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The American Evolution

Acting praxis and *The Cherry Orchard*: the role
of Stanislavsky and emotion in the rehearsal
methods of Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler

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ABBREVIATIONS

Russian names have been anglicized – Stanislavsky, Boleslavsky etc. Any other form is retained from sources which employ it.

CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

‘Method Acting’, as David Krasner explains, ‘emerged as a technique that drew from Stanislavsky’s emphasis on the craft of acting, and accentuated working on a role that called upon the actor to build from his or her personal life and political ideals.’ (Hodge, 2010:145) The ‘craft of acting’ to which Krasner refers is born of the notion that human beings have great depth and that the actor is a vastly ‘complex psychological being’ generating ‘layers of meaning in performance which lie beyond easy comprehension.’ (ibid.)

Two key figures in the development of the Method are Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler. Strasberg is the person most synonymous with, and perhaps the most notorious, proponent of the Method. Whilst he developed a complex and intricate system, Strasberg’s actor training system can be essentially broken into *relaxation*, *concentration*, and *affective memory*. The latter is the most controversial feature of Strasberg’s Method and his contemporaries and scholars have questioned its necessity, efficacy and safety for over fifty years.

Strasberg defines his teaching as learning ‘to arouse the imagination, which is the belief in the reality and logic of what you are doing,’ and ‘finding the expression of these things.’ (Strasberg, 1964:118). Strasberg’s central exercise for arousing the imagination and learning to express it is *affective memory*. He developed the exercise from the early work of Stanislavsky in emotional memory, which Strasberg learnt through Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya at the American Laboratory Theatre (Gordon, 2010:28).

Strasberg maintained that affective memory exercises were a key component in drawing truthful, emotionally affective performances. They continue to form an essential part of the work at the Strasberg Institutes and the Actors Studio and, as Marc Gordon highlights, they ‘remain useful in culling out performances of great depth, and they often can solve acting problems where other approaches fail.’ (Krasner, 2000:58). These acting problems, in the context of Stanislavskian-based acting theory, have a tendency to be related to *truth* and *living the moment* on stage. Indeed all three of the most successful Method teachers, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, place emphasis on giving *truthful* performances.

Robert Hethmon recognizes the contentious issue of *truth* in acting: ‘What is “real” in acting? What is “true”? These makeshift words constantly creep into talk about acting, but they have no unequivocal meanings.’ (Hethmon, 1965:198) For Strasberg, a truthful performance is one in which the actor has ‘the belief, faith and imagination to create on the stage the “living through”...’ of a part. (Strasberg, 1987:123) This belief is rooted in the actor’s own personal experience, stimulated through affective memory. For Adler, truthful acting is performing the actions of a character in the imagined given circumstances. (Rotte, 2000:194)

It was as a result of Strasberg’s emphasis on this inside-out approach to creating a role, and specifically affective memory exercises, that the Group Theatre fractured in 1934. Stella Adler, who had been directed several times by Strasberg in the Group Theatre, grew disaffected and frustrated. She sought advice from Stanislavsky himself during a chance meeting in Paris in 1934 and he advised her that ‘if my System doesn’t help you, don’t use it.’ (Hirsch, 1984:78) Stanislavsky, according to the notes taken by Adler’s hired secretary, suggested that she approach

her roles from an outside-in perspective; that is ‘creating the outer life of a role, planning it in terms of a series of actions, taking you inside a character’s mind.’ (ibid)

Thus the Method became fractured and new strands began to be developed. Stella Adler began leading the acting classes at the Group Theatre emphasizing later parts of Stanislavsky’s research (Carnicke, 2000: 60): imagination, given circumstances and physical action. Adler’s technique stresses the training of the imagination through sense memory, investigating the given circumstances of the play through intensive script analysis and building a vocabulary of actions from which a physical score can be established.

The point of departure between Strasberg and Adler is related to the source of creative inspiration. As highlighted, Strasberg deems the self and personal circumstances as critical in creating inspiration for a role, whereas Adler, whilst not dismissing the importance of bringing oneself to a part, finds the source of inspiration in the imagination through the given circumstances.

In order to appraise the techniques of Strasberg and Adler in a contemporary, university setting, this research will begin by focusing on highlighting their definitions of emotion within the conceptual framework of their training systems. The notion of emotion and the role of inspiration in attaining it and truthfully portraying it are fundamental to both Adler and Strasberg. In light of this definition, or discussion, conclusions will be drawn with regards to how this informs their own techniques. Moreover, how these definitions conform to their descriptions of their own needs and preferences as actors will be considered.

The overall research aim is to find out what can be determined by the implementation of Method exercises in a short rehearsal period for Chekhov’s *Cherry*

Orchard. In a contemporary context, with student actors, how effective are these exercises in solving creative problems? What drives a theatrical performance and how best do actors achieve their ‘creative state’ (Benedetti, 2008:683) during the rehearsal process and in the final performance? That is to say how do the exercises employed create a mental and physical readiness for performance and how easily are the two synthesized?

This research work will contribute to the development of understanding Method exercises in a contemporary context in a number of ways: first, by providing a critical review of issues pertinent to the diffusion of training into practice; second, by critically examining existing accounts of Method training and its efficacy in producing a ‘truthful’ performance, truthful as remarked upon above by Strasberg and Adler; third, by obtaining the views of student actors on the practices and exercises employed in rehearsal, a rich picture of implementable Method actor training exercises of both practitioners can emerge, allowing a meaningful comparison between theory and practice, from which an improved understanding of creative issues in a student productions can be derived.

CHAPTER TWO

2. ISSUES AND A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Defining 'the Method'

The development of the Method began after the Moscow Art Theatre's American tour between 1923-1924. There are accounts from both Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg on the influence that this tour had on their vision for an American acting tradition. (Strasberg, 1987:37-38; Rotte, 2002:198)

The Method started in earnest in the Group Theatre between 1931-1941 under the guidance, until 1934, of head acting teacher Lee Strasberg. The goal was to create a unified language of theatre that both the actor and director could speak in order to achieve a highly truthful performance as an ensemble in much the same way that the Moscow Art Theatre had demonstrated in New York.

