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Getting at "The Truth": A Feminist Consideration of American Actor Training

by

Rosemary Malague

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
The City University of New York

2001

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Chapter 1

The "Given Circumstances"

In 1985, in a scant but provocatively titled essay, "The (Female) Actor Prepares," Linda Walsh Jenkins and Susan Ogden-Malouf begin with this premise:

> Actors are more powerfully affected by a play than is an audience; the audience process is at best a weak mirror of the players'. A feminist critique of theater shifts the gaze from product to process: If the journey toward production can be liberated from gender oppression, perhaps the product itself will be so as well.[1]

This opening proposition, that it is the *actor* who is most powerfully affected by the performance process, hints at a truism with ramifications that have been under-examined within a feminist context. As if in answer to the rallying cry issued by this and other forays of the early 1980s, feminist scholars have ventured forth in droves, offering responses to and prescriptions for redressing gender oppression in the theatre. In the ensuing years, there has been a proliferation of feminist criticism, casting its "gaze" on a wide range of theatrical processes *and* products. Yet relatively little feminist attention has been paid to the role of the actor and, in particular, to the effects of the predominant methodologies of American actor training: in the "process" of actor training, it is the *actor* who becomes the "product." It is time to use the apparatus of feminist criticism to study the material experience of the actor,

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specifically through an investigation of both the theoretical and practical elements of American Stanislavsky-based acting techniques.[2] In this dissertation, I undertake a thoughtful analysis of American actor training, exposing gender biases endemic to its traditions and uncovering (or recovering) elements of the "American approach"--and its antecedent, the Stanislavsky "System"--which might serve to empower rather than oppress its female practitioners.

"Truth" on the Stage

The System developed by Russian actor-director-teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky more than a century ago is an intricate and multifarious collection of observations, revelations, and principles pertaining to the art of acting. Its premise is that acting is a craft, with concomitant tools and skills that can be acquired and practiced. Accordingly, it offers practical guidance--and guidelines--to actors as craftspeople. The System also contains its own ideal aesthetic for acting: "Truth on the stage." Though any attempt to reduce the System to a single axiom risks oversimplification, few would argue with this particular assertion. "Truth on the stage" is generally agreed to be the central mission of Stanislavskian acting theory and of those American acting teachers who have based their work on its tenets.

In Stanislavskian theory, the end is also the means: truthfulness in the theatrical product is achieved through truthfulness in the acting process. The believable actor is one who believes. Stanislavsky's conclusion is a reversal of the one reached a century earlier by Denis Diderot in his renowned essay *Paradox of*

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"truth," "nature," and "reality" can no longer be presumed to have fixed, universal meaning. As Chris Weedon says, "Poststructuralist discourses reject the claim that scientific theories can give access to the truth [since] science can only ever produce specific knowledges, with specific implications."[7] Using the science of sociobiology as an example, Weedon illustrates how "natural laws" (such as those referred to by Moore) have historically been used to "determine in advance what constitutes normal femininity and masculinity, to fix subjectivity by insisting that certain meanings are the true ones because they are determined by natural forces beyond our control."[8] What are the implications, then, for women performing in a theatre art predicated on a belief in such "natural" forces?

Feminist theorist Elin Diamond exposes "truth" in traditional mimesis as inextricably intertwined with traditional assumptions about gender:

> For feminist historians, philosophers, and literary critics in the last three decades and, in fact, much earlier, truth and the sameness that supports it cannot be understood as a neutral, omnipotent, changeless essence, embedded in eternal nature, revealed by mimesis. Rather Truth is inseparable from gender-based and biased epistemologies.[9]

For feminist critics, then, the very premise of Stanislavsky's System is deeply suspect. I juxtapose these quotations from Stanislavsky and Diamond to articulate a new "paradox of acting"--one for the feminist actor. What if one can't--or doesn't want to--believe? What happens if one discovers that the "truth" produced in Stanislavskian acting is socially constructed, reflecting a patriarchal world view? If one accepts the

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notion that "truth" is relative and subject to gender-based assumptions and prejudices, might the traditional American approaches to acting begin to collapse, foundationless, like a house of cards?

One important factor in the acting process is the dramatic literature for which the actor prepares. Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf note that Stanislavsky-based actor training "asks the performer to align with a part" and "to search for those self-revelations that are appropriate to a role." Taken at face value, this appears to be a neutral and natural process. But a feminist consciousness doubts the "neutrality" of such a technique. What happens when a woman is "asked to align with an unhealthy gender role" and "to search for self-revelations that are demeaning"?[10] By what means does a woman enact a role in a misogynist text? These questions lend new meaning to Stanislavsky's statement that art "converts a fiction into a beautiful artistic truth." What is the fiction? And what are the costs for the actor converting it into an apparent truth?

Feminist theatre criticism has long problematized realism as a dramatic form, casting doubt on its efficacy for the representation of female subjects. But the predominant training methodology in colleges, universities, conservatories, and professional training centers in this country remains rooted in realist traditions. Historically, feminist accusations of essentialism have been rightly directed at realism, which tends to reify "natural" gender roles, assuring us of their stability. In her 1988 book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan says of the spectator: "She sees women as mothers, relegated to supporting roles that enable the more important action

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of the male protagonist. She sees attractive women performers made-up and dressed to seduce or be seduced by the male lead. While the men are generally active and involved, the women seem marginal and curiously irrelevant, except as a tacit support system or as decoration that enhances and directs the pleasure of the male spectator's gaze."[11] If this is what the feminist spectator sees, then it must also be what the female actor *embodies*. She must enter into that gender role in an active (or passive) fashion, with her own body, her own self. And in the tradition of Stanislavsky-based acting, she must delve into her own psyche to "become" the character. One need only glance at contemporary scene books and regional theatre schedules to see that, even with the emergence of feminist alternative texts, canonical and conventional dramatic literature continues to provide most of the acting opportunities for women, both in and out of the classroom.[12]

The relationship between the actor and the character--or the performance text--is a basic building block of Stanislavskian theory. Given the fact that recent theory has cast doubt on the "truth" in conventional mimesis, I re-examine the concept of "creating a character" through the lens of feminist theory. Does the female actor typically take strong, Stanislavskian *action* on the stage? Or is she more often placed in the role of *re*actor to the stronger male character? Does she damage herself in mining her psyche to play the role of victim? Or object? Conversely, might Stanislavskian script and character analysis techniques actually be used to provide the actor with agency, allowing her to make informed and empowering choices about role-play?

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One answer may be found in the criticism leveled at Stanislavskian acting by male playwrights. Apparently resentful of the centrality of the actor in Stanislavsky's production model, writers like Edward Albee and David Mamet have been extremely vocal, appearing to feel somehow threatened by the power that actors potentially wield. Neither allows cross-gendered casting of their plays; both are horrified by the distortion such an innovation might create. On a more fundamental level, they are insistent that the function of the actor is merely, as Albee says, "to translate the play intact from the page to the stage."[13] Mamet is even more emphatic in his recent ruminations on acting. Damning Stanislavsky as "an amateur," he proclaims: "The actor is onstage to communicate the play to the audience. That is the beginning and the end of his and her job."[14] While these are not unexpected sentiments from playwrights, why should writers feel so threatened by trained and thoughtful actors? Perhaps they fear the actor's power to question, reinterpret, or even subvert a play's "fixed" meaning by providing, through the collaborative process, different points of view. Perhaps they fear the ways in which this implied power might be appropriated by feminist Stanislavskians and used to their own ends.[15]

Stanislavskian (Patriarchal) Authority

Another area of concern for the female actor is the structure of the acting classroom. The Stanislavskian pedagogical model places at its center a patriarchal figure who serves as teacher/director/critic. Under his (or her) close and careful guidance, students are led through exercises designed to help them to "get in touch"

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realistic roles (read: *gender* roles) in the acting classroom, where judgment of the "wrong" performance is swift and absolute.

My interest in acting methodologies dates to my own professional training as a student at Circle in the Square Theatre School in New York in the early 1980s. The training was derived primarily from Lee Strasberg's work at the Actors Studio; several of the teachers were his disciples. Though I was not a conscious feminist at the time, my awareness of sexism in the classroom was keen. The training was a tremendous struggle; at its best demanding, at its worst demoralizing and demeaning. In watching the actresses whose work was most praised, I saw clearly sexist patterns emerge. The "successful" actresses were usually those I referred to then as the "Sam Shepard actresses," that having been the era of his vogue.[18] I remember them crawling around on the floor in scenes from *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Fool for Love*. Particularly lauded was the young woman who removed her blouse for a scene from *Equus*. These were the "good actresses," often blonde and conventionally attractive. They were routinely acknowledged for their "risk-taking," and they scored points for their "vulnerability." But what was the nature of the risks they took? What was the nature of their vulnerability?

Criteria for the success of actors in the classroom may parallel Sue-Ellen Case's observations about the typical configuration of female sexuality on the stage. Contrasting the sexuality of Amanda in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* to that of Alan in Peter Schaffer's *Equus*, Case suggests that in the former, "the female actor learns to be passive, weak and dependent in her sexual role, with a fragile inner

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life that reveals no sexual desire"; in the latter, "the young man's sexuality is blatant and aggressive."[19] In the acting classroom, men are the aggressors; the woman who offers herself as sexual object is often regarded as the most daring, vulnerable, and therefore, the most "honest" actor.

The woman who offers herself as sexual object may also be regarded as the most "marketable" actress. The women I describe were, more than likely, identified by the teachers as "commercial." Sex sells. And success sells the school. I should add that the successful men in these classes *also* conformed to a model; also "Shepard actors" (in those days), they were the inheritors of the t-shirt-wearing-Marlon Brando-as-Stanley Kowalski-tradition, the t-shirt-wearing-James Dean-as-Rebel Without a Cause-tradition, the angry-young-(American)-man tradition, performing scenes from *True West* and *Tooth of Crime*. Just as the women of the class were rewarded for their figures and fragility, so were the men rewarded for their muscles and machismo. Worth noting is the fact that some of these people *do* work. I see them on soap operas and occasionally on stage and in films. (Or perhaps I should say I *have* seen them. The women, who now approach forty, have all but vanished from the scene.) If the studio serves as an entry into the theatrical "marketplace," the commercial prospects of an acting student may be a prejudicial factor in the training he or she receives.

I remember the tyrannical, fearful tenor of the acting classes, and how we were called upon to follow instructions slavishly, without question or explanation. Though we studied Stanislavsky-based techniques, particularly Strasberg's Method, we

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were given no readings, no history--in fact, no explanation of what the Method was, where it came from, or the theory behind its operation. I remember countless people breaking down (though these breakdowns were frequently characterized as "breakthroughs"). And I remember my own "breakthrough," when I played the role of Susan in Michael Weller's *Loose Ends* (a play which now strikes me as a vociferous reaction to feminism, villainizing the young wife who rejects motherhood for a career). In the scene of marital break-up, I wept profusely and was rewarded with praise. It's possible, of course, that I *had* finally had a "breakthrough," that my acting had begun to grow. But it also seems possible that I was finally behaving in the expected way; that I was rewarded for the proper performance of my gender role.[20]

I include these personal recollections as a way of framing the impetus for my research. This is my personal story, but it is also the story of American actor training. This is borne out in anecdotal evidence everywhere. Tony Award-winning actor Cherry Jones, in an interview discussing her own actor training at Carnegie-Mellon University, voices her concerns about the ideological and psychological control wielded by her teachers:

> We had a different head of the department every year, and of course each new head would bring in new acting teachers who told you to forget everything you'd ever learned, that they had one true way. I watched some of my classmates believe that, which troubled me, because I think one should be an agnostic with acting teachers as well

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> as with God. The manipulation with acting teachers is tremendous, and a number of kids from my class actually had nervous breakdowns.[21]

Though Jones appears to be an example of someone who managed to emerge from the system unscathed, the unusual power dynamics within the Stanislavskian acting class, with its potential for manipulation, exploitation, and patriarchal control, should be further examined.

The very nature of the acting process places the actors' "selves" at risk. Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf refer to the tendency of teachers to serve as "all-knowing guru for whom the performer must be absolutely vulnerable (opening the way to both psychological and sexual exploitation)."[22] Indeed, the power structure of the acting classroom, with students literally required to "perform" for their teachers--to do what they are told, on the spot--leaves many actors open to the possibility of sexual harassment. One notorious infraction is cited by Richard Hornby in *The End of Acting*: "An acting teacher named Paul Mann, whose classes included such techniques as nudity, allegedly had sexual relations with his students as a method of 'releasing' them. . . . Interestingly . . . other acting instructors were quoted as saying that Mann's approach was perfectly reasonable; they too had sex with students."[23] One would hope that Paul Mann's behavior represents an unusually extreme violation, but the kind of abuse reported in that scenario is at least a potentiality in many acting classrooms. And even in classrooms where sexual abuse is not a threat, where students are not coerced to perform sexual acts, they may, instead, be coerced to perform *gendered* acts. What are the material effects of power and control in the

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acting classroom?

In this study, I examine the specific pedagogical strategies and practices of four master teachers, revealing the power dynamic at work between instructor and student. I demonstrate how the teachers' expectations may contain double (gendered) standards, often oppressive and humiliating to the female student. I also seek teaching practices which resist the patriarchal model. Must the Stanislavskian classroom be autocratic? Is there room for an alternative model of facilitation?

The function of "authority" in Stanislavskian actor-training is greater than that of the single authority figure in front of the classroom: the System itself has to a large extent become the authoritative approach to American acting. For those who adhere to the precepts of Stanislavsky's System, the word "truth" has traditionally taken on a third crucial meaning: if "truth on the stage" is considered both the means and the end of good acting, Stanislavsky's System is the one true way to achieve it. Widely regarded as the most influential system of acting in the western world, Stanislavsky's technique has become an institution, dominating training and practice throughout the twentieth century, and inspiring religious-like fervor in leagues of true-believers. Ironically, the System has long been open to a wide range of interpretations, with much disagreement about which interpretation is "truest." Followers generally fall into one of two categories: those who claim to teach and practice Stanislavskian acting with the greatest understanding and fidelity, and those who claim that their own interpretations of the System add to and/or surpass Stanislavsky's original work.

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The authoritative claims of Stanislavskian theory often prove problematic for feminist (and other) theatre practitioners. In *Acting (Re)Considered*, a collection of contemporary essays on a variety of acting practices, Phillip Zarrilli shares Diamond's challenges to the concepts of the "real" and "true," but aims his critique directly at actor training:

> Many discourses about acting assume that they are expressing *the* truth. Most narratives foreground neither the process of constructing this "truth" nor the voice or specific position from which this (version of) "truth" is being constructed. To do so would reveal the fact that *this* "truth" is a particular version authored by a particular person for a particular audience in a particular place and time, and is thereby open to question and revision.[24]

It becomes important, therefore, to examine and expose the assumptions underlying truth claims made by and on behalf of Stanislavskian acting theory--especially from a feminist perspective. What kind of truth is produced--or *re*produced--on stage? Whose truth is it? What does it mean for the actor to be "honest" in his--and especially her--acting process? What are the effects of actor training which indoctrinates students in "one true way"? On the other hand, if these discourses are, as Zarrilli says, "open to question and revision," how might a system which gives the actor primacy in the production process be useful for the feminist actor? Can the actor be encouraged to think critically about the System, and to make use of it as a source of artistic expression? In asking--and answering--these questions, I hope not

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only to expose restrictive and sexist aspects of Stanislavskian acting, but also to determine whether these "pitfalls" can be avoided. How might elements of the System be recaptured and reconfigured to have use value for the female--and feminist--actor?

As a feminist researcher and theatre practitioner, I am interested in the material effects of actor training on *all* women, whether they identify themselves as feminists or not. My research, therefore, considers how women are ill-used or well-served by Stanislavsky-derived actor training processes. But I also consider the special needs and strategies of consciously feminist actors. Elizabeth C. Stroppel theorizes two "categories" of feminist acting which are useful to this discussion. She says:

> I have analyzed and defined two categories of feminist acting, namely "implicit" and "explicit." The former involves acting that occurs, for the most part, within a realistic framework but still seeks to imbue characters with a sense of individual psychology and social critique. The latter implies the type of acting that breaks realistic frames and exposes the constructedness of the acting process and the characters created. It visibly highlights differences of gender, race, sexual preference, and class as cultural representations rather than subsumes them as natural reflections of society. Both are equally valid in their feminist intent and process, if not in their resultant product.[25]

My dissertation examines how American actor training traditions might hinder or help the purposes and practices of both "implicit" and "explicit" feminist actors--and their acting projects.

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One of the implied goals of Zarrilli's book is to invite a "(re)consideration" of the "languages of" and "the ideology implicit in any kind of acting."[26] Richard Hornby, in *The End of Acting*, suggests that "the time is long overdue" for applying the theories of poststructuralism and feminist criticism to acting.[27] And Sharon M. Carnicke, in the conclusion to her recent study *Stanislavsky in Focus*, acknowledges that "gender issues are another important topic that I have had to leave aside," suggesting that someone else might take up an examination of the Method, which "provides rich soil for gender analysis."[28] All are "invitations" to which I wish to respond, with an in-depth study and critique of the dominant modes of American acting theory and actor training, informed by a feminist perspective. In the fifteen years since the publication of "A (Female) Actor Prepares," there has been an explosion of feminist theatre theory addressing a wide range of topics; there have also been numerous studies on American acting, actor training, and acting teachers.[29] But the key issues touched upon by Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf deserve deeper analysis than they have yet received; there has not yet been a full-length project which examines the Stanislavskian acting process from a feminist point of view. My "(re)consideration" is a *feminist* consideration, devoted to the history, theory, and practice of American Stanislavsky-based acting techniques.

The "American Approach"

The study I am undertaking necessitates first an historical and theoretical outline of the impact of Stanislavsky's System on American acting practice. Although

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I have introduced my discussion by reviewing the foundational principles of the System, my project focuses not primarily upon Stanislavsky's own writings and practices but instead on those of his American inheritors, specifically, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Uta Hagen, whose work comprises what I am calling "the American approach."

American knowledge of the System is to some extent a "received" understanding; this is a matter of record. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood's English translations of Stanislavsky's writings, which include *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Building a Character* (1949), and *Creating a Role* (1961), have been assailed as inherently flawed.[30] But these texts tell only part of Stanislavsky's history in America. It was not primarily through his books that Stanislavsky first came to be known in this country; his theories (and/or various interpretations of them) had already begun to take hold prior to their publication. In the early 1920s in New York, a number of events converged to incite great enthusiasm in his work. The first was the overwhelmingly positive reaction to performances by Stanislavsky's company during its 1923 American tour. Christine Edwards describes the actors' accomplishments: "For the most part the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) players were praised for three facets of their acting: their excellent ensemble; the utter naturalness and lifelike quality of their productions; and the fact that they seemed to be 'living' their roles instead of 'performing' them."[31] This description certainly suggests that by 1923, the company was successfully implementing Stanislavsky's techniques and meeting his aesthetic goals.

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Among those most moved by the powerful performances were American actors, who were inspired to attempt similar achievements themselves. As Edwards concludes:

> The lasting effect upon American acting . . . was not accomplished by the performances of the Moscow Art Theatre alone. They served to father the desire, as it were, in the American actor to make his acting more realistic, more truthful, more truly creative, and they prepared the ground for further study of Stanislavsky.[32]

American Stanislavskian training would begin under the tutelage of former members of the Moscow Art Theatre's First Studio, those who had left Russia and emigrated to the United States.

Among the MAT actor-teachers who participated in the popularization of the System, Richard Boleslavsky was the first and most powerful link between Stanislavsky and America. Shortly after the arrival of the MAT, Boleslavsky began lecturing in New York; he also published several articles in theatre journals on Stanislavsky's System. He founded the American Laboratory Theatre (ALT) in 1924, where he was joined in his teaching by Maria Ouspenskaya, another popular MAT performer from the American tour. Their work at the American Laboratory Theatre, says Edwards, was "instrumental in shaping the course that American teaching of acting was to follow, to a great extent, in the succeeding years. Among its early members were Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, and Harold Clurman; these were to be instrumental in the application of the Stanislavsky method to the American theatre."[33]

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The application of the Stanislavsky System would come first in their work with the historically innovative Group Theatre, then through their respective acting, directing, teaching, and writing; it continues posthumously today through their own disciples.

This is the genealogy of American "Method" acting.[34] The theatre has a long history of celebrating its own heritage, connecting generational links into one continuous chain. I recall a green room game called "Shaking the Hand of the Man Who Shook the Hand of Shakespeare."[35] Like John Guare's "six degrees of separation," moving backwards in time, an actor can claim a connection through handshakes, all the way back to Shakespeare. The lineage of actor training works much the same way. I was trained by the students of Strasberg and Adler and Clurman, who were trained by Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya, who were trained, in turn, by Stanislavsky.[36] And now, I have my own group of students, whom I train. This patriarchical tracing of lineage has its own potential meaning for feminists, as practitioners tend invoke the name of the "father," Stanislavsky, to assert their own authority.

This lineage also has meaning in terms of the way in which the American approach evolved. Like all genealogies, the "family tree" of American acting has separate branches, as well as members who squabble, fight over their inheritance, and stop speaking to one another. These feuds are an essential part of the history. The dissension began during the Group Theatre years, 1931-1940. As founding members of the Group, Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman practiced the theories they had learned at the ALT, with Strasberg assuming primary responsibility for actor training.

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Among those who trained under Strasberg's guidance were Stella Adler (who had herself studied at the ALT) and Sanford Meisner. As the voice of authority in actor training for the first few years, Strasberg's emphasis was, famously, on emotion; he drew upon Boleslavsky's work and expanded it with his own exercises, attempting to stimulate "real" and believable emotion in his actors. The most widely known rehearsal technique associated with Strasberg was his use of "affective memory."[37] But during a 1934 visit to Paris, Stella Adler had the unusual opportunity to work directly with Stanislavsky for a number of weeks. This experience provided Adler with a first-hand knowledge of Stanislavsky's teachings which Strasberg did not possess. She returned, famously, to dispute or "correct" Strasberg's interpretations of the System, placing far greater emphasis on the role of imagination and the actor's relationship to the given circumstances of the play. In this open challenge to Strasberg's authority, Sanford Meisner (and many others) took Adler's side. The 1930s training and the debates that grew out of it ultimately led to a series of related but different approaches to acting, all containing roots in Stanislavsky and links to one another, but with markedly different emphases.

The genealogical view of Stanislavsky in this country is, in effect, the "official" history of "Method" acting. This view is shared by many historians and critics, among them Richard Hornby, who in his 1992 "attack" on American acting summarizes this widely accepted version of Stanislavsky's entry into American theatre, but with his own sharp point of view:

> Acting theory in America remains pretty much where it has been for the

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> past sixty years. This theory has its roots in Stanislavski's ideas, as taught by Maria Ouspenskaya and Richard Boleslavsky at the American Laboratory Theatre in New York City in the 1920s, and then as radically interpreted and taught by Lee Strasberg at the Group Theatre and later at the Actors Studio. Entrenched today at American acting conservatories and university theatre departments (with few exceptions), it is a mimetic theory, reflecting the influence of the realism that prevailed in the theatre during Stanislavski's early years.[38]

Hornby points to a corruption of the System through time, directly faulting Lee Strasberg for moving away from what is traditionally thought of as "character" acting toward an intensely inward-looking, self-absorbed, personalized distortion of Stanislavsky's ideals.

The first, most influential American interpreter of Stanislavsky was indisputably Lee Strasberg, particularly since he trained others of his contemporaries who went on to become influential teachers. Yet one must note that this generation of teachers, though clearly still under his ideological influence, often positioned themselves *against* Strasberg, carving out their own individual approaches and emphases. Those differences in point of view are often articulated by the teachers themselves, who show little hesitancy--in fact, seem to relish--criticizing one another's work.[39]

Eva Mekler also subscribes to the hereditary theory of Stanislavsky's legacy in her 1987 book *A New Generation of Acting Teachers*. In this collection of interviews

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with twenty-two professional acting teachers located on both coasts and in prominent graduate programs across the country, Mekler documents the pervasive influence of the "first generation" of acting teachers on subsequent ones. The very first words of her preface read: "When the Moscow Art Theater toured the United States in 1923," marking that milestone moment--the "birthday" of American acting technique. She says that "Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Harold Clurman, and Sandy Meisner--soon to be followed by Elia Kazan, Uta Hagen, and Bobby Lewis . . . were the founders of the modern American approach to the craft of acting."[40] Mekler traces the influence of these teachers to the ones she interviews, who "are still concerned with teaching their students techniques that promote the spontaneity of the moment, help them develop a character, and arouse authentic emotion and expressive physical and vocal behavior."[41] All of these qualities are inherently Stanislavskian, particularly the phrase, "authentic emotion," which is a hallmark of the American approach.

