

## *Lee Strasberg - The Man vs. The Method*

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### **Abstract:**

Lee Strasberg (1901-1982) is a divisive figure whose method of acting is often misunderstood. Few people understand what it is or how it works, or its relationship to the Stanislavski System. This is due to a number of misconceptions about the nature of the training with its emphasis on the development of the sensory imagination. This paper aims to challenge some of the myths about the Method, and to clarify Strasberg's unique contribution to actor training.

**Keywords:** Lee Strasberg, Method Acting, Actors Studio, Stanislavsky, Boleslavsky.

For many years now, Lee Strasberg's reputation as a teacher of acting has been repeatedly called into question. Depicted by his detractors variously as "a highly overrated cultural icon"<sup>i</sup> and as "a dogmatic who brooked no heresies,"<sup>iii</sup> it has also been suggested that he was largely responsible for the decline of the American theatre.<sup>iii</sup> Even playwright Arthur Miller chose to ridicule him in his last play, *Finishing the Picture*, in a thinly disguised portrait of a self-serving artistic fraud called Jerome Fassinger.<sup>iv</sup> As David Krasner observes in his article, 'I Hate Strasberg,' disdain for him is so intense that it "has become a favorite pastime."<sup>v</sup> With so much hostility towards him personally, it's hardly surprising many people find it difficult to separate the man from the Method. In this article, therefore, I wish to re-evaluate the artistic legacy of this hugely controversial figure, as well as to challenge some of the more common misconceptions about the Method.

So what exactly *is* the Method? To begin with, it's not really a method.<sup>vi</sup> As Strasberg tried to clarify on a number of occasions, it's an approach to acting rather than a fixed set of rules:<sup>vii</sup>

"I have always stated simply that the Method is based on the principles and procedures of the Stanislavsky system... However, I have always referred to our own work as a 'method of work,' because I never liked the implication of the term 'system!...' (Strasberg 1989, 84) The important words here to note are 'principles' and 'procedures' - it's a way of working - as he stated in an interview, "it's about tools, not rules."<sup>viii</sup>

Strasberg based his training on a model taken from Stanislavski. In the first part - 'the actor's work on the self' - the focus is on training the actor's sensory imagination, while in the second part - 'the actor's work on the role' - the focus is on preparing scenic material for performance.<sup>ix</sup> His private classes reflected this two-part structure with two hours on exercises to train the actor-as-

instrument, and two hours for work on monologues or scenes to train the actor-as-player. It should be noted, however, that this applied only to his private classes - in the sessions at the Actors' Studio, the actors themselves chose whether to work on exercises, monologues or scenes in front of an audience of professional observers.

The training part consists of a sequence of exercises involving imaginary objects. This is because Strasberg believes the fundamental skill of acting is in learning how to respond to imaginary stimuli.<sup>x</sup> The exercises involve simple everyday activities such as having a drink, looking in a mirror, putting on underwear, taking a shower etc.<sup>xi</sup> Through a sequence of carefully structured exercises, the actor explores a series of imaginary objects going from the simple to the complex - from single to multiple sensations, from material to non-material sensations, from outer to inner sensations, and from sensorial to emotional experiences.<sup>xii</sup> The sequence incorporates all five of the senses, slowly increasing the strength, intensity and combination of sensations experienced by the body.

To enable these sensations to be manifested fully, the actor prepares the body to express them by relaxing both physically and mentally, by using sounds to release any pent-up feelings, and by 'speaking out' any difficulties that may occur.<sup>xiii</sup> Each step of the sequence encourages the actor to go deeper into the sensory imagination so as to meet the full range and complexity of experience required by a play.<sup>xiv</sup> And while the style of theatrical expression may change from play to play, the basic organic reality is always the same - no matter what kind of play, the actor always creates a real 'live' human being who thinks, breathes, senses, feels, moves, speaks, acts and experiences on the stage.