Harold Clurman, co-founder of the Group Theatre, defined the Method as a 'means of training actors as well as a technique for the use of actors in their work on parts.' (Clurman, 2000:369) The means of training actors was through systematic 'acting exercises, rehearsal techniques and working procedures with the intention of helping actors achieve greater persuasiveness, feeling and depth.' (Hodge, 2010:144). Krasner goes on to explicate that 'the Method combines Stanislavsky's techniques and the work of his pupil Eugene Vakhtangov for the purpose of understanding and effectively performing a role.' (ibid.) The influence of Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov is immeasurable. I would emphasize that both Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg regarded Stanislavsky's System as intended to be molded to cater to individual acting problems. Stanislavsky himself in the preface to *An Actor's Work* (Benedetti,

2010:xxvii) says ‘It is essential for every actor... to create his own system.’ Both Strasberg and Adler acknowledge this and have therefore developed their techniques in ways that have suited them best as actors. Through-lines of Stanislavskian theory run simultaneously in both practitioners but they have evolved different strands of the System, all of which require contextual consideration but should be considered primarily on their own merits and not as carbon copy Stanislavsky.

Once we acknowledge an American evolution of the System into the Method, Adler and Strasberg are both practitioners of it. Whilst Strasberg is synonymous with ‘The Method’, Krasner identifies ten principles on which they both agreed in relation to method acting (Hodge, 2010:145-6), and therefore reference will be made to both Adler and Strasberg as proponents of the Method.

Adler and Strasberg’s disagreement over action/emotion led to a split in the Group Theatre in 1934. Whilst Strasberg continued to teach his acting classes with emphasis on emotional memory, Stella Adler began teaching her own classes emphasizing the given circumstances and imagination.

2.2 STRASBERG: Emotion as inspiration

'We train the imagination, senses and emotions, helping the actor to expand the ability to conceive more than the ordinary. Our training nurtures creativity, which is the highest material that can be used for art.' (Strasberg in Cohen, 2010:2)

Strasberg's method, in his own words, 'is an amalgam of the work of Stanislavski, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold and the Group Theater.' (Cohen, 2010:preface) He explains that Stanislavsky is the foundation for systematic actor training but that he found 'in certain circumstances the Stanislavski approach does not work. The Stanislavski formulation often does not lead the actor to seek the kind of reality which the author conceived and which underlies the words he wrote' (Strasberg, 1965:309). Strasberg here is alluding to the limitations of *magic if*. He tackled this issue by expanding on Vakhtangov's re-phrasing of the *magic if* which asks the actor to replace 'If I was so and so, what would I do' with 'If I am playing Juliet, and I have to fall in love overnight, what would I, the actor, have to do to create for myself belief in this kind of event?' (Strasberg, 1965: 308). Finally, Strasberg was influenced by Meyerhold's experimentation with form, something that Strasberg also attempted during the Group Theatre years. (Gordon, 1984:6) Strasberg asserts that 'observing and analyzing their work', both visually as Strasberg saw their productions and through their written literature, 'is essential in forming a practical comprehension of the theoretical approach of our work and training.' (Cohen,2010:preface) This information counters criticism that Strasberg is simply a mis-reading of Stanislavsky and demonstrates that he drew influence from a variety of techniques before finalizing the Method.

Early in his career, Strasberg identified the actor's problem as that of one of achieving the same level of spontaneity and truth on stage performance after performance. Taking the inspiration from Stanislavsky, Strasberg set out to develop a methodology to the acting craft that focused on finding 'a solution that leads the actor from creation to expression in ways that eschew purely external approaches' (Strasberg, 1987:90)

Stanislavsky's work is perhaps most evident in Strasberg's Method: relaxation, concentration, and emotional memory are some of the key exercises for both practitioners. Strasberg states 'I start with Stanislavski's original premise that there are things within human beings called the unconscious and subconscious which we can use for acting.' (Cohen, 2010:146) The notion of subconscious and unconscious behavior, whilst not an idea discovered by Stanislavsky, forms the basis of much of Strasberg's work particularly in the area of emotional work. He quickly acknowledges the flaws in Stanislavsky's work: 'While the emotional approach has been the inspiration for our work, Stanislavsky had not yet understood its application for the stage, and the actors conveyed a static inner focus and set up the basic criticism of Stanislavsky's work that the acting was too internal. Stanislavsky was criticized for 'psychologizing' and the critics were right.' (ibid.) The basis of Strasberg's criticism came from watching the Moscow Art Theatre on their American tour. (Strasberg, 1965:72) Ironically, this 'psychologizing of acting' is common criticism in relation to Strasberg's Method. (Gordon, 2010:144-145) Strasberg's goal was therefore to continue Stanislavsky's work on emotional inspiration and to study its application to the live stage.

Creativity and autonomy for the actor are the fundamental elements in Strasberg's Method. In the same framework of theory as Stanislavsky, Strasberg believes the actor to be a creative artist who should actively work to bring to life a character through intelligent, considered work on the part.

Strasberg, like Stanislavsky, wanted to develop exercises, and ultimately solutions, to the problem of creating 'the illusion of the first time' (Strasberg, 1987:34) doing so, unlike Stanislavsky, through stimulating *emotional temperament* in actors. Strasberg believed that truthful performances came from an actor really experiencing emotions, *living through* the part. Sharon Carnicke gives extended commentary on the Stanislavskian notion of *perezhivanie* or *living through* and its relation to the Method in *Stanislavsky In Focus* (1998, chapter 5).

The central problem for Strasberg then, is how to 'stimulate the heart to be warm' (Strasberg, 1987:34), how to stimulate feeling. That is to say that whilst specifically through extensive training there existed technical ways of dealing with vocal and physical elements of the part, Strasberg saw a deficit in the actor's ability to stimulate emotions. Strasberg quickly acknowledges and accepts Stanislavsky's notion that emotions 'cannot be directly forced' and moves to suggest they can be 'stimulated'. (Strasberg, 1987:126) This underlines Strasberg's approach to emotion as the point of inspiration.