Is "The Method" on the Wane?

Why study "The Method"? Why now? A recent *New York Times* article, entitled "Dispensing with Dogma in the Education of Actors," would have one believe that the Method is on the wane. A subtitled caption heralds this message: "After decades under the spell of the Method, students can now choose from an array of theories, one of which is to have none at all."[42] But there is ample evidence to suggest that in spite of an array of techniques and practitioners currently challenging the authority of "The Method," it remains the dominant approach in this country.[43]

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Just as Hornby and Mekler trace the hereditary lineage of Stanislavsky's influence, Joyce Spivey Aldridge documents the continuing dominance of Stanislavskian training in her study "The Tradition of American Actor Training and its Current Practice in Undergraduate Education." Surveying six hundred and ten responding theatre programs in 1990-1991 to determine to what extent there was commonality and/or diversity in instructional approaches on the undergraduate level, Aldridge concluded that "the primary basis of current actor training reflects Stanislavsky's acting system."[44] Nearly all of the top twelve required texts on acting in undergraduate classes were written either by Stanislavsky or by those who follow his theories. Aldridge noted that "current methods of teaching script analysis have been heavily influenced by Stanislavsky's acting system" and that "common fundamentals of movement included relaxation, proper body alignment, and work designed to encourage physical responsiveness to character creation"--all Stanislavskian precepts.[45] This is not to say that alternatives to Stanislavsky's System had no presence in undergraduate acting classes, but that "diversity" in the teaching of undergraduate acting fell largely *within* rather than outside of Stanislavsky's System.[46]

Beyond the university, New York City remains a primary destination for aspiring stage, film, and television actors in this country, as a prospective site for training as well as employment. There, too, Stanislavsky-based training retains its predominance. In her 1994 investigation of "The Actor Training Legacy of Sanford Meisner," Diane Clayre Cecchini Holub evaluated acting schools in New York City to

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determine their use of Sanford Meisner's approach. She found that in more than one hundred and forty training programs in New York,

> the overwhelming majority offer training based on Stanislavski's System, that of a Stanislavski derivative, or a combination of the two. Most often, the second-generation Stanislavski derivative reflects the work of Group Theatre members Strasberg or Meisner or, to a much lesser extent, Adler. . . .
>
> No other philosophical affiliation has achieved the popularity of those of Stanislavski and Meisner.[47]

It would appear that both academic and "professional" actor training continued to place primary emphasis on techniques derived from Stanislavsky--at least to the end of the twentieth century.

Cynthia Jessica Pang, in her dissertation "The Angst of American Acting: An Assessment of Acting Texts," argues that American knowledge of--and fidelity to--Stanislavsky has so changed the discourse on acting that even "alternative" approaches to training seem to borrow heavily from his principles: "Most acting texts today are essentially transmogrifications of concepts developed by Stanislavsky but interpreted in different forms and through exercises."[48] Though the vocabulary of acting has undergone an evolutionary process, Pang detects a "throughline" which links even apparently dissimilar developments in twentieth century acting:

> Stanislavsky, Boleslavsky, Chekhov, Ouspenskaya, Adler, Strasberg, Carnovsky, Lewis, Meisner, Hagen, Chaikin, and Grotowski were all

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> interested in the expression of truth on stage. This interest led to the insistence that stage emotion should be real, not indicated. This desire for honesty and accuracy is truly representative of much of the twentieth century acting and training.[49]

So entrenched is the System that many non-naturalistic practices co-opt the value of "real" emotion and "truth on stage." Even David Mamet's biting critique of Stanislavsky and American Method-based acting is entitled *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*. The phrase "truth on the stage" resounds and recurs like a mantra of American acting.

Since I began actively researching this project in 1998, there are a number of other factors which continue to convince me that a feminist study of American Stanislavsky-based actor training is not passé but past due. I could not have predicted that there would be no fewer than half a dozen new publications on Stanislavsky-based acting techniques: three books published on or by Stella Adler, another book by Larry Silverberg in his series on Sanford Meisner, Carnicke's *Stanislavsky in Focus*, and David Krasner's collection, *Method Acting Reconsidered*, which hopes to "set the record straight" about the much maligned Method.[50] Each summer, several of my students head off to New York to study at the Stella Adler Conservatory or the Lee Strasberg Institute. And they return with contemporary stories which bear a familiar ring to my own recollections of nearly two decades ago. People are still talking about the Method, teaching it, and practicing it. As Krasner says, "Method acting refuses to go away."[51]

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Feminist Reactions

The dominance of Stanislavskian theory, its connections to realism, and the specific problems of gender bias in actor training have not gone unnoticed by feminist critics. Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf began such an inquiry in "A (Female) Actor Prepares" by talking with a number of women then practicing in academic and professional theatre forums about the possibilities for "merging feminist theory, art and praxis."[52] Their conversations revealed that all of these practitioners advocated non-realistic practices as feminist alternatives to dominant theatrical conventions, and that many of the women identified a strong male-oriented basis implicit in both the goals and the process of Method acting:

> While males usually need to learn to acknowledge their emotional resources, female actors need to focus, clarify and cast off inhibitions against public expression of their already rich emotional life. . . . Socialization in American culture creates male actors who must work through layers of defenses in order to gain access to their emotional resources (thus the great popularity of Method-oriented approaches) and female actors who must overcome scores of self-effacing habits in order to gain presence and claim focus on the stage (for which little acting pedagogy exists).[53]

This analysis expresses sensitivity to the possibility that women's needs may be different from those of men in the acting process. But to a certain extent, this point of view tends to essentialize gender positions; it, too, assumes a biased posture,

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making generalizations about the emotional qualities and expressiveness of "men" as one group and "women" as another. By focusing attention on the *needs* of the actors, this analysis fails to shed light on the traditions in training which create and maintain such gendered expectations. Sue-Ellen Case begins to move in the right direction when she observes that "many female actors achieve success through their ability to act neurotic; crying and acting insane is reinforced."[54] But why? Is this due to the system of acting itself? To its mode of implementation? To the dramatic material for which the actor prepares? To the expectations of the teacher? Or all of the above?

In her fascinating study "Sex Roles in the Acting Class: Nonverbal Gender Display in Performance," Deanna Jent reports the results of her sustained observation of students in university acting sessions over the course of a semester. Using sociologists' models of traditional "masculine" and "feminine" movement, which characterize male behavior as large, aggressive, and expansive, and feminine behavior as passive, submissive, and small, she discovered that in spite of the fact that the class was designed to "open them up," "the students consistently displayed traditional or stereotypic behaviors both verbally and nonverbally."[55] This occurred even *before* scripts were introduced, when the actors were creating their own improvisational material. Were they, as Butler might suggest, performing their socialized gender roles in the "appropriate" way, as they have been trained to do for their whole lives? Jent notes that though "acting teachers claim that they want 'flexible' performers . . . most do not address gender-related behavior that could be keeping the performers inflexible."[56] While students may come to class with a propensity for staying within

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socially normative behavior, it is also possible that in the social microcosm of the acting classroom, teachers serve as the enforcers of Butler's "social policy of gender regulation and control," unconsciously rewarding students for "good" behavior.[57]

If student bodies are already inclined to conform to the "script" of social expectations, the introduction of dramatic texts, as suggested earlier, only adds to the pressure to play one's gender role properly. It comes as no surprise, then, that feminist theatre theory and practice has largely been dedicated to seeking alternatives to the traditional approaches they critique. First, the limitations of conventional dramatic literature--particularly that authored by men--is of material significance to feminist actresses whose interest is less scholarly than practical. Cherry Jones describes the fairly constrained Stanislavskian "given circumstances" of most heroines in the classical canon: "In Shakespeare the conflict for the heroine can't be the country you're about to lose, it's always this obsession with one of those really lackluster guys."[58] As a result, Jones says she has a tendency to "throw the script across the room in frustration when she first reads it," and relishes the opportunity to play strong, active women; among her favorite roles are those written by feminist playwrights such as Timberlake Wertenbaker, Paula Vogel, and Tina Howe.[59]

This image of "throwing the script across the room" serves as a great metaphor for the preponderance of feminist reactions to patriarchal theatre traditions. Frustrated by their objectification in canonical scripts and on conventional stages, feminist writers, directors, and actors figuratively (and literally) throw the old scripts out and begin again. One strategy has been, as Jones suggests, to work with plays by and

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about women. In addition to the playwrights named by Jones, writers such as Caryl Churchill, Maria Irene Fornes, and Sarah Daniels have received positive attention by feminist critics and producers. Conversely, other female playwrights, such as Beth Henley, Marsha Norman, and Wendy Wasserstein, have provoked greater controversy; they are frequently identified as "feminist" writers by *mainstream* critics but not by their feminist counterparts. As Helene Keyssar notes, their works "yield the stage to familiar female types, engaged in activities that remind us of conventional modern drama by men."[60]

For many feminist practitioners, then, the best remedy to the problems presented by conventional drama is to reject "drama" altogether in favor of "performance art." Where traditional dramatic forms require women to step into scripted roles, which may include negative gender models, performance art offers them the opportunity to create their own roles, and to make their own political statements. Women artists have found and embraced a wide variety of alterative modes of performance which offer them stronger opportunities for female agency and social commentary. As Marvin Carlson says in *Performance: A Critical Introduction*: "The goal is . . . to provide through performance alternative possibilities for identity positions outside those authenticated by conventional performance and representation."[61] Following this path, much feminist theatre has moved away not only from conventional dramaturgy, but also from the Stanislavskian acting which supports it.

One such example is the African-American performer/playwright Anna

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Deavere Smith, who has been said to have created a unique acting technique of her own, a byproduct of her reaction against Stanislavskian theatre, theory, and training.

> I felt very oppressed by the formal structures of theatre, the first one being the role of an acting teacher in a classroom. When I became the acting teacher, there was this expectation that I was going to be this authority who resolved everything and came up with the answers.
>
> The through-line always made me feel bad in teaching, reading, and trying to write plays. . . . I came across a graph of the objectives of the Stanislavsky technique. Super objective. Little objective. It was straight lines with arrows. Quite soon after that I was reading a book about African philosophical systems and saw a picture of a wheel that had all these little spokes with arrows pointing towards the center. I knew then that I wanted to try to find a way of thinking or structure that was more like that.[62]

Accordingly, Smith creates her own non-linear theatre pieces drawn from interviews with "real life" subjects; she tape-records then memorizes their words and inflections, embodying speakers of multiple racial, ethnic, and gender identities through a process akin to "channeling." Both the "writing" and the enactment of Smith's work, therefore, represent an intended liberating departure from the conventions of realistic and Stanislavsky-based practice.[63]

Alternatives to Stanislavsky-based acting have also been sought (and found) by a number of other feminist performance artists, among them Karen Finley, Holly

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Hughes, and members of the feminist-lesbian troupe, Split Britches: Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver. Yet all of these performance artists create their own material; they cannot be said to be "actors" in the traditional sense of the word. For example, Sue-Ellen Case describes the creative process of Split Britches: "Their dialogue speaks their own personal experiences, opinions, and actual interactions onstage. The actors are never 'lost' in a character, but act a character within the narrative, until that narrative shifts."[64] While performance art has proved to be a fertile ground for feminists, nurturing the development of new material as well as new modes of "acting," it is chiefly produced by writer-actors, such as the women mentioned above. Since these women are responsible for the creation of their own material, they are never trapped by it. My concern, therefore, is with the dilemma of feminist actors who are not "in charge," those women who *are* asked to "lose themselves in the role." What empowering alternatives are there for female actors who are not writers but interpreters of dramatic material?

A number of feminist critics, directors, and actors draw inspiration from the theories of director/dramatist Bertolt Brecht. Elin Diamond, in particular, argues for the utility of a Brechtian approach in feminist theatre projects:

> A feminist practice that seeks to expose or mock the strictures of gender, to *reveal* gender-as-appearance, as the effect, not the precondition, of regulatory practices, usually uses some version of the Brechtian A-effect. That is, by alienating (not simply rejecting) iconicity, by foregrounding the expectation of resemblance, the

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> ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the spectator.[65]

This Brechtian alternative is endorsed by actor Lauren Love, who documents her own discomfort with American actor training in her essay "Resisting the 'Organic.'" Following Dolan, Love is interested in breaking out of her traditional training--and her traditional gender role--to find a new mode of stage expression.

> I am eager for a feminist approach to acting which will empower me to deconstruct a performance just as feminist theorists have begun to deconstruct play texts. I wonder whether I can apply the skills I have already learned to a feminist agenda, or whether they are too mired in oppressive ideology to use successfully.[66]

Love's critique of the "organic" approach, which she attributes to Uta Hagen, is persuasive. But her solution is not to throw it away (how can she, when she has already assimilated the acting technique?) but to use it in a new way, in "a kind of hybrid Brechtian/Method technique."[67] Love's decision to meld these two approaches together suggests two possibilities: first, that "the Method" is so much a part of our theatrical heritage that it cannot be ignored; and second, that while a Brechtian style of acting may point us in new directions in theatrical production, it does not *replace* our traditional modes of training because it is not in and of itself an actual acting *technique*. As Jerzy Grotowski puts it:

> I think it is necessary to distinguish between methods and aesthetics. Brecht, for example, explained many very interesting things about the possibilities of a way of acting which involved the actor's discursive

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> control over his actions, the Verfremdungseffekt. But this was not really a method. It was rather a kind of aesthetic duty demanded of the actor, for Brecht did not actually ask himself: "How can this be done?"[68]

Since Stanislavsky-based acting remains the most comprehensive and institutionalized "system" of acting, it merits close examination from a feminist point of view. Love's hybrid blend of acting styles/techniques suggests the possibility of recuperating elements of the System by eschewing its oppressions and finding its potential utility for feminist performance. Chris Weedon says that "in poststructuralist feminism, we can choose between different accounts of reality on the basis of their social implications."[69] Can Stanislavskian acting allow us such a choice?

It seems that "picking and choosing" is already an approach being implemented by female and feminist theatre practitioners across the country. In her 1997 dissertation "Acting Theory, Training, and Practice from Feminist Perspectives: 'Hearing the Patterns' in One Hundred Voices," Stroppel reports that respondents in her survey "agreed with . . . selective use of various parts of realistic training."[70] In many ways, Stroppel's study paves the way for my own: her project seeks to "assess the modes in which feminist perspectives may (re)shape current theories and approaches to acting training and practice in America, and to use them to define feminist acting."[71] She exposes problems implicit in Stanislavskian training, but hopes that with a heightened feminist awareness, "Method practice can then work in spite of its alignment with an acting technique that originated a century ago."[72]

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Research and Methodology

Since my purpose is to investigate American, Stanislavsky-based acting theory and practice, I have identified four prominent teacher-theorists from that tradition to comprise the body of my study: Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Uta Hagen. As members of the first generation of acting teachers influenced by Stanislavsky's theories, they remain strong connections to past, present, and future. My reasons for the selection of these four are manifold. First, nearly any discussion of American "Method" acting lists these same names in the same order.[73] Simply put, they are, to date, the most famous and influential of American acting teachers. Historical accounts of Stanislavsky in America clearly name Strasberg and Adler as the earliest important links. Because these two ultimately split, with Adler turning away from Strasberg's Method, they also complement one another: Strasberg's emphasis on emotion and Adler's subsequent emphasis on the given circumstances of the play provide counterpoints. Meisner's technique, with its "Repetition Exercise," is a further development away from Stanislavsky though still based in his fundamental principles. This approach focuses on (constructs?) actor impulse, and on the actors' relationships to one another. David Krasner characterizes these differences in an intriguing and potentially useful way, referring to "Strasberg's emphasis on the psychological, Adler's on the sociological, and Meisner's on the behavioural," which he believes demonstrate "the diversity of Method training."[74] Uta Hagen credits Harold Clurman with opening a "new world" for her in the theatre, taking away her "tricks" and demanding that she use herself in the role.[75] She assimilated this new

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way of acting into her performances and her teaching, and she remains one of New York's most prominent and celebrated acting teachers (and actors).

Each of the four has authored at least one book on acting which represents his or her respective views on the craft. Though three of them are now deceased, their books remain in print. I have suggested that the lineage from teacher to teacher keeps current practice connected to the past; like other works I have cited, Richard Brestoff's *The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods* is predicated on this assumption: "Acting teachers today are either students of these great master teachers, or were students of their students." Brestoff concludes that "most teachers teach as they are taught."[76] He uses this idea not only as the basis for providing profiles of the "great" American teachers (who include Strasberg, Adler and Meisner), but also to help prospective students to identify potential sites where they might train in these legacies, including institutions which were (and are) associated with the teachers I examine.[77] By the end of the 1940s, all four of these "master" teachers were in place: Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio (and also, later, at the Lee Strasberg Institute); Stella Adler at the Stella Adler Studio (later, the "Stella Adler Conservatory"); Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse; and Uta Hagen at H.B. Studio. Each continued to teach more or less without interruption for the next half century; Strasberg until his death in 1982; Adler until her death in 1992; Meisner until his death in 1997; and Hagen to the present day.

In the case of the three who have died, their legends and techniques live on in the schools with which they were affiliated. There are Lee Strasberg Institutes on

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both coasts; his name is eternally connected with the Actors Studio and now with its spawn, "The Actors Studio Drama School," which is an M.F.A. degree-granting program affiliated with the New School. The Stella Adler Conservatory continues to operate in New York and Los Angeles. Sanford Meisner's picture is still on the brochure for the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theatre and, when one phones the school, one is assured that the instructors have all studied "under the tutelage of Mr. Meisner." In Los Angeles, the technique continues to be taught at the Meisner/ Carville School. Meisner's name is also used to advertise numerous schools, programs, and instructors who implement the "Meisner Technique."

In addition to their place in the lineage of American actor training, their tenure as master teachers, and their enduring legacies at a number of theatrical institutions, these teachers continue to be popularized by what now appears to be a cottage industry of books about them. These are not scholarly studies but "how-to" books, designed to explicate, interpret, or augment the master teachers' work. The following is a partial list: Loraine Hull's *Strasberg's Method As Taught by Lorrie Hull*, Edward Dwight Easty's *On Method Acting: The Classic Actor's Guide to the Stanislavsky Technique as Practiced at the Actors Studio*; Joanna Rotté's *Acting with Adler*; and Larry Silverberg's *The Sanford Meisner Approach: An Actors Workbook*--as well as *Workbook Two*, *Workbook Three*, and *Workbook Four*.[78] As long as actors, teachers and students continue to enroll and read, these practices thrive.

A number of scholarly books and dissertations also document the work of these teachers. In addition to the works by Aldridge and Pang, cited above, Jean

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Scharfenberg's "Lee Strasberg: Teacher" offers an analysis of tape-recordings of his sessions at the Actors Studio.[79] Steve Vineberg's "Method in Performance: Fifty Years of American Method Acting" provides useful information on the background of the Method, the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio, as well as an analysis of Method acting style.[80] Tellingly, his focus is almost exclusively on male actors who became famous through their practice of the Method: one chapter is entitled "Clift, Brando, Dean and Harris," and another, "The Third Generation," examines Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino, and Robert Duvall through their work on the *Godfather* films. While Vineberg's insights on Strasberg's influence clearly do not offer a feminist perspective, they help lead me to my own.[81] Joanna Rotté's new book *Acting With Adler* provides a supplement to Adler's books, offering insight into her theory and classroom practice.[82] Cecchini Holub's dissertation "The Actor Training Legacy of Sanford Meisner" is an invaluable source of Meisner-based practice, interpreting what, exactly, Meisner stood for, and how his work is implemented today.[83] Susan Spector's dissertation "Uta Hagen, The Early Years: 1919-1951" is a biographical discussion of Hagen's development as an actress and teacher.[84]

Of most value to this study, however, are the primary sources: the teachers' written work and the published transcriptions of their classroom sessions. Although these books are necessarily only partial representations of each teacher's practice, and although they are clearly not the same as actually "being there" for class sessions, they serve two important historical and theoretical functions. First, they are documents of the teachers' actual theories and practices; each book provides a kind of "window"

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into the historical classroom it represents. Second, they are also acting "textbooks," responsible (in part) for the wider dissemination of these acting techniques to actors and teachers across the country.

Strasberg's direct testimony about his work is contained in his professional memoir, *A Dream of Passion* (1987), and in *Strasberg at the Actors Studio* (1965), edited by Robert Hethmon.[85] Stella Adler's ideas are represented in her book *The Technique of Acting* (1988), and in two posthumous compilations of her transcribed teaching sessions and class notes: *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov* (1998), edited by Barry Paris, and *Stella Adler: The Art and Technique for Acting* (2000), edited by Howard Kissel.[86] This new primary material is a tremendous resource which contributes greatly to my reading of Stella Adler. Sanford Meisner's book *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (1987) also presents his theory and practice in the form of transcribed class sessions and interviews with the teacher.[87] Uta Hagen has authored two books on acting: *Respect for Acting* (1973); *A Challenge for the Actor* (1991); as well as *Sources: A Memoir* (1983).[88]

A word must be said about the transcribed material. Hethmon, Paris, Kissel, and Longwell each describe and address the challenges implicit in transferring tape-recorded classroom sessions into written form. Among the issues they discuss are: the absence of visibility of the classroom players; repetition and lack of clarity in the spoken word (as opposed to written composition); and the need to condense voluminous material while remaining faithful to its content. Each editor recounts his own particular approach to meeting those challenges, and the efforts taken to

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accurately depict the teachings of his subject. Although the edited material is not complete, it can, therefore, be taken as representative of each teacher's work. And the fact that there is so much supporting evidence of these theories and practices reinforces the reliability of the transcribed material: none of the documents stands alone and, taken together, they paint vivid portraits of these four teachers. In addition to all the books by and about these teachers, several videotapes also document their work. The opportunity to observe Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner at work (even if on tape) fleshes out the portraits of them drawn through the written word; witnessing Hagen onstage is like seeing her textbooks come to life. These documents and practitioners, through their similarities and their pointed differences, collectively create an overview of American actor training traditions.

The symmetry in evaluating the work of two men and two women offers me the opportunity to raise questions about gender roles in teaching as well as acting. To some extent, the books and videos reflect the male and female voices of their authors. Adler and Hagen, in particular, tend to use examples drawn from the (female) roles they have played. Most of the books contain actual transcripts of classroom dynamics, while others focus more on theories, exercises, and anecdotes of student problems and progress; all are supplemented by outside studies and documentation. This, too, provides balance for the project.

This dissertation is a feminist theoretical inquiry into American actor training, using these four select teachers as "case studies." I conduct a close reading of each representative text, describing and documenting the "signature" approach of each

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teacher, but with the intention of uncovering the ideological underpinnings of their respective theories and practices from a feminist perspective. (For example, Strasberg emphasizes emotion. What are the implications for female actors? Adler redirects attention to the script. What impact does this have?) I make use of earlier "straight on" studies, raising questions which have not been asked before. Is there a gender bias implicit in the respective theories? What is the power dynamic of each teacher's classroom model? Do the exercises free actors from the restraints of conventional behavior or, instead, shackle them? Do standard approaches to acting inhibit rather than enhance the actor's freedom in terms of gender and sexuality? What is the relationship, in these practices, between the actor and the dramatic material? Are men and women trained for the same material in the same way? If Stanislavskian theory (as understood in this country) perpetrates gender oppression, might it (potentially) be used, instead, to empower the actor? Is Stanislavsky-based training itself deeply embedded with gender-based assumptions, or do they arise from the applications of the technique? While my research concentrates specifically on the original source material, the acting "texts," it is also supported by published articles, interviews, videos, and histories of the training.