The performing part consists of working on monologues or scenes. The emphasis here is on learning to apply the exercises to various kinds of scenic material. Strasberg's opening question after each presentation - "What were you working for?"<sup>xv</sup> - aims to clarify whether the application of the exercises to the scenic material had been successful in terms of creating the basic sensory and emotional experience leading into physical action.<sup>xvi</sup> It's important to note that Strasberg conceives of physical action as part of a complex interplay of character, relationship, situation and event, leading him to disagree with Stanislavski's later 'Method of Physical Actions'.<sup>xvii</sup> In *A Dream of Passion* he clarifies his view on the nature of action saying it is "determined by a character's emotional state":

“... if an actor knows how to create the proper sensory and emotional experiences which motivate and accompany the behavior of the character, he will be accomplishing the primary task of the actor: to act - that is, to do something, whether it be psychological or physiological.” (Strasberg 1989, 165)

For, as David Krasner points out in his article, 'The System, Sense-Emotion Memory, and Physical Action/Active Analysis': "... affective memory combined with given circumstances doesn't deny the importance of playing actions: all three are holistically incorporated into the performance... But what Strasberg insisted on, following Stanislavsky, is experiencing the life of the circumstances onstage through feelings and tasks and not by the Method of Physical Actions - mechanically reproducing actions." (White, 2014, 204)

Work on scenic material includes extensive use of improvisation, together with exercises based on animals, paintings and music to help the actor to embody a character.<sup>xviii</sup> Much of this work was derived from his time at the American Laboratory Theatre and from his rehearsal practice with the Group Theatre, as has been fully documented by Wendy Smith and Helen Krich Chinoy.<sup>xix</sup> This part also includes the analysis of scripts as can be seen from the detailed transcripts of the tape-recorded sessions at the Actors' Studio where his commentaries include many reflections on character, relationship, situation, event, action and theme.<sup>xx</sup>

The specific value of the Method is that it trains the actor to live organically on stage with the same reality as in life: "On the stage it takes the peculiar mentality of the actor to give himself to imaginary things with the same kind of fullness that we ordinarily evince only in giving ourselves to real things. The actor has to evoke that reality on the stage in order to live fully in it and with it ... In life the reality exists with or without the awareness of the participant. On the stage it has to be created." (Hethmon 1966, 198-199)

What Strasberg means by reality has nothing to do with realism. He is referring to the physiological functioning of the actor which is why he emphasises that training must be undertaken through the five senses. It is only by engaging the sensory imagination that the actor learns how to live on the stage organically and experientially. He dismisses the suggestion that the Method is only suitable for plays based on psychological realism, and as his own productions for the Group Theatre testify - such as *The House of Connelly*, *Men in White*, *The Case of Clyde Griffiths*, *Gold Eagle Guy*, and *Johnny Johnson* - the Method can be applied to a wide range of scenic material.

Some critics take Strasberg to task for over-emphasising the training of the inner technique at the expense of the outer technique, but this is to forget that use of voice, speech, movement and

dance as part of an actor's training was already well established by the 1920s. Training the inner technique on the other hand - including the sensory imagination of the actor - was an entirely new phenomenon, and this explains in part the powerful impact that the Method had on actor training in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. The arrival of the Method heralded a theatrical revolution - not only the discovery of a wholly new approach to acting, but also one which helped give expression to the work of a new generation of American playwrights such as Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman, William Inge and Tennessee Williams.

I would now like to challenge some of the more common misconceptions about the Method. The first of these is to do with the origins of the Method and its relation to the Stanislavski System. As regards the name, it almost certainly derives from a series of lectures given by Richard Boleslavsky to coincide with the first visit to America of the Moscow Art Theatre, as can be seen from an article published in *Theatre Arts Magazine* called 'Stanislavsky - The Man and his Methods.'<sup>xxi</sup> The appellation was later adopted by the Group Theatre as can be seen from the compilation of articles put together by Toby Cole in *Acting: A Handbook of The Stanislavski Method*, and from the title of Robert Lewis's book, *Method or Madness?* How it came to be associated primarily with Strasberg is explained by him in a letter to Christine Edwards in 1960:

