors fully immersing themselves "in the moment" and concentrating on their partner. Meisner taught actors to achieve spontaneity by understanding the [given circumstances](#) of the scene (as did Strasberg). He designed interpersonal exercises to help actors invest emotionally in the scene, freeing them to react "honestly" as the character. Meisner described acting as "...living truthfully under imaginary circumstances".[4]

[Robert Lewis](#) also broke with Strasberg. In his books *Method—or Madness?* and the more autobiographical *Slings and Arrows*, Lewis disagreed with the idea that vocal training should be separated from pure emotional training.[5] Lewis felt that more emphasis should be placed on formal voice and body training, such as teaching actors how to speak verse and enunciate clearly, rather than on pure raw emotion, which he felt was the focus of method training.[5]

[Stella Adler](#), an actress and acting teacher whose students include [Marlon Brando](#), [Warren Beatty](#), and [Robert De Niro](#), also broke with Strasberg after she studied with Stanislavski himself, by which time he had modified many of his early ideas. Her version of the method is based on the idea that actors should conjure up emotion not by using their own personal memories, but by using the scene's given circumstances. Like Strasberg's, Adler's technique relies on carrying through tasks, wants, needs, and objectives. It also seeks to stimulate the actor's imagination through the use of "as ifs". Adler often taught that "drawing on personal experience alone was too limited". Therefore, she urged performers to draw on their imaginations and utilize "emotional memory" to the fullest.[6]

[Constantin Stanislavski](#) described his acting system in a trilogy of books set in a fictional acting school: *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and *Creating a Role*. He also wrote an autobiography, *My Life in Art*. Acting teachers inspired by Stanislavski include:

- [Richard Boleslawski](#), actor, film director, and founder of the [American Laboratory Theatre](#) in New York.
- [Michael Chekhov](#), an actor, director, and author (and nephew of [Anton Chekhov](#)) whose technique enhanced and complimented Stanislavski's over the course of his career at the Moscow Art Theater and later his film work in Hollywood.
- [Maria Ouspenskaya](#), an actress who taught at the American Laboratory Theatre. Her students included [John Garfield](#), [Stella Adler](#), and [Lee Strasberg](#).
- [Lee Strasberg](#), a director, actor, and producer whose teachings are most closely associated with the term Method acting.
- [Stella Adler](#), an actress and founder of the [Stella Adler Conservatory](#) in New York City. [9]
- [Andrey Vasilyev](#), an actor and founder of the Stanislavski Studio in Los Angeles.
- [Herbert Berghof](#), founder of [HB Studio](#) in New York City.
- [Uta Hagen](#), an actress and the author of *Respect for Acting* and *A Challenge for the Actor*, who emphasized the techniques of identity and substitution.
- [Robert Lewis](#), an actor, director, co-founder of the [Actors Studio](#), and author of *Method—or Madness?*
- [Peggy Feury](#), an actress, member of the [Actors Studio](#), and teacher[10]

## **Lee Strasberg**

Although other highly regarded teachers have also taught "The Method", it is Strasberg who is considered the "father of method acting in America," according to author Mel Gussow, and from the 1920s until his death in 1982 "he revolutionized the art of acting

by having a profound influence on performance in American theater and movies".

[4] From his base in New York, he trained several generations of theatre and film's most illustrious talents, including Barbra Streisand, Anne Bancroft, Dustin Hoffman, Montgomery Clift, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Fonda, Julie Harris, Paul Newman, Ellen Burstyn, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro and director Elia Kazan.[4]

By 1970, Strasberg had become less involved with the Actors Studio, and with his third wife Anna opened the [Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute](#) with branches in New York City and in [Hollywood](#) to continue teaching the [Stanislavski techniques](#) which he had interpreted and developed for contemporary actors. The Institute's primary stated goal was "to reach a larger audience of eager and emerging talent"[5] than was served by the Actors Studio's notoriously selective admission process,[3] and as teachers of The Method began to deploy their own personal interpretations of the discipline, "to dispel growing confusion and misrepresentation of the Method, preserving what had by now become fundamental discoveries in actor training." [5]

[Harold Clurman](#), in describing what Strasberg brought to the Group Theater, wrote:

Lee Strasberg is one of the few artists among American theater directors. He is the director of introverted feeling, of strong emotion curbed by ascetic control, sentiment of great intensity muted by delicacy, pride, fear, shame. The effect he produces is a classic hush, tense and tragic, a constant conflict so held in check that a kind of beautiful sparseness results. The roots are clearly in the intimate experience of a complex psychology, an acute awareness of human contradiction and suffering.[4]

## [Actors Studio](#)

In 1947, [Elia Kazan](#), [Robert Lewis](#), and [Cheryl Crawford](#), also members of the [Group Theatre](#), started the [Actors Studio](#) as a non-profit workshop for professional and aspiring actors to concentrate on their craft away from the pressures of the commercial theatre. [13] Strasberg assumed leadership of the studio in 1951 as its artistic director. "As a teacher and acting theorist, he revolutionized American actor training and engaged such remarkable performers as [Kim Hunter](#), [Marilyn Monroe](#), [Julie Harris](#), [Paul Newman](#), [Geraldine Page](#), [Ellen Burstyn](#), and [Al Pacino](#)." Since its inception the Studio has been a nonprofit educational corporation chartered by the state of New York, and has been supported entirely by contributions and benefits.... We have here the possibility of creating a kind of theatre that would be a shining medal for our country", Strasberg said in 1959. UCLA acting teacher Robert Hethmon writes, "The Actors Studio is a refuge. Its privacy is guarded ferociously against the casual intruder, the seeker of curiosities,

and the exploiter... [T]he Studio helps actors to meet the enemy within... and contributes greatly to Strasberg's utterly pragmatic views on training the actor and solving his problems ... [and] is kept deliberately modest in its circumstances, its essence being the private room where Lee Strasberg and some talented actors can work."

