

Texas Theatre Journal
8.1 January 2012

Roman Candle: An Examination of Method Acting

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Method acting. Possibly no two words in the American Theatrical lexicon inspire a wider spectrum of reactions, from enthusiastic, almost religious embrace to visceral rejection. Anecdotes abound of actors indulging in emotion to the detriment of the performance, such as Aesop's assaulting a stagehand during a production of Euripides' *Orestes*. Though this example predates Stanislavsky and the development of the American Method, it is often cited as an excess of the technique of emotional identification, a technique that would come to be the signature of Method acting. "Method" is at times used to indicate self-indulgent behavior in discussions of actorial excess. On the other end of the spectrum comes audience approbation for the deeply affecting performances of Method acolytes such as Al Pacino, Daniel Day-Lewis, and Marlon Brando. Method acting, particularly as espoused by Lee Strasberg and comprising a complete emotional identification with character, has been responsible for some of the most significant performances in the American dramatic consciousness such as serving as the driving force behind the initial performances of Tennessee Williams' major works. The combination of potentially problematic behavior with vivid, affecting performance makes the Roman candle a most effective metaphor for Strasberg's Method. When properly set and utilized, such pyrotechnics are beautiful and deeply moving. However, they can also be dangerous and short-lived. Closer examination of Method acting on a theoretical and practical level reveals problematic aspects of the American theatre's signature technique. The rise of the postmodern performance environment that marks contemporary practice has necessitated a departure from the scientific determinism that helped birth Method's psychological focus and created a multiplicity of equally valid interpretations. Combined with Method's potentially unstable and highly subjective merits, this climate change has, in essence, doomed the Method.

Though often applied to a number of different techniques derived from the work of Stanislavsky, the term "Method acting" is best defined as those tenets of Konstantin Stanislavsky's acting system which were promulgated by Lee Strasberg via Richard Boleslavsky. Stanislavsky himself pursued a comprehensive theory of psycho-technical acting, with an emphasis on the truthful recreation of roles, and transformed the American theatrical world. Lee Strasberg, a founder of the Group Theatre, studied acting under Richard Boleslavsky, a student of Stanislavsky's. Strasberg's work with the Group, grounded in Stanislavskian principles, was the backbone for what became known as the Method. Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, also Group Theatre members, developed their own derivative techniques. Their systems focused on imagination and spontaneity respectively, while Strasberg encouraged his students to

turn inward for emotional truth (Montagne). These techniques were also rooted in Stanislavsky's work. Due to this common root, the techniques of Adler and Meisner share a great deal in common with the Strasberg Method, and are sometimes mistakenly referred to as Method, but they do not emphasize affective memory and emotional recall. These are the primary hallmarks for which the Method has become famous and are sometimes referred to as memory-based techniques. This discussion focuses specifically on Strasberg's Method as it comprises the first major incarnation of Stanislavsky's work in the United States.