The use of the case study format makes this dissertation an inquiry not only into acting theory but into history. Acting "theory" does not really exist in pure form; it takes on meaning only as it is *practiced*, as it is taught by real teachers, in real classrooms, and performed by real students. These case studies, therefore, are useful in a variety of ways. Singly and together, they offer a history of American actor

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training traditions. This history provides a context for understanding the current moment. Studying these teachers of the past is an important task because if, as I have suggested, people teach as they have been taught, acting classrooms of the twenty-first century may continue to operate much as they did during most of the last century--or at the very least retain traces of their origins.

My research into the material effects of the training of these four teachers, therefore, also contains a personal investment for me as both scholar and practitioner. I approach this project from my own experience as a lifetime participant in acting classrooms, in the roles of both student and teacher. I also bring to the project a lifetime of acting--and of observing other actors. James Clifford lays out the special function of the "participant observer": "'Participant observation' serves as shorthand for a continuous tacking between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts."[89] I hope that this study contributes not only to feminist thought about the history and theory of American actor training, but to the way it will be practiced in the twenty-first century.

In the following chapter, "Affective Memories: Lee Strasberg and Emotional Control," I examine the theory and practice of Lee Strasberg's Method, paying particular attention to his emphasis on emotion. What are the effects of this psychological approach to actor training? Does Strasberg perpetuate gender stereotypes in his teaching? I investigate the power dynamic between Strasberg and his students, analyzing the effects of his patriarchal presence in the classroom--and in

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our collective, cultural consciousness. What does Strasberg have to do with our understanding of American acting? Can the Method be implemented without the presence of the (patriarchal) teacher? Is the Method about freedom or control--and who, exactly, controls the actor's body and emotions?

The third chapter, "Imagination: Stella Adler and The Script," examines Stella Adler's move away from Strasberg's Method, with her emphasis on intellect and imagination as alternatives to emotion. Much of Adler's technique can be attributed to her personal desire to get "out from under" Strasberg's control. She seeks to set actors free, giving them sets of skills which will make them independent of their teachers. Adler calls upon actors to study the script and to discern the "intentions" of the playwright. While on the one hand there may be political implications for the feminist actor in "serving the playwright," Adler's attention to the "given circumstances" of the script are particularly useful. Adler considers carefully the social, political, and economic environments which produce different kinds of "characters"--and different kinds of plays. Although her tendency is to universalize characters according to category (e.g., *all* members of the aristocracy behave in one way), her attention to the social construction of character offers potential for materialist feminist applications.

The fourth chapter, "Exercises in Repetition: Sanford Meisner and 'Instinct,'" exposes established patterns in the actor-teacher relationship, as well as the constructed nature of the actor's "impulse." Although Meisner positions himself firmly against Strasberg, his classroom model is similar; he controls and badgers his students into

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producing his version of "the truth." This "truthful" behavior conforms strictly to socially normative gender roles. Though Meisner's emphasis is on releasing the actor's impulse, particularly in relationship to the other actor (a shift from Strasberg's emphasis on self; Adler's emphasis on text), Meisner is responsible for dictating what that impulse should be. Furthermore, Meisner has become famous for his "Repetition Exercise," which is the primary means through which the impulse is induced. He describes it as "an exercise for actors where there is no intellectuality."[90] But though this Repetition Exercise is presented as an open, improvised opportunity for actors to react honestly and spontaneously to one another, it has, in fact, its own structure which clearly mirrors the climactic structure of most western drama. Instead of offering a variety of possible human interactions, it seems to lead inevitably to an aggressive, violent pitch.

In the fifth chapter, "Simple Object Lessons: Uta Hagen and 'Substitution,'" I explore this variation of Strasberg's "Method," which places far more emphasis on self-observation outside of the classroom. Like Adler, Hagen privileges the script. But her examples of both self-observation and substitution of personal experience are clearly gender-inflected. Her section on endowing objects reads almost like *Respect for Acting* meets *Hints from Heloise*, as she advises actors on how to use lipstick, nail polish, needle and thread on stage. Also revealing is the fact that female actors in her model nearly always need to observe themselves in their weakest, most humiliating, and shameful moments in order to embody characters. Rather than looking at the constructed nature of characters (as Adler does), Hagen asks actors to accept them as

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written, and to find the parallel moments from their own lives as substitution. Yet Hagen also provides suggestions for the actor and the teacher which are hopeful. First, her practice is highly concentrated on empowering individual actors to take charge of their own training and their own performances. Acknowledging that she will not be there when they are on stage, she seeks to equip them with a sense of independence; similarly, she cautions teachers strongly *against* the models of those such as Strasberg and Meisner, recognizing what she calls the "danger" of the acting teacher's chair.

Finally, the last chapter, "The Magic If," offers a conclusion to the dissertation, summarizing discoveries made and seeking possibilities for culling the more empowering elements of Stanislavsky-based acting for use by feminist actors and teachers. The "given circumstances" of American actor training today reveal a history of sexist assumptions and practices. But Stanislavsky says, "From the moment of the appearance of [the Magic] *If* the actor passes from the plane of actual reality into the plane of another life, created and imagined by him."[90] What *if* . . . ? Can the Stanislavsky System--with its patriarchal, gender-based and biased nineteenth century roots--have utility for the twenty-first century feminist actor?

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Notes

1. Linda Walsh Jenkins and Susan Ogden-Malouf, "The (Female) Actor Prepares," *Theater* 17, no. 1 (winter 1985): 66.

2. In her recent book on Stanislavsky, Sharon M. Carnicke provides a model for transliteration and translation of Russian names. She stipulates: "Russian names have been anglicized . . . according to guidelines established by the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. Stanislavsky's surname is sometimes transliterated with a final *-i*, as if it were Polish. This form is not standard, and I retain it only for sources which employ it" (Sharon M. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus* [Canada: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998], xiii). Following Carnicke and the Library of Congress, I will adopt the standard spelling "Konstantin Stanislavsky" in my text, but will preserve the alternative spellings of original sources in quoted material. See also *Merriam-Webster's Biographical Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1995), 976.

3. Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. Walter Herries Pollock (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963). Though written c. 1773, Diderot's essay was not published until 1830 (Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present*, exp. ed. [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993], 161).

4. Diderot, 15.

5. Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Handbook*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1963), 23. Italics and brackets are Hapgood's. Hapgood describes *An Actor's Handbook* as a compilation of Stanislavsky's "own words," collected from his books and unpublished papers, "including fragments and variations, exceptionally pithy statements," which Hapgood states "were found and are here translated for the first time" [*An Actor's Handbook*, 5].

6. Sonia Moore, *The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 8.

7. Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 28.

8. Weedon, 126.

9. Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), iv.

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10. Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf, 66.

11. Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 2.

12. See, for examples: Ed Hooks, *The Ultimate Scene and Monologue Sourcebook: An Actor's Guide to Over 1,000 Monologues and Scenes from More than 300 Contemporary Plays* (New York: Back Stage Books, 1994); and *American Theatre* 18, no. 1 (January 2001): 112-118.

13. Edward Albee, 14 January 1999, Philadelphia Art Alliance. Albee spoke specifically about his loathing for the practice of cross-gendered casting during "Conversations with Legends: Edward Albee," a public session sponsored by the Philadelphia Art Alliance. A week earlier, *New York Times* reported that on a standing request from David Mamet, Samuel French withdrew production rights from an all-female company which had already scheduled and advertised an evening of Mamet monologues. See Jesse McKinley, "On Stage and Off," *New York Times*, 8 January 1999, sec. E, p. 2, col. 3.

14. David Mamet, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 8-9. In spite of the anti-Stanislavskian, anti-Method posture assumed by Mamet, the technique he espouses is clearly derived directly from that tradition.

15. See, for example, Gay Gibson Cima, "Strategies for Subverting the Canon," in *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as if Gender and Race Matter*, ed. Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 91-105.

16. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 270.

17. Butler, 279.

18. Gay Gibson Cima argues that Shepard's dramatic structure offers opportunities for female actors to "reject the narrative altogether and begin their own independent journey" (Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Women* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993], 167-8). Yet for Cima, this "journey" seems to involve "exiting" the frame. To my mind, this means that the woman's independent journey is conducted offstage; it is not typically contained within the story Shepard tells. Cima's examination of the ways in which female actors have historically created new and different acting styles is fascinating--and instrumental in my own work--but I find

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her location of agency for women within Shepard's plays of limited use from an acting perspective.

19. Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 122.

20. I must also acknowledge an indebtedness to my teachers at Circle in the Square Theatre School. At Circle, I had the opportunity to study with a number of distinguished theatre artists and teachers. In addition to the intensive training in acting technique and scene study, I received instruction in dance, movement, stage combat, voice, speech, song interpretation, and singing technique. All of these classes taught me a great deal about acting and the theatre; I continue to employ many of the lessons I learned in my own acting, directing, and teaching. And my training at Circle in the Square ultimately led me to a more scholarly interest theatre studies, one aspect of which is which is manifested in this project.

21. Holly Hill, *Actors' Lives: On and Off the American Stage* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 317.

22. Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf, 66.

23. Richard Hornby, *The End of Acting: A Radical View* (New York: Applause, 1992), 33.

24. Phillip Zarrilli, "General Introduction: Between Theory and Practice," in *Acting (Re)Considered: Theories and Practices*, ed. Phillip Zarrilli (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

25. Elizabeth C. Stroppel, "Reconciling the Past and the Present," in *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future*, ed. David Krasner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 120.

26. Zarrilli, 16.

27. Hornby, 8-9.

28. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 9-10. Carnicke's scholarship, with its new insights into the evolution of Stanislavskian theory and practice, is an important resource for my own project.

29. Key texts in feminist theatre theory and practice include: Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* and *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Women*; Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*; Jill Dolan, *Feminist Spectator* and *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Performance* (Ann Arbor:

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University of Michigan Press, 1993); Lesley Ferris, *Acting Women* (New York: New York University Press, 1989); Patricia R. Schroeder, *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996). Important collections of essays include: Sue-Ellen Case, ed., *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, eds., *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as if Gender and Race Matter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Lynda Hart, ed., *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, eds., *Acting Out: Feminist Performances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Helene Keyssar, ed., *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Karen Laughlin and Catherine Schuler, eds., *Theatre and Feminist Aesthetics* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995); Carol Martin, ed., *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Relevant studies on acting will be cited separately.

30. Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski* (New York: Methuen, 1988), 298-300; 315. In 1993, a fragmentary example of Hapgood's distortions through omission and abridgement were documented in a side-by-side comparison to Benedetti's new translation of a passage from Stanislavsky's (and Hapgood's) *An Actor Prepares*. Carnicke observes what Benedetti's work reveals about Hapgood's version: "gone are the careful examples . . . gone is the collaborative basis of theatrical art." In addition, Carnicke notes that "Hapgood also deletes much of the give and take of dialog, thus changing the Socratic nature of [the teacher's] relationship with his students to that of lecturing professor" (Sharon M. Carnicke, Introduction to "From *The Actor: Work on Oneself*" by Konstantin Stanislavsky, trans. Jean Benedetti, *The Drama Review* 37, no.1 [1993]: 38).

31. Christine Edwards, *The Stanislavski Heritage: Its Contribution to the Russian and American Theatre* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 230.

32. Edwards, 239.

33. Edwards, 240.

34. Although the term, "the Method," has entered the vernacular as a generic phrase used to describe (and even stereotype) a distinctly American approach to acting, it has its own etymology and should not be used to obscure differences between a variety of related, though not identical techniques. Strictly speaking, "the Method" is a term put into use by Lee Strasberg to describe his own work and to differentiate it from "the System." See Edwards, 261.

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35. Though women may be on the contemporary end of the chain, only men were on Shakespeare's.

36. Stella Adler also studied directly with Stanislavsky for a number of weeks in 1934; her work with him will be examined in the third chapter of this dissertation.

37. Edwards, 245. Strasberg also credits Eugene Vakhtangof as an influence in this area (Lee Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion*, ed. Evangeline Morphos [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987], 84).

38. Hornby, 5.

39. Their points of departure have been the subject of articles and interviews, such as "The Reality of Doing: Interviews with Vera Soloviova, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner," and "Working with Live Material: An Interview with Lee Strasberg," both of which are included in the collection *Stanislavski and America: An Anthology from the Tulane Drama Review*, ed. Erika Munk, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966).

40. Eva Mekler, *A New Generation of Acting Teachers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), ix.

41. Mekler, x.

42. Rachel Shteir, "Dispensing with Dogma in the Education of Actors," *New York Times*, 2 August 1998, sec. 4, p. 32.

43. Among the currently popular "alternatives" to Stanislavskian training mentioned in the *Times* article are Anne Bogart's implementations of "Viewpoints" and the training developed by Japanese artist Tadashi Suzuki; these two approaches are practiced individually and in combination with one another. Both are exciting a great deal of enthusiasm but have yet to be widely institutionalized. See also Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith, eds., *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints* (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1995); Tadashi Suzuki, *The Way of Acting* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986).

44. Joyce Spivey Aldridge, "The Tradition of American Actor Training and its Current Practice in Undergraduate Education," Ph.D. diss. (University of Colorado at Boulder, 1993), 204.

45. Aldridge, 189-190.

46. Aldridge, 202.

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47. Diane Clayre Cecchini Holub, "The Actor Training Legacy of Sanford Meisner" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1994), 212-214.

48. Cynthia Jessica Pang, "The Angst of American Acting: An Assessment of Acting Texts" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1991), 385-386.

49. Pang, 386.

50. David Krasner, "I Hate Strasberg: Method Bashing in the Academy," in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 3-4.

51. Krasner, "I Hate Strasberg," 8.

52. Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf, 66.

53. Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf, 68.

54. Quoted in Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf, 68.

55. Deanna Jent, "Sex Roles in the Acting Class: Nonverbal Gender Display in Performance," *Theatre Studies* 35 (1990): 20.

56. Jent, "Sex Roles," 26.

57. Butler, 279.

58. Janice Paran, "Heiress Apparent: Cherry Jones Knows How to Make an Entrance," *American Theatre* 14, no. 5 (May/June 1997): 12.

59. Paran, 12.

60. Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre and Theory*, 2 (see note 29 above). This collection comprises a number of essays which discuss, debate, and define "feminist" playwriting.

61. Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 183.

62. Anna Deavere Smith, "Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You," an interview by Carol Martin, in *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre*, 191.

63. I would argue, however, that there are aspects of Smith's work which are not as clean a break from Stanislavsky as she would believe; they continue his quest for truthful behavior and a depiction of "real life," and include techniques which are actually derived (at least in part) from Stanislavskian practice.

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64. Sue-Ellen Case, *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 10.

65. Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 46. The promotion of Brechtian style as a desirable alternative to conventional, realistic mimesis is prevalent in feminist criticism. See also: Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 93; Diamond, "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," in *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre*, 120-135; Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, 106-117; *Upstaging Big Daddy*.

66. Lauren Love, "Resisting the 'Organic'": A Feminist Actor's Approach," in *Acting (Re)Considered*, 275.

67. Love, 279.

68. Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1968), 205.

69. Weedon, 28.

70. Elizabeth C. Stroppel, "Acting Theory, Training, and Practice from Feminist Perspectives: 'Hearing the Patterns' in One Hundred Voices" (Ph.d. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1997), 66.

71. Stroppel, "Acting Theory, Training, and Practice," 2.

72. Elizabeth C. Stroppel, "Reconciling the Past and the Present," in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 121.

73. See, for example, Krasner, *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 6.

74. David Krasner, "Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner: Method Acting," in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (New York: Routledge, 2000), 127.

75. Uta Hagen, *Respect for Acting* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 8. Though Hagen was not a member of the Group Theatre, she is "in the line" of Stanislavsky's heritage, through both Harold Clurman and her husband Herbert Berghof, who was a charter member of the Actors Studio. She has had a remarkable presence as a teacher in New York; her tenure at H.B. Studio exceeds fifty years. Her first book, *Respect for Acting*, was published in 1973, almost fifteen years prior to those published by Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner.

76. Richard Brestoff, *The Great Acting Teachers and their Methods* (Lyme, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 1995), xii.

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77. Brestoff also profiles Bertold Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, and Tadashi Suzuki, but he devotes one hundred forty pages to Stanislavskians and a mere twenty-one to alternatives.

78. S. Loraine Hull, *Strasberg's Method as Taught by Lorrie Hull* (Woodbridge, Conn.: Ox Bow Publishing, Inc., 1985); Edward Dwight Easty, *On Method Acting: The Classic Actor's Guide to the Stanislavsky Technique as Practiced at the Actors Studio* (New York: Ivy Books, 1981); Joanna Rotté, *Acting with Adler* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000); Larry Silverberg, *The Sanford Meisner Approach: An Actor's Workbook* (Lyme, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 1994); *The Sanford Meisner Approach: Workbook Two, Emotional Freedom* (Lyme, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 1997); *The Sanford Meisner Approach: Workbook Three, Tackling the Text* (Lyme, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 1998); *The Sanford Meisner Approach: Workbook Four, Playing the Part* (Lyme, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 2000).

79. Lee Scharfenberg, "Lee Strasberg: Teacher" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1963).

80. Steve Vineberg, "Method in Performance: Fifty Years of American Method Acting" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1985).

81. When Vineberg revised his dissertation for publication, he included a chapter on "neurotic" Method actresses. While he pays more attention to women in the published work, I will argue that his assessment supports my concerns about Lee Strasberg and his Method. See Steve Vineberg, *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1991).

82. Rotté, *Acting with Adler*. This is a published revision of Rotté's dissertation, "The Principles of Acting According to Stella Adler" (Ph.D. diss., The City University of New York, 1983). The work is based on Rotté's participation as a student in Adler's classes, and on her review of transcribed class sessions made available to her by Adler.

83. Cecchini Holub, "The Actor Training Legacy of Sanford Meisner" (see note 47 above).

84. Susan Spector, "Uta Hagen, The Early Years: 1919-1951" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, June 1982).

85. Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion* (see note 37 above); Lee Strasberg, *Strasberg at the Actors Studio: Tape-Recorded Sessions*, ed. Robert Hethmon (New York: Viking Press, 1965; reprint, New York: Theater Communications Group, 1991).

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86. Stella Adler, *The Technique of Acting* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988); *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov*, ed. Barry Paris (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); *Stella Adler: The Art and Technique for Acting*, ed. Howard Kissel (New York: Applause, 2000).

87. Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

88. Uta Hagen, *Respect for Acting; A Challenge for the Actor* (New York: Scribner, 1991); *Sources: A Memoir* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983).

89. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 34.

90. Meisner and Longwell, 36.

91. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Handbook*, 94.

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Chapter 2

Affective Memories: Lee Strasberg and Emotional Control

One of my first and most memorable introductions to the discourse on feminist theatre theory in practice occurred when I encountered a book bearing this arresting (and amusing) title: *Upstaging Big Daddy*. A collection of essays edited by Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, the book addresses the challenges facing--and strategies employed by--feminist theatre directors. Although I would recommend these essays as essential reading for any feminist theatre practitioner, I confess that it was the book's brilliant title (and guiding metaphor) that I found most enticing. While the book addresses itself to the theatre director, its title captures the plight (and potential ploy) of the actress. Borrowing the image of "Big Daddy" from Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the title points to traditional patriarchal elements of American theatre production while playfully suggesting the power of the female actor to "take the stage" or "steal the scene."

In their introduction to the collection, Donkin and Clement observe that under the heavy weight of theatrical traditions, many female practitioners unwittingly succumb to the pressures imposed on them by canonical literature and conventional production processes, thereby sacrificing their own sense of "truth" on the stage:

> Theater artists abandon their own truths in favor of some larger Truth, because their little truths have nowhere to settle in what the critical

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theorists refer to as a master narrative.

> In an effort to understand how women are persuaded to abandon their truths, we . . . identified . . . a powerful desire to please, to be pleasing. Please whom? we wondered. . . . We instinctively felt that the need to please was connected to a presence that was complex and contradictory: at once protective, generous, jovial, and profoundly disabling. This was not Big Brother. This was Big Daddy.[1]

For Donkin and Clement, the figure of "Big Daddy" can be both real and metaphorical. He can be producer, playwright, critic, or "prima donna director, whose power is absolute, whose approval is the breath of life." "Big Daddy" can also be understood as "a form of cultural conditioning," they say, whose power has been "internalized by women."[2] In this chapter, I will argue that in the tradition of American actor training, "Big Daddy" is, in fact, a real figure; he is also a figure who has been "internalized" by generations of female *and* male actors and teachers. Lee Strasberg is the "Big Daddy" of American Method acting.

Any review of American theatre history would reveal overwhelming evidence--even unanimous agreement--that Lee Strasberg is the patriarch of the Method. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I outlined the generally accepted genealogical lineage of Stanislavsky-based approaches to acting, in which Strasberg is viewed as the American "father." He studied at the American Laboratory Theatre in the early 1920s under the tutelage of former Moscow Art Theatre members Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, thereby becoming one of the first generation of Americans

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> the validity of their work, and substitutes for their ability to authorize their own. Directing, acting, or designing for Big Daddy means showing him what he wants to see instead of exposing the awkward contradictions and ambiguities of being female in a sexist, racist society.[3]

While Donkin and Clement's description of this phenomenon has far-reaching implications for women in theatre, what is most astounding about their sketch of "Big Daddy" is that it could be used, virtually without alteration, to describe Lee Strasberg, his teachings, and his legacy.

Lee Strasberg's judgments *were* so powerful that they continue to "resonate in everyone's head"--even now, after he has been dead for nearly twenty years. But as Peggy Phelan suggests, reflecting on the areas of inquiry opened by performance studies, "part of what performance knows is the impossibility of maintaining the distinction between temporal tenses, between an absolutely singular beginning and ending, between living and dying."[4] She hopes that conceiving of performance studies as a project of historiography "illuminates the rich task of the historian who tries to restage a drama that is behind us for someone who necessarily encounters that past in the future of its unfolding."[5] Might the drama of Lee Strasberg be restaged in the space created by performance studies and feminist theory? How might a performative re-examination of Lee Strasberg's teachings offer new understandings about the Method?

In this chapter, I will argue that there is a story about American Method acting

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that has not been told. The story is, in effect, a performance history: the enacted (and repeated) behavior of Lee Strasberg and those actors who worked with him in the Group Theatre, at the Actors Studio, at the Lee Strasberg Institute(s), and in his private classes. The "theory" of the Method is, in many ways, inseparable from the history--and nature--of its teaching. I will argue that Lee Strasberg was the very embodiment of the Big Daddy figure. He established a paternalistic approach to his actors early in his career, and its effects were often debilitating--especially for women. That paternalism survives him; it has become a part of the Method itself.

Strasberg's presence *was* synonymous with power and control, and the nature of that control was often deeply emotional. Like the Big Daddy figured by Donkin and Clement, Lee Strasberg demanded that his students please him. He demanded real, truthful emotion from his actors, and often controlled them by eliciting it himself.[6] Strasberg's own emotional life also contributed to the Method and its practice in a variety of ways. Known as an unemotional man, he thrived on exploring the emotions of others. His need for artistic achievement was to a great extent fulfilled through the students in his charge--especially those who became famous. He needed them to need him, then claimed them as his creations. He dominated them, confused them, controlled them.

Most important to this study, however, is the fact that all of these elements of the Method were--and may continue to be--"particularly disabling to women."[7] Strasberg's paternalistic teaching is filled with sexism and gender biases. His approach to actor training is largely diagnostic and often resembles psychotherapy,

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with Strasberg in the role of (unlicensed) analyst, delving into the actor's psyche. In assessing "the actor's problem," Strasberg's diagnoses could frequently be characterized as "female trouble." Time after time, in his classroom and in discussions about his teaching, Strasberg identifies more acting "problems" in women than in men, and he draws attention to himself in playing the role of "doctor," curing them. But as these women "fix" themselves to please the doctor/teacher, do they, as Donkin and Clement would argue, bypass their own (truthful) experience of being female? This is an especially important question when one considers that working with the Method is often described as "working on one's self." In needing the teacher's approval to validate their work, do they also ask him--and allow him--to validate (or invalidate) their very selves?