Strasberg wrote: "At the studio, we do not sit around and feed each other's egos. People are shocked how severe we are on each other." [4] Admission to the Actors Studio was usually by audition with more than a thousand actors auditioning each year and the directors usually conferring membership on only five or six each year. "The Studio was, and is *sui generis*", said Elia Kazan, proudly. Beginning in a small, private way, with a strictly off-limits-to-outsiders policy, the Studio quickly earned a high reputation in theatre circles. "It became the place to be, the forum where all the most promising and unconventional young actors were being cultivated by sharp young directors..."[18] Actors who have worked at the studio include Julie Harris, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Geraldine Page, Maureen Stapleton, Anne Bancroft, Dustin Hoffman, Patricia Neal, Rod Steiger, Mildred Dunnock, Eva Marie Saint, Eli Wallach, Anne Jackson, Ben Gazzara, Sidney Poitier, Karl Malden, Gene Wilder, Shelley Winters, Dennis Hopper and Sally Field.[3][4]

The Emmy Award-winning author of *Inside Inside*, James Lipton writes that the Actors Studio became "one of the most prestigious institutions in the world" as a result of its desire to set a higher "standard" in acting.[3] The founders, including Strasberg, demanded total commitment and extreme talent from aspiring students. Jack Nicholson auditioned five times before he was accepted; Dustin Hoffman, six times, and Harvey Keitel, eleven times. After each rejection, a candidate had to wait as long as a year to try again. Martin Landau and Steve McQueen were the only two students admitted one year, out of two thousand candidates who auditioned.[3]

## Teaching methods and philosophy

In describing his teaching philosophy, Strasberg wrote, "The two areas of discovery that were of primary importance in my work at the Actors Studio and in my private classes were improvisation and affective memory. It is finally by using these techniques that the actor can express the appropriate emotions demanded of the character".[25] Strasberg demanded great discipline of his actors as well as great depths of psychological truthfulness. He once explained his approach in this way:

The human being who acts is the human being who lives. That is a terrifying circumstance. Essentially the actor acts a fiction, a dream; in life the stimuli to which we respond are always real. The actor must constantly respond to stimuli that are imaginary. And yet this must happen not only just as it happens in life, but actually more fully and more expressively. Although the actor can do things in life quite easily, when he has to do the same thing on the



stage under fictitious conditions he has difficulty because he is not equipped as a human being merely to playact at imitating life. He must somehow believe. He must somehow be able to convince himself of the rightness of what he is doing in order to do things fully on the stage.

According to film critic/author [Mel Gussow](#), Strasberg required that an actor, when preparing for a role, delve not only into the character's life in the play, but also, "[F]ar more importantly, into the character's life before the curtain rises. In rehearsal, the character's prehistory, perhaps going back to childhood, is discussed and even acted out. The play became the climax of the character's existence." [4]

### **Elia Kazan as student**

In [Elia Kazan's](#) autobiography, the [Academy Award](#)-winning director wrote about his earliest memories of Strasberg as teacher:

He carried with him the aura of a prophet, a magician, a witch doctor, a psychoanalyst, and a feared father of a Jewish home. He was the center of the camp's activities that summer, the core of the vortex. Everything in camp revolved around him. Preparing to direct the play that was to open the coming season, as he had the three plays of the season before, he would also give the basic instruction in acting, laying down the principles of the art by which the Group worked, the guides to their artistic training. He was the force that held the thirty-odd members of the theatre together, made them 'permanent'. He did this not only by his superior knowledge but by the threat of his anger... [H]e enjoyed his eminence just as the admiral would. Actors are as self-favoring as the rest of humanity, and perhaps the only way they could be held together to do their work properly was by the threat of an authority they respected. And feared. No one questioned his dominance – he spoke holy writ – his leading role in that summer's activities, and his right to all power. To win his favor became everyone's goal. His explosions of temper maintained the discipline of this camp of high-strung people. I came to believe that without their fear of this man, the Group would fly apart, everyone going in different directions instead of to where he was pointing.... I was afraid of him too. Even as I admired him. Lee was making an artistic revolution and knew it. An organization such as the Group – then in its second year, which is to say still beginning, still being shaped – lives only by the will of a fanatic and the drive with which he propels his vision. He has to be unswerving, uncompromising, and unadjustable. Lee knew this. He'd studied other revolutions, political and artistic. He knew what was needed, and he was fired up by his mission and its importance. [8]:59



## Classroom settings

Kazan described his classes:

At his classes in the technique of acting, Lee laid down the rules, supervised the first exercises. These were largely concerned with the actor's arousing his inner temperament. The essential and rather simple technique, which has since then been complicated by teachers of acting who seek to make the Method more recondite for their commercial advantage, consists of recalling the circumstances, physical and personal, surrounding an intensely emotional experience in the actor's past. It is the same as when we accidentally hear a tune we may have heard at a stormy or an ecstatic moment in our lives, and find, to our surprise, that we are reexperiencing the emotion we felt then, feeling ecstasy again or rage and the impulse to kill. The actor becomes aware that he has emotional resources; that he can awaken, by this self-stimulation, a great number of very intense feelings; and that these emotions are the materials of his art.... Lee taught his actors to launch their work on every scene by taking a minute to remember the details surrounding the emotional experience in their lives that would correspond to the emotion of the scene they were about to play. 'Take a minute!' became the watchword of that summer, the phrase heard most often, just as this particular kind of inner concentration became the trademark of Lee's own work when he directed a production. His actors often appeared to be in a state of self-hypnosis.[8]:61