Literature on Method acting is both widespread and generally available, though much of it is either a journalistic examination of actors or it deals with Method in fields outside of the performing arts. Further, it is limited by a general lack of public understanding of what the Method is. This work focuses specifically on the Method as developed by Lee Strasberg and works to place it in its theoretical and historical context within the American theatre, an approach recently found in journalistic sources. Sandie Chen's 2008 article in *Daily Variety* focuses on the idiosyncratic work of Daniel Day-Lewis, practitioner of a specific and personal variation on the Method, while psychological and educational journals often lump a number of Stanislavski-derived techniques together under the banner of the Method. Examination of Strasberg's technique specifically in terms of performing arts can be difficult to come by. When approaching the literature in question, it is important to differentiate the various techniques identified as "Method" and focus on the Method taught by Lee Strasberg specifically. Wendy Lippe, in the *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama, & Sociometry*, explores the Method's flagship technique of affective memory as a therapeutic tool, while Susan Verducci of San José State explores Method acting as a tool for teaching empathy in students. By and large, recent scholarly work on the Method is often found outside of the theatre in other disciplines, such as the aforementioned psychology and education fields, while journalistic work handles discussions of particular actors. Due to the nature of the press, coupled with the impetus to sell papers and write about the more interesting or unusual cases, the reasonable assumption is that empirical evidence from journalistic sources will skew towards the most extreme examples. The subjective nature of theatre criticism and ephemerality of performance further confuse the matter. When drama critic and reporter Mel Gussow wrote of Lee Strasberg's death in 1982, he mentioned "disappointing" Strasberg-directed productions in the 1963 Broadway season produced by The Actor's Studio (Gussow, D20). However, Howard Taubman reviewed a number of these productions positively in the *New York Times*. These conflicting journalistic reports make it difficult to empirically track Method's efficacy. Further, a reliance on newspaper reviews is structurally prone to a positive bias. Once an actor is established enough to be readily identifiable with a particular technique and to warrant mention by major theatre critics, the conditions of commercial theatre have ensured his capacity to turn in consistently good performances and garner consistently positive reviews. This skews the perception of Method's efficacy towards the positive and limit attempts to empirically track results.

Method's focus is on the use of emotional identification and memory to draw an honest performance from the actor. Anna Strasberg, wife of Method pioneer Lee

Strasberg, writes that the Method is intended not to teach the student how to act, but instead how to live (Strasberg 18). Strasberg writes that what should be depicted onstage is literal, full life as opposed to imitation or mimicry. The goal is a real and affecting experience for the actor. This technique does not teach the actor how to affect the audience, but instead how to affect himself. This singularity of focus on the actor's internal experience is the hallmark of the Method. Anna Strasberg draws connections between memory and direct physical stimuli, writing "that when actors bite into a food from childhood, they are truly biting into their own childhoods" (Strasberg 23). The Method seeks to assist the actor with recall, and so the food and childhood are combined into a single experience. The emphasis here is on fullness and vividness of the actor's experience. The process of drawing on those things that are most felt and therefore most readily available to the actor fuels that actor and provides the material from which he can build a performance. According to Louis Scheeder, founder of New York University's Classical Studio and Associate Dean of Faculty at the Tisch School of the Arts, this is a process powerful enough to elevate that actor to the status of co-creator, as opposed to enactor (Scheeder 9). Given the actor's struggle with the Theatre Guild and film studios of the time, the attractiveness of such an ennobling is difficult to deny. Marlon Brando, often considered the embodiment of the Method, credits inward focus and memory techniques as the things which made him a "real actor" (Gussow, D20). The majority of Mr. Brando's training came from Strasberg's major detractor, Stella Adler. However, Mr. Brando gives primary credit for his success to the inward turn and drawing from personal experience which is a technique that is hallmark of Strasberg's Method. Given this, Mr. Brando's recognition as a powerful actor in numerous reviews seems to be an endorsement for the Method. A long line of reportedly astounding performances by Mr. Brando supports the Method's preeminence in the American theatre.

Another advantage of the Method is its accessibility. Anna Strasberg writes in *Training of the American Actor* that, "all people have emotional memories" (Strasberg 20). The training offered by the Method consists of tapping into traits which are universally available. Strasberg points out that "not everyone can recreate" their emotional memories effectively, but developing this capability is precisely the point of Method training. Fred McVittie, professor at Manchester Metropolitan University, in his article on actor training, asserts that "part of the functional effectiveness of such training in the management of performance excellence is possibly down to the incorporation by the trainee actor of the necessary metaphors for the effective organization of behavior" (McVittie 160). Learning to employ the technique is the purpose of training. Strasberg does not claim that the re-creation facility is beyond anybody, simply that some are unable to do the re-creating without training. It is the purpose of that training to develop or strengthen the recreation faculty, which suggests that the capability can be opened to anyone. Many Americans, deeply inculcated with the democratic ideal, find this all-inclusive methodology appealing. Because it draws upon something everyone possesses, anyone with the right training can become an actor. What was once thought to be the domain of the special individual is now generally available. A technique by which any person could potentially learn to act

and rise to the status of stardom holds a deep fascination in the American democratic spirit, which may explain why Method techniques took root in the United States more firmly and lastingly than even in their homeland of Russia.