Finally, since Strasberg's influence transcends the grave, I will seek to determine whether the practice of the Method can be separated from the sexist assumptions which fathered and fostered it. The principles of Method acting have historically been bound to the ways in which the technique has been taught. If one becomes a "Method actress," then, might that be tantamount to carrying Lee Strasberg's (or his surrogates') judgments around in one's head, long after he is gone? Or might elements of the Method be used, instead, to help female actors to trust themselves? Can Method training lead one to a sense of strength as an independent artist? Or is it inevitable that a good Method actress must be a "good little girl," acting to please "Big Daddy?"

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Patriarchal Precedent (and Prejudice)

Since I began this chapter by referring to Lee Strasberg as the "patriarch" of the American Method, it will be helpful to define my use of the term, and to place Strasberg's practice within its patriarchal context. In postmodern feminist theory, the word "patriarch" signifies more than the idea that Stanislavsky is the "father" of the System, or that Strasberg is the "father" of the Method (although paternalism is an important factor); it represents an entire social structure which the Method both reflects and upholds. In her book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Chris Weedon defines the term "patriarchal": "It refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. . . . In patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male."[8] Weedon also explains the patriarchal structure of society:

> To say that patriarchal relations are *structural* is to suggest that they exist in the institutions and social practices of our society and cannot be explained by the intentions, good or bad, of individual women or men. . . . The social institutions which we enter as individuals--for example, the family, schools and colleges . . . pre-exist us. We learn their modes of operation and the values which they seek to maintain as true, natural, or good. As children we learn what girls and boys should be and, later, what women and men should be.[9]

What is perhaps unique about acting school is that it is a site where childhood lessons about "true, natural, and good" behavior are so explicitly repeated and reinforced. In

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few other places does a patriarchal authority figure so openly single out individuals to judge them, concluding: "Yes, that is the *right* way to act" or "No, you are behaving the *wrong* way." And in the patriarchal structure of Stanislavskian actor training, which privileges "truthful" behavior, the standards for "believability" are inevitably gender-based.

Like the patriarchal society into which he was born, the patriarchal structure of Stanislavskian acting is one which Strasberg did not create, but one which he inherited and perpetuated. Sharon M. Carnicke is the first author I have come across to comment on the gender biases implicit in Stanislavsky's own books, specifically evidenced in the relationship between the teacher "Tortsov" and his female students. She notes these briefly in the introduction to her book *Stanislavsky in Focus*:

> In his fictionalized acting manuals, Stanislavsky sometimes betrays a less than admirable attitude toward his women students. . . . He asks them to walk up and down the hall, faulting their every move, calling each step false, until they collapse in tears. When he describes how the use of personal emotion on the stage can be harmful to the psyche of an actor, he chooses a woman's memory to explore. His women students often cry, flirt, show off on stage, respond best to scenes that feature maternal love; in short, they are drawn from stereotypical images.[10]

Surprising is the fact that this observation has not been made earlier or more often; Carnicke throws the doors wide open for the inquiry I am conducting. As Weedon's work suggests, in teaching actors to behave "truthfully," the patriarchal prejudice of

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Stanislavskian training requires that male and female actors behave, respectively, as men and women "should."

Richard Boleslavsky is the link between Stanislavsky and Strasberg; he taught Strasberg the principles of the System at the American Laboratory Theatre in the early 1920s. He, too, wrote an influential book, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, which was published in advance of Stanislavsky's books in 1933. *Acting: The First Six Lessons* remains in print today; it appeared regularly on course syllabi at least into the 1990s.[11] Carnicke notes that although Boleslavsky's book was published three years prior to *An Actor Prepares*, its structure imitates the fictional form that was chosen by Stanislavsky as early as 1923.[12] She describes the book's structure: "Boleslavsky presents *Acting: The First Six Lessons* as if it were a dialogue between an older, wiser teacher and a young, talented, but naive actress, its form mirroring that of a play."[13] What Carnicke does not mention or explore is the fact that, like Stanislavsky's manuals, Boleslavsky's book is rife with sexist assumptions.

In the theatrical form the book takes, there are two characters: "I" (the teacher, Boleslavsky) and "The Creature." "The Creature," of course, is an impressionable young woman who comes to the fictionalized Boleslavsky for help with her acting. Boleslavsky's tale begins with the depiction of a childish, emotional young actress and concludes with her development into an emerging artist. But this development is achieved through *his* efforts--through the *teacher's* work on the actor's self.

Boleslavsky sets the scene. "*Enter a Pretty Creature of eighteen. She looks at*

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me with wide-open, frightened eyes and crushes her handbag violently."[14] It matters that the "Creature" is pretty, because her beauty plays a role in the way in which her teacher perceives and treats her. He is drawn to and moved by her feminine qualities. In their first meeting, the Creature says things like, "Please help me. I love the theatre." She recounts her prior acting experiences, but the teacher finds her ridiculous--and tells her so. He issues his first, tough acting lesson, cutting her down to size.

> I: What right have you to say that you have worked in the theatre? You have destroyed the very conception of the word Theatre. *(A pause; the Creature looks at me with the eyes of one innocently condemned to death. The little Handbag lies on the floor.)*[15]

The teacher then threatens to tell her that she should give up acting, and reduces her to tears. He describes the moment, capturing first the Creature's reaction to his threat, then his own reaction to her:

> *Pause. The eyes of the Creature change their expression, she looks straight into my soul with a sharp scrutinizing look, and seeing that I am not joking, clenches her teeth, and tries in vain to hide what is happening in her soul. But it is no use. One enormous tear rolls out of her eye, and the Creature at that moment becomes dear to me. It spoils my intentions completely.*[16]

The teacher's response at this point is terribly important--for it seems to set the stage for an entire century of American Method actor training. After reducing the young

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woman to real tears by implying that she has no talent, he offers this evaluation:

> I must tell you that this very moment you did more for the theatre, or rather for yourself in the theatre, than you did in playing all your parts. You suffered just now; you felt deeply. Those are two things without which you cannot do in any art and especially in the art of the theatre.[17]

Real tears, suffered *because* of the teacher's machinations, become a sign of talent. Here, Boleslavsky captures in fictional form a real and truthful moment that has been played out countless times in countless teaching encounters throughout the century. The teacher makes the student cry and calls it a performance. And he feels a sense of satisfaction in having produced the "performance" himself. She *pleases* him.

In this exchange, the student becomes the teacher's "puppet"; her feelings and self-perceptions are manipulated by--and constructed by--the teacher. In Boleslavsky's book, "The Creature" returns for more, gradually becoming closer and closer to him in their one-on-one relationship. But though he begins by making the young woman cry, the teacher seems also to feel an attraction to her. In the development of the drama, the plot is meant to demonstrate that the actress grows under the teacher's care. For example, following their work on memory of emotion, he says: "she goes away, strong, alive, and beautiful; I am left alone with my cigar."[18] Here, I cannot help but think of Freudian symbolism and wonder, "When is a cigar *not* just a cigar?" Boleslavsky seems almost to invite such a reading, subtly implying the teacher is aroused by the beauty of his own "creation."[19] The young actress finds employment

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and success, but although Boleslavsky *says* she grows strong through the course of their encounters, she does not grow independent. In the last meeting depicted in the book, The Creature tells her teacher, "One day, I'll learn to argue with you," not pausing before she says, "Please tell me: what shall I pay attention to. . . ?"[20] The Creature has become *his* creation, and she remains dependent upon him.

Boleslavsky is not the subject of this particular study, but nor is he a mere sidenote. It would be easy to write-off mistreatment of a woman in an acting manual or an acting classroom as the misogyny of one man in one time period. But tracing the lineage from Stanislavsky to Boleslavsky to Strasberg (and to anecdotes from the present day), one begins to wonder whether gender biases are, as Weedon suggests, not due to the intentions of *individual* women and men, but rather built into the patriarchal *structure* of the Method. As Anna Deavere Smith writes about the impetus for developing her own "technique" of acting: "I just couldn't sit in another class and see someone brought to tears by a coach."[21] Emerging from the patriarchal model of the Stanislavsky System are two central issues which bear careful consideration. The first is the notion that "real" emotion is the basis of truthful acting. Method acting relies on the idea of an essential "self" which, if uncovered and fully expressed, will lead to "truth" on the stage. The second is that the means for the actor to access and reveal this "true self" is not through independent action, but through reliance upon a patriarchal authority figure who will provoke the actor's emotions and then judge the truthfulness of their expression.

The title of Stanislavsky's first book on acting has been translated variously as

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An Actor Prepares; *The Actor: Work on Oneself*; and *An Actor's Work on Himself*.[22] All of these variations reflect Stanislavsky's early emphasis on the actor's inner resources, which would form the basis of Strasberg's Method.[23] Strasberg first encountered these theories in Boleslavsky's classroom, where they were transmitted and reinforced. Vakhtangov's "reformulation" added even more reliance on personalization, demanding that an actor make a scene "real and personal to himself" using "the principles of motivation and substitution."[24] The Method, therefore, evolving out of these primary sources, is concerned first and foremost with the actor's work on the "self."

But in the language(s) of feminism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism, the very idea of the "true self" is called into question. Weedon explains the concept of subjectivity--and its place within the patriarchal structure.

> The terms *subject* and *subjectivity* are central to poststructuralist theory and they mark a crucial break with humanist conceptions of the individual which are still central to Western philosophy and political and social organization. "Subjectivity" is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world. Humanist discourses presuppose an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent and which makes her what she *is*. . . . Against this irreducible humanist essence of subjectivity, poststructuralism proposes a subjectivity which is precarious,

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> contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak.[25]

Thus, the search for one's "true self" is challenged by the proposition that a person's subjectivity is, as Weedon says, "not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced."[26] And the troubling complication in Method acting is the role the acting teacher may play in contributing to the construction of that subjectivity. Weedon elaborates on the ways in which patriarchal structures constitute gendered subject positions:

> Gendered subject positions are constituted in various ways: by images of how one is expected to look and behave and by rules of behavior to which one should conform which are reinforced by approval or punishment, through particular definitions of pleasure which are offered as natural and imply ways of being a girl or woman, and by the absence within particular discourses of any possibility of negotiating the nature of femininity and masculinity.[27]

This passage could be used to describe the workings of an acting classroom. Women enter the room with gendered subject positions already constituted by society--and so does the teacher. In the "master teacher" model of Stanislavskian actor training, the instructor then judges the truthfulness of the acting based on how the actor looks and behaves, conferring his approval or disapproval. Since the teacher's notions of truthful behavior are also informed by his own subject position, he may expect his students to conform to their "natural" femininity or masculinity, and deem them "bad

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actors" if they do not.

Steve Vineberg claims that the concept of the "master teacher" of acting was introduced in the United States with Boleslavsky."[28] While it may also have had other precedents, the very phrase "master teacher" captures within itself the patriarchal authority--and prejudice--implicit in the teaching structure of the Method. In the field of Method acting, I would argue that "the actor's work on the self" might more accurately be characterized as "the *teacher's* work on the actor's self." Historically, in the work the teacher does, he helps to produce the actor's sense of (gendered) self. Women are encouraged to cry and flirt; to *be* emotional and sexy. And in the documentation of Strasberg's work in his classroom, one can observe the ways in which he wields (heterosexual) patriarchal control to construct the subjectivity of his "subjects."

I have outlined the patriarchal precedents (and prejudices) of the Method, drawing a line forward from Stanislavsky. But the remainder of this chapter will focus specifically on the teaching theories and practices of Lee Strasberg. In her introduction to *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson suggests that "theorizing which is explicitly historical, that is, which situates its categories within historical frameworks, less easily invites the dangers of false generalizations than theory which does not."[29] I have already established in the introduction to this dissertation that Method actor training continues today in the tradition of Lee Strasberg. I hope that by examining his practice as a historical case study, lessons can be learned about the perils and potentialities of this particular model for actor training.

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The Method

What, exactly, *is* "the Method"? Defining the term--and outlining the practice it represents--is a useful a prelude to a more complex feminist inquiry. Although "the Method" has become a generic label commonly used to describe a wide range of American, Stanislavsky-derived acting techniques, it is most properly applied to describe the specific approach developed and taught by Lee Strasberg. Although Strasberg drew heavily on Stanislavsky, Boleslavsky, and Vakhtangov, he ultimately developed his own method--*the* Method--through years of experimentation with actors in the Group Theatre, the Actors Studio, and in private classes. The Method, in keeping with its influences, focuses chiefly on the actor's internal work, with exercises designed to encourage relaxation, concentration, sensory experience, and emotional expression. Its aesthetic goal is verisimilitude.

Over the years, Strasberg offered contradictory explanations for the coining of the phrase "the Method." All of these, however, are related to questions of ownership and authority, and are connected to lingering doubts about whether what Lee Strasberg was teaching was the *true* Stanislavsky technique. In the late 1950s, Strasberg refused responsibility for creating the term, stating that it originated not inside but outside the Actors Studio.

> Only when the Studio's work began suddenly to be responded to outside was the word "method" actually first used, and it was used by people outside. Only because other people were saying "Ah, Stanislavski!" and I could not honestly say the work wasn't his, did I find myself

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> having to temporize and say, "well, the best things in it I suppose are Stanislavski's. The other things come from me. I don't know." "*The* Method" was first used outside. Emphasis on the article "the" came from other people, who meant to imply that they were referring not to just any method, but to "the" particular method singled out by the Actors Studio.[30]

This was Strasberg's predicament: some of the work was his, but it was based on Stanislavsky. And in the personal history of his practice, Strasberg suffered early and persistent attacks for misunderstanding and/or misrepresenting Stanislavsky's teachings. This set up a sort of "damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't" dilemma for Strasberg, in which he risked censure either way. He couldn't deny that he was teaching Stanislavsky's System, nor could he attest that he was teaching it faithfully.

By 1960, though, Strasberg not only accepted but seemed to claim ownership of the term "Method" as a way out of his dilemma. In a letter to Christine Edwards, author of *The Stanislavsky Heritage*, he wrote:

> 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" to suggest that while we obviously are influenced by Stanislavsky's ideas and practices, we used it within the limitations of our own knowledge and experience. . . . [Original ellipsis.]

By saying that the Group Theatre used an adaptation of the

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> Stanislavsky Method, we mean that we emphasized elements that he had not emphasized and disregarded elements which he might have considered of greater importance. Also, that in experimenting with some of the ideas propounded by Stanislavsky, we came to conclusions and practices of our own which he might not have agreed with. . . . 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 or procedures that Stanislavsky himself used, nor would he necessarily agree with whatever is done in his name.
>
> I therefore feel it 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.[31]

What is persuasive about this explanation is its apparent candor: Strasberg concedes that when he began working with the Stanislavsky System his knowledge of it was not complete; he also acknowledges that through his own experimentation and practice, he emphasized certain elements of the System and disregarded others. In this way, he claims--and accepts--responsibility for the Method as distinct from the System. He also achieves two goals: he not only protects himself against accusations that he is not "true" to Stanislavsky's System; more importantly, he establishes himself as no mere disciple or disseminator, but as the creator of an American acting technique. By the

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early 1970s, when he began dictating his only book, *A Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method*, Strasberg (somewhat immodestly) declared the Method to be "the summation of the work that has been done on the actor's problem for the last eighty years" (*DP*, 85).

There are reams of articles and numerous books dedicated to Strasberg and his Method, all of which provide source material for this case study. Among them are two histories, David Garfield's *The Actor's Studio* and Foster Hirsch's *A Method to their Madness*; two dissertations, Jean Scharfenberg's "Lee Strasberg: Teacher" and Steve Vineberg's "Method in Performance: Fifty Years of American Method Acting" (revised and published by Vineberg as *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style*); Cindy Adams' biography, *Lee Strasberg: The Imperfect Genius of the Actors Studio*; numerous examinations/explications of the Method itself, including Robert Lewis' *Method or Madness?*; Edward Dwight Easty's *On Method Acting*; and S. Loraine Hull's *Strasberg's Method as Taught by Lorrie Hull*; several video documentaries; and a new collection of essays edited by David Krasner, *Method Acting Reconsidered*.[32]

But perhaps the best sources for understanding Strasberg's Method are those which express his intentions and practices in his own words: *Strasberg at the Actors Studio* and *A Dream of Passion*. Although Strasberg never recorded his theories in a textbook, per se, these two publications come close to fulfilling that purpose. The former, *Strasberg at the Actors Studio*, is drawn from hundreds of tape-recorded sessions conducted by Strasberg at the Actors Studio between 1956 and the early

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1960s. Robert Hethmon, editor of the book, describes these recordings as "a most unusual chronicle" which "seemed to offer the opportunity of illustrating in book form [Strasberg's] philosophy of theatre and methods of working with actors" (*SS*, xv). In reading this book, one has the opportunity not only to "hear" Strasberg's impromptu lectures on various aspects of the Method, but also to "listen in on" exchanges between him and his students as he comments on their work. Hethmon arranges the material according to subject, attempting to elucidate the theory and practice of the Method.

A Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method is Lee Strasberg's professional memoir, begun in 1974 and edited by Evangeline Morphos after his death. In this volume, which he dictated on tape, Strasberg traces the origins of the Method and explains its principles and practices. He relates many encounters with students from throughout his lifetime; these are not dated, but are offered as prime examples of both his challenges and achievements. Carnicke notes that late publication appears to be the rule for most master teachers of acting, beginning with Stanislavsky: "Because the practice of acting resists easy explanation and neat theory, most actors write little. Its teachers tend to turn to writing when they come to terms with their own mortality, as if expressing a deeply felt impulse to fix into stable form their necessarily ephemeral art."[33] Clearly this was one of Strasberg's desires in writing *A Dream of Passion* at the end of his life; he wished to leave his own written document on Method acting "for the record."

Likening his life's work (perfecting an approach to acting) to a "journey,"

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Strasberg describes the kind of "truthful" acting process which is necessary to produce a sense of "real life" on the stage:

> It has been common to characterize acting as demanding belief, faith, and imagination. To believe, one must have something to believe in; to have faith, one must have something that encourages faith; to have imagination, one must be able to imagine something specific. The purpose of these acting exercises is to train the actor's sensitivity to respond as fully and as vividly to imaginary objects on stage as he is already capable of doing to real objects in life. He will, therefore, have the belief, faith, and imagination to create on the stage the "living through" that is demanded of the performer. This remains my major emphasis. (*DP*, 123)

Strasberg's Method is predicated on the notion that the actor can become sensitive to imaginary stimuli in the same way he or she is to real stimuli. If an actor develops a "belief" in the imaginary, he or she will then have a "real" response to the fictional life onstage. In this equation, belief in the fiction leads to "truthful" response; the actor accomplishes a "living through" which, in turn, creates a sense of verisimilitude for the audience.

Strasberg also conceives the actor as an "instrument." The actor's mind, body, voice, and emotions together comprise his or her "instrument." And the challenge for the actor is to gain control over "the instrument." Strasberg uses the example of musicians and their instruments to explain the special plight of the actor as performer:

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> It should be noted that in all the performing arts except acting, the artist has an instrument outside of himself which he learns to control. The instrument that the musician works with--the piano, the violin--does not create mental or emotional responses of its own. Regardless of the emotional state of the performer, the instrument remains objectively calm and capable.
>
> The actor's instrument, however, is himself; he works with the same emotional areas which he actually uses in real life. . . . The actor is both the artist and the instrument--in other words, the violinist and the violin. . . . The Method, therefore, is the procedure by which the actor can open control of his instrument. (*DP*, 122)

This passage succinctly states the basic premise of the Method. The actor *is* the instrument; Method actors refer to themselves as "my instrument." And all of the various exercises of the Method are designed to meet the goal articulated by Strasberg above: *control* of the instrument.

But taken together, Strasberg's statements on the Method raise questions for this feminist consideration. What does "control" of the instrument mean? Who controls it--and how? What if there is a feminist "crisis" of faith or belief, not only in the potential for "reality" to be depicted onstage, but also in the existence of a "true" inner self? Strasberg's Method presumes it can both access and express a universal truth. In doing so, it elides questions about gender roles and about the patriarchal power structure of Method actor training. The best way to understand these issues is

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through an analysis of Strasberg's basic exercises.

Strasberg lists the chief elements of the training: "Everything we deal with in these exercises--relaxation, concentration, sense memory, emotional memory--was defined by Stanislavsky" (*DP*, 124). Although he does not mention "affective memory" explicitly, this phrase, so often associated with the Method, is represented in its two facets: sense memory, which involves imaginary objects; and emotional memory, "which pertains to the more intense reactions of an emotional response" (*DP*, 111). Strasberg says, "Affective memory is the basic material for reliving on the stage, and therefore for the creation of a real experience on the stage" (*DP*, 113). In this way, nearly all of the exercises of the Method pertain to "affective memory."

In the following section, I will highlight the basic vocabulary of the Method, using Strasberg's own end-of-career statements on his teachings. In outlining these exercises, I will first call upon Strasberg's definitions of them, then begin to raise questions about these apparently "neutral" processes from a feminist point of view. Later, I will present detailed examples from Strasberg's practice as part of my interrogation of the gender biases and bases of the Method.

Relaxation. As in Stanislavsky's System, the foundational element of the Method is relaxation; it is the key to everything that follows. Strasberg's theory is that excess tension, both physical and mental, inhibits the actor's expression. As Strasberg defines it, "Tension is the presence of unnecessary or excess energy which inhibits the flow of thought or sensation to the required area" (*DP*, 125). "Relaxation," he says, "is the equivalent to the tuning of the violin or piano" (*DP*,

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125). Relaxation is the first step.

The relaxation exercise is, therefore, the Method exercise from which all else stems. In order to achieve relaxation, the actor is asked to sit in a chair which is not particularly comfortable, then told to maneuver into a position in which he or she could conceivably fall asleep. Strasberg's theory is that "one can be comfortable and relaxed, and uncomfortable but nonetheless relaxed" (*DP*, 126). Since an actor, by the very nature of the work, is often in "uncomfortable" situations on stage, relaxation is all that much more important.

Once in the chair, the actor "checks" his or her tension by determining the physical areas in which it is located, moving the body in those places, and using will to release the tension. Strasberg believes that physical tension is easier to release than mental tension; for mental release, he suggests focusing on four major areas: the temples, the space on the bridge of the nose leading into the eyelids, the muscles on the side of the nose leading to the mouth and chin, and the back of the neck (*DP*, 127-128). The actor is encouraged to allow these muscles to sag in unhabitual ways as a way of releasing habitual tension. Emotion often wells up during this relaxation period, Strasberg says, and actors are encouraged to allow it to be vocally released (*DP*, 129).

This relaxation, however, is directed and, in fact, adjudicated by the teacher. The teacher "checks" the actor's relaxation. One way for the teacher to "check" is to lift the student's limbs. Strasberg says that if, for example, he lifts a subject's arm, if it is relaxed, it will drop. But the arm doesn't always "drop." Through this exercise,

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Strasberg identified what he calls the "oppositional stance," which occurs when an actor pulls the arm in instead of dropping it. Strasberg says: "I have discovered that this usually suggests some built-in conditioning to oppose whatever is demanded" (*DP*, 98). Successful "relaxation," therefore, is achieved when a student gives in to the demands of the teacher. She must allow him to manipulate her arms literally as a puppet would be maneuvered by the puppeteer. "Relaxation" now begins to look like a breaking down of resistance, and a willingness to allow oneself to be physically manipulated.

Concentration. The second phase of the Method is concentration. As Strasberg says: "Relaxation is only a prelude to the actor's central concern: the need for concentration. Everything the actor does is a two-sided action. Relaxation is connected with concentration" (*DP*, 130). In this phase of the process, the actor works on recreating sensory reactions to imaginary objects (this is also referred to as "sense memory.") He or she should first observe these objects in life, then recreate them through memory. The objects chosen can stimulate all of the senses; Strasberg likes the imaginary drinking of a breakfast beverage since that exercise "contains all the senses--touch, taste, sight, hearing, and smell" (*DP*, 134). These concentration exercises become more complicated with the "mirror exercise," where actors try to repeat the reality of their morning rituals in front of an imaginary mirror. Strasberg also uses the imaginary putting on of socks and shoes, recalling the sensation of different kinds of fabric against the skin, the feeling of sunshine on the body--all to stimulate sensory recall.

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These exercises also break down resistance, as they encourage actors to find faith in the imaginary. By remembering the way one deals with objects in life, one recreates those sensations in an artificial environment as a means of sensitizing the instrument and gaining a sense of belief. These, too, are coached by the teacher, and occasionally differ according to the gender of the performer. The morning ritual, for example, means: "for the female, combing the hair and putting on makeup; and for the male, shaving" (*DP*, 134).