## Legacy

"Whether directly influenced by Strasberg or not", wrote acting author Pamela Wojcik, "the new male stars all to some degree or other adapted Method techniques to support their identification as rebels... He recreates romance as a drama of male neuroticism and also invests his characterization 'with an unprecedented aura of verisimilitude'." [30] Acting teacher and author Alison Hodge explains: "Seemingly spontaneous, intuitive, brooding, 'private', lit with potent vibrations from an inner life of conflict and contradiction, their work exemplified the style of heightened naturalism which (whether Brando agrees or not) Lee Strasberg devoted his life to exploring and promoting." [31]

Pamela Wojcik adds:

Because of their tendency to substitute their personal feelings for those of the characters they were playing, Actors Studio performers were well suited to become Hollywood stars.... In short, Lee Strasberg transformed a socialistic, egalitarian theory of acting into a celebrity-making machine.... It does not matter who 'invented' **Marlon Brando** or how regularly or faithfully he, Dean,

or Clift attended the Studio or studied the Method at the feet of Lee Strasberg. In their signature roles – the most influential performances in the history of American films – these three performers revealed new kinds of body language and new ways of delivering dialogue. In the pauses between words, in the language 'spoken' by their eyes and faces, they gave psychological realism an unprecedented charge. Verbally inarticulate, they were eloquent 'speakers' of emotion. Far less protective of their masculinity than earlier film actors, they enacted emotionally wounded and vulnerable outsiders struggling for self-understanding, and their work shimmered with a mercurial neuroticism... [T]he Method-trained performers in films of the fifties added an enhanced verbal and gesture naturalism and a more vivid inner life.[31]

## Stella Adler

**Stella Adler** (February 10, 1901 – December 21, 1992)[1] was an American actress and acclaimed acting teacher.[2] She founded the [Stella Adler Studio of Acting](#) in [New York City](#) and [Los Angeles](#) with long-time protégé Joanne Linville, who continues to teach Adler's technique.[3][4] Her grandson Tom Oppenheim now runs the school in New York City,[2] which has produced alumni such as [Marlon Brando](#), [Robert De Niro](#), [Elaine Stritch](#), [Kate Mulgrew](#) and [Jenny Lumet](#).[5]

In January 1937, Adler moved to Hollywood. There she acted in films for six years under the name Stella Ardler, occasionally returning to the Group Theater until it dissolved in 1941. Eventually she returned to New York to act, direct and teach, the latter first at [Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop](#) at the [New School for Social Research](#), New York City,[10] before founding [Stella Adler Studio of Acting](#) in 1949. In the coming years, she taught [Marlon Brando](#), [Judy Garland](#), [Elizabeth Taylor](#), [Dolores del Río](#), [Lena Horne](#), [Robert De Niro](#), [Elaine Stritch](#), [Martin Sheen](#), [Manu Tupou](#), [Harvey Keitel](#), [Melanie Griffith](#), [Peter Bogdanovich](#) and [Warren Beatty](#), among others, the principles of characterization and script analysis. She also taught at the New School,[11] and the [Yale School of Drama](#). For many years, Adler led the undergraduate drama department at [New York University](#),[3][12] and became one of America's leading acting teachers.[9]

Stella Adler was much more than a teacher of acting. Through her work she imparts the most valuable kind of information—how to discover the nature of our own emotional mechanics and therefore those of others. She never lent herself to vulgar exploitations, as some other well-known so-called "methods" of acting have done. As a result, her contributions to the [theatrical culture](#) have remained largely unknown, unrecognized, and unappreciated.[13]

—Marlon Brando

## Stanislavski and The Method

Adler was one of few American actors to study with [Constantin Stanislavski](#). She was a prominent member of the [Group Theatre](#) but differences with [Lee Strasberg](#) over the [Stanislavski System](#) (later developed by Strasberg into [Method acting](#)) made her leave the Group. She once said: "Drawing on the emotions I experienced — for example, when my mother died — to create a role is sick and schizophrenic. If that is acting, I don't want to do it."

Adler met with Stanislavski again later in his career and questioned him on Strasberg's interpretation. He told her that he had abandoned emotional memory, which had been Strasberg's dominant paradigm, but that they both believed that actors did not have what is required to play a variety of roles already instilled inside them, and that extensive research was needed to understand the experiences of characters who have different values originating from different cultures.

For instance, if a character talks about horse riding, one needs to know something about horse riding as an actor, otherwise one will be faking. More importantly, one must study the values of different people to understand what situations would have meant to people, when those situations might mean nothing in the actor's own culture. Without this work, Adler said that an actor walks onto the stage "naked". This approach is one for which one of her students, [Robert De Niro](#), became famous.

Adler also trained actors' sensory imagination to help make the characters' experiences more vivid, a commonality between her and Strasberg. She believed that mastery of the physical and vocal aspects of acting was necessary for the actor to command the stage, and that all body language should be carefully crafted and voices need to be clear and expressive. She often referred to this as an actor's "size" or "worthiness of the stage". Her biggest mantra was perhaps "in your choices lies your talent", and she would encourage actors to find the most grand character interpretation possible in a scene; another favorite phrase of hers regarding this was "don't be boring".