Strasberg's Method offers a strong foundation in skills that students will find generally useful. "The first exercise we teach," writes Ms. Strasberg, "and the most important exercises being taught in this method, are *relaxation* and *concentration*. . . . You cannot do anything great without the art of concentrating and relaxing" (Strasberg 18). Strasberg does not focus specifically on acting here, and these skills can be useful in a number of different disciplines, from acting to running an engine lathe. Educational theorist Susan Verducci finds Method acting a potentially helpful tool for cultivating empathy in young people. She writes that drama can provide additional sources of experience which can be drawn upon even by nontheatrical practitioners in their everyday life (Verducci 88). Given the Method's focus on emotional identification with the character, she asserts that such training is the vehicle for optimal development in moral education. Training in the Method can be useful even if one's chosen discipline lies outside of acting.

However, much like a Roman candle, the Method can be dangerous if improperly employed. The idea of Method actors crying uncontrollably or otherwise behaving unusually has almost reached the level of cliché in the theatrical world (Strasberg 18). Lee Strasberg was frequently denigrated as a "poor man's psychiatrist" (Scheeder 12). Lacking real training in counseling or psychiatry, overzealous acting teachers may find themselves unleashing forces that they or their students are incapable of dealing with adequately. Certain Method detractors credit this approach to a sort of guru-hood or mysticism. Wendy Lippe echoes these concerns in discussing the commonly used "temporal rule," by which students are only encouraged to draw on experiences at least seven years in their past. "This temporal rule, thought by some drama teachers to 'psychologically safe,' may only be 'psychologically random.' Perhaps, drama teachers, who are usually not members of the mental health professions, should not be using this technique, regardless of the temporal considerations" (Lippe). While studies have not found a connection to mental disorder or trauma in actor training, it is entirely conceivable that such intense and uncontrolled experiences could inhibit a consistent practice if misapplied. Forensic psychologist Raymond Hamden spoke of Method acting as a way of compartmentalizing a role and drawing on one's own feelings to identify with a character, and asserted that acting should only be based in a script (Hamden). Immersing oneself in the character often wins positive attention, such as was the case with Daniel Day-Lewis' performance in the film *My Left Foot* (1989). However, Hamden speculates as to the dangers of this behavior, which has led to injuries and illnesses in its adherents. Mr. Day-Lewis, for example, broke ribs due to his immersion in the above-mentioned role. Character immersion, a technique popularly equated with Method actors, is generally not taught as a desirable technique within recognized Method programs. However, it stems from the Method's focus on internal identification with the character's emotional state. Some practitioners find it impossible to work without immersion as they find it difficult to "jump in and out" while maintaining character identification (Chen 19). Such prac-

tioners, seeking to draw on their own emotions and experiences, find them to be a poor substitute for those of the characters, and thus recreate the lives of the characters in order to give themselves experience from which to draw. Anecdotal evidence alone can attest to the problematic nature of such behavior, and it is the psychological focus that the Method is predicated upon, which renders it necessary in the first place.

That these techniques have long-term efficacy in terms of psychological and educational development is accepted in numerous fields. Dr. Lippe's work with the Method as therapy as well as the work of educational theorist Susan Verducci demonstrate this usefulness. Verducci feels that such training could be used to help students "cultivate not only their capacity to empathize, but the habit of doing so" (Verducci 97). Though studies have yet to find a conclusive connection, empirical evidence, echoed in the concerns of Dr. Hamden, indicates a need for concern due to potentially adverse reactions on the part of the actor. Method acting has a profound psychological effect on the practitioner himself, as evidenced above. However, psychology has been shown to be only one of many possible explanations for behavior.