A further problem in Strasberg's view of acting is that of expressiveness. An actor may be able to stimulate emotion but the problem for Strasberg is 'The creation of *the right kind* of emotion' (Strasberg, 1987:90). On this basis, Strasberg developed his version of emotional memory exercises and substitution. A further problem is that the *right kind* of emotion may be stimulated but the actor cannot correctly or

faithfully express it. Strasberg identifies ‘habits of expression. (The actor) is conditioned to express his feelings and emotions not by nature, character, and strength of his own emotional responses, but by what society or his environment will permit.’ (Strasberg, 1987:95) Strasberg uses relaxation, concentration and emotional memory exercises to battle these *mannerisms*. These are aimed at alleviating any blocks to the correct *expression* of emotion.

This underlines the psychological responsibility that Strasberg places on the actor. The duality of an actor, as described by Diderot, is a positive influence in Strasberg’s view of acting who gives a lengthy analysis of Diderot in *A Dream of Passion* (1987, 33-36). For Strasberg, it is futile for an actor to attempt to avoid his personal history, feelings and thoughts and he believes therefore that ‘what is most important is the use of the soul of the actor as the material for his work – the necessity for the study of the emotions and the analysis of simple and complicated feelings.’ (Strasberg, 1987:62) If an actor can get to grips with emotional understanding and expression as the point of inspiration for his work as an actor, he will become a powerful, truthful stage performer, one who personifies Strasberg’s belief that ‘acting is the process of living on the stage.’ (Strasberg, 1987:63)

Considering the above and from Strasberg’s work at the Group Theatre, through to his work at the Actors Studio, it is clear that he places an enormous emphasis on an actor’s ability to emote *truthfully*. To emote truthfully, an actor must find the emotional temperament of his character, as defined by his imaginary reality in the play, and use that as the point of inspiration.

This emotional point of inspiration is exemplified by Strasberg’s comments on the rehearsals for *Success Story* in 1932. In discussing the profile for a character

played by Luther Adler (1903-1984), the brother of Stella Adler and key actor in the Group Theatre, Strasberg describes him as ‘a hot-tempered class-conscious stock boy who pushes his way to the top. The character was motivated by an all-encompassing anger at his class situation.’ (Strasberg, 1987: 87) Strasberg here categorizes the character by his emotional temperament as defined by his imaginary reality and gives this as the point of emotional inspiration for Luther Adler whom he describes as not being able ‘to find the true emotion of his character.’ Strasberg goes on to give Luther a substitution exercise in order to find truthful anger.

Substitution is the ‘substituted reality which has no relation to the scene, but which, for the actor, creates the event’ (Cohen, 2010:149). Strasberg would give the actor an altered set of circumstances for the scene if there were a problem *creating the right kind of emotion*. These circumstances would be catered to the actor and would motivate them to respond with the desired emotion.

In another example from the same rehearsal period Stella Adler, who Strasberg candidly classifies as an actress who ‘had an unusual emotion intensity, expressiveness, and physical vitality’ (ibid), is rehearsing the part of a meek Jewish secretary. Strasberg had to tone down Stella’s temperament as an actress in order to fit the emotional profile of the character, as defined by Strasberg, she was portraying. Speaking again in abstract terms of an emotional point of inspiration, Strasberg says he ‘wanted a deep emotion... but contained in a pure, lovely, ethereal quality.’ (ibid) As a result of this, Strasberg gives Stella a substitution exercise that would help her adjust her emotional expression to suit the profile.

These two examples highlight a fundamentally misunderstood part of the Method. Critics claim that Method actors work from themselves and their past and

therefore have a tendency to always bring the same elements of themselves to the parts they play. Strasberg himself firmly refutes this and actively attests that he ‘could not accept the actor’s mere expression of himself as being of service to the play.’ (Strasberg, 1987: 90) Instead he sees the purpose of the Method as ‘never one of creating emotion per se, nor... to create the emotion which the actor himself would naturally express in those circumstances. Rather, the purpose was to find a way of creating the emotional reaction demanded of the character by the text.’ (ibid.)

In the two examples above, Strasberg assists the actors in finding both an emotional response to the situation that is truthful to the actor (through substitution) and an emotional response that is fitting of the character (through profiling the temperament in the given circumstances).

Once the emotional temperament of the character is established and the actor is able to find a truthful means of expressing it, Strasberg moves to highlighting the importance of *logical behavior* of the character. This part of Method training works extensively with improvisation that he sees as leading ‘not only to a process of thought and response, but also helps to discover the logical behavior of the character.’ This will help to maintain and sustain the emotional inspiration already acquired through the early stages of emotional memory exercises.

Strasberg summarizes the purpose of an actor’s training as ‘designed to develop the imagination and train belief on the stage’ in order to ‘help the actor create the necessary reality demanded by the play. All of this training deals with the actor’s process of creation.’ (Strasberg, 1987:83) Strasberg’s Method ‘considers the actor as

a creative artist who must translate the ideas, intentions and the words of the author into a living presentation. In this presentation, the sound of the word contains not only meaning, but sensation, emotion and behavior.’ (Strasberg, 1987:198)

The basis for the Method then is that of actors who must *live through* their parts, endowing their stage life with real emotion and logical behavior, starting from an emotional point of inspiration.

Before discussing Adler’s approach, a word should be said about Strasberg’s work on action, which despite common misconceptions, did form part of the initial and ongoing work in developing the Method.

What we would do in the first session and in the reading rehearsals, was block out the actions, without acting them. Then we would start to work so that as the reading rehearsals went on, we almost began to have a performance in the chair. The actors would have a sense of what it was they were working toward later. (Strasberg, 1976: 545)

This refocuses criticism towards Strasberg that admonishes the Method for its emphasis on emotion over action. It is here clear that Strasberg did give considerable attention to the role and nature of action in dramatic performance but that, in his experience, the source of an actor’s creativity, and the most common block for an actor, lays not in his ability to understand action but rather truthfully expressing the resulting emotion.