## Legacy

Adler's technique, based on a balanced and pragmatic combination of imagination as well as memory, is hugely credited with introducing the subtle and insightful details and a deep physical embodiment of a character. <sup>[15]</sup> [Elaine Stritch](#) once said: "What an extraordinary combination was Stella Adler—a goddess full of magic and mystery, a child full of innocence and vulnerability."<sup>[15]</sup> In the book *Acting: Onstage and Off*, [Robert Barton](#) wrote: "[Adler] established the value of the actor putting himself in

the place of the character rather than vice versa ... More than anyone else, Stella Adler brought into public awareness all the close careful attention to text and analysis Stanislavski endorsed." [15]

## Quotes

- "In your choices lies your talent."
- "Never explain, never complain."
- "Don't use your conscious past. Use your creative imagination to create a past that belongs to your character. I don't want you to be stuck with your own life. It's too little." [3]
- "You can't be boring. Life is boring. The weather is boring. Actors must not be boring." [3]
- "Growth as an actor and as a human being are synonymous." [19]
- "A junkie is someone who uses their body to tell society that something is wrong." [19]
- "The word theatre comes from the Greeks. It means the seeing place. It is the place people come to see the truth about life and the social situation. The theatre is a spiritual and social X-ray of its time. The theatre was created to tell people the truth about life and the social situation." [3]
- "Life beats down and crushes the soul and art reminds you that you have one."
- "The play is not in the words, it's in you!" [20]

## Uta Hagen

**Uta Thyra Hagen** (12 June 1919 – 14 January 2004) was a German American actress and drama teacher. She originated the role of Martha in the 1962 Broadway premiere of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee (who called her "a profoundly truthful actress"). Because Hagen was on the **Hollywood blacklist**, in part because of her association with **Paul Robeson**, her film opportunities dwindled and she focused her career on New York theater.

She also wrote *Respect for Acting* (1973) and *A Challenge for the Actor* (1991), which advocate realistic acting (as opposed to pre-determined "formalistic" acting). In her mode of realism, the actor puts his own psyche to use in finding identification with the role," trusting that a form will result. [9] In *Respect for Acting*, Hagen credited director **Harold Clurman** with a turn-around in her perspective on acting:

In 1947, I worked in a play under the direction of Harold Clurman. He opened a new world in the professional theatre for me. He took away my 'tricks'. He imposed no line readings, no gestures, no positions on the actors. At first I floundered badly because for many years I had become accustomed to using

specific outer directions as the material from which to construct the mask for my character, the mask behind which I would hide throughout the performance. Mr Clurman refused to accept a mask. He demanded ME in the role. My love of acting was slowly reawakened as I began to deal with a strange new technique of evolving in the character. I was not allowed to begin with, or concern myself at any time with, a preconceived form. I was assured that a form would result from the work we were doing.

Hagen later "disassociated" herself from her first book, *Respect for Acting*.

[10] In *Challenge for the Actor* she redefined a term which she had initially called "substitution", an esoteric technique for alchemizing elements of an actor's life with his/her character work, calling it "transference" instead. Though Hagen wrote that the actor should identify the character they play with feelings and circumstances from their (the actor's) own life, she also makes clear that

Thoughts and feelings are suspended in a vacuum unless they instigate and feed the selected actions, and it is the characters' actions which reveal the character in the play.

## **Sanford Meisner and the Meisner Acting Technique**

If you're wondering about Sanford Meisner's acting technique, read on. Here you'll find the basics of the Meisner technique, along with what to expect in Meisner acting classes and acting schools through sample exercises you can try at home. You can also look at a list of Meisner actors and other information to help you decide if this acting method is for you.

### **1) What is the Meisner acting method?**

This acting method was inspired by [Stanislavski](#). Sanford Meisner studied with Lee Strasberg at the Group Theatre but then developed his own method, rejecting sense memory and anything that keeps the actor "in his head". The goal of his acting technique is to prepare the actor to follow his instincts and be spontaneous on stage.

### **The reality of doing**

Sanford Meisner believed that an actor has to be involved in something real onstage for the audience to be really engaged. The actor becomes the character

by *doing*, by committing to the action and acting on his impulses. Meisner often reminded his students to *play*.

### **Moment-to-Moment Acting**

The only thing that's real is what's happening in the moment. One actor responding to another in the moment. Instead of deciding in advance on objectives and beats, the Meisner-trained actors strive to experience each scene *now*. Meisner devised several "repetition exercises" and improvisation exercises to help actors put their focus on their partner so they can experience the scene as it is happening rather than be cut off from the moment by being self-conscious.

### **Imagination and preparation**

Meisner actors use their imagination to enter each scene *charged* with the emotion of the given circumstances of the play. Meisner believed that "the fantasy of daydreaming" is much more powerful and reliable than the use of sense memory or emotional memories from our own past. Meisner students are encouraged to make up fantasies that will make them feel like the character. For example, if a character enters a scene in a rage but the actor playing the role can't relate to the given circumstances of the play, the actor will "daydream" a situation that would put him in a rage. This is only used as preparation to start the scene. Once the actor is in the scene, he lets go of his preparation and reacts moment-to-moment.

## **2) What can you expect?**

### **•A lot of exercises**

Whether it's improvisation or repetition exercises, you'll do a lot of exercises before you get to the actual dialogue from your scenes. In order to stay spontaneous on stage, you'll be asked to learn your lines "flat" (mechanically), without deciding in advance where to pause or how to say the line, so there won't be much traditional rehearsal homework.