These concerns are also accompanied by sociologically problematic aspects of the Method system, particularly a habit of reinforcing cultural mores and stereotypes. Sociologist Nina Bandelj, in her 2003 study on acting, found that the conventions and tenets of Method acting took a path of least resistance (Bandelj 388). In essence, the attempt to find strong emotional identification with the character causes the actor to appropriate aspects of the character that are largely superficial. Though this would seem to run counter to the immersive habits often identified with Method, they remain structurally similar in the incorporation of objects from the character's "life" to build a strong emotional identification and draw from one's own stock of memories and experiences. Character immersion is essentially a way to create personal experiences which the actor can draw upon to identify his own emotions with that of his character. Despite a high level of dedication implied by use of this technique, Bandelj writes that the evidence indicates a path of least resistance. In the case of significant distance between actor and character, "if they resonate with an actor's idea of what a character should be like," those elements are selected that are most readily available (409). One of the major aspects of building a character, particularly one of significant distance in time and place from the actor, comprises the idea of what the actor thinks the character should be like. This is a potentially uninformed opinion, and can therefore be prone to stereotyping habits as actors call to mind their most immediate identification of particular roles.

Method theory focuses little on the act of playing, or projecting the internal experience it cultivates to the audience. Strasberg points out that the "audience must not catch you working" (Strasberg 23). There is little reference to the actor's connection to the audience in the writings of Lee and Anna Strasberg. Here, then, is the crux of Method acting's limitations. Even if the power of the Method's emotional product can be taken as axiomatic, and the works of Hamden, Verducci and Lippe as discussed above point in this direction, there seems to be little attention to projecting this powerful experience to the audience. If the emotion is not communicated to the audience, the actor's experience becomes a moot point in terms of the performance. The

actor becomes arbiter of the experience, which also potentially explains the Method's detractor's claims of "mysticism" as actors and the perceptions of their teachers do not agree on the experience. Strasberg experienced limited success as a director for the stage and his proteges often did not manage to continue their original successes after the screen tests for which he prepared them (Scheeder 4). These actors had tools to create strong emotional experiences, but lacked the tools to communicate said experience to an audience. Indeed, though successful Method actors are known to exist, proving that Method acting is communicable to an audience, one should note that the rhetoric comprising the technique itself is focused on the inner life of the actor: the idea of "learning to live" from Anna Strasberg as noted above. If life is the primary concern, Bandelj casts doubt upon the communicability of this process. She points out that while "actors pursue strategies of character-role creation that will help them construct credible representations," ordinary people are not concerned about their authenticity (Bandelj 409). A grieving person does not concern himself with the perceived authenticity of his grief, he simply experiences it. If the Method is, as Strasberg asserts, living on stage, it is hampered from reliable communication with the audience. An actor who is living onstage cannot be overly concerned with the credibility and quality of his representation, as this would be false to life.

The Method's sustainability as a technique for facilitating quality performance is questionable. In reviewing the Group Theatre's 1933 production of Sidney Kingsley's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Men in White*, Brooks Atkinson makes mention that this piece was the first success following the Group's 1931 debut with *The House of Connelly* (Atkinson 1933, X1). He praises both Strasberg-directed works, lauding the earlier as "beautifully imagined and modulated" (Atkinson 1931, 22). This two-year gap between praiseworthy productions indicates a certain hit-or-miss quality to their work. Though Harold Clurman and others were also directing for the Group around this time, Strasberg was the primary acting theorist driving the company with a focus on memory-based technique (Scheeder 4). Within the Group Theatre, the Method evidently lacked the ability to create consistent results in the working, practicing actor. Brooks Atkinson asks "what went wrong?" regarding Strasberg's 1938 production of *Dance Night* by Kenyon Nicholson. Atkinson writes that the play fails to succeed in the face of every advantage, from a polished and tested script to an attractive cast and noted director (Atkinson 1938, 20). As to whether the acting technique employed was the fatal flaw, Atkinson does not directly say. However, he does describe the piece as being static and rigid, which suggests that there was a lack of communication between cast and audience.