"I do not believe that anyone but Stanislavsky himself has a right to talk of the Stanislavsky System. I have therefore stressed the use of the word 'Method' as against 'System'... By saying that the Group Theatre used an adaptation of the Stanislavsky Method, we mean that we emphasized elements that he had not emphasized, and disregarded elements which he might have considered of greater importance... In other words, while it would be true to say that we try to make use of the basic ideas of the Stanislavsky System, we do not feel it necessary to be limited just to those ideas... I therefore think it is both theoretically wise and practically sound to talk of the work done by the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio as being an 'Adaptation of the Stanislavsky System.' The Method is therefore our version of the System." (Edwards 1966, 261)

In *A Dream of Passion*, Strasberg qualifies this further saying: "The work which I represent can now legitimately be called the Method. It is based not only on the procedures of Stanislavsky's work, but also on the further clarification and stimulus provided by Vakhtangov." (Strasberg 1989, 84)

The important point is that the Method grew out of the work of Stanislavski. Even if it is only a partial reading, based on elements taken from the inner technique, it undisputedly derives its origins from the so-called 'early' stage of the Stanislavski System.<sup>xxii</sup>

A second misconception, based on a misunderstanding about its specific use, is to do with the exercise known as affective or emotional memory. This particular exercise has been the cause of more heated debate than any other aspect of the Method. Condemned by its many critics as "sick," "neurotic" and "psychologically damaging," it has also been suggested that it encourages actors to probe dangerously into their own private traumas.<sup>xxiii</sup> According to Strasberg, however, the exercise is only for moments of high or intense emotion that cannot be created any other way, and that there are usually only one or two such moments in any play.<sup>xxiv</sup>

While he may have disregarded his own guidelines about the exercise while working with the Group Theatre, in later years he would insist that only his advanced students were allowed to practice it,<sup>xxv</sup> and undertook 'live' demonstrations of the exercise - including the one featuring his third wife, Anna, on the cover of *A Dream of Passion* - to prove its efficacy and safety as a means of creating emotion onstage.<sup>xxvi</sup> In addition, as Mel Gordon points out in *Stanislavsky in America*,<sup>xxvii</sup> he did not fully systematise his teaching until the mid-1960s - *before* founding the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute – as confirmed by the many accounts of his acting classes as given by former students such as Lola Cohen, Edward Dwight Easty, Ned Manderino, S. Loraine Hull, and Ed Kovens.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The third misconception, connected to the use of the emotional memory exercise, is the idea that the Method is based on Freudian psychoanalysis. Jonathan Pitches argues in *Stanislavsky and the Science of Acting*, that Strasberg's understanding is drawn "not from Ribot's theories but from Freud's psychoanalysis,"<sup>xxix</sup> that "Freud's theories were not so much a source of interest but a methodology" for Strasberg,<sup>xxx</sup> and that the Method is based on "a pseudo-psychoanalytical approach."<sup>xxxi</sup> He also claims that the Method redefines certain elements of the System as psychological rather than physiological,<sup>xxxii</sup> and suggests an interpretation of Anna Strasberg doing an emotional memory exercise as "offering private pain as public spectacle."<sup>xxxiii</sup> A quick glance at the transcripts of *Strasberg at the Actors' Studio*, however, reveals that the key technical terms used by him are words such as impulse, stimulus, response, transmission, volition, tension, relaxation, habit, conditioning, sensation, emotion etc.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In *A Dream of Passion*, Strasberg explicitly acknowledges his debt to Ribot,<sup>xxxv</sup> and in the prospectus for the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute he describes the Method in behaviorist terms saying it is based on:

"... how the human organism functions, of the process of conditioning, of the creation of habits, of the interaction between the conscious and the unconscious..." (Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute 1993, 3)