2.3 ADLER: Emotion as a byproduct of Action

‘The Adler Technique had a strong appeal to star-struck neophytes. It combined First Studio theatricalism and imaginative acting choices that led to well-defined stage Action, by way of Clurman-style intellection.’ (Gordon, 2010:160)

Action and imagination are Adler’s contribution to the American acting tradition. Her actor training, as explicated in somewhat simplified detail by her grandson Tom Oppenheim (Bartow, 2006:29-46), focuses on the actor as an independent thinker, an intellectual who can make acting choices befitting of his own analysis of their character and the play. Adler fails to tackle any *acting problem* head on and instead, in her writing, philosophizes about the nature of the acting tradition (history, standards etc.) and encourages the actor to be receptive to other cultures: artistically, sociologically and historically. As Strasberg commented: ‘Stella Adler... never found that all-consuming interest in the process of acting that I felt.’ (Strasberg, 1987:81-82)

Adler did not see the craft of acting as a process and therefore did not develop a methodology for coping with acting issues in as much detail as Strasberg. Certainly, both books published regarding Stella’s technique (Adler, 2000 & Rotte, 2000) centre around issues such as ‘Making Actions Doable’, ‘Giving Actions Size’, ‘Dressing the Part’, ‘Actors are Aristocrats’ and ‘Making the Costume Real’ (Adler, 2000: contents page). Each of these chapter titles implies an external approach to the part in contrast to Strasberg’s concentration on the interior. The titles regard the process of acting as an objective, intellectual craft and this is the fundamental difference in emphasis between Strasberg and Adler.

Adler developed and refined her technique of actor training over the course of sixty years and it had its roots in her youth. Stella Adler came from an illustrious family of Jewish actors; both her mother and father were celebrated Yiddish Theatre stage actors and her own exposure to the stage occurred when she was four years old. (Rotte, 2000:4) Jacob, a highly celebrated actor, taught his children to study life, and nature and encouraged them to imitate the world around in them: ‘All of his kids had to imitate everything. We were acting all the time’ (Adler, 2000:52). From a young age therefore Stella was taught that acting was doing, and in her own words was ‘not just a job that begins when you arrive at the theatre in the evening.’, rather, ‘something for which you are constantly preparing’ (ibid.). The influence of her father and the philosophy of acting as an artistic craft for which you never stop learning are highly evident in the classroom lectures and the technique she established in later life.

Adler who was used to learning the craft of acting through experience in the repertory tradition, found herself in peculiar waters with the Group Theatre. Strasberg was spearheading the Group and teaching a variety of exercises. Strasberg taught Stanislavskian improvisation and affective memory techniques ‘which were new techniques to everyone except the actors who had been at Boleslavski’s lab.’ (Hirsch, 1984:75) Stella Adler, then, already exposed and well-versed in these exercises immediately felt displaced and, given the weight of her statement that only she was an ‘actual’ student of Boleslavsky, disheartened with the system being taught.

This clearly demonstrates Adler’s unease with a systematic approach to learning the craft of acting. She in fact claimed that the Group Theatre years were the worst years of her theatrical life.

The crux of her dissatisfaction with Strasberg and his actor training methods was during the rehearsals for *Gentlewoman*. Stanislavsky worked one-on-one with Stella for a period (which varies in length according to different accounts) on the part and he told her that ‘if my System doesn’t help you, don’t use it.’ (Hirsch, 1984:78) He suggested that she work from imagination using the given circumstances of the play and that she create ‘the outer line of a role, planning it in terms of a series of actions’ (Gordon, 2010: 154). This immediately caused a rift between herself and the staunch leader of the Group, (Lee) Strasberg.

This should be analysed more closely. At no point during the transcripts, which were noted down by a French translator-secretary (Gordon, 2010:154), does Stanislavsky, as intimated by Stella Adler, suggest he has abandoned affective memory or its efficacy in solving certain scenic problems. In fact, he told her that ‘his System exercises were a last resort’ (ibid.) for creative blocks and therefore not a method of rehearsal or actor training. It is evident from *An Actor Prepares*, published in English shortly after this encounter, that Stanislavsky did indeed consider affective memory an important part of his System as he dedicated an entire chapter to it.

Instead, Stanislavsky suggested that Adler approach the part in a different manner. He taught her exercises that formed part of the method of physical action, which she simplified to ‘starting from the outside’ (Hirsch, 1984:78) and using the given circumstances. This outside-in approach to building a character ‘had a liberating effect on Adler’ who took the lessons with Stanislavsky ‘as a negation of Emotional Recall’ (Gordon, 2010:154). In fact Stanislavsky was offering alternative exercises and methods to Stella Adler, all of which were part of his ongoing experiments and studies. It is true that his emphasis on affective memory as the most effective tool to combat creative blocks had waned but he maintained, in a candid

recollection in 1935, that ‘everything she had learnt (from Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya) was right.’ (ibid)

Stanislavsky’s statement here contradicts any notion that what Lee Strasberg was teaching was ‘wrong’, rather in fact, what he had been teaching was approved of and supported by Stanislavsky. What the Americans failed to do at this juncture was recognize Stanislavsky’s system as fluid, organic and in constant development and both Adler and Strasberg attempted to outline and determine in concrete terminology something that Stanislavsky never set out to do.

Stella Adler’s upbringing in community theatre, her experiences in commercial theatre, the initial years of the Group Theatre, her meeting with Stanislavsky in 1934 and the subsequent classes taught by Stella Adler at the Group are the foundation stones for the technique she later formed at her Conservatory.

The approach to actor training included Stella’s demands that her pupils study works of art, literature and culture. Part of the Adler doctrine was that actors were not simply working men and women who performed routinely but creative artists responsible for their own development as much as a human being as an actor. The craft of acting for Stella Adler was first and foremost centered on the artistic and cultural development of the human soul. (Rotte, 2000:16) Joanna Rotte, who studied under Adler, said that ‘she conceived the idea of a studio as a haven in which students could become persons equal to the times in which they lived and actors equal to the demands of contemporary theatre.’ (ibid.)

How then does this *non-methodical* method of Stella Adler tackle the issue of emotion and what emphasis does she place on it in the context of performance? For

Stella Adler, emotion is a byproduct of action. The emphasis is instead on action, doing: 'Acting and doing are the same. When you're acting you're *doing* something, but you have to learn not to *do* it differently when you *act* it.' Joanna Rotte further explains the emphasis in training on 'doing actions – including studying their natures, the circumstances around them, the attitude of the doer, and the justification for doing them.' (Rotte, 2000:79)

With regards to emotion, and in particular the use of emotional memory exercises, Adler says an actor should never attempt to go to an 'emotion itself or to use emotion as a source. As a teacher I discourage the student from reaching out for any emotion, conscious or unconscious. All the emotion is contained in the action. The action can be a personal or an imaginative one.' (Adler, 1964:143) In the first instance, Adler is in agreement with Strasberg in discouraging actors from trying to emulate or play an emotion (Strasberg 1987: 90) but diverges from his method in also discouraging an actor from using emotion as the source, or *inspiration*. Stella Adler, it can be deduced, believes that the inspiration for truthful acting comes from mapping out the physical action of the play and understanding the given circumstances. She elaborates:

The playwright gives you the play, the idea, the style, the conflict, the character. Etc. The background life of the character will be made up of the social, cultural, political, historical and geographical situation in which the author places him. The character must be understood within the framework of the character's own time and situation. Through the proper use of his craft, the actor will see the differences of social, historical, and cultural environment between himself and the character.