### **•A challenge**

Sanford Meisner said, "It's all right to be wrong, but it's not all right not to try." In this acting method, every line uttered by the actor has to come out of a genuine impulse. This is not an easy thing to do, especially when you're eager to act. Learning moment-to-moment acting is a challenge and you may often feel frustrated.



# The Meisner Technique

Ready to continue learning about the Meisner Technique? You can view sample Meisner acting exercises below or scroll down the page to read about Meisner actors and Meisner's book on acting. You'll also find some information to help you decide if Meisner acting schools are a good choice for you.

## 3) Sample Meisner Acting Exercises

Sanford Meisner developed several acting exercises to help actors be *in the moment* and *real* on stage. Here's a few examples:

### Word Repetition Game

Two actors face each other. One actor starts by saying something about the other actor (for example, "you're pale"). The other actor responds by repeating the words ("you're pale"). The two actors repeat the line over and over back and forth, as if it were a ping-pong game. The trick is to resist artificially changing the intonation to make the line sound interesting. By listening to each other, the actors take the focus off themselves.

The next level of the exercise is to repeat the lines from each actor's point of view...

"You're pale."

"I'm pale?"

"You're pale."

"I'm pale?"

When an actor picks up a cue from his partner and feels a true impulse to make a new observation, he does so.

"You look upset."

"I look upset?"

"You look upset."

"I look upset?"

Later on, you can do this exercise with the lines from the script you're working on.

### Improvisation exercise

One actor picks an activity that is difficult and requires all their attention (for example, learning a script for an audition the next day). The other actor comes

into the scene *charged* with given circumstances he invented (for example, the actor imagines he or she just got the part of a lifetime). The two actors do a word repetition game, taking their cue off each other's behavior.

#### **4) Is the Meisner Acting Technique for You?**

- The Meisner technique is great if you feel self-conscious as an actor. If you're having a hard time being spontaneous or relating to the other actors on stage, this may be right for you. Since it will help you take the focus off yourself, it's also a good acting method to deal with stagefright.
- A working knowledge of Meisner acting will come in handy when you work with very spontaneous actors who give a different performance every night or every take. On the other hand, exclusive use of Meisner techniques can be tricky when you're dealing with a non-responsive actor or when you're auditioning and not getting much from the reader.
- The Meisner technique is particularly effective for film acting because it delivers very subtle performances from actors and a lot of different takes for a director to choose from. Since the method of Sanford Meisner is very internal though, you'll want to complete your studies with movement, speech and voice classes, as well as a good character workshop.

#### **5) Famous Meisner Actors**

James Caan, Griffin Dunne, Robert Duvall, Peter Falk, Jeff Goldblum, Jennifer Grey, Allison Janney, Diane Keaton, Grace Kelly, Christopher Meloni, Chris Noth, Gregory Peck, Tony Randall, Joanne Woodward

... and many more.

Meisner Training is an interdependent series of training exercises that build on one another. The more complex work supports a command of *dramatic text*. Students work on a series of progressively complex exercises to develop an ability to first *improvise*, then to access an emotional life, and finally to bring the spontaneity of improvisation and the richness of personal response to textual work. The techniques developed the behavioral strand of *Stanislavski's*. The technique is used to develop improvisation skills as well as "interpreting a script, and creating the specific physical characteristics of each character the actor played"[2] and is still taught as an acting technique at the *Sanford Meisner Center* in Los Angeles. [3]

Exercises:

- Repetition- *"In this exercise, two actors sit across from each other and respond to each other*

*through a repeated phrase. The phrase is about each other's behavior, and reflects what is going on between them in the moment, such as "You look unhappy with me right now." The way this phrase is said as it is repeated changes in meaning, tone and intensity to correspond with the behavior that each actor produces towards the other. Through this device, the actor stops thinking of what to say and do, and responds more freely and spontaneously, both physically and vocally. The exercise also eliminates line readings, since the way the actor speaks becomes coordinated with his behavioral responses*

## **The Stella Adler Acting Technique**

Stella Adler believed that an actor's talent lies with his imagination. This theater and film actress turned acting teacher trained with Stanislavsky and studied the method, but didn't believe that an actor needs to relive past experiences to connect with the play.

Through years of teaching, she developed an acting method that helps actors be truthful on stage by fully believing in the circumstances of the play.

### **1) What is the Stella Adler acting method?**

Here are the main points of this approach to acting:

- **Acting is Doing**

The actor must always *do* something on stage. He looks for actions in the script (for example, "to teach, to confess, to beg", etc.) and finds the human conflict in them. He must have a justification for each action (know exactly why he is performing each action).

- **Developing the imagination**

An actor develops his imagination by first observing the world around him in very specific details. He can then create specific images in his mind in order to surround himself with things that are true to him on stage. If he succeeds, the audience will see through his eyes.

- **Training the mind**

Actors must have a real understanding of the play in order to reveal its secrets to the audience. They must study the text and its ideas but also research the social situations of the play.

- **Size**

Actors need strong bodies and voices for the stage so they can bring size to their actions. Adler encouraged actors never to be small. Her students

learned to always bring a bigger meaning to the text. Below is a short video where she discusses this "sense of epic" the actor must have.

Stella Adler felt that a lot of actors confused being true and natural with being ordinary and boring. Her approach to acting definitely helps actors break away from "boring" .

## 2) What can you expect?

### •A lot of rehearsing

Adler expected her students to prepare for every single activity and action they were going to have on stage. If you study her acting techniques, you will spend a lot of time creating specific images for the circumstances of the play. For example, if you are working on the 'Where am I?' in a scene, you will work out in your mind every minor detail of what surrounds you.