Overall Sensation. Once the concentration exercises have been attempted and explored, the actor moves on to what Strasberg calls "overall sensation" (*DP*, 138).[34] A famous example of this type of work is the shower exercise, in which the actor recreates the experience of showering, while standing fully dressed in front of the class. Strasberg claims this exercise is useful for "unblocking" the actor: "We've discovered that almost all human beings have areas of inhibitions, self-consciousness, and embarrassment which make it difficult for them to express as fully on stage as they experience in private" (*DP*, 138). The overall sensation exercise is designed to help an actor to concentrate on his or her own sensory experience, living through it as in life, but in front of others. This is an intensely personal exercise, also designed to create a feeling of exposure:

> The key may perhaps reside in the fact that there is the element of nakedness involved in a shower, etc. For most people, this creates strong inhibiting reactions. At the end of the exercise, I will usually check the actor's own belief in what he is recreating. I say, "All right,

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> okay, now stand up slowly, maintain the exercise, keep the exercise going; turn and look at me." Invariably the people will turn around and they cannot look at me, even though the exercise has been done fully clothed. They laugh, they blush, they respond in an embarrassed way without necessarily being able to tell me why. On questioning, they will admit that it is because they feel naked. . . . The strength of what they have created is of the same intensity as if it were literally true. (*DP*, 140)

Here, the actor is directed by the teacher to perform one of the most intimate of human rituals: the bath. One touches oneself as one would in "real" life. The embarrassment evoked in this exercise may stem from more than "belief" in nakedness; one has been rendered naked through the exposure of an intensely personal ritual. In this procedure, the teacher becomes a kind of voyeur.

Strasberg complicates the "overall sensation" exercise, on occasion, by adding more and more elements to it, including: work with an imaginary personal object; a vocal action such as the humming of a song; the recreation of physical activities such as getting dressed; or the recitation of a soliloquy from *Hamlet*.

> The actor does not act this monologue with the meaning that it may have in the immediate context of the play; rather he permits it to be affected by whatever sensations he is working on. Thus, the monologue may be delivered in a sauna by someone who is responding to some personal object, who at the same time is sleepy, getting up,

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> etc. The words take on utterly new meanings and dimensions that might be demanded by a particular director's interpretation. (*DP*, 142-143)

Here, one sees Strasberg's signature emphasis on actor sensation rather than on textual interpretation. Although this phase of the work is about exercises rather than performance, the words of the play take on the meaning that the actor gives them--not through conscious thought, but through sensory experience.

The Private Moment. At this point in the work, Strasberg introduces another exercise for which he became notorious: the private moment. As much as Strasberg emphasizes sensory experience, he is also heavily invested in disrupting what he views as habitual behavior in the actor.

> Having realized that the actor's behavior on the stage is often limited by the habits of expression which he has developed in life, I searched for other possibilities that would help to strengthen the actor's expressiveness. One set of exercises was suggested by a well-known phrase of Stanislavsky's about the capacity to establish for himself the necessary privacy on the stage in order to stimulate his concentration to work--the actor's need to be "private in public." (*DP*, 143)

In this exercise, Strasberg encourages actors to "go beyond everyday, casual behavior and permit a fullness and vividness of expression which he rarely indulges in except in what I call the private moment" (*DP*, 143). In this "private moment," the actor must engage in an activity which he or she would ordinarily cease if someone entered the

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room; this activity must be performed in front of the class.

Strasberg cites as an example one instance in which a woman "did things girls don't like to reveal. She plucked hairs and other things like that" (*SS*, 117). This same young woman developed further, dancing "privately" for the teacher.

> She was lying in bed in her room all alone, because she only does this when she's by herself and in a mood everybody gets into sometimes. Then she put on the Turkish music and started to dance. You have never seen such abandon as this girl had on stage. It was what I call hot dancing, and it was exciting, thrilling, and shocking in the sense that you just didn't think of this kind of thing with that girl. She hadn't seemed that kind of girl." (*SS*, 117)

Like the shower exercise, this "private moment" throws into relief not an *imaginary* private moment but a *real* one. The actor's work has nothing to do with text or character, but with self-revelation. Actors risk real vulnerability, here, as they are required to, in effect, allow a group of strangers into their bedrooms, to watch them engaging in intimate acts. "She hadn't seemed *that* kind of girl," Strasberg says, apparently titillated by her display. Having broken down the student's initial resistance, the teacher can ask her to do just about anything.

Animal Exercise. In the animal exercise, students observe and then imitate the behavior of a particular animal as a way of leading toward physical characterization. Strasberg says, "This exercise trains the actor by forcing him to deal with the character's behavior rather than relying on his own feelings" (DP, 147). While this

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may be a non-literal opportunity for actors to move away from their stereotypical behavior, much depends upon the animals chosen for or by the actors. (When I was a student at Circle in the Square, we were given these instructions: "You are an animal in the jungle. You are starving, and you are in heat. Begin.") Strasberg notes that "some actors dread the animal exercise. It seems as if they are almost afraid of becoming animals" (*DP*, 148). Might there also be *other* reasons for their fears?

Emotional Memory. Along with the private moment exercise, the most famous Method exercise--one which really labels the entire practice--is the emotional memory exercise. Strasberg describes it: "The actor is asked to recreate an experience from the past that affected him strongly. . . . I ask the actor to pick the strongest thing that ever happened to him, whether it aroused anger, fear, or excitement. The student tries to recreate the sensations and emotions of the situation in full sensory terms" (*DP*, 149). The exercise is not designed for story-telling, but for the actor to actually stimulate and re-experience strong emotion at will. Like the other exercises of the Method, the emotional memory is, at least initially, conducted by the teacher. Although Strasberg does not require the actors to divulge their secrets to him, they must reveal emotional response. Strasberg pokes and prods at memories until students express the desired reaction.

Song and Dance. In song-and-dance, the student is asked to sing a song one note at a time, sustaining that note until his breath runs out. No attention should be paid to rhythm. The realization, Strasberg says, is that "while the actor may not have been aware of it, he was, nonetheless, subservient to the pull of habit" (*DP*, 154).

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Arrhythmical movement is also added to disorient the actor. Strasberg's belief is, oddly, that many people, but "especially women, have difficulty in carrying a tune" (*DP*, 144).

Scene Work. The final aspect of Strasberg's training of actors is work on scenes. In fact, at the Actors Studio, many acting problems are diagnosed and worked on in the context of the presentation of memorized and rehearsed scenes, on which Strasberg makes commentary. Strasberg's emphasis is not primarily on the actors' *performance* of the scene, however, but on the ways in which they use a scene to work on particular "problems." At the end of each scene, Strasberg asks the question, "What were you working on," allowing actors to provide a basis for him to evaluate their work. The work is not, therefore, likely to be examined for interpretation, characterization or faithfulness to the play, but instead for the fullness of the actor's expression. As Strasberg says, "The analytic part of the actor's work is, of course, essential to the actor's development as an artist. But Stanislavsky sought to replace the actor's mental, intellectual, and theorizing activities with truthfulness, experience, and behavior" (*DP*, 173). This is "the actor's work on himself." These are the basic exercises; this is the crux of the Method. The Method's goal is to allow for the "truthful" outward expression of the actor's "real" inner life.

Patriarchal Practice: Lee Strasberg as "Big Daddy"

I began this chapter with the assertion that Lee Strasberg is a "Big Daddy" figure, both literally and metaphorically. I have outlined the theory of his practice

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and the basic exercises of the Method as he defines them. But I have also begun to question some of the assumptions of the Method. Does the expression of "real" emotion lead to "truthful" acting? Does the Method facilitate the outward expression of one's "true self," or might it instead contribute to the construction of traditionally masculine and feminine behavior? How might the structure of the Method and its teaching include patriarchal prejudices which can adversely affect actors? A biographical sketch of Strasberg's professional life, as told through his own recollections and those of his colleagues and students, will prove useful at this point in demonstrating how the theories of the Method translate into practice. For the questions I raise will be answered through an analysis of Lee Strasberg's teaching of his own technique.

Lee Strasberg was one of the founders of the Group Theatre in 1931, along with Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford. As interested as Clurman was in creating a socially and politically conscious theatre, he also remembers that another reason for the formation of the Group was Strasberg's obsession with acting, "upon which he seemed as concentrated as a jeweler over the inner mechanism of a watch."[35] Accordingly, the founders of the Group established as one of their chief goals the creation of a new kind of working environment for the actor. Harold Clurman recalls the contemporary context of the late 1920s, and the plans he and Strasberg made:

> Young actors, Strasberg and I declared, had no opportunity at the Theatre Guild, or elsewhere, to be trained while they were rehearsing . . . the actor's individual problem as a growing craftsman

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> was neglected. . . . In our group we would pay careful attention to the actor's development. Rehearsals themselves would constitute a schooling.[36]

Clurman's use of the phrase "growing craftsman" to describe the young actor demonstrates a respect for the artist; the Group's founders sought to offer actors a place to develop the skills necessary to practice their craft artfully.

Yet another one of Clurman's early recollections of Strasberg begins to tell a more complicated story. Before the formation of the Group, as Clurman and Strasberg were getting to know one another, they observed a rehearsal together at the Theatre Guild. According to Clurman, the actress Helen Westley "was having great difficulty with a scene." Clurman remembers, "Strasberg, who sat beside me, finally whispered: "I could get it out of her," meaning that he knew how to deal with the actress' problem in this scene and could produce the desired result. . . . He spoke as if he possessed a magic key, a secret of some kind."[37] While Clurman was inspired by Strasberg's sense of confidence, and recounts the story to explain Strasberg's intense interest in the actor's process, the phrase that jumps out of the story is Strasberg's belief that he could "*get it out of her.*" The expression calls forth images of a police interrogation--bringing in the "muscle" to "break" the informant. It also continues a very particular model for the relationship between student/actor and teacher/director: she needs him to get the performance out of her; he achieves his artistic identity by doing so. In this way, her performance becomes *his*.

The best source for the perspective of the women of the Group Theatre is a

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series of interviews conducted by Helen Krich Chinoy in the early 1970s for a special issue of the *Educational Theatre Journal*: *Reunion, A Self-Portrait of the Group Theatre*.[38] Actresses Stella Adler, Phoebe Brand, Margaret Barker, and Ruth Nelson all made comments about Lee Strasberg which suggest that they bristled--and did not flourish--under his style of authority. Brand tells a story that echoes Clurman. She had been a student at the Clare Tree Major School of the Theatre at the same time as Strasberg, before his days at the American Laboratory Theatre, and reencountered him as an actress under his direction during the first year of the Group Theatre. Rehearsing a scene with the actor Franchot Tone, Brand felt unable to get through to him; he was "taking an exercise." ("Taking an exercise" was the phrase used early on for implementing affective memory. The Method has often been criticized for turning the actor's concentration inward, away from the scene and scene partner, especially during that "moment.") Brand remembers:

> Lee said, "Phoebe, Why don't you work the way Franchot does?" "Well, what is he doing?" I said. "He's enriching and enlarging the part." I said, "But I am trying to work with him." He repeated, "I wish you would work the way Franchot does." He was beginning to get mad, but at the same time he was petting me, stroking me. He was very angry with me, but at the same time he was stroking me to say, "I'm not really mad at you." All this was very confusing. Confusion was one of the things we suffered from. (*RSP*, 516).

One can feel in this description Strasberg's efforts, once he was able to "get his hands

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on" the actress, to "get the performance out of her." He manipulated and confused her. Today, "petting" and "stroking" a subordinate while filled with anger towards her suggests a term then unknown: sexual harassment; at the very least, this might now be considered "inappropriate behavior." Brand tempers her comments by acknowledging that societal perspectives on the role of women had changed in the forty intervening years. "Nobody treated women properly in those days," she says. "And I think we were treated better than most women--much better" (*RSP*, 514-515). Still, her recollections about the role of women in the Group are enlightening.

Strasberg has his own memory of working with Phoebe Brand during that same period. (It is clear in reading Chinoy's interview with Strasberg that she shared with him the comments made by other interviewees, offering him a chance to respond. She says in her introduction to the interview that "it seems wholly appropriate for Lee Strasberg to have the last word" [*RSP*, 544].) But his self-defense regarding Brand reads almost as an admission. Strasberg speaks of the tremendous pressure he was under that summer to deliver results. He says, "Phoebe Brand was playing her first big part. And I took the responsibility. I said, 'I'll get the performance from you'" (*RSP*, 547). For Strasberg, the performance is characterized as "total emotion" (*RSP*, 546). As early as 1931, then, Strasberg took responsibility for eliciting the performance--emotion--from the actress, and his strategies for doing so were clearly manipulative.

Ruth Nelson remembers this same quality in Strasberg. She, too, had studied with Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya, but did not have Strasberg's authority within the

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Group. She recalls that the playwright Maxwell Anderson had insisted that she play the ingenue in his play, *Night of the Taos*. But what might have been a thrilling moment for the actress--to have been chosen by the playwright for a leading role--was ruined by Strasberg.

> Lee got me in conference and said, "Of course you're quite unsuited for the role. But we'll see what we can do with improvisation to bring something out of you which perhaps you haven't used." That finished me as far as the role was concerned. The idea that I could possibly do anything was gone forever. So that was another period of agony. This is about the way it went on for me. I'm speaking personally; there was no joy whatsoever. (*RSP*, 528)

Although this story points to a casting conflict between playwright Maxwell Anderson and the directors of the Group Theatre, the importance of Nelson's recollection to this discussion is Strasberg's work with the actor. Here, Strasberg makes it clear to Nelson that she is not his first choice for the role, thereby undermining her confidence. A sense of self-confidence is essential for any actor stepping onto the stage. But Strasberg removes it, placing himself between Nelson and the role. He would make the performance happen, by "bringing something out of her" that he hadn't yet seen (even though Anderson had apparently seen the necessary quality). Whether this would happen through cajoling, manipulating, or bullying, he would "get it out of her." But Nelson says that the approach backfired. Strasberg destroyed her confidence and her performance.

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Margaret Barker also remembers Strasberg's "hands-on" approach during that first summer. "I remember, at the very first reading, Strasberg came up behind me and relaxed my shoulders and taught me the whole kind of energizing that we do, totally shaking me out and getting absolute relaxation" (*RSP*, 522). But if Strasberg's was a "hands on" approach, he manipulated more than the physical life of the actors; he had his hands on their emotional lives as well. Barker recalls his emotional demands: "My whole feeling was always that if you cry, you cry; and if you don't you don't. But it was awful, with Strasberg, because you felt that if once you cried and had a full emotional thing, you weren't acting if that didn't happen every time. You didn't quite know what else to do" (*RSP*, 523). She concludes that the training was damaging. "I think some actors were hurt," she says. "Strasberg was so intent on getting what he called 'real emotion' that he reduced us to a pulp" (*RSP*, 523). Nelson agrees: "At times, work with Lee was unhealthy. It got to the point where I was excused from Lee's classes. I couldn't take it. He would be very difficult in rehearsal sometimes. I don't know what was going on, what happened" (*RSP*, 530-531). Margaret Barker has her own theory about how Strasberg became the "Big Daddy." She describes him as a "little man" who had trouble getting through to "this terribly alive bunch of people who were not theatre students" (*RSP*, 523). She says, "To control us, I think Strasberg tried to top us with his voice and his passion, and he turned almost everybody against him" (*RSP*, 524). Barker makes an interesting point, here, when she observes that the members of the Group were *not* his students. They were professional actors--peers--who began to resist him.

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The most significant resistance to Strasberg's training at the Group Theatre came from Stella Adler. After spending a number of weeks working with Stanislavsky in Paris in 1934, Adler brought her findings back to the Group, informing them that the System was being distorted by Lee Strasberg's practice. A rift ensued. As Phoebe Brand remembers, from that point forward, "There were sharp divisions. It was like being either a Republican or a Democrat" (*RSP*, 516). Following Adler's challenge to his acting methodologies, Strasberg never regained the authoritative status within the Group Theatre which he had previously enjoyed.

Strasberg's version of the story is somewhat different. But again, his self-defense also seems an admission in the context of this discussion. Responding to the rift in the Group, Strasberg places the blame squarely on Adler's shoulders.

> Now in terms of the difficulty with actors in the Group Theatre, we have to be careful. The difficulty was with Stella Adler, not the actors. . . . It was Stella who changed, not our method. It went on just the same. But I feel that she does not know and understand what the work was, because she thinks that it was to create emotion. Stella had a way of being very emotional, personally. She had a very full, vivid, emotion, but one which frankly rubbed me the wrong way. I remember one moment saying to her in *Success Story*, "If you cry, I'll kill you!" And I meant it. Obviously I wanted her to have emotion, but not to cry the way she personally would cry. (*RSP*, 550)

First, Strasberg finds a way to discredit Adler as an authority of Stanislavskian acting

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by saying she misunderstood the work; he also claims it was her "emotionalism" which clouded her vision and damaged her acting. But he goes on to claim credit for "getting out of Stella" her best work--albeit it through threats and bullying. To bolster his claims, Strasberg cites criticism Adler received for emotionalism in her later work with non-Method directors, declaring: "in the plays she did with me, she was great" (*RSP*, 550).

One example of the work Strasberg did with Adler involves the use of Vakhtangov's theories, and what Strasberg calls a "reformulation of Stanislavsky's 'creative if'" (*DP*, 85). Strasberg told Chinoy about rehearsing John Howard Lawson's play *Success Story* for the Group Theatre:

> Stella Adler . . . had an unusual emotional intensity, expressiveness, and physical vitality that the playwright felt was wrong for the character of the meek Jewish secretary who was secretly in love with the stock boy. Lawson wanted Stella to play the role of the sensuous and glamorous wife of the corporation head. We perceived in Stella, however, the presence of the emotional colors needed to create a controlled or dynamic character. I wanted a deep emotion--which Stella had--but contained in pure, lovely, ethereal quality. It was very difficult to get this from her because of her natural tendency to "burn up the stage." In one sequence, Stella's character was supposed to show concealed longing for the stock boy, but for Stella, the notion of a repressed, hidden, calm romance was alien to her own behavior. All of

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> her attempts were overdone, or without any personal truth.
>
> She was finally able to achieve the character by means of an unusual adjustment, which I called the "shipboard adjustment" (*DP*, 87-88).

In the "shipboard adjustment," Strasberg asked Adler to behave as though everything were happening on a ship. He claimed success: "Not only did the adjustment work, but people came back stage and didn't recognize her. Friends told her that she was so different, so changed, so calm. It was probably her most distinguished performance" (*DP*, 88).

There are several revelations in this discussion. First, this is another instance of a playwright selecting a female actor for a role, and Strasberg deciding that he knew better. But he hides behind that royal "we": "*we* perceived in Stella the presence of emotional colors." Who are *we*? We are Strasberg, deciding that the dynamic woman whose emotion "burns up the stage" should be recreated into a woman with a "lovely, ethereal quality." After transforming (taming?) her, Strasberg took the credit. "Getting it out of her" defined his practice--then and later.

Though Strasberg's training for the role of "Big Daddy" began during his years with the Group Theatre, he mastered his part in the years which followed, in his private classes and at the Actors Studio. Gordon Rogoff, who had been Administrative Director of the Actors Studio during 1959 and 1960, and had the opportunity to work closely with Strasberg, wrote a damning essay about him for a special *TDR* series in 1964-1965.[39] At that time, Rogoff made this keen observation

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about Strasberg's renewed and growing authority as a master teacher of acting: "Protecting Strasberg's authority now, as it couldn't have done with the Group Theatre, is the simple accumulation of years. White hairs may not a grown man make, but they certainly help the illusion. And in the theatre, sometimes to its cost, illusion also has a higher standing than reality."[40] With the simple accumulation of years, Strasberg gained an ever more authoritative stance. And while those under his direction in the Group Theatre were, as Barker noted, more or less his peers in terms of age and experience, the passage of time lent Strasberg the necessary age difference to establish even more of a father-child dynamic with his student-actors.

Rogoff expressed concern that the necessary corollary to Strasberg's paternalism was the child-like deference of his students. In "Lee Strasberg: Burning Ice," he details Strasberg's paternalism and its crippling effects. "Like it or not," he writes, "Strasberg's impact on actors drawn into his circle is a real one."[41] In assessing Strasberg's charisma and its hold on his students, Rogoff says:

> Classically, somewhat simplistically, charismatic relationship is the extension of by-play between parent and child, neither side willing or able to break the cord. . . . Stronger men than Strasberg have not been able to resist the plea of a perpetual child for care, confirmation, and--veering toward the sinister--severity, reprimands, and the hovering threat of being cut out of the will.[42]

Rogoff suggests, in fact, that many of the hopeful actors who came to Strasberg had suffered the rejection of their own families by pursuing an unrespectable (theatrical)

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career, and that they arrived at the Studio "in search of a home."[43]

That the actors also perceived this relationship is evidenced in their own language. According to Rogoff, in the early 1960s when Molly Kazan addressed the Studio membership about their plans to form a producing unit, she

> looked around the room at the aging ingenues, the greying young leading men, the forty- the fifty-year-old students, and implored them to come to their senses about who they were. They were still referring to themselves as "kids," she said, and after fourteen years at the Studio, it was time to realize that they should have grown up. Kids they weren't then and kids they aren't now.[44]

In a 1963 television interview, several members of the Studio, among them Geraldine Page, Rip Torn, and Paul Newman, discussed that new producing unit of the Studio and made an oblique reference which supports Rogoff's story. Geraldine Page was asked by the moderator whether the decision to produce was a "declaration of independence" on the part of the actors, to which she responded: "We felt it was so. And we've noticed that the, uh, term, 'kids,' is not applied as often now."[45] Perhaps the middle-aged actors were made aware that they were not "kids," but their relationship with Strasberg remained one of parent and child.

Even Strasberg's daughter Susan lends credence to notion that her father functioned as father-figure to his students. She laments: "My father was so busy being a father to so many other actors that by the time he came home at night he had no energy left really to be a father . . . to his own children."[46] But Strasberg was not

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not always a kindly father figure, especially with his female students.

Ben Gazzara, a member of the Actors Studio from its early days, is now in his seventies. A "tough guy" actor once compared to Marlon Brando, he seems an unlikely source for an unsolicited "feminist" critique of Lee Strasberg.[47] But in a recent A&E Biography of the teacher, Gazzara offers this comment, apparently from the blue: "I really felt sorry for the girls . . . the girls . . . the girls were under more pressure. I don't know why Lee, Lee seemed to be more of a severe father with the women than he was with the men."[48] In establishing the patriarchal presence, Strasberg made himself indispensable to the actor's process. But he was tough on the actors--especially the women. He created an environment where actors didn't work *with* him but *for* him. Strasberg was the one who made the evaluations and decisions; it was he who validated--or withheld validation. And that is precisely what is dangerous about the Method--especially for the female actor.

Working on "the Self": Training or Therapy?

A new collection of essays on the Method has recently appeared, with Lee Strasberg pictured on its cover: *Method Acting Reconsidered*. David Krasner, editor of the volume, makes his project the recuperation of Strasberg and the Method from what he refers to in his introduction as "Method Bashing in the Academy."[49] Krasner charges that "disdain for Strasberg . . . has become so intense that understanding it requires less reliance on objective reason and more on psychopathology."[50] And although Krasner acknowledges feminist critiques of the Method, such as those of

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Elaine Aston and Sue-Ellen Case, he does not lend them much credence. He claims that Aston's own exercises for feminist actors are "indiscernible" from Strasberg's work, and that Sue-Ellen Case's concerns about the Freudian basis of the Method are largely unfounded, since the Method is "fundamentally not Freudian but Pavlovian."[51] But Krasner's reconsideration attempts to lay to rest feminist concerns about the Method before a thorough feminist examination has been conducted. And there are ways in which Krasner appears almost to preempt such an inquiry, suggesting (ironically, given the Method's predilections) that it might come from an irrational, emotional place.[52]

Krasner's choice of the word "psychopathology" is a curious one, since a great part of the lore surrounding the Method is its dangerous resemblance to psychotherapy, particularly in the hands of Lee Strasberg. I would suggest that there are many compelling *reasons* for feminists--and others--to disdain aspects of Strasberg's practice. But allowing Krasner's notion for just a moment, I would ask: If there *is*, indeed, a "psychopathology" driving some critiques of the Method, might it represent a collective "emotional memory" of training trauma induced by Strasberg himself?