Through his craft he will be able to translate these difficulties and use them to arrive at the character. (Adler, 1964: 149)

Adler's practical exercises relate to stimulating the imagination through establishing acting goals, sense memory and action based tasks. Through these exercises, the appropriate emotion will be created. When asked about her contribution to actor training and specifically what is unique about it, Stella replied: 'I don't think anything, except my sense of theatre, sense of theatricality, sense of measure. I don't think I'm unique.' (Rotte interview pg. 201) For Stella Adler, acting was an intuitive process and one that required the actor to be a *renaissance man*, with a wide knowledge of culture, art, history and sociology which would help to build a wider physical, mental and emotional vocabulary. This simplified definition of Adler's acting tradition highlights the basis on which the rehearsals for *Cherry Orchard* would be conducted – a detailed contextual framework for the play as the basis for developing an acting vocabulary.

CHAPTER THREE

3. RESEARCH METHODS

I have chosen action research as the strategy for the thesis. This reflects my personal involvement in the rehearsals as director and actor trainer and therefore highlights the subjective nature of analyzing the results.

After every rehearsal, a questionnaire was given out to the members of the cast in relation to the exercises we had employed. The questionnaires asked the cast to rate the exercises using a scale from 1 (meaning of no beneficial use) to 5 (something which they believe has and will continue to help them in future). These results would help to indicate the actors' personal opinions towards the work.

The rehearsals and acting experiments were carried out at the Department of Drama and Theatre arts at the University of Birmingham using undergraduate students. The majority of these students were from the drama department (either joint or single honors) and two were drawn from non-drama courses but who had considerable acting experience.

Some of the key limitations to the research methodology include: actors' previous exposure (or non-exposure) to the exercises either through the University or other rehearsal periods; varying degrees of experience as actors (some have had professional work experience and others have only worked in amateur environments); and, the rehearsal timescale was very short and did not allow for the depth of work demanded by the nature of the exercises. Each of these limitations ought to be considered when drawing conclusions.

CHAPTER FOUR

2. STUDY RESULTS

4.1a Act Two

Act two of *The Cherry Orchard* is particularly noted for its lack of dramatic action, focusing instead on the musings of the characters and the subtext. In order to achieve a sense of stillness, of reflection, and most importantly of inner truth and justification, I chose Strasberg's exercises. The exercises I selected were relaxation, concentration, and affective memory – the structure and implementation of which I took from *Strasberg At The Actor's Studio, A Dream of Passion, The Lee Strasberg Notes* and *Stanislavsky in America*.

In order to make a fair and rounded assessment of the efficacy of the selected Method exercises, I referred to the varying importance Strasberg places on them. I selected the exercises that he deemed integral to the solution of creative problems.

Of concentration and relaxation, Strasberg says: 'The heads and tails of the coin of acting are relaxing and concentrating.' (Cohen, 2010:5). Their importance within the Method itself is clearly underlined: 'Just because you know what to do in a scene, doesn't mean you're able to do it. To truthfully convey the ideas that the scene demands, we need the ability to relax at will and to apply inner concentration and awareness.' (ibid)

We spent forty minutes before each rehearsal on the concentration and relaxation exercises as advised by Strasberg (ibid). Initially, I asked the actors to find a position in which they could relatively easily fall asleep. I directed them from head to toe, taking a considerable amount of time to describe the mental image of a warm, relaxing flow of water draining through the body, relaxing every muscle and tension. It was interesting to see the physical collapse of the actors' bodies during this period

of the exercise – they visibly became more relaxed and at ease. Once these external tensions were identified, I asked the actors to become aware of the temples which is the area Strasberg classifies as one of the three ‘areas of mental tension’ (Hethmon, 1965:91) The actors were instructed to permit the nerves in the temple to relax and to free up any tension caught in this area. Further to this, we repeated the basis of this exercise in the other two areas of mental tension: the bridge of the nose and around the mouth.

Relaxation and concentration, which the above exercise combines, were well received by the actors. In the first instance, it made them intuitively aware of their bodies, their posture and physicality and they found it easier to respond to direction regarding the external physicality of the characters. Secondly, on a very practical level for this play in particular, the actors were made aware of the mood of the act. The actors playing the servants Yasha and Dunyasha were able to begin to consider the implications of being on their own in the open air enjoying the freedom of being away from the Gaev house. This in turn, along with exercises later in the process, informed their reading of a subtextual, playful, physically open relationship between each other. It is therefore noteworthy that relaxation and concentration influenced this thinking into subtextual relationships and not just relaxed the body from nervous tension. In discussing the exercise after rehearsal, the students acknowledged that the exercise may be useful in long-term actor training but that more so than this, it allowed a sense of freedom, ease and it eliminated ‘unnecessary energy’ (Cohen, 2010:5) which they said is often missing in rehearsal processes and would contribute significantly to their future practice.

Affective memory exercises were used to support this newly burgeoning, imaginative harvest from the relaxation and concentration exercises. I explained the nature of the exercises and their intended objectives as (Lee) Strasberg did. This allayed any fears that the students had in relation to the fallacies they had heard regarding the technique. I recounted Strasberg's words: 'The soul of the character you're playing comes from your own emotions, but some actors question it because they become overly emotional. The exact opposite should happen. The actor should learn to control these emotions to use them on stage.' (Cohen, 2010:27) I also quoted Lee's fundamental outline of the exercise: 'The emotional memory is the actor's weapon to create a complete reality on stage.' (ibid.)