### •A lot of thinking

Stella Adler believed that an actor's most important tool is his mind. She also believed that an actor must completely understand the text of the play to be able to communicate it onstage without faking. So expect to do a lot of research, script analysis and paraphrasing of the play to make it your own.

## 3) Sample Stella Adler Acting Exercises

### •Imagination Exercise

Pick an object and describe it. The goal is to get very specific (shades of colors, texture, etc.) but to communicate what the object looks like in a direct simple way that speaks to your audience. The more you do this exercise, the more objects will *speak* to you and the quicker your imagination will kick in onstage. Then take the exercise to the next level by letting your imagination run free (Adler calls that "traveling"). For example, a green couch can remind you of emerald earrings a woman wore at a party you went to which reminds you of the music that was playing and so on and so on.

### •Paraphrasing

Pick a book and write down one idea from the book in your own words, then present it onstage to others. Try to *experience* the idea so you can give it a live dimension on stage. To do that, you first need to understand the idea, then respond to it and make it your own until you feel a real need to communicate it.

### •Inner justification

Randomly pick a simple line from a play you don't know and bring it to life by imagining in details the reason why you're saying that line. Try to make a strong choice, something that stirs you and creates conflict. This exercise helps actors *experience* their lines instead of just saying them.

## 4) Is the Adler technique for you?

Studying the Adler technique is a great way to study acting if you're a very creative person who feels limited by the more structured acting techniques. Here are a few other things to consider.

- Stella Adler challenged her students constantly. Getting the most out of her acting method requires a lot of hard work and dedication.
- Adler's acting style is very relevant if you want to be a theater actor because she helped her students build the high level of energy required for the stage. It's all about being bigger than life, so if you're the kind of actor who's great at being natural and being yourself but not so good at "taking the stage", study Stella Adler.
- This is a good acting method to pick if you find yourself often "faking" or "indicating" as an actor. Ms. Adler helped her students focus on creating true images for themselves so they wouldn't have "to lie" on stage. This method also helps with stage fright.

## 5) Famous Actors who studied the Stella Adler Acting Technique

Marlon Brando, Warren Beaty, Robert de Niro, Ellen Burstyn, Harvey Keitel, Benicio Del Toro, Liev Schreiber, Mark Ruffalo, Naomi Watts, Patrick Stewart, Ed Norton, Sean Astin, Antonio Banderas, Salma Hayek, Matthew Modine...

...to name a few.

## The Art of Acting by Stella Adler

An inspiring book by a great lady of the theatre. Compiled from transcripts of Adler's notes and classes, this book has 22 acting lessons that cover everything from beginner exercises to how to dress the part and create characters. This book will speak to all the actors who chose this profession to feel "more alive".

# The Michael Chekhov Acting Technique

The Michael Chekhov acting technique is a powerful method for actors that is less known than it should be. Many acting schools don't even teach it, although many aspects of the Chekhov technique, such as the use of the psychological gesture, are very useful to modern actors who must be ready to get into character at a moment's notice on a film set. Michael Chekhov worked with Stanislavsky at The Moscow Art Theater, but he really took the work on imagination and psychology to another level, helping his students create truly inspired performances.

Numerous Oscar-nominees and winners have used the teachings of Chekhov to work on their roles, from Anthony Hopkins and Johnny Depp to Helen Hunt and Marisa Tomei, to name a few.

## 1) What is the Chekhov Technique?

For Chekhov, actors are not here to imitate life but to interpret it, to bring out its hidden meaning to the audience. For this, they must be able to act with ease, bring form and beauty to their creative expressions, and see the big picture so they can convey it in their performance.

### •Sensitivity of the Body

The actor's body must be trained to be receptive so it can convey creative impulses to the audiences. Through psychological exercises, the actor's body can be developed from the inside. The actor must learn to *radiate* the inner life of its characters and to create an imaginary center within his body that will allow him to connect to the various energies of many different characters.

### •Rich Psychology

The actor must penetrate the psychology of its characters. He can train by observing others and figuring out why they act or feel a certain way. Unlike method actors, Michael Chekhov firmly believed that drawing from real feelings from one's life kills inspiration and should be avoided. Creative feelings on the stage come from the actor's ability for compassion.

### •Creative Imagination

Our creative imagination constantly draws pictures in our mind. We can learn to collaborate with these images by asking questions from them and sometimes ordering them to show us what we are looking for. For example



you can ask your character, "show me how you would approach this part of the scene" and keep asking questions until the answer you get stirs you up emotionally and helps you start to enter the inner life of the character. Once you have a very clear inner vision, you can start incorporating it by copying one aspect of your vision at a time.

Similarly, the actor can use his imagination to create an imaginary body for his character. This allows the actor to really feel like another person and to start exploring his character's reality, movement and speech from the inside.

• **Atmosphere, quality and sensations** The atmosphere - whether it is happy, sad, calm, hectic, nervous, etc. - has a tremendous impact on the way we act. An actor can create an *atmosphere*, imagine it "in the air" and submit to it. He can imagine an outer atmosphere for a scene and an inner atmosphere for his character, contrasting them. These atmospheres will permeate his body and psychology when he acts.

Similarly, he can choose to give a quality to his movements. For example, if he chooses to move calmly, the physical *sensation* that results from his movements will attract similar emotions without any effort at all. This could be called working "from the outside in", except in this acting technique, the actor doesn't fake anything, he just lets atmospheres and sensations inspire his performance.