As noted above, Method's inward, memory-based focus does not concern itself with audience communication, and thus is a likely culprit. The need to produce consistent performance on a regular basis is a major concern of acting technique, and yet comprises one of the Method's major limitations. In historical terms, one should keep in mind that although the personal lives and conflicts of the Group Theatre members often intervened in their ensemble work, this is no defense of the Method program. Acting technique, much like any other, exists primarily to ensure consistent performance regardless of surrounding conditions. That it was unable to deliver in the Group era seems to be an early warning of the limitations to come.

Stylistic limitations also shackle the Method. The focus on emotion and affective memory draws on an intense psychological naturalism. The actor must draw on his own experiences in order to create characters, being forced to somehow generate those experiences should there be a substantial difference between the character and the actor. This single fountain of creativity may keep the actor from accessing more fantastic plots or stylized pieces that form a significant part of the theatrical canon. It is conceivable that an actor using Method technique would be forced to identify the motives of Oedipus in light of his own experience, an endeavor that might prove difficult, regardless of the assertions of Dr. Freud. According to film historian David Thomson in his article for the *Wall Street Journal*, strong identification with a character may blur the lines between reality and fantasy, a condition which borders on the realm of dysfunction. It would seem that the options run between either the actor limiting himself to contemporary Realism or, Icarus-like, braving the stylistic heights with the very real prospect of crashing. Erring on the side of caution, the Method actor finds himself limited to a smaller range of pieces, bounded by his experience and personal emotional range.

The Method, like the Roman candle, is capable of providing fuel for a strongly emotive and highly beautiful performance as is evidenced by the long list of successful Method actors, such as Pacino, Marlon Brando, and Day-Lewis. That this technique is generally available appeals to the American sense of fair play and equal accessibility by not privileging a talented minority or requiring a prohibitive special capability. The focus on developing the actor as an organism through an emphasis on relaxation, concentration and teaching "how to live" also makes it an attractive technique. However, all of these benefits have a price. Given the difficulty of coping with the complexities of the human mind, particularly by unprepared practitioners, the safety of the Method lies open to question. The possibility of a traumatic or confusing experience may discourage the student as well. The possibility of mishap aside, the very structure of the technique lends itself to the creation of stereotypes in performance. Due to actors' role in creating media, and therefore cultural consciousness, the potential for relying on stereotypical forms is deeply problematic from a sociological perspective. These concerns, when coupled with the limitations inherent in the Method's theories, suggest a technique that should be approached with caution. In the increasingly uncertain and diverse performance environment that is the contemporary American theatre, complex ideas of identity and motivation call into question Method's certainty that psychology holds the answers. The rise of postmodern thought and subsequent departure from the scientific objectivity originally underpinning Stanislavsky's work creates a multiplicity of viewpoints equally valid to psychological solutions. The realization that not all things are explicable, as demonstrated in physics by Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle, proves a purely psychological rendering of thought and action inaccurate and one-sided (Krasner 22). Though this is a problem shared by all Stanislavsky-derived techniques, it is particularly pronounced in the Method's memory-based, emotional focus. Justifying the subjective and unstable merits of Method acting becomes difficult when faced with the combination of a postmodern performance environment and Method's internal

contradictions in theory and practice. Reconciling these contradictions, if possible, will require courage and critical thought on the part of Method practitioners and educators. Transforming the Method so radically will require the actor Diderot calls for in *The Paradox of Acting*, an actor with "a good deal of judgment [who] must have in himself an unmoved and disinterested onlooker" (Diderot 198). Given the Method's polar opposition to the concept of an unmoved and disinterested actor, the needs engendered by the techniques development fall into direct conflict with the signature tenets of that very same technique. Through internal inconsistency and external pressure, this Roman candle has burned itself out.

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