Once the confusion over the exercise was cleared, we began to prepare our emotional memories. The actors took it in turn to relax (using the exercise), and to contemplate the scene for which the exercise was being used. This is a fundamental departure from the nature of the Method as a training system in that Strasberg, which reserved emotional memory exercises 'for the correction of inauthentic or inadequate feelings.' (Gordon, 2010:144) Our departure therefore was in attempting to use the exercise not for correcting *inauthentic* feelings but rather for, as Strasberg put it, 'stimulating a proper mood' (ibid) for the scene.

For each character, I identified an emotional undercurrent that I wanted the actor to aim towards. For example:

Ranevskaya – deep in internal thought, lost in the past and intimidated by the future.

Gaev – plagued by insecurity about his lifestyle and his future and attempting to find resolve in his past.

Lopakhin – deep, loyal affection for Ranevskaya and an innocent, pressing desire to resolve the familial problems.

In order to find these emotional moods, or temperaments as I referred to them in rehearsal, I asked the actors to go away and to identify a time in which they had felt a parallel sense of emotion. As maintained by Strasberg, in the rehearsal process itself, I was not to be interested in the actual stories behind the emotional parallels but rather in the sensory details. Ultimately I never discovered what the histories were behind each of the actors' recalls.

The exercise began by taking a moment to relax the mind and body. I asked the actors to recount in fine sensory detail the circumstances that led up to the emotional reaction. I allowed the actors the freedom to control the mapping of the sensory details but interrupted on occasions in which I thought they were skipping over information that would be relative to the climactic emotional reaction. For the most part, these interruptions were related to smells and sounds, which the actors found most challenging to recall.

The exercise took several attempts to fully be understood by the actors. They often held themselves back, or thought that they were making mistakes when outlining information. As Strasberg says, the idea of the exercise is not to go to the emotion directly, but to remember the sensory details surrounding it in exacting detail. After several attempts, results started to appear and the actors responded well to the nature of the exercise. They struggled, once the exercise was complete, to successfully call up the emotional memory in scenic work. I suggest that this was because of a serious lack of time for the rehearsal period. Strasberg states that once an actor has become accustomed to the exercise, he ought to be able to achieve the

peak state of the emotional memory in a very short amount of time. (Strasberg, 1987:151) It took much longer in our rehearsal to do so.

The questionnaires gave the exercise a positive response and the students said that it is something that they would research and use again in future. Combined with the relaxation and concentration exercises, the students believed that affective memory allowed them to understand the nature of the subtext, not only of their own characters, but also, perhaps subconsciously, of their fellow scene partners. The actors stated that what initially seemed slightly hollow, non sequitur Chekhovian dialogue began to intuitively make sense and it allowed them to justify their lines internally.

A practical result of this exercise was the development of the relationship between Yasha and Dunyasha. As had been indicated from the relaxation and concentration exercises, the actors wished to pursue a subtextual relationship in order to profile their characters and to justify some of their actions over the course of the play (such as Yasha's reaction to Dunyasha in Act 3 when she announces that she's been called 'a little flower'). Yasha's temperament was one of a hot-blooded, bon vivant set out to connive his way up the social hierarchy and Dunyasha's was one of a social climber who spends much of her time imitating her social superiors in order to tackle a taunting sense of despondency. The actors very successfully used the emotional memory exercises to achieve these temperaments for the start of act two and this led on to another key component of Strasberg's rehearsal system, improvisation. With the correct mood identified and the actors suitably relaxed, I asked them to improvise a scene taking place directly before the opening of act two. By channeling the inspiration that formed through the exercises, the two actors played out a scene. Neither actor was instructed to do anything in particular but simply to let

the inner life of their character and their emotional temperament guide them to logical, truthful behavior. The result of this combination of exercises and improvisation led to the pre-scene that stuck throughout the rest of the rehearsals and appeared in the final performance.

This pre-scene may not have worked in the context of the whole play, or if the play were being assessed on its merits to social and historical accuracy but I believe that it is staple proof of the creative nature of Strasberg's exercises and it allowed the actors the freedom to form inspiration (from an emotional pretext) and to develop into justified, logical behavior. I believe that with a longer rehearsal period that these exercises would have produced further exciting results. The actors felt that the overall method of rehearsal, although initially seeming to be too focused on the self, opened doors to understanding the nature of their characters and the text. If I had had more rehearsal time with actors, I would have endeavored to follow the same avenue of improvisational and emotional exploration with them.

4.1b Act Three

Act three was rehearsed predominantly using techniques of Stella Adler. Adler essentially believed that action comes before emotion or, put another way, that emotion is the result of physical action. An actor must invest his imagination in the given circumstances of the play and use action based exercises to plot out the storyline. The main problem in creating a study of the practical efficiency of Adler's technique for tackling creative problems is that there is little to no definitive literature on the exercises she conducted. As the literature review acknowledges, Adler's technique is more philosophical and non-investigative. With that in mind, I referred to Mel Gordon's exercises in *Stanislavsky in America*, Joanna Rotte's descriptions of

the exercises in *Acting With Adler* and some of the practical examples from Stella Adler herself in *The Art of Acting*.

Act three, in stark, intentional contrast to act two, is filled with lively stage action. Whilst the narrative, dramatic action continues to take place off-stage (with the auction of the estate), the lively party atmosphere calls for a lot of dramatic life. In particular, I was keen to focus on the background activity taking place during the party. There was danger, particularly with the short amount of rehearsal time, that whilst the upstage action, formed of Chekhov's dialogue, could be rehearsed and comprehended by the actors, the life of the party (taking place in the back room) may become strained, false, that is to say devoid of *truth*. Selecting Adler's exercises, therefore, afforded us the opportunity to work on action. Ultimately the exercises were very useful at producing swift stage results.