• **The Psychological Gesture**

Just like we can access our emotions through atmospheres and sensations, we can access the will to pursue objectives through a gesture that encompasses all the needs and wants of the character. The actor starts with his first guess of what the character's main desire may be and from there, develops a gesture with his hand and arm that encompasses this desire. He gradually expands this gesture to the entire body, changing it until he feels satisfied as an artist. The psychological gesture should be strong but not tense, simple but definite, and archetypal in nature.

## 2) What can you expect?

• **A new approach to training**

Michael Chekhov believed that the actor's greatest tools, aside from his body, were his intuition, imagination and artistic vision. As such, you can expect to rely on your instincts much more than you ever have in more traditional training.



### •A lot of exercises

One of the strength of the Michael Chekhov approach is that he had acting exercises for every aspect of an actor's training. These exercises help the actor not only work on a part, but grow as an artist by building long-lasting stage presence, creative imagination and inspiration.



### •Improvisation Work

Michael Chekhov believed that in order to be free, the actor must be an expert improviser who is able to take the words of the play and the director's vision and from that freely interpret how the character acts and delivers the lines. You will be doing some improvisations on your own and some as part of a group, learning to give and receive within the ensemble.

## 3) Sample Michael Chekhov Acting Exercises



### •The Imaginary Center Exercise

The actor imagines a center in his chest, a center of power from which all his impulses to move come from. He then performs a series of movement from this center, from simple gestures like lifting an arm to actions like closing a door or sitting down. The energy from the center always precedes and follows the movement, creating both a strong impulse to move and an energy field after the movement is created. The exercise greatly develops an actor's presence on stage and diminishes feelings of stage fright and self-consciousness. Later on, the actor can move that center around as he creates different characters.



### •Individual Improvisation Exercise

Pick in advance two contrasting moments to begin and end the improvisation. You can improvise everything in between. There is no set plot, only a mood to start with and a very different mood to end with. As you get more comfortable with the exercise, you can add more signposts along the way, like a mood to hit in the middle of your improvisation or a certain tempo. This teaches the performer to improvise within the *necessities of the performances*(lines, stage directions, pacing, etc.)



### •Psychological Gesture (PG) Exercise

Practice a body position (the Psychological Gesture) that suggest a single quality along with an accompanying simple sentence. Practice the position and say the words until you feel them permeate your psychology, then start making slight changes to the gesture, noticing each time the changes in how you feel and deliver the line. Then try to change the tempo, going from a slow to a fast tempo, noticing each subtle change and changing the sentence with each tempo.

#### **4) Is the Michael Chekhov acting technique for you?**

The Michael Chekhov technique really resonates with very intuitive and creative types who like to get in character by experiencing the part rather than figuring it out through script analysis and reasoning. For the same reason, it's also helpful for actors who are too much in their head. Chekhov wrote that the more we knew about a character, the less we could perform it, meaning that our analytical minds kill imagination.

Michael Chekhov warned against trying to squeeze feelings out of you. If you think you are forcing yourself to feel on the stage, a good teacher of the Chekhov technique will show you how to surrender more to the work and trust what you create with your imagination.

#### **5) Famous Actors who studied the Chekhov Technique**

Johnny Depp, Clint Eastwood, Anthony Hopkins, Helen Hunt, Anthony Quinn, Marilyn Monroe, Jack Nicholson and Marisa Tomei, to name a few.

#### **To the Actor by Michael Chekhov**

This inspiring book is a must have for actors, from beginners to seasoned veterans who need a new perspective on their art. It is filled with the visionary insight of a fantastic actor and teacher, along with practical exercises that bring real solutions to acting problems like how to prepare for a part, find presence on stage and inhabit a character.

# Unique Acting Training Methods

Want to discover new acting training methods? Here you can read some information and see sample acting exercises on unique acting techniques taught in some acting schools: the methods of Tadashi Suzuki, Viola Spolin and Anne Bogart. If you want to go beyond the leading acting techniques like Method Acting and Meisner, read on to discover these lesser known but unique acting methods.

## 1) The Spolin Technique

**What is it?** The acting technique developed by Viola Spolin uses improvisation and some 200 plus theater games and acting exercises to access the actor's creativeness. Through play, the actor can free his instrument and become more spontaneous, as well as work on specific issues like concentration, characterization and conflict.

**What can you expect?** A lot of improvisation work, from physical improvisation to singing and word games. Most of the games are done in groups so there is a strong sense of ensemble.

**Sample Acting Exercise.** Two actors face each other. One imitates the other's gestures but both try to conceal from the audience who is initiating the movement and who is following. This mirror exercise is a great way to work on concentration.

**Is it for you?** Because this acting technique is based on theater games and playing, it is a very good choice for children actors and comedy actors. It's also useful for any actor who struggles with self-consciousness or has been told, "you need to get out of your head". Although this acting method came from the theater, film actors will also find it useful to solve specific problems they're having with a role or character.

**Improvisation for Theater by Viola Spolin**

## 2) The Acting Training of Tadashi Suzuki

**What is it?** This acting technique often taught alongside the Viewpoints method is also very focused on the body, especially the lower body and the feet, the

actor's "roots". This acting technique is grounded in ballet, Greek and Japanese theater, and martial arts.

**What can you expect?** A rigorous training that at times may feel more like a martial arts class than an acting class. The training focuses on developing the actor's center through a series of walking and stomping exercise. You will also work intensely on vocal exercises and concentration through stillness.

Below is a video on the Suzuki acting technique you may find interesting. It talks about how Suzuki acting training challenges the actor and helps him or her with body awareness and focus. It explains how it helps actors reach their souls through the body.