The Method has long been subject to criticism that it enters into areas where training ought not go, delving into the actors' psyches, digging up buried memories, eliciting personal confessions, and demanding private displays. The Method supposes that by "getting at" the fear, inhibition, or psychological obstruction, an actor's "problems" can be "cured." Richard Hornby criticizes this psychological approach to

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actor training to in his "radical attack" on "Strasbergian acting." He says:

> A legacy of this approach is that American actor training, and rehearsal techniques as well, have often come to resemble psychoanalysis itself--or a parody of it. . . . Since the actor must show real emotion on stage, and since he is typically inhibited, it becomes the job of the acting teacher or director to release him from his inhibitions. The teacher or actor interrogates the actor about his emotional life, often in the most intimate and intrusive way, reducing the poor individual to hysterics or uncontrolled weeping as a triumphant "breakthrough."[53]

This notion is refuted by David Krasner; in fact, Hornby's critique is among those Krasner deems a "psychopathology."[54] But in most accounts and documents of Strasberg's teaching, he certainly does appear to take on the role of doctor or "therapist"; Hornby's description fits.

Feminist psychologist Maureen O'Hara writes about the challenges facing actual psychotherapists in the postmodern world in her essay "Constructing Emancipatory Realities."[55] O'Hara acknowledges that the help a therapist gives a patient is directly related to her own subject position and feminist perspective. Analyzing the different strains of feminist thought, O'Hara concludes:

> There are, of course, enormous implications for the therapist in these different positions. If you believe that a woman's meaninglessness and emptiness--her depression--stems from her alienation from primordial femininity, then your therapy will be geared toward separatism, casting

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> off the artifices of "masculine consciousness" and reaffirming the "essential feminine." You will eschew activities associated with the "masculine" and cleave to those that are womanist. You will see intuition, feeling, magic, sensuality, dance, poetry and mysticism as facilitating your client's recovery of her "divine female nature. . . ."
>
> By contrast, therapy informed by a poststructuralist or constructivist position necessitates a heightened commitment to rationality and critical analysis of both the outer world of signs and language and inner subjectivity. It involves consciousness-raising activities to challenge even deeply felt identifications and pull apart cherished psychic structures with the view to realigning them with female emancipatory interests. Such a therapy has to be essentially activist, requiring women to . . . become . . . both an interpreter of culture and a maker of culture.[56]

O'Hara's understanding of the therapist's role has implications for the Method acting teacher. Training is not, and should not be, considered therapy. But as O'Hara points out, even a trained psychotherapist may not get at *the* truth of a patient's emotional life. The therapist's evaluations and treatment decisions are based upon her own subject position and feminist politics (or lack thereof). I explore this perspective on *actual* therapy because if even a therapist's subjectivity and politics can shape a patient's understanding of her own emotional life--and affect the course of action she takes in her life--then the potential exists (with similar hazards) for an acting teacher

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to shape an actor's sense of herself in a mode of training that focuses so intently on actor emotion and psychology.

Marc Gordon is another scholar who attempts to recuperate Strasberg and the Method in his essay "Salvaging Strasberg at the Fin de Siècle." He, too, rejects the notion that Strasberg caused mental breakdowns in his students. "Stories circulated that aspiring Method actors were suffering nervous breakdowns at the hands of the demon Strasberg, who perversely exorcised them of their deepest fears with private moment and emotion memory exercises. Such was the mystique, not the truth, surrounding the Method.[57] Yet even *Strasberg* acknowledges such incidents in his practice, when he miscalculated an actor's readiness for an exercise or stability to perform it. In each of these incidents, those who broke down were women.

In an interview with Richard Schechner in the early 1960s, Strasberg admitted that his work goes into dangerous areas--and that sometimes actors suffer deep psychological effects.

> In fact I once had a Private Moment which was terrifying. An actress came in who I realized was very bound to convention and didn't move from within. I knew that the problem would be to awaken something within her. She hadn't done any exercises, and I never let anybody do a Private Moment if he hasn't done the concentration and relaxation exercises, because I don't know how strong control is. I didn't know that she was under the care of a doctor, she had not told me. She had an emotional disturbance, and she should not have done Private

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> Moments because they only lead to a re-affirmation of whatever bothers you. . . . She did a Private Moment which was one of the greatest I've ever seen. I sat in amazement. I wouldn't have believed that this girl had it in her. But she couldn't recover from it, it was so strong. You see, obviously I didn't know that there was anything emotionally wrong with the girl. She had to stop the work.[58]

Strasberg himself says that the work is dangerous. He blames the woman, though, for not having revealed her "disturbance." Yet what is most intriguing about Strasberg's account is that he reports this woman's private moment was "the greatest" he had ever seen. Watching a woman in total breakdown, on some level, fulfills Strasberg's (aesthetic?) goals.

In his book *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style*, Steve Vineberg studies many more male actors than he does female. But three of the most famous women of the Method, Geraldine Page, Kim Stanley, and Sandy Dennis, are examined together in a chapter bearing the dubious title: "The Neurosis Kids."[59] Placing only women in this category, Vineberg describes them as "a conspicuous group that specialized in playing neurotics."[60] In another chapter entitled, "Method Sanity," he places three more women: Maureen Stapleton, Eva Marie Saint, and Kim Hunter.[61] Curiously, in interviews elsewhere, these women add to the evidence that Strasberg *did* contribute to (if not cause) the emotional instability of several of his women students.

Maureen Stapleton, a member of the Actors Studio with a long and

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distinguished career on stage, film, and television, testifies to having witnessed the psychological nature of Strasberg's work, and makes the direct comparison between the Method and psychoanalysis:

> I had my reservations. . . . I especially didn't like that "private moment" and "sense memory" stuff he pushed. It's okay up to a point, but that point too often was reached and then left in the dust. Who wants to see people get hysterical and start crying and moaning for real? To my way of thinking, unless you're a therapist or a doctor, you stay out of certain places in the human psyche. Frankly, I don't think Sigmund Freud was as nosey [*sic*] as Lee Strasberg. The whole business just didn't sit well with me; his classes could be disquieting at the very least and, in their most flagrant moments, downright intrusive.[62]

In fact, Lee Strasberg did position himself as a kind of "doctor" of acting in his teaching sessions. He led actors to release their inner emotions, operating on the principle that true emotion creates truthful acting.

Medical metaphors abound in literature within and about the Method, and these metaphors have great meaning. They imply that the actor is somehow "sick" and in need of a cure, and in the Method, it is not the performance which needs to be cured but the actor himself. Or, more often, *herself*. Tanya Augsburg warns that even in medicine today--real medicine--there are dangers for women giving "informed consent" to the doctors who would treat them.

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> Biology, medicine, gynecology, obstetrics, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and more recently cosmetic surgery: the imbrication of these sciences and disciplines continues to constitute women as inferior beings, dependent upon doctors. Women's informed consent is phantasmagoric at best since they have had the additional burden of having their bodies, bodily processes, and emotions not only medicalized but pathologized.[63]

This pathologizing of female patients finds its way into the "operating room" of the acting class. Though Strasberg has been scrutinized as "doctor" or "therapist," what has not received enough comment is what happens specifically to the *female* students whose "problems" are in need of "diagnosis." How does Strasberg determine what is "healthy" or "normal" behavior for a woman? What emotions does he think she should be feeling--and how should she express them? By what authority does he make these diagnoses? And what control must the female actor surrender in allowing herself to be "cured"? For contemporary actors, and particularly feminist actors, these aspects of Method actor training must be considered and challenged.

Diagnosing the Actor: "Female Trouble"

In interviews, transcripts of his classroom sessions, and in his book, Strasberg often appears somewhat self-aggrandizing in the stories he tells about curing actors of their problems. What is striking, however, is how often his stories seem to be about women. In *A Dream of Passion*, for example, Strasberg uses representative examples

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of real actors he has taught to illustrate typical acting (actor) problems and his solutions to them. Approximately ten of these stories are about women and their problems, and only two are about men. And the men's problems are more mundane than the women's. (The problem of one of the male actors concerns only the learning of lines; this is the most innocuous example in the book. The other story refers to a man doing the "song and dance" exercise; Strasberg follows it with a longer example featuring a woman, claiming it was a woman's problem which led to the invention of the exercise in the first place.) In *Strasberg at the Actors Studio*, real actors are represented either through Strasberg's direct address to them, or they are evoked by Strasberg in the stories he tells his classes to illustrate sample problems and solutions (much as he does in *A Dream of Passion*). These examples are somewhat more balanced, with nearly forty concerning women and fewer than thirty concerning men.[64] But again, the actresses are the ones who seem to have the most challenging--and the most personal--problems; the actresses are also the ones who usually receive Strasberg's harsher treatment.[65] In these examples, Strasberg describes his perception of an actor's problem, his diagnosis, and his cure. Very often, however, the actor is unaware that she even has a problem. Her job is to follow his directions; he determines whether she is "cured." Several of these anecdotes are so revealing in their content that they announce themselves as material for feminist criticism. I will, therefore, allow Strasberg to tell them in his own words.

Strasberg says that one woman he trained progressed in her work on relaxation, but that as he lifted her arm, "there was tension with some slight suggestion of the

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oppositional stance." The "oppositional stance," as mentioned earlier, is an unwillingness to give over control of her arm to Strasberg. Strasberg's diagnosis and cure, here, are rather alarming.

> I told her she was tense, expecting that she would make an effort to relax. She did not respond. I repeated my comment, and, to make sure that she heard and responded to me, I lightly hit the arm. Immediately she relaxed that area. Something made me say, "Did you used to be punished?"
>
> She said, "Yes."
>
> That helped to explain both the degree of her tension and the rigidity of her neck and back muscles during relaxation. This is an area which some psychiatrists believe retains certain types of traumatic emotional experiences. (*DP*, 98)

Here, when the actress has difficulty submitting to his direction that she "relax," Strasberg actually *hits* her. From her response, he intuits that she "used to be punished"; this is the source of the problem. In this situation, Strasberg believes the actress needs to undergo psychological therapy in order to be cured.

But what Strasberg does not consider is whether his own exercise is an impediment to her relaxation. Group Theatre actor Morris Carnovksy relates an anecdote about Strasberg and relaxation which he credits to Sanford Meisner:

> Sandy tells a story that illustrates an aspect of Lee's character that we in a certain way enjoyed and respected and in the other way were scared

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> to death of and resented. Sandy's comment was, "Lee will say to you after a rehearsal (through clenched teeth) "How many times have I told you to relax! RELAX!" (*RSP*, 517)

The joke captures this aspect of Strasberg's personality--and a potential flaw in his relaxation technique. The actor is encouraged to relax, but needs Strasberg to make it happen. Strasberg stands over the actor, prods her, lifts her arms, holds her head. Is it possible that all of this might produce the opposite of the desired result? And even if Strasberg *does* aid in relaxation, how will the actress later relax on her own? Strasberg actually asserts that she may *not* be able to relax without him. "Anyone trying this exercise by himself will usually discover that he really can't tell the difference between tension and relaxation. This can only be discovered with the help of a teacher who checks the actor" (*DP*, 130). The actor's experience of his or her own body is not as authoritative as the teacher's observations of that body.

The next example of Strasberg's diagnostic teaching leaps out of the medical metaphor into the realm of "practicing medicine without a license." The kind of medicine Strasberg practices is psychiatric. He describes another woman who had a very difficult time relaxing. So Strasberg employs his "hands on" approach to encourage physical and mental relaxation.

> I became curious about the particular problem she was having. I tried to help her to put her head back far enough to rest on the back of the chair, in order to relax the nerves and muscles, which seemed somewhat rigid. She complained that she could not do so because she

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> had arthritis. When she put her head back, she experienced a very sharp pain in her neck. To investigate, I supported her neck, encouraged her to let it rest in my hand, and asked her to tell me when the pain started. (*DP*, 96-97)

Strasberg then asked the actress a series of questions. Did she have the pain as a baby in the crib? When did it start? The actress replies that she had seen numerous doctors who had not been able to diagnose her properly. But Strasberg gets her to reveal in one session that her older sister had threatened to kill her if she thrashed around in bed. Having unearthed this "repressed memory," Strasberg concludes: "Obviously, both the tension and the pain were the results of conditioning. The release of those areas was essential for her to free herself from mannerisms and tension that interfered with her ability to express herself on stage" (*DP*, 97). The implication is that Strasberg has not just solved the actor's problem, but has miraculously *cured the woman*. And he does so in what appears to be a movie-style, clichéd revelation: he intuits the problem, she speaks it aloud, and she is cured.

In another example of the relaxation exercise, Strasberg attempts to defend himself against the accusations that he acts as an unlicensed therapist. But once again, the story he tells seems to affirm the charge instead. He says:

> A lot of confusion has resulted from the misunderstanding of the work with the actor which I've described. Some charge that these issues are more properly within the sphere of the analyst, psychiatrist, or physician. The accusation has been made that this work really amounts

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> to amateur analysis or "cheap" psychiatry. It is true that often the work leads to results unrelated to acting.
>
> For example, after participating for a number of months in my classes, a young lady apologized for having to discontinue because she had become pregnant. My wife, Anna, was startled when the actress declared that I was directly responsible for her pregnancy. Noticing my wife's reaction, she hastened to explain. Doctors had told her she could not conceive. She had therefore decided to concentrate her energies on training to be an actress. When the doctor notified her of her pregnancy, he added that it was undoubtedly due to the relaxation she had practiced in recent months. (*DP*, 104-105)

The statement that Anna Strasberg was actually "startled" by the student's revelation is slightly distasteful; one wonders what Strasberg would have his readers infer. Does he mean to suggest that his wife believed him capable of infidelity with his students? Or is he asserting his "virility" as a teacher? In either case, the teacher's implied control over his female student becomes complete. The suggestion that he is responsible (albeit indirectly) for her pregnancy seems to draw on old mythology about frigid, hysterical, and barren women, allowing Strasberg to claim the (male) power of curing her. The unexpected byproduct of her actor training is that she is restored to her natural female role: mother.

A final story from Strasberg serves to summarize this point. He says of another young actress with apparently "insurmountable" (psychological) problems,

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"Finally, after she had been with me for about three years, working regularly on herself . . . she was able to do a scene . . . and it was believable. She was real and human, and her voice was beginning to be normal" (*SS*, 169). Presumably she was not "real" or "human" or "normal" until her work with Strasberg, whose diagnosis, prescription, and control "cured" her (female) condition.

Bad Habits: "Fixing" the Girl

Since the goal of the Method is to encourage or release "truthful behavior," Strasberg paid a great deal of attention to the personal behavior of his students. One of his teaching preoccupations was with "habits" or "mannerisms" in actors. Strasberg identified actors' personal or "habitual" behavior, then sought to change it. His claim is that actors are often unaware of their own mannerisms, which can get in the way of the Method's goal: truthful emotional expression. He says:

> Whatever capacities the human being is born with, it is by means of training and conditioning that he learns to use them. He learns to walk and talk without any awareness of the mechanisms that go into these procedures. . . . Once he has learned how to do it, he simply does it by habit. He develops habits of thought, of speech of behavior, of attitudes toward his environment. (*DP*, 95)

The notion that human behavior is conditioned behavior might, in some contexts, offer new freedoms for male and female actors--and have potential utility for a feminist actor. But Strasberg's assumption is that beneath this conditioned behavior lies a true

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self waiting to emerge. The Method's goal is to clear away the psychological blocks, creating an open path for the actor to express herself. But in the process, I would argue that Strasberg may either reinforce culturally conditioned behavior or replace it with conditioning of his own. This is a built-in risk in Method training.

Strasberg's theory includes the idea that actors are unaware of their own mannerisms, but that he is able to see them. They need him to identify their (false) habitual behavior. He says that when a person decides to become an actor,

> He has little or no knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of his sensory and memory equipment; even less does he understand the behavior of his emotions and the way in which he expresses them.
>
> Often he does so in ways which become so limited that we call them "mannerisms." Since to the individual these are his natural expressions, he thinks of them as being real and true and does not perceive that they are mannered. At the Actors Studio I had to find ways of dealing with an actor's mannerisms that obscured the truth of expression that involves the relationship between the intensity of feeling and emotion. (*DP*, 96)

Once again, Strasberg is the one who determines what is "real and true." The actor cannot tell what is "true" and what is "mannerism," but apparently Strasberg can. This has particular implications for the behavior of women. When discussing actor problems in general, Strasberg always employs male pronouns. But when he addresses actor problems in particular, they often belong to women. Why is it the

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mannered behavior of women that is in need of alteration? What strategies does Strasberg use to remove these (bad) habits, and what is the "truer" behavior he seeks?

An excellent representative example can be found in Geraldine Page, an enormously successful stage, film, and television actress. In an interview with Richard Schechner in the early 1960s, Page identified her biggest acting problem to be her "mannerisms." But her sense of this problem, it seems, comes from Strasberg's diagnosis. When Schechner asked Page whether she had ever done the "Private Moment" exercise, Page said that she had not: "That's the least of my troubles." She told him what (Strasberg thought) her "troubles" were:

> Well, the first thing Lee said was, "I want you to do a scene--pick anything, it doesn't matter--and I want you to stand still and talk loud. No gestures, no line readings." I thought, "How dare he? What am I, a sack of potatoes?" They were doing a scene from Giraudoux' *Electra* and they asked me to play Clytemnestra. That part just pulls at you to do all sorts of marvelous things. And I had to stand still and talk loud. "It'll kill me," I thought, and I couldn't sleep for a week. But I did it. And it was very good for me because the complaints about my mannerisms quieted down. Lee kept after me. I found out how much less I had to do to make a scene come across.[66]

Although Page acceded to Strasberg's diagnosis and prescription, one senses in her retelling of the story a lingering doubt about the choice. Her own reading of *Electra* continues to invite "all sorts of marvelous things." But Strasberg would have her still.

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In *A Dream of Passion*, Strasberg offers his side of the story, explaining both his "diagnosis" of a famous (anonymous) actress and his radical solution to help cure her of her mannerisms:

> In one instance I faced this problem with an actress of stature and great talent. She had a set of mannerisms that were the acquired characteristics of her conditioning. In one scene, she would constantly flutter her hands. To discourage this, we tied her hands behind one of the pillars that helped sustain the balcony. This forced her to eliminate the involuntary nervous behavior of her hands, and simply wait until the need for organic expression arose. When the emotional motivation became strong enough, without thinking, she snapped the light thread that bound her hands behind the pillar. By then, the gesture was both necessary and fully expressive of the emotion behind it. (*DP*, 96)

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I posed these rhetorical questions: "Is Method acting oppressive to women? Can Method acting be empowering for the feminist actor?" My inquiry began with a sense that women have historically been "tied" by convention in the acting classroom. But here, an actress is literally tied down so that her mannerisms can be brought under control.

Now, Strasberg may be right in identifying mannerisms which can limit an actor's freedom of expression--especially if the actor is unaware of his or her own habits. Yet questions about choice and control recur. And further issues are raised by a second account of what appears to be the same story. Although Strasberg does

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not identify the actress in question as Geraldine Page, his son John, also an acting teacher and director, does. He recounts the event in his own memoir *Accidentally on Purpose*, identifying it as his first encounter with the well-known actress.

> The first time I saw her work at the Studio she was standing on stage with her hands at her sides. Every time she moved her hands and arms my father would command her to stay still. After several tries, in which she always managed to make some kind of gesture, he asked the Studio's stage manager, Lee Marsh, to tie Gerry's hands behind her back with a rope. There came into her eyes a look of fear and desperation, like that of a trapped animal. She finally became very still, and when she began again she was completely simple. Deep emotion filled her body and voice and expressed itself in the most personal and intimate manner. She made me lose all sense that I was watching someone act; it seemed impossible that she could consciously will herself to be this vulnerable. These are the moments when one understands exactly what realistic acting is: no more theory, no more acting, no more ideas.[67]

There are discrepancies in these two stories: Lee Strasberg claims to have tied her arms with a "thread," while John Strasberg remembers a "rope." But the restraint itself remains constant. And though elsewhere in his book John Strasberg is scathing in his criticism of his father's approach to acting, here he is obviously persuaded. The story about Geraldine Page, however, raises a number of questions about what it

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means to "act." In this instance, John Strasberg is witness to an event in which a woman is told by a patriarchal authority figure that she must--for her own good--have her hands tied behind her back. He watches her eyes fill with "fear and desperation" like a "trapped animal" and concludes that she is "acting." But does the actress make her own choices, or exercise a conscious use of her own will? How does the exercise help her to control her gestures when she is not tied? And will she be able to repeat this "authentic moment" without its original (troubling) context? In interviews, Geraldine Page always credited Lee Strasberg with teaching her much about acting, but according to Cindy Adams' 1980 biography of Strasberg, "Artistic differences ruptured the relationship nearly twenty years ago. . . . The wounds have yet to heal."[68]

Adams also suggests another possible explanation for Strasberg's need to "fix" the actors with whom he worked. She spent a great deal of time with Strasberg, interviewing him for *Lee Strasberg: The Imperfect Genius of the Actors Studio*; since Strasberg approved of the project, she also had access to a number of his associates. She makes this observation:

> Lee was drawn to anyone with a tic, perhaps because neurotics seem to have heightened sensitivities. He loved highly gifted freaks. He loved that negative-positive level of genius in the crazily desperately talented Kim Stanley and Geraldine Page and Jimmy Dean. Paula [Strasberg's wife] admitted her husband was drawn to the very young, the big stars, and the mortally sick.[69]

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While Strasberg's approach claims to get at the "real" expression underlying an actor's habits, it can wind up constructing that "reality." Strasberg says of another "highly gifted actress" that she "refused to recognize the difference between her mannerisms and her reality. It took her over ten years before she was able to accept the idea. Once she was able to acknowledge this, her acting showed remarkable progress" (*DP*, 96). Again, this diagnosis raises more questions than it answers. How is it that Strasberg knows the difference between the actress' mannerisms and "her reality"? And what does it say about the training that it took her ten years to change? Strasberg does not say whether she worked during that period--or whether she began to work once she dealt with her mannerisms. Judgment of success seems to derive chiefly from Strasberg's perception of progress. When she is finally "broken" and does as he asks, her work "progresses." She is reconditioned.

Actor as "Product": "Actor by Lee Strasberg"

Following the opening of the Lee Strasberg Institute in Los Angeles, young actors were seen around the city sporting T-shirts bearing the slogan, "Actor by Lee Strasberg."[70] Clearly intended as a promotional gimmick, the phrase is stunning in its implications. I have already discussed the ways in which Lee Strasberg's teaching model "produces" the performative behavior of student actors, making them, in effect, "products" of the acting classroom. But in the history and practice of American Method acting, actors have also become *literal* products--commodities to be sold in the marketplace of theatre, film, and television under the brand name: "Method

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actor."

Bruce McConachie traces the etymology of the word "production" as used in a theatrical context, linking it to capitalist structures and noting that its first appearance in the 1890s would have been understood to refer to "the investment of capital and the hiring of labor to create and sell a product on the entertainment market in the expectation of generating a profit."[71] Although Strasberg, Clurman, and Crawford founded the Group Theatre on an entirely different set of principles, with profit far from the minds of its star-free (and poverty-stricken) ensemble, the gradual dissolution of the company was due in large part to financial concerns. According to Group Theatre historian Wendy Smith, Harold Clurman told the Group near the end of their years together that it was time for them all "to become independent and self-supporting, to run their lives on the basis of what was best for them as individuals."[72] This meant becoming a part of "show *business*" or the film *industry*; many would seek fame and fortune on Broadway and in Hollywood. And although Lee Strasberg would continue to maintain the ideal of acting as a "serious" art, he would also succumb to the temptations of commercial success.