The Adlerian exercises selected were: the actor's goals, imagination, sensory truth, action and circumstances. Although more of Adler's exercises were employed than Strasberg's in act two, there was a large amount of crossover and interrelated aspects of the exercises. I introduced the actors to the technique through initial script analysis – a very important aspect of Adler's training. We did table work relating to act three, and the wider play, in order to contextualize the play in relation to society, economy and history. This achieved a greater, deeper understanding of the play's intentions and thereby allowed the actors more confidence when employing the actor's goal exercise. This is in keeping with Adler's focus on the importance of the exploration of 'the given circumstances of the play rather than those of their own private lives. Unlike work at the Studio, where literary values, themes and styles are virtually never referred to, Adler classes are filled with comments about plays and playwrights.' (Hirsch, 1984:215)

Once the script analysis was completed, we began working on the actor's goals. For the actor's goals exercise, I asked the students to first outline their character's dramatic action. This used the Action exercise in which a playable score of physical actions was outlined and intensified by breaking the action down further into playable verbs. For example, Simeonov-Pischik's remarks from this exercise were thus:

Physical activity - dancing and drinking at a party

Circumstances - The house is one in which I have dined and partied on many occasions in the past. In the past, the house was filled with a sense of purpose, or pride and of austerity. Recently, the house has become to look dilapidated, uncared for and aged. The walls once clean and bright have become stained and are beginning to peel. The once beautiful furniture has begun to look in decline, there is a noticeable amount of dust around the corners and crevices of the room. The servants, apart from Firs, have neglected the care of the cutlery and glassware – they were once very refined and beautiful. I am here for unknown reasons, I am only partially aware of the full extent of the ramifications of the sale of the house. Whilst I notice the decline of the house, I don't particularly compute its relevance to the impending auction. There is no such thing as symbolism to me here. I see that other party-goers, in particular Ranevskaya and Varya, are in a state of flummox, of nervous tension. I do not deal well with this kind of emotional fraying and instead busy myself with drinking, dancing and creating points of entertainment in any manner possible.

Actions - weak. I do not ask for specifics. E.g. 'I would like another drink' is a reflection of my weak manner of action, in place of a stronger action 'I would like a drink of champagne'. The choice of my weak actions is a reflection of my internal dialogue which finds the party atmosphere very uncomfortable and I feel the need to fill this nervous air with words and behavior; albeit weak words and behavior.

This excerpt exemplifies the very specific, action based focus of Stella Adler's approach to a part. She emphasizes the importance of detail, of making every action, every moment in the scene truthful and justified. The actor playing Simeonov-Pischik continued to go into fine details about the circumstances and how, through action, his character responds. There is an interesting point highlighted here by the actor – he *feels* uncomfortable and so carries out an *action* to compensate for this feeling. This at first seems to confirm Strasberg's notion that emotion comes before action. But in fact the circumstances, that is to say the physical action and physical landscape surrounding the actor, is affecting his emotion and his behavior and so he compensates for these feelings by further *action*.

Following this part of the rehearsal process, the actors were asked to describe, or in the words of Adler, 'give away' their score and verbs to each other. This involved, for example, Simeonov-Pischik sitting in scene, on his own, imagining the party going on around him, reading through his above action template in full. Once each actor had done this, they were asked to work together to build from each others' scores, adding detail, embellishing thoughts and furthering the imaginative realities. Once this was complete, the actors were asked to perform their action sequences physically, without words.

This exercise was particularly well received according the questionnaires. The actors said that they were used to script analysis and had previously found that it was useful in building character biographies but finding a practical application for it, through the action and actor's goals exercises, was particularly useful.

In order to embellish and give greater truth to the scenic behavior of the characters, I asked the actors to carry out imagination and sensory truth exercises. I asked the actors individually to imagine, in great detail, what the Gaev drawing room and ballroom would look like. What would it contain? What colours would be prominent? What is the use for every object they imagine being there? These descriptions created a lively, detailed image in their minds of the rooms in which they would be acting. To further emboss these imagined images, we conducted sense memory exercises. Here is an example of one of the sensory truth exercises conducted with Varya. I described the following situation to the actress playing Varya and she acted it out, slowly and deliberately:

Imagine you are in the Gaev drawing room. In the drawing room there is a large, comfortable chaise longue. There is a small drinks table to the foot of this chaise longue. The chaise is made from fine, mustard colored material. Look at the size of the chaise and the quality of the material. There is a small tear at the head of it that has not yet been attended to. Move to the large cabinet on the back wall and begin to look through the drawers for a needle and thread. You can't see it but you feel the prick of the needle as you shuffle through the drawer. You get out the needle and investigate the small prick it has made in

your finger. Notice the colour of the blood – dark, thick. You suck your finger as you move back to the chaise, ensuring you don't get blood anywhere. You sit on the chaise. It feels soft, bouncy and very comfortable. You unconsciously begin to feel the age and history that the chaise carries. Begin to thread the needle. It takes you a number of attempts but eventually you thread it. Sew up the chaise slowly and carefully mindful of its pride of place in the drawing room.

Following this sensory description and action, the actress began to find new subtextual inspiration in the room. She endowed items, furniture, and candlesticks, with personal truths and with sensory detail. The above was one exercise out of many with all of the actors in creating personal spaces within the room and sensory detail which had particular meaning for each character.

The questionnaires indicated that the actors found it difficult to truly 'see' the house even when they recalled their stage pictures and sense memory. They indicated that this was because, despite all good intentions, a rehearsal room by any other name is still a rehearsal room. Once we were running the technical rehearsal and dress rehearsal in the completed set, the actors indicated that the exercises became clearer and more useful for the forthcoming scene work.

Having used the exercises, the rehearsals began to synthesize each of the elements. The rehearsal would begin with imagination, circumstances and sense memory exercises before weaving those into the action based exercise completed previously. I asked the actors to abandon the script and to improvise a scene at the party, concentrating on how each of the characters would respond to one another.

Eventually, after several rehearsals, I asked the actors to begin to fit the scenes from the play itself into their improvised scenarios. This created fluid dramatic action and the actors stated that it was a very interesting, very organic way of approaching the act.

4.2 Analyse and synthesise the findings with the literature review

Both rehearsal methods were well received by the actors despite the marked differences between them. The implementation of the exercises, albeit isolated from the context of an actor-training program, definitely assisted inspiration for each of the actors.