Certainly Strasberg had read Freud but he had also read Ribot, James-Lange, Pavlov, Wilhelm Reich, Alexander Lowen, Moshe Feldenkrais and many others.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

I would like to conclude this article with an extract from an interview with the American film director, Arthur Penn, who knew Strasberg personally from his close association with the Actors' Studio: "There always was a lot to criticize about Lee [Strasberg] and there always will be. He was a controversial figure, a combative, opinionated man with whom I often had disagreements. But I respected him greatly, and he was a wonderful teacher... I always recommend to people who ask about Lee - and they always do - to focus on his work, his teachings, and that's where the heart of the man will be found." (Grissom: 2016)

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<sup>i</sup> Holmberg, Arthur, *ART News*, 3

<sup>ii</sup> Senelick, Laurence, *Chekhov Theatre*, 288

<sup>iii</sup> Hornby, Richard, *End of Acting*, 184

<sup>iv</sup> Miller, Arthur, *Plays: Six*

<sup>v</sup> Krasner, David (ed.), *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 7

<sup>vi</sup> Hethmon, Robert H. (ed.), *Strasberg at Studio*, 41-42

<sup>vii</sup> Hull, S. Loraine, *Strasberg's Method*, 18

<sup>viii</sup> Barthel, Joan, *New York Times*, 1-2

<sup>ix</sup> Gassner, John (ed.), *Producing the Play*, 146

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 146

<sup>xi</sup> Strasberg, Lee, *Dream of Passion*, 132-143

<sup>xii</sup> Strasberg, Lee, *Dream of Passion*, 124

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-130, 141

<sup>xiv</sup> Strasberg, Lee, *Tulane Drama Review*, 118

<sup>xv</sup> Hull, S. Loraine, *Strasberg's Method*, 235

<sup>xvi</sup> Strasberg, Lee, *Dream of Passion*, 161, 165; Adams, Cindy, *Imperfect Genius*, 179

<sup>xvii</sup> Garfield, David, *Player's Place*, 176-179; Strasberg, Lee, *Dream of Passion*, 78

<sup>xviii</sup> Strasberg, Lee, *Dream of Passion*, 74-75, 90-91, 106-107, 147-148

<sup>xix</sup> Smith, Wendy, *Real Life Drama*, 91-4, 140-2; Chinoy, Helen Krich, *Group Theatre*, 65-9

<sup>xx</sup> Hethmon, Robert H., *Strasberg at Actors' Studio*, 281-322

<sup>xxi</sup> Boleslawski [sic], Richard, *Theatre Arts*, 37:27, 74, 80

<sup>xxii</sup> Tcherkasski, Sergei, *Stanislavski Studies*, 113

<sup>xxiii</sup> O'Malley, Suzanne, *New York Times*, 7

<sup>xxiv</sup> Strasberg, Anna, *Acting Techniques*, 20-21; Strasberg, Lee, *Tulane Drama Review*, 132

<sup>xxv</sup> Strasberg, Anna, *Acting Techniques*, 20-21

<sup>xxvi</sup> Strasberg, Lee, *Dream of Passion*, 151

<sup>xxvii</sup> Gordon, Mel, *Stanislavski in America*, 142

<sup>xxviii</sup> Cohen, Lola, *Method Acting Handbook*; Easty, Edward Dwight, *On Method Acting*; Manderino, Ned, *All About Method Acting*; Hull, S. Loraine, *Strasberg's Method*; Kovens, Ed, *Method Manual*.

<sup>xxix</sup> Pitches, Jonathan, *Science and Stanislavsky*, 113

<sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid.*, 109

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 117

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 115

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 116

<sup>xxxiv</sup> See also the index of technical terms and topics in Hethmon, Robert H., *Strasberg at the Studio*, 417-420

<sup>xxxv</sup> Strasberg, Lee, *Dream of Passion*, 111-112

<sup>xxxvi</sup> His views on the James-Lange theory can be read in Strasberg, Lee, *Dream of Passion*, 183-184