What was Strasberg is selling? First, he was selling his own ability to teach. The Actors Studio has never been a profit-making center. Members have variously, over the years, paid either minimal dues to keep the Studio running--or no dues at all. But in spite of the fact that it was originally conceived as a place where instructors would donate their services, Lee Strasberg was the first session facilitator to draw a salary.[73] And throughout his career, Strasberg taught private classes at home and in

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rented spaces, and eventually created his own school, "The Lee Strasberg Institute," with branches in New York, Los Angeles, and London. (The London location operated for ten years but no longer exists; the schools are now run by Strasberg's widow, Anna Strasberg, and their son, David Lee Strasberg).[74] There is no question that Strasberg developed a reputation for producing famous students, and that this increased his own enrollments. It also contributed directly to the running of the Studio itself, which relies on donations from supporters, among them rich and famous members taught by Strasberg. And ultimately, it led to Strasberg's own late-career, Hollywood celebrity, when former student Al Pacino helped make him a film star.[75]

Acting student and teacher become interdependent economically as well as psychologically: the "brand name" of "the Actors Studio" or "the Method" or "Actor by Lee Strasberg" confers upon actors an aura of seriousness, legitimacy, and authenticity; it also avails them of professional contacts and job opportunities.[76] In turn, the actors' commercial success directly contributes to the reputation and revenues of the institution(s) and/or teacher(s). But how does a student's "marketability" affect his or her training? Might Strasberg's notion of truthful and emotionally full performance be influenced by market considerations? To what extent is training inflected with the suggestion that actors play according to "type"--either by accentuating their own type or conforming to a recognizable social stereotype?

The promotional T-shirt designed for Strasberg's Institute, whether intentionally or not, points to the "brand name" of the Method in more ways than one. Although the slogan, "Actor by Lee Strasberg," advertises the school, a T-shirt is itself an

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emblem of the Method actor, marking a particular brand of masculinity identified with Method acting. As David Garfield, an historian of the Actors Studio says: "In the public mind, of course, the prime symbol of the Studio actor was always to be the torn T-shirt and its prototype, Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski."[76] What the prototype signifies is important. Hal Hinson, in an essay entitled "Some Notes on Method Actors," describes Brando's signature performance as Kowalski: "His body sends out shock waves which make his sexual bullying palpably terrifying." But Hinson goes further, identifying Brando's Kowalski not merely as a role, but as an entire *style* of acting. "Surly and muscular, with his mask of belligerent solitude, Marlon Brando is the Method's battered icon. For most, the Method begins and ends with Brando. He and the Method are synonymous to the extent that his style has become the Method style."[77] The style, for male actors, has to do with a particular portrayal of masculinity and male sexuality.

This aspect of the Method is evidenced in Steve Vineberg's in-depth analyses of Method acting and actors, first in his dissertation "Method in Performance: Fifty Years of American Method Acting," then in its revised form for publication, *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style*. In the former study of Method actors, Vineberg (tellingly) concentrates almost exclusively on men. He lists as representatives of their generation, Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Julie Harris. In the subsequent generation, he describes *The Godfather* films (Strasberg played a role in *The Godfather, Part II*) as "almost a capsule version of the history of the Method," naming Robert DeNiro, Robert Duvall, Michael Gazzo,

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and Al Pacino as prominent practitioners of their generation; he also examines Dustin Hoffman.[79] Vineberg suggests that "the Method . . . is not just a technique but a style as well--the style that most important American actors, certainly since the early days of the Actors Studio, have seized and shaped, consciously or unconsciously, under the tutelage of Lee Strasberg . . . or away from it."[80] All of the men mentioned by Vineberg exude a toughness; they are images of a particular kind of masculinity, and of male heterosexuality. Is this an image that sells?

Peggy Phelan identifies the "sales" element in the power dynamic between performer and spectator, drawing on a popular film about a Method actor. She says:

> As Dustin Hoffman made so clear in *Tootsie*, the performer is always in the feminine position in relation to power. That is, women and performers, more often than not, are "scripted" to "sell" . . . something to someone who is in the position to buy. . . . Traditional theatre evokes desire based upon and stimulated by this inequality between performer and spectator--and by the (potential) domination of the silent spectator. This works both ways: "the silent spectator desires to be dominated by (to submit to) the performance and the performer's presence, while at the same time maintaining the distance of dominant judge" (Schneider 1987). That this model of desire is apparently so compatible with (traditional accounts of) "male" desire is no accident.[81]

Actors in the Method classroom needed first to "sell" something to Strasberg; he then shaped their work so that it could be "sold" on the outside. Perhaps it is unsurprising,

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given Phelan's evoking of the model of male desire, that one of the things that "sells" in performance--in and out of the classroom--is sex.

Strasberg was interested when women were able to express their sexuality to his "satisfaction" in classroom exercises. This is evident in the classroom transcripts edited by Robert Hethmon, drawn from Actors Studio sessions Strasberg conducted in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In a discussion about actors and audiences, Strasberg explains that when he views actors at work, he may be positioned as both teacher *and* audience member. He acknowledges his own subjectivity in what he "likes" or "dislikes," but simultaneously asserts his ability to retain professional objectivity as an arbiter of good acting. Yet in this paradoxical discussion, Strasberg makes a shocking admission regarding women and sex, revealing more than he may intend.

> If a girl is very attractive, I will like any scene that she does. Until a few years ago Betty Grable was my favorite. Frankly I didn't care what she did when she got on the screen; I enjoyed watching her. I would go to see every Betty Grable picture. The point is that I am not immune to the various effects to which an audience is subject, but I do not react and affirm artistic results in acting unless those artistic results are actually present. (*SS*, 347)

Hethmon says that "Strasberg has the objectivity of the doctor who stands outside the body he is treating" (*SS*, 170). But here, Strasberg's confession suggests a subjectivity altogether different. He was not entirely immune to the feminine "charms" of the bodies he treated. In fact, within his acting class, feminine charms

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were sometimes what he sought to cultivate.

Female attractiveness and sexuality are part of the "truthful" acting that Strasberg elicited from his acting students. The actor's "work on herself" occasionally seems to involve unleashing the seductress within. One actress, identified by Hethmon as "DD," is described as having just become a star on Broadway, but in a role quite different from the one she was working on at the Studio. Following her performance of the latter role, Strasberg's primary response has to do with her "attractiveness" (*SS*, 256).

> It is very good for you to realize that the part you are playing on Broadway is not the only part you can play. You can play unattractive parts attractively, and you can play attractive parts attractively. You have talent, not just type. Your type helps you to compete on the open professional market, but the thing you really have is talent. You are here because of the talent. And the only reason for our being here is to explore the talent. That is the service we render to professional actors. (*SS*, 256-257)

It makes good sense that one of the Studio's goals was to help actors to increase the range of roles they could play. But what is most interesting about this passage is Strasberg's statement about attractiveness and "the professional market." The actress' work on herself, here, seems to be about exploring her "attractiveness"--which is implicitly understood to mean attractiveness to men--and Strasberg seems to feel she needs him to validate this for her. She will "sell" better in the market if she is

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"attractive," and Strasberg will help her to find confidence in her desirability.

In another session, Hethmon describes actress "TT" as "a star on Broadway, in the movies, and on television." He quotes Strasberg as saying: "The audience accepts her as capable. Yet she hasn't learned to use herself" (*SS*, 257). For Strasberg, "using herself" means revealing--and playing--her sexuality. But by sexuality, he does not mean her sexual desire, but her *desirability*. Following her work on a scene, Strasberg praises her by saying, "Today, purely in looks, you were more attractive. You looked sexier." But while he praises her for making this progress, he tells her that she did not go far enough: "You must be true and real to those things in yourself" (*SS*, 258). He goes on and on about the importance of sexual attractiveness.

> In a part like Maggie in *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof* that quality is of first importance, but I remember that when we saw you do Maggie it was missing. In that play the girl, no matter what she is, has to be attractive; otherwise the play becomes unpalatable. The girl cannot be just generally attractive. She must be deliberately attractive, a woman who can make herself attractive to a man, who *is* sexually desirable, so that the problem in the play is placed where it belongs, on the man, not on her. *We* are attracted to the girl, and therefore the man should be. If that isn't possible, there is no drama. (*SS*, 259)

For the actress playing Maggie, Strasberg's emphasis is completely on the woman making herself the *object* of desire, rather than allowing herself to be the desiring

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subject that Williams' Maggie certainly is.

Strasberg's perceptions of the actress playing Maggie--and of the role itself--call to mind Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking feminist film criticism of the early 1970s, and her coining of the phrase "male gaze," which has entered the lexicon of feminist criticism. Mulvey writes:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.[81]

In much the same way he looks at the "pin-up" Betty Grable, Strasberg takes on the role of the active male spectator, seeking pleasure in the erotic display of his acting student in the role of Maggie.

John Clum, however, clearly borrows from Mulvey in arguing against Strasberg's reading of the role of Maggie in his book *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*. Clum identifies Tennessee Williams' work as "classical American gay drama," suggesting that Williams' plays were "daring" because:

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> the man was presented as the object of the gaze. . . . The women look and the man is looked at; this pattern is central to Williams' work. Maggie the Cat, walking around in her slip . . . may be erotically charged for some members of the audience, but she really isn't the object of the gaze. Brick is."[82]

Strasberg obviously sits in the section of the audience which is gazing at Maggie, in the "privileged position of the ideal white, middle-class, heterosexual male spectator" identified by Jill Dolan.[83] Strasberg expects the actress to "attract" him--that's where his focus is. And he doesn't talk very much about *acting*. His language is more essential than that: she "has to *be* attractive" and she "*is* sexually desirable." Otherwise, the play becomes "unpalatable." But to whom?

What must be made clear, however, is the fact that in this particular Studio session, "TT" is *not* playing the role of Maggie. Strasberg is recalling her earlier work as a means of stressing the importance of "TT's" attractiveness. The role she *does* play is not mentioned by Strasberg or documented by Hethmon, so one cannot even identify its particular demands. Does Strasberg prescribe "sexiness" for the role--or for the actress? It doesn't seem to matter to Strasberg. Since the actor's work has to do with her "self," Strasberg's critique (as is often the case) has very little to do with any play at all, but rather with the actress' essential qualities. Referring to her sexiness once again, Strasberg continues to coach her:

> Frankly this quality is essential for your progress, acting-wise and career-wise. Because you have it. Huh? I mean, when you sit there,

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> as you sit there now, you have it. That's right. I want to see your legs and I want to see your body this way. Usually--I don't know--but usually in life--I forget; I don't want to make you too self-conscious--but as I remember, you dress differently. You present an image of capability, an intelligent, no-nonsense kind of thing, and we--how should I say it?--we admire that, but we don't like it. (*SS*, 260)

The language Strasberg uses sounds almost pornographic; he coaches her in ways that seem designed to arouse the male spectator--who is himself. He uses "we" to mean himself, of course, but the plural pronoun seems to stand in for spectators in general who, as Mulvey argues, are assumed here to look through the "male gaze." When he tells "TT" that she "has it," one assumes the "it" refers to sex appeal, the ability to arouse men, to arouse the teacher. Strasberg suggests that "TT" often plays roles with an "aggressiveness" that he finds unnecessary (*SS*, 258-259), and he describes her "real life" demeanor, as "capable" and "intelligent." But while these qualities are "admirable," he--and the (male) audiences he now represents--do not find them "likable." Strasberg is teaching her to behave as a woman *should* behave. And when she does, he is pleased: "It has been a real pleasure just to see you sitting there. As you sat, the line was good" (*SS*, 260). Is she an actress or a model? It seems that pleasing Strasberg--pleasing "men"--is necessary for her "progress" in acting (in the classroom) and in her career (in the marketplace). She sells herself to Strasberg who prepares her to sell herself on the open market.

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Lee Strasberg and Marilyn Monroe (A Cautionary Tale)

Perhaps the most flagrant example of the phenomenon of actor as "product" may be found in a brief examination of the relationship between Lee Strasberg and Marilyn Monroe, as a coda to this chapter. In my research on the Method, I viewed a documentary entitled, "Lee Strasberg: The Method Man" on A&E Biography. This hour-long video includes clips of Strasberg teaching and talking about his work, as well as commentary from many former students and associates. In the midst of this piece ostensibly about Lee Strasberg, the screen is suddenly filled with familiar images of Marilyn Monroe: she waves from a window, smiles at the camera, blows kisses to her fans; she stands on the subway grate, legs exposed, as the famous white halter dress floats above her head. "What has this to do with Lee Strasberg?", I thought at first. And how typical, it seemed to me, that television should "sex up" this documentary by focusing on a famous sex symbol rather than on the Method itself. It took a day or two for me to realize the obvious: the exploitation of Marilyn Monroe was not conducted by the documentarians alone, but by Strasberg himself; the story of Lee Strasberg and Marilyn Monroe is paradigmatic of the concerns of this study. It epitomizes the risks of the relationship between a controlling, paternalistic acting teacher and an insecure woman seeking validation through an authority figure, yearning to be taken seriously as an artist.

All of the lore surrounding Marilyn Monroe casts her as a profoundly vulnerable young woman, deeply marked by an unhappy childhood. Abandoned by both father and mother, she spent her life searching for--and collecting--surrogate

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parents. She looked especially for father figures; it is widely known that several of the men in her life (including one-time husband, Arthur Miller) answered to her nickname for them: "Daddy." But it seems that in many ways, the ultimate father figure in Marilyn Monroe's life was Lee Strasberg. According to Monroe's biographer Donald Spoto, "From the first day they worked together in private sessions in the Strasberg apartment . . . that spring of 1955, Lee gave Marilyn the strongest paternal-professional guidance of her life–a kind of total psychological mentorship."[84] This "total psychological mentorship" would prove to be more than professional. Lee Strasberg would become intimately involved in nearly every aspect of Monroe's life. And in doing so, he would become, for Monroe, the "Big Daddy" of them all, taking the role of acting teacher as "Big Daddy" to almost unimaginable ends.

Marilyn Monroe was already a star when she came to study with Lee Strasberg in 1955. In fact, Spoto says that at the same time she sat quietly as an observer in the back of the Actors Studio, a fifty-two-foot-high photograph of her image was mounted atop a Broadway movie theatre only blocks away, advertising *The Seven-Year Itch*.[85] Monroe was a sex symbol, but she had always had "a craving for learning and serious artistic achievement."[86] She had already studied with Phoebe Brand and other former members of the Group Theatre at the Actors Lab in Los Angeles; she had also taken classes with renowned Russian acting teacher Michael Chekhov, nephew of Anton Chekhov and associate of Stanislavsky. These experiences piqued Monroe's interest in Stanislavsky-based technique. But by the mid-fifties, the Actors Studio was already regarded as the American center for "serious" actor training, and many of Monroe's

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friends and colleagues (among them Shelley Winters and Elia Kazan) encouraged her to study with Lee Strasberg. Upon the dissolution of her marriage to Joe DiMaggio, Monroe left California to embark on a new life in New York, a life in which Strasberg would play an enormous role.

"Lee Strasberg is a genius, you know. I plan to do what he says."[87] These words were attributed to Marilyn Monroe by renowned feminist activist Gloria Steinem, who was herself briefly an observer at the Actors Studio. They characterize Monroe's willingness to place herself in the acting teacher's hands and to submit to his judgment. And so she did. Lee Strasberg encouraged Marilyn Monroe to believe that she possessed great talent that he could unlock. He began to teach her elements of the Method in one-on-one sessions in his apartment, in private classes, and at the Actors Studio. As a condition of working with her, Strasberg also insisted that Monroe pursue psychoanalysis.[88] He welcomed her into his home and family, fed her and gave her a place to stay, coddled her, nourished her, and managed her. In doing so, he created not a stronger actress but a dependent one; for the remainder of her professional life, Monroe was unable to act without the assistance of Lee Strasberg and his wife. As Elia Kazan said of Strasberg, "He found his perfect victim-devotee in Marilyn Monroe."[89] Strasberg profited from this relationship emotionally, professionally, and financially.

Strasberg's work with Marilyn Monroe parallels the training described elsewhere in this chapter. The Method may very well have served to reinforce Monroe's image (and sense of self) rather than expanding her range as an actress and

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strength as an artist. Monroe biographer Carl Rollyson, in a chapter entitled "Search for Self: The Method," describes her first encounter with Strasberg as "nothing less than a comprehensive examination of her reactions to very personal, embarrassing questions designed to gauge her sensitivity, to ascertain how easily, quickly, and imaginatively she could react to what Strasberg termed 'the stimulus.'"[90] Monroe's responses to *real* questions about her *real* life would form the basis of Strasberg's assessment of her acting potential. He provoked a personal response to see whether she could "perform."

Concurrent with her studies with Lee Strasberg, Monroe underwent psychoanalysis with Dr. Marianne Kris. Apparently by odd coincidence, the analyst lived in Strasberg's apartment building. Each day Marilyn would take the elevator from one to the other: she would first delve into her past with Dr. Kris, then with "Dr." Strasberg who, Spoto says, "led her through a series of sense-memory exercises that required her to feel and act like a child: one day she had to play a hungry baby, another a lonely waif, a confused schoolgirl, a young bride."[91] Spoto observes that so much delving had "obvious perils" for Monroe:

> A devout Freudian, Kris (like Strasberg in his private sessions with Marilyn) constantly led her back to childhood. . . . The Freudian school took seriously the medical model: crisis meant something was wrong and had to be fixed. . . . And Marilyn, who always felt it best to put her life right by doing rather than discussing, by action rather than by talk, a weariness often set in. But these were parental authority

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figures, and so she stayed with the program.[92]

This pathologizing of not only the patient but the *actress* is a part of Strasberg's Method. That Marilyn desired to *do* rather than to delve is revealing, because instead of working on bold, external choices and changes, Strasberg led Monroe to continue working on her "self." And Spoto says: "The result was predictable: Marilyn began to worry more about herself."[93]

According to Lee Strasberg's daughter Susan, Monroe's first in-class exercise was the "song and dance": "She stood up there alone and began to 'sing'. . . . Well, the tears began to pour down her face. She kept her concentration, not wiping them away. She was sobbing and singing, and when she finished everyone in the room wanted to run up onstage and hold her."[94] But Spoto says, "She was not performing; she was anxious about Lee's judgment."[95] In another class, Strasberg led her through the "sense memory" exercise. Actress Kay Leyder recalls: "as she described her clothes and what she heard and the words that were said to her, she got very--she began crying, sobbing until at the end of it she was really devastated. And I guess the thing that stood out in my memory was that he [Strasberg] was very clinical about it."[96] Again, crying seems to be the measure of the actress, no matter how it is produced. Emotional "availability" is key.

Even more revealing is the substantive work Monroe did in her Method acting classes--that work which was designed to "stretch" her as an actress, but which seems instead to have called for her to continue playing (versions of) herself. Carl Rollyson's book *Marilyn Monroe: A Life of the Actress* attempts to examine the

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"interpenetration of life and art," a subject which he says is "approached by other biographies of sex stars but never consistently pursued."[97] This "interpenetration of life and art" is of particular interest when Rollyson analyzes Marilyn and the Method. Strasberg assigned the "animal exercise" to Marilyn; he describes the purpose of the exercise as one which "helps the actor to approach a part by recognizing the difference between himself and the character" (*DP*, 147). But according to Cindy Adams, Monroe's assignment was to improvise a kitten. She borrowed one from a pet shop, studied him for weeks, and "presented herself to Lee's class as a playful, lazy, stretching, scratching, purring kitten."[98] Rollyson says: "One can readily imagine Monroe identifying with the kitten's feline grace, but more significantly *to be a kitten* involves shedding adult inhibitions to recover a primordial spontaneity free from stereotyping, free from the Hollywood manufacturing of Marilyn Monroe."[99] But in performing the animal exercise--an exercise designed to help actors find alterative modes of behavior--what could be *more* stereotypical than to find a famous "sex kitten" playing a *kitten*? How does this help her to shed her manufactured image? Rollyson's notion is that Monroe could "identify" with this animal. Does he suggest that her "true self" is "kitten-like"? Does such an idea open her options or reinforce her limitations, reducing her to her habitual (i.e., manufactured) self?

When Marilyn Monroe advanced to doing actual scene work in her acting classes, the choice of scenes also says a great deal about the workings of the Method. She performed two roles in Lee Strasberg's private classes and one at the Actors Studio: Lorna Moon in Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*; Blanche Dubois in Tennessee

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Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*; and the title role in Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*. Again, Rollyson points out the *similarities* between Monroe and her roles.

> The characters she chose to portray while at the Studio must have clearly stimulated her own profound feelings of orphanhood, exploitation, and alienation: Anna Christie, in search of her father and feeling abused by life, prostituted; Lorna Moon, "a lost baby," whose mother was a suicide and whose father was an alcoholic; Blanche Dubois, caught up in dreams of a romanticized self and terrorized by fears of fading beauty. These women reminded her of the attenuated hopes of youth, of how difficult it was to achieve a mature identity.[101]

That Monroe actually chose these roles herself is not entirely clear. John Strasberg says his father chose *Streetcar* for her and asked his son to play the role of the newspaper boy. The plan was that Blanche serve as a preparation for Monroe's Actors Studio debut in *Anna Christie*.[102] Arthur Miller recalls that *Anna Christie* was an assignment: "Strasberg had suggested she study the part of Anna."[103] And though her own acting partner, Maureen Stapleton, remembers having chosen the scene herself, she says she thought Monroe was "more convincing than Greta Garbo had been in the movie. . . . She was more believable as a vulnerable fallen woman."[104] This notion of "believability" is the hallmark of the Method. And in all three of these scene choices, Monroe's potential "believability" appears to be connected to the factual and psychological resemblance the roles bear to her own life. Although these characters might require her to play more than her "sex kitten"

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persona, they all call upon her to play sad, victim-like women by using the sad, victimized aspects of herself.

Strasberg played upon that victim-like quality by becoming involved in Monroe's personal life as well as her professional life. A charitable view would be that he sought to help her, but regardless of his intentions there are other implications. He invited Marilyn into his family, a fact attested to by his daughter Susan in the very title of her book: *Marilyn and Me*. According Susan Strasberg, Marilyn Monroe

> fled Hollywood to make a new life in the East. There she chose my father to be the keeper of the flame, the caretaker of her luminous, underrated talent. Over the next eight years she became a private acting student of my dad: his favorite protegee, a second daughter to my mother, who coached her in all of her films, a benefactor to my younger brother, Johnny, and an older sister to me. She was the adopted third child in our family.[105]

As the "third child," she was welcome in the Strasberg home "anytime." She took advantage of this offer, sometimes turning up in the middle of the night when she found herself unable to sleep. She often displaced Johnny Strasberg by taking his room (he would sleep on the couch), and Susan once witnessed her father cradling Marilyn, singing her to sleep.[106] Monroe vacationed with the Strasbergs and grew to depend on them personally, emotionally, and professionally. Susan marks this as a formative experience in her own life, saying that as she grew up, "I had one constant, unfulfilled, secret longing. I wanted to be like Marilyn because that was the only way

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to win my father's love and approval--as she had."[107]

Eventually, the professional relationship which led to the personal would lead back to the professional on a larger scale, as the Strasbergs became involved directly in Marilyn Monroe's film work. This is where their financial interest grew. Lee Strasberg's wife Paula Miller became Marilyn's dramatic coach on a series of films. Paula Miller was herself a former actress and member of the Group Theatre. I hesitate, in this feminist inquiry, to consider Paula Miller solely as Lee Strasberg's wife or agent; it seems a terribly conventional approach to examine her as the "wife of," instead of looking at her as an artist in her own right. Yet all accounts of Paula Miller suggest that her own sense of herself was as the "wife of," and that she *was* devoted to acting as her husband's agent. Susan Strasberg says of her mother: "She was satisfied because she believed the most glorious achievement for a woman was to be a partner to an extraordinary man."[108] And Paula Miller said herself, "It is a man's world and I'm glad it is. . . . Yes, I am. I think that's how it should be."[109] As the "wife of" Lee Strasberg, she acted in his stead as coach to Marilyn Monroe in all of the films she made subsequent to her first association with the master teacher. Through Paula's work in this capacity, the Strasbergs would begin to make real financial profit from their association with the star.