Act two, with its emphasis on creating an emotional temperament for the scene and the characters, motivated the actors to become independent, creative thinkers. Instead of waiting for direction, each actor through the exercises contributed significantly to the development of the act. For the actors, the emphasis on emotion, and emotional truth, justified their lines and their behavior. It established a logical pattern of inner truth, which concretely personified itself through stage action. This complements Strasberg's comments on action: 'Physical action is determined by the character's state of mind and the emotional experience.' (Strasberg, 1987:164)

Act three, with its emphasis on stage action, was a longer and ultimately more time-consuming rehearsal process. The means by which the actors created their stage actions were extensive, highly detailed and more emotionally draining (for the actors) than act two. The development of the score of actions, the imagination and sensory truth exercises all required intense focus and energy as well as perseverance. It should be reiterated that the exercises were used in isolation as specific means of assessing practicality and not, as they were used by Stella Adler, as actor training

tools. However, with this in mind, it is interesting to note that the questionnaires indicated that the actors found this technique more difficult and emotionally draining than Lee Strasberg's Method. This is counter to the claims in the literature review that focusing on the self, investing personal truths into performance leads to dazed actors. (Hornby, 1992:183)

Both the actors and I agreed that Stella Adler's exercises certainly create a great deal of stage detail and this helped the actors and me in approaching the 'world of the play' with regards to it being about a group of people interacting with one another in the given circumstances.

CHAPTER FIVE

5. CONCLUSION

The overall aim of the research was to investigate the definition of emotion within the conceptual framework of the actor training systems of Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg. In the literature review, the objective was to highlight their differing interpretations of the role of emotion in the acting process and to establish patterns in their own practice. In the practical experiment, the research objective was to ask what can be determined by the implementation of the training exercises of Strasberg and Adler into a present day rehearsal process and production of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*. Finally, the evaluative objective was to assess how effective these exercises were in solving creative problems in the context of work with student actors.

The literature review supports the statement that Strasberg considers emotion as the inspiration required for an actor to fulfill a truthful portrayal of a character and that Adler asserts that all stage behavior must be the result of action, of doing and that emotion will be a byproduct of this.

Whilst Adler and Strasberg differ in emphasis, both sought acting filled with truthful, logical behaviour. The methods by which they achieved this relied on their personal interpretation of Stanislavsky's theories that they learnt through Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya. Much has been made of Stella Adler's meeting with Stanislavsky in 1934, after which Adler declared 'Stanislavski said we're doing it wrong.' (Hirsch, pg. 79) I would argue that the focus of researchers of the Method and its development ought not to emphasize what was or was not said during this brief meeting but rather on the clash of personality and experience between Adler and

Strasberg. Stanislavsky himself dismissed the meeting with Adler in 1935: ‘A completely panic-stricken woman came to see me in Paris. She clutched me and cried, “You destroyed me!”... I had to take her on, if only to restore the reputation of my System. I wasted a whole month on it.’ (Gordon, 2010:155) And most tellingly, he concludes: ‘It turned out that everything she had learnt was right.’ (ibid) I believe that Stanislavsky was continuing to maintain what he had maintained throughout his life: there is no single answer to the problems of acting. Instead, it is the responsibility of the actor to select exercises and tools to assist in the solution. If one element does not work, try it a different way.

As Stanislavsky says, the techniques Stella Adler had been taught were indeed correct but her temperament as an actress and as a person meant that she was more inclined to working on acting problems through action and externals as opposed to emotionally focused exercises. Lee Strasberg was the opposite of this and so he employed early Stanislavsky. Carnicke concludes: ‘Taken together, Strasberg and Adler – the one reflecting early and the other late Stanislavsky – do not represent a radical change in the System as is often assumed, but rather a cross-section of the master’s continuing experiments.’ (Carnicke, 2000:61)

The recommendation from the literature review therefore is that detailed study ought to be carried out in the areas of personality driven actor training and how this can delineate an entire theory of acting. The problem of unraveling the Method, it would seem, is less related to the interpretation of Stanislavsky and more related to a clash of personalities in a highly fervent period of theatre and film.

The conclusions that can be drawn from placing the two methods side-by-side in two acts of a play are that they both achieve what they set out to achieve. That is to

say that both methods, according to the actors' experiences, create a sense of inner truth and logical behavior. The argument for further investigation in this area then is to assess whether this inner truth that is felt by the actors through the use of the exercises is believable for an objective audience who have not had any information regarding the process. The conclusion I draw from this experiment is that the latter is unimportant in the rehearsal context – the main use of the exercises we employed was creating the life of the play and allowing the actors to choose, that is to motivate and to justify their behavior. This in turn produced more confident performers who intimately understood the multifaceted layers of a complicated play. Whether this translated to believable and 'good' acting from the audience's point of view is the material for a far more detailed and rounded study.

This study was by no means exhaustive and it was not a critical analysis of *The Method*. Instead it was an experiment: how effective and practical are the basic exercises and rehearsal methods of Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler in the context of a short rehearsal period for a Chekhov play. What are the advantages and disadvantages? Is it possible to isolate elements of their systems (in the way that Stanislavsky encouraged his students to do) in order to address areas of creative blocks?

There are several reasons for this not being an exhaustive study. Neither Lee Strasberg nor Stella Adler would support the notion that the exercises used can be effectively employed without very extensive preparatory work. I therefore have approached the study from a selective standpoint. Stanislavsky, speaking of his system, said 'If the System doesn't help you, forget it.' (Lewis, 1986:54) He

encouraged actors to use his work, which he was reluctant to have written down for fear of a sense of *finality*, in a way that suited them. He maintained that actors could select tools from the system if a creative problem arose.

A further limitation to the study was the use of student actors. The actors ranged from 19-21 years of age and came from a variety of acting backgrounds. A significant limitation was that four of the actors had used emotional memory exercises before and therefore had previous experience of its process – this impacted on the results as they were held back for some time whilst the other actors learned the technique.

The final, overriding limitation was that of time. Both Ranevskaya and Lopakhin were final year students and could not commit fully to the rehearsal process until two weeks before the final practical assessment. The other actors were involved with Guild productions and final assessments (some being joint honors) and also were unable to commit to a full rehearsal schedule. This impacted significantly on the amount of time and work we could spend developing the exercises in full – that is to say exploring interesting avenues of creative inspiration that came as a result of the exercises. We had to make decisions as to which avenues to follow and to work from and this perhaps limited the actors in realizing their full creative potential.

The experiment and rehearsal process provides a good overall analysis of selected Method exercises in a student context. The results from the study indicate that both Adler and Strasberg's acting exercises can generate some interesting theatrical results and creative avenues for exploration.

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