**Sample Acting Exercise.** The actor stomps through the classroom to a strong beat with knees slightly bent, concentrating his energy in the lower body. The idea is to try to maintain a strong stomp while keeping the upper body completely still and relaxed.

**Is it for you?** This is one of the acting techniques better suited to stage acting. You should also consider adding a Suzuki workshop to your acting studies if you are struggling with concentration and presence on stage.

## **The Way of Acting by Tadashi Suzuki**

### **3) Viewpoints Acting**

**What is it?** This method was originally created for dancers and is strongly grounded in movement and the actor's body. Actors are encouraged to explore space and time from 9 different viewpoints: Architecture, Space, Shape, Choreography, Gesture, Duration, Tempo, Repetition and Reaction.

**What can you expect?** Your acting classes will include a lot of improvisation using music, movement and voice. Most acting schools that teach Viewpoints will also offer a more traditional acting training curriculum.

**Sample Acting Exercise.** Here's a basic Viewpoints space exercise you can try at home: Just walk around and stop. Try to get a sense of where you stand in space by observing dimensions and distances between yourself and objects surrounding you. In class, you would also observe the special relationships with other actors standing in the room.

**Is it for you?** This acting training is especially useful if you are mostly interested in theater acting because it will help you develop a strong presence on stage and work well in an ensemble. This method may be more appealing to you if you

are a very physical actor or a dancer turning to acting. You may also consider a Viewpoints class if you need to work on your physicality on stage or if you want to get more comfortable in front of an audience.

**A practical guide to Viewpoint and Composition by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau.**

## **The Alexander Technique: An Acting Approach**

### **By Tom Vasiliades**

"As long as you have this physical tenseness you cannot even think about delicate shadings of feeling or the spiritual life of your part. Consequently, before you attempt to create anything it is necessary for you to get your muscles in proper condition, so that they do not impede your actions." - Constantine Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*

Stanislavski understood that excessive and unnecessary tension interferes with creating the spiritual life of the character in performance. The Alexander Technique deals with this directly. It is a method that empowers the actor to become aware of the physical habits that impede performance and to transform those habits thus improving breathing coordination and vocal production, facilitating the creation of the physical life of characters with ease and allowing fuller emotional expression. The Technique is fundamental to the training of actors; it is an integral part of the curriculum at theater schools, universities, and conservatories in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe.

In my work with student and professional actors, I teach them how to better use themselves. By 'use' I mean the relationship of the coordination of the muscles, sensory appreciation (the kinesthetic sense) and thinking. If an actor is performing with rigidity then the actor is not using herself or himself well. Both the actor and audience will typically experience this as poor vocal production, lack of freedom in movement and tense expression of emotions.

The negative impact on performance is obvious. Moreover, actors often have an unreliable sensory appreciation of their performance. They may not be aware of excessive or unnecessary tensions, or they may sense it but not understand how to change what is going on. Through studying the Alexander Technique actors become aware of their habits of 'misuse'. Alexander work includes hands-on work as part of the process. The teacher - with gentle touch - listens (in kinesthetic terms) to what the actor is doing and offer suggestions and directions for the actor to create improved use. Actors and non-actors have the capacity to self-direct themselves and change habits of misuse to improve their performance. Through self-direction the actor creates new ways of performing so as to not impede actions. Among the benefits are a lengthening of the musculature, improved general use and functioning and the re-kindling of accurate



sensory appreciation.

During the Broadway production of *Private Lives*, I worked intensively with the two stars, Alan Rickman and Lindsay Duncan. The play was a rigorous test for the actors, including strenuous fight scenes and the demands of being onstage for most of the production. Through our work together, Mr. Rickman and Ms. Duncan were enabled to have ease and lightness during the performance, despite the emotional intensity and physical demands of the roles. They created the 'spiritual life' of the part.

Of this experience Rickman wrote: "With the best intentions, the job of acting can become a display of accumulated bad habits, trapped instincts and blocked energies. Working with Tom and the Alexander Technique to untangle the wires has given me sightings of another way. Mind and body, work and life together. Real imaginative freedom."

There are many methods and approaches in the acting world. What is unique about the practice of the Alexander work is that it offers the actor the opportunity to assess what is happening during the performance and improve it. Understanding how you do what you are doing in an Alexander way is what Stanislavski spent his life's work exploring.

These students learned that by finding greater ease through redirection, they can grow in stature, poise and the ability to be spontaneous in their performances. Their voices fill the theater with increased strength and enhanced resonance. The overall effect on the repertory company is that of more evenly balanced performances by the students, a more effective ensemble between student actors and professionals, and heightened enjoyment for the audience.

At the core of an actor's training is the process of learning to respond truthfully in the moment to imaginary circumstances. Constriction of the body in the form of fear and performance anxiety causes a hyper-responsive nervous system over-contracted muscles and an unbalanced skeletal system. As a result, timing becomes erratic, lines and actions are anticipated, and emotional responses become forced or faked. The Alexander Technique can serve as a powerful catalyst for opening the actor's instrument to the deepest resources of available responses in the moment of performance. The results are a blend of vulnerability and absolute commitment that can create riveting moments in the theater.

The Alexander Technique offers the actor a very specific psycho-physical process, a means of guiding a performance toward a deep sense of atonement with each moment as it unfolds. The study of the Alexander Technique is a gradual, in-depth process of re-education, requiring time and repetition. As the actor rebuilds a more reliable kinesthetic feedback system, he or she grows to be a more consistent, mature and dynamic performer, vividly contributing to the magic of the overall theatrical event.