When Paula worked with Marilyn on *Bus Stop*, Strasberg demanded that his wife receive a fee of $1,500.00 per week for her services as acting coach. According to Spoto, he said in front of the actress: "Marilyn is too emotionally weak to handle this sort of thing alone. . . . She *needs* Paula."[110] He was not only willing to

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undermine Monroe's confidence, he used her dependency to secure a sum that was greater than any other member of the crew--or most actors--would receive. Spoto also says that for *The Prince and the Showgirl*,

> the most outrageous and time-consuming demand came from none other than Lee Strasberg, who . . . announced the condition for Paula's participation as Marilyn's coach on *Prince*. He would accept nothing less than a guarantee of $24,000 for ten weeks' work, plus expenses and double for overtime. This . . . would come to about $38,000--again, much more than most actors were receiving in New York or Hollywood.[111]

And as Irving Stein, attorney for Marilyn Monroe Productions, wrote in a corporate memo regarding *The Prince and the Showgirl*:

> Lee doesn't care that this money would really come from Marilyn's pocket. . . . [An accountant for Marilyn Monroe Productions] carefully explained the shaky finances, but Lee was adamant. He kept emphasizing Marilyn's emotional weakness--and then he said he would be willing to settle for a percentage of the picture! . . . Paula, he said, is more than a coach--therefore he doesn't care what other coaches get. He absolutely rejects Paula's *Bus Stop Salary*.[112]

Spoto documents numerous ways in which the Strasbergs played on Monroe's insecurities constantly, making her believe she couldn't do the work on her own.[113] Accordingly, Marilyn herself expressed a willingness to pay rather than do without

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Paula.[114] By the time Marilyn filmed *The Misfits*, Paula was commanding the unheard-of fee of $3,000.00 per week for her work with the actress.[115]

Ironically, given the money she (and her employers) were pouring out, Marilyn Monroe was ultimately damaged by Lee Strasberg and Paula Miller in a variety of ways, professional and personal. Paula Miller was regarded as a terrible problem by a number of filmmakers who contended with her, among them, Laurence Oliver. Olivier, who directed and acted with Monroe in *The Prince and the Showgirl*, says: "I was told that Lee Strasberg's wife, Paula, 'always came along with Marilyn.'"[116] Olivier found Paula to be entirely without talent except to "butter Marilyn up." He says: "This was Paula's unique gift to the art of acting, or rather the artful success of Marilyn's career, out of which the Strasbergs stood to make much capital. This was what, I realized in growing alarm, I was stuck with."[117] This view is corroborated by Monroe's husband at the time, Arthur Miller, who identified the trouble Lee Strasberg wrought through his wife/agent Paula Miller. Arthur Miller says that the situation was complicated by the fact that "Marilyn's trust in Paula was by no means complete: she regarded her merely as Lee's stand-in who was indeed capable, however unintentionally, of misleading her."[118] Rollyson poses an apparently rhetorical question when he asks, "Why did Monroe, who had such good instincts in her reading of a role, need a coach at all?"[119] Arthur Miller seems to answer this question, citing a concern central to this study: "Kazan had said of Strasberg once that his great fault was to make his actors more and more rather than less and less dependent on him."[120] This was certainly the case with Marilyn Monroe, who found

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herself unable to function without the coaching and counsel of Lee Strasberg and his wife.

Monroe's dependency on the Strasbergs is also reflected in a few bits and pieces of notes she made for herself. Spoto, who has reviewed these documents, says these scraps of paper show how Lee Strasberg's judgments occupied her thoughts. Marilyn wrote: "Doing a scene is like opening a bottle. If it doesn't open one way, try another--perhaps even give it up for another bottle? Lee wouldn't like that."[121] Marilyn would also say to her friends, "Oh, Lee would like this," or "Lee would disapprove of that," or "I wonder what Lee would think of this." And in her notebooks, she would write, "I mustn't feel this way. Lee will disapprove of me."[122] Clearly, Monroe internalized Lee Strasberg's judgments; he occupied not only her material world but her thoughts and emotions as she struggled to become an artist.[123]

As for Strasberg, the benefits of his association with Marilyn Monroe are almost immeasurable. A deal had been struck. Susan Strasberg hints at Marilyn's original intentions when she quotes Marilyn as saying, "since your daddy's given me his stamp of approval, other people are suddenly changing their tune."[124] But other people "changed their tune" about the Method, too. During this period, Harold Clurman pointed out how Strasberg benefitted from his arrangement with Monroe. In his 1958 book *Lies Like Truth*, Clurman writes:

> How does it happen, then, that only in the past three or four years there has been such a rush and rash of publicity about the Method? What at

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> this late date causes the endless palaver about Method and non-Method acting in and outside the profession?
>
> Marilyn Monroe has a lot to do with it! That sumptuous lady in her eagerness to learn had begun to attract attention far and wide. Everybody wanted to know what the Actors Studio was that the phosphorescent Marilyn should be concerned with it.[125]

Marilyn Monroe brought attention to the Actors Studio and to Lee Strasberg. His association with her contributed to his renown. As John Strasberg says of his father, "his fame came through other people."[126] And Marilyn was among the most famous. One anonymous actress was quoted as saying of Strasberg: "Look, he had Marilyn, even if not in the this biblical sense, and every starlet wants to be the next Marilyn Monroe. For that they'll kiss his pecker in Macy's window."[127] Film critic Stanley Kauffman puts it bluntly: "In short, what I'm saying is that he cashed in on her."[128]

The extent to which Strasberg "cashed in" exceeds the imagination; his final control over Marilyn Monroe could almost be a metaphor of feminist invention. Although his earnings through his association with Marilyn Monroe were exponential--monies paid by her for classes; donations made to the Studio; film coaching fees; increased enrollments leading to increased revenues--Marilyn Monroe's gratitude towards (total dependency on?) the Strasbergs was ultimately expressed in a manner which is astounding in its ramifications--especially for this study. In her 1961 will, Marilyn Monroe left all of her personal belongings and seventy-five percent of her estate (including future earnings) to Lee Strasberg. It seems almost impossibly poetic

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that Lee Strasberg, her acting teacher in life, should become the trustee of Marilyn Monroe's *image* in perpetuity. Yet this is the case. The Strasbergs have held, since Monroe's death in 1962, not only the "rights" to her image, but the profits thereof. These number in the millions of dollars--possibly beyond. And only last year, Lee Strasberg's second wife, widow, and heir, Anna Mizrahi Strasberg, auctioned Marilyn Monroe's personal possessions at Christie's, receiving her portion of the $13.4 million dollar sale.[129] As S. Paige Baty says in her study *American Monroe*, Marilyn Monroe has become an "iconic commodity," and her "heirs make their living by trading in images of the dead."[130] Strasberg traded on Monroe's image in life and death.

The story of Lee Strasberg and Marilyn Monroe is marvelous in its scale, and I must acknowledge that this makes it unique rather than typical. Such money and fame are *not* an everyday occurrence in the theatre; most acting teachers and students toil in relative poverty and obscurity. I must also say that of necessity, the rest of Marilyn Monroe's history is left out. Lee Strasberg was *not*, of course, the first or only person to exploit her, nor was he the first or only one to shape her image. Similarly, there is ample evidence that Marilyn Monroe learned early in life to exploit opportunities when she saw them; she was not always an unwitting victim in the exchanges she made. Her story is very complex and has been told in places and ways too numerous to count. Yet the story of Strasberg and Monroe still functions as both paradigm and parable. In Method acting, the goal is to act in a believable manner. The means toward that end is to work on the "self"--to delve into the psyche and to

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use one's own emotional experiences to create a *re*living on the stage. This "work" is done not independently, but under the supervision of a "master teacher" who shapes and judges truthful behavior on the stage. And the power dynamic of that relationship fraught with implications which should be of continuing interest to the feminist actor and teacher.

* * *

In an essay written in the early 1960s, "Lee Strasberg: Burning Ice," Gordon Rogoff wrote that in "the great battle for an American theatre," elements of the Method must be left behind. My concern here is different from Rogoff's, but he makes suggestions which have potential utility for feminist actors. If they are to benefit at all from the Method, it will happen by

> using what has been learned; discarding what has clotted the brain and paralyzed action, movement and growth; building theatres where the eternal child will find no comfort . . . where actors no longer sing in chorus that their hearts belong to Daddy. Indeed, if theatres are ever to come alive . . . it will be necessary first for them to hang signs over their entrances making their position unmistakable, signs that declare in the plainest language available that Daddy doesn't live here anymore.[131]

Rogoff's nearly forty year old vision for "the American theatre" is certainly not a feminist one, but his argument prefigures mine. And the fact that Rogoff's warnings

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have not entirely been heeded makes his message all the more meaningful for twenty-first century feminist practitioners. For a feminist actor to proceed today, she must use what she has learned, but discard what "clots her brain," what paralyzes her "action, movement, and growth."

What is there to be learned from Strasberg's Method? There are many things: relaxation; concentration; sensory, physical, and emotional awareness--surely all of these might benefit any actor. The implied goal of the Method is to allow the actor *freedom* of expression. All of these are skills and values a feminist actor might choose to "keep." But in the history of Method actor training, the actor's freedom of expression has too often been inhibited by the teacher's control. What a feminist actor might choose to discard from the Method is the notion that there is one "truthful" way of behaving, and that the acting teacher is her sole judge. She must make her own decisions about the kind of acting she wants to do, acting on her *own* sense of truth instead of endeavoring to please the teacher in front of the room--or his ghost in her head. She must reject the patriarchal structure of the Method: No longer does her heart belong to Big Daddy; Big Daddy doesn't live here anymore.

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Notes

1. Donkin and Clement, "Editors' Introduction," in *Upstaging Big Daddy*, 3.

2. Donkin and Clement, 4.

3. Donkin and Clement, 3-4.

4. Peggy Phelan, "Introduction: The Ends of Performance," in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 8.

5. Phelan, 11-12.

6. Several critics are emphatic that Strasberg does not call for "real" emotion but "remembered" emotion; the latter is regarded as "controllable" while the former is not. But I would argue that as long as the actor is called upon to *really feel* something, then the emotion is "real." See Marc Gordon, "Salvaging Strasberg at the Fin de Siècle," in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 52-53.

7. Donkin and Clement, 3.

8. Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 1-2.

9. Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 3.

10. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 10.

11. Richard Boleslavsky, *Acting: The First Six Lessons* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1933). See also Aldridge, "The Tradition of American Actor Training and its Current Practice in Undergraduate Education," 286. In a survey of undergraduate theatre classes across the country, Aldridge lists Boleslavsky's book as number seven among required texts in the year 1990-1991.

12. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 68-69.

13. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 69.

14. Boleslavsky, 17. The italics are Boleslavsky's, used to separate "stage directions," or description of the action, from the dialogue.

15. Boleslavsky, 21.

16. Boleslavsky, 21.

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17. Boleslavsky, 21.

18. Boleslavsky, 52.

19. This passage concludes the chapter on "Emotion Memory," in which Boleslavsky explains the theory to his student using cucumbers as stimuli for emotional response. He tells the story of a young couple who become engaged "when walking in a cucumber patch." For the rest of their lives, the appearance of cucumbers on a table would elicit a feeling of happiness in them because, as Boleslavsky says: "They made the happiest decision of their lives, between two mouthfuls of cucumbers, so to speak" (Boleslavsky, 41). This, too, invites so obvious a Freudian reading it seems that Boleslavsky may be making a joke.

20. Boleslavsky, 133.

21. Anna Deavere Smith, *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines* (New York: Random House, 2000), 50-51.

22. See Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1936); Konstantin Stanislavsky, "From *The Actor: Work on Oneself*, trans. Jean Benedetti, *The Drama Review* 37, 1 (1993), 38; Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 73.

23. In his later work, Stanislavsky developed the "Method of Physical Actions" which, as Carnicke says, "suggests that the emotional life of a character results from the actors' physical behaviour more directly than from affective memory" (Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 61). See also Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1949); and *Creating a Role*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961). In these two later books, Stanislavsky shifts his focus to other concerns, such as physical and vocal expression, and text.

24. Lee Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion*, 86 (hereafter cited as *DP*). See also Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 377; and E. Vakhtangov, "Preparing for the Role," trans. B. E. Zakhava, in *Acting: A Handbook of the Stanislavski Method*, rev. ed., comp. Toby Cole (New York: Crown Publishers, 1955), 141-151.

25. Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 32.

26. Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 21.

27. Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 95.

28. Steve Vineberg, *Method Actors*, 92.

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29. Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 9.

30. Strasberg, *Strasberg at the Actors Studio: Tape Recorded Sessions*, ed. Robert Hethmon, 41 (hereafter cited as *SS*).

31. Edwards, *The Stanislavsky Heritage*, 261; 292 n. 70.

32. David Garfield, *The Actors Studio: A Player's Place* (New York: Collier Books, 1980); Foster Hirsch, *A Method to their Madness* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984); Jean Scharfenberg, "Lee Strasberg: Teacher"; Steve Vineberg, "Method in Performance: Fifty Years of American Method Acting"; Steve Vineberg, *Method Actors*; Cindy Adams, *Lee Strasberg: The Imperfect Genius of the Actors Studio* (New York: Doubleday, 1980); Robert Lewis, *Method or Madness* (New York: Samuel French, 1958); Edward Dwight Easty, *On Method Acting*; S. Loraine Hull, *Strasberg's Method as Taught by Lorrie Hull*; and David Krasner, ed., *Method Acting Reconsidered*.

33. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 55.

34. Strasberg does not require that actors actually accomplish these exercises before proceeding to the next challenges in the sequence (*DP*, 134).

35. Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Story of the Group Theatre and the Thirties* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 11.

36. Clurman, 23.

37. Clurman, 15.

38. Helen Krich Chinoy, ed., *Reunion: A Self-Portrait of the Group Theatre*, (hereafter cited as *RSP*).

39. Gordon Rogoff, "Lee Strasberg: Burning Ice," in *Stanislavski and America*, 257.

40. Rogoff, 274.

41. Rogoff, 273.

42. Rogoff, 273-274.

43. Rogoff, 274.

44. Rogoff, 278.

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45. *American Theater Conversations: The Actors Studio*, published by Creative Arts Television Archive, 30 min., originally broadcast on *Camera 3*, 1963, videotape.

46. Quoted in *Lee Strasberg: The Method Man*, prod. and dir. Clare Beavan, 60 min., A BBC/Arts and Entertainment Co-Production, broadcast on *A&E Biography*, 1999, videotape.

47. Garfield, 156. Like Brando, Gazzara originiated a role in a well-known Tennessee Williams play: Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. But Garfield notes that Gazzara resented the comparisons between himself and Brando, stating: "Lee would never let anyone get away with that."

48. *Lee Strasberg: The Method Man*.

49. David Krasner, "I Hate Strasberg: Method Bashing in the Academy" in *Method Acting Reconsidered*.

50. Krasner, 7.

51. Krasner, 13.

52. See also Krasner, 12-13; 36 n. 33.

53. Hornby, *The End of Acting*, 32.

54. Krasner, 7. Though it seems like an extreme statement, Krasner *does* actually link the word "psychopathology" with harsh critics of the Method, including Richard Hornby and Robert Brustein, who authored an unflattering play about Strasberg entitled "Nobody Dies on Friday."

55. Maureen O'Hara, "Constructing Emancipatory Realities," in *The Truth About the Truth: De-constructing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 151-155.

56. O'Hara, 153-154.

57. Gordon, 47-48.

58. Richard Schechner, "Working with Live Material: An Interview with Lee Strasberg," in *Stanislavski and America*, 192.

59. Vineberg, *Method Actors*, 206-222.

60. Vineberg, *Method Actors*, 206-222.

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61. Vineberg, *Method Actors*, 223-248.

62. Maureen Stapleton and Jane Scovell, *A Hell of a Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 65.

63. Tanya Augsburg, "Orlan's Performative Transformations of Subjectivity," in *The Ends of Performance*, 286.

64. In *A Dream of Passion*, the choice to use primarily women to illustrate acting problems is clearly Strasberg's. In *Strasberg at the Actors Studio*, however, one must also consider Robert Hethmon's role in selecting the material as editor. Still, the quality and content of Strasberg's coaching is noticably different for men and women.

65. See, for example, *SS*, 227-341; and *SS*, 336-346. Hethmon describes these as exchanges that have not been condensed, and acknowledges their "acerbic tone" (*SS*, xvii). Both exchanges are between Strasberg and female students.

66. Richard Schechner, "The Bottomless Cup: An Interview with Geraldine Page," ed. Charles Mee, in *Stanislavski and America*, 249.

67. John Strasberg, *Accidentally On Purpose* (New York: Applause Books, 1996), 88-89.

68. Adams, 4.

69. Adams, 257.

70. *Lee Strasberg: The Method Man.*

71. Bruce A. McConachie, "Historicizing the Relations of Theatrical Production," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 168.

72. Wendy Smith, *Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 408.

73. Garfield, 83. Garfield says that it had been Elia Kazan's intention when founding the Actors Studio that teachers should donate their services, but Lee Strasberg's strained financial situation moved Kazan to arrange to provide him with a salary. In the early days, Studio members were asked to contribute to the running of the Studio with two dollars per week; today there is no cost to members at all. See also Garfield, 54; and Doug Moston, "The Actors Studio" in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 286.

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74. Don Shirley, "The Method to their Business," *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, 12 November 2000, p. 81.

75. See Adams, 366-377. It is widely known that Pacino was responsible for Strasberg's appearance in *The Godfather, Part II*; this role led to several other film appearances in the 1970s, including *And Justice For All* (also with Pacino) and *The Sunshine Boys*.

76. Many Actors Studio members have been rewarded with stage and film roles over the years; other members have lamented the fact that the Studio, which was intended as a workshop, was turned into an ongoing audition when various directors and producers would attend. Kim Hunter, who originated the role of Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, names this as the reason she stopped attending sessions in her interview for *Lee Strasberg: The Method Man*.

77. Garfield, 151.

78. Hal Hinson, "Some Notes on Method Actors," *Sight and Sound* (Summer 1984): 200.

79. Vineberg, "Method in Performance," 351.

80. Vineberg, "Method in Performance," 384.

81. Peggy Phelan, "Feminist Theory/Poststructuralism," in *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre*, 178. Phelan cites a personal communication with Rebecca Schneider as her source for portions of this passage.

82. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1989), 19. This extract is from an essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which Mulvey identifies as having been written in 1973 and first published in 1975 in *Screen* [Mulvey, 14].

83. John Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 22-23.

84. Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, 18.

85. Donald Spoto, *Marilyn Monroe: The Biography* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 327.

86. Spoto, 331.

87. Spoto, 122.

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88. Spoto, 330. Spoto cites as his source Gloria Steinem in *Ms.*, vol. 1, no. 2 (August 1972): 36.

89. See Carl Rollyson, *Marilyn Monroe: A Life of the Actress* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 93; Spoto, 312; Susan Strasberg, *Marilyn and Me: Sisters, Rivals, Friends* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 31.

90. Quoted in Spoto, 309. Spoto cites as his source Elia Kazan, *A Life* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 539.

91. Rollyson, 90.

92. Spoto, 387.

93. Spoto, 385-386.

94. Spoto, 387.

95. Susan Strasberg, *Marilyn and Me*, 83.

96. Spoto, 387.

97. Quoted in Fred Lawrence Guiles, *Legend: The Life and Death of Marilyn Monroe* (New York: Stein and Day, 1984), 272.

98. Rollyson, 1.

99. Adams, 260.

100. Rollyson, 95.

101. Rollyson, 98.

102. John Strasberg, 95.

103. Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 372.

104. Stapleton, 118.

105. Susan Strasberg, *Marilyn and Me*, xii.

106. Susan Strasberg, *Marilyn and Me*, 90.

107. Susan Strasberg, *Marilyn and Me*, xiii.

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108. Susan Strasberg, *Bittersweet* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), 25.

109. *Lee Strasberg: The Method Man.*

110. Spoto, 353.

111. Spoto, 367.

112. Quoted in Spoto, 367.

113. Spoto, 375.

114. Spoto, 367.

115. Spoto, 440.

116. Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 208.

117. Olivier, 209.

118. Miller, 420.

119. Rollyson, 103.

120. Miller, 448.

121. Quoted in Spoto, 325.

122. Quoted by Spoto in *Lee Strasberg: The Method Man.*

123. For a fascinating novelistic exploration of Monroe's life, see Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde* (New York: Ecco Press, 2000). Since *Blonde* is a work of fiction, it obviously cannot be used as a source for this investigation. A disclaimer on the copyright page of the book reads: "While many of the character portrayed here have some counterparts in the life and times of Marilyn Monroe, the characterizations and incidents presented are totally the products of the author's imagination." Indeed, the fictional acting teacher "Pearlman" bears only some of the character traits associated with Strasberg. Still, Oates' evocation of the acting teacher's power over the student is clearly drawn from the "Strasbergian" teaching tradition. In *Blonde*, the "Blond Actress" trades sexual favors to the teacher for his attentions. Although there is much to suggest Strasberg's attraction to Monroe, there is no real evidence to suggest that theirs was a sexual relationship.

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124. Susan Strasberg, *Marilyn and Me*, 34.

125. Harold Clurman, *Lies Like Truth* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 251.

126. Quoted in Susan Strasberg, *Marilyn and Me*, 167.

127. Guiles, 412.

128. *Lee Strasberg: The Method Man.*

129. "2-Day Monroe Sale Earns $13 Million," *New York Times*, 29 October 1999, sec. B; p. 2.

130. S. Paige Baty, *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 62 n. 8.

131. Rogoff, 279.

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Chapter 3

Imagination: Stella Adler and The Script

When Lee Strasberg died in 1982, Stella Adler began her class at the Stella Adler Conservatory by asking for a moment of silence in memory of her former colleague. Then, as the story goes, she raised her head and announced to her students: "It will take fifty years for the American actor to recover from the damage that man did."[1] This anecdote is both bitingly funny and profoundly revealing. On the surface, it shows Stella Adler at her theatrical best: caustic and catty, calculating her performance for dramatic effect. But beneath the surface, Adler's gibe reveals not only her animosity toward Strasberg and his Method--which extended beyond the grave--but also her own life's mission. For Adler's quip can arguably be read as a summary statement of her teaching career. Following her unhappy association with Lee Strasberg in the Group Theatre in the 1930s, Stella Adler spent the next fifty years "recovering": recovering Stanislavsky-based American acting from the damage she believed had been done by Lee Strasberg, and restoring to the American actor the values of imagination, intellect, and independence.

The rivalry between Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler is legendary and well-documented. It is generally understood to be rooted in a fundamental disagreement regarding the practice of the Stanislavsky System, with Strasberg emphasizing Stanislavsky's "early" work on emotion, and Alder embracing Stanislavsky's "later"

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work on given circumstances and physical actions.[2] But the bitter difference of opinion between the two was not merely a matter of theory; it was both practical and personal. It dated to the early 1930s, when Adler worked as an actress under Strasberg's direction. She was made so miserable by Strasberg's interpretation and implementation of the System that she took her case directly to Stanislavsky in Paris, telling him: "I loved the theatre until you came along, and now I hate it!"[3] When she returned to the Group with her first-hand report that Strasberg had misunderstood the System, Adler effectively usurped his authority and asserted her own, thereby creating a new branch of American Stanislavskian actor training. She would go on to teach actors at the Group Theatre, the New School for Social Research, the Yale School of Drama, and the Stella Adler Conservatories in New York and Los Angeles. She authored one book on acting in her lifetime; two more have been compiled, edited, and published posthumously.[4]

None of the research on Stella Adler, however, investigates the possibility that any of the events related to this bit of theatre history might have feminist implications. Adler has largely been either ignored or rejected by feminist theatre scholars and practitioners. Elizabeth Stroppel, for instance, in her research on (and search for) feminist acting methodologies, laments the fact that there are still relatively few books on acting authored by women, and worries (quite rightly) that "a woman author would not necessarily guarantee the presence of a feminist perspective anyway."[5] In fact, to prove her point, Stroppel offers both Stella Adler and Uta Hagen as negative examples, briefly noting that in spite of their success as acting teachers, they "would

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not be considered feminists by [her] study's definition." But by lumping the work of these two women into the category of "a Euro-centric, Stanislavskian-based [meaning also 'male'] method," Stroppel fails to search for the distinctions which might yield surprises. She effectively dismisses the practices of these women instead of examining them. And while Stroppel may be correct in thinking that it would be a bit of a stretch to consider Adler or her practice "feminist" according to late twentieth (or early twenty-first) century theoretical criteria, that same theoretical apparatus might provide new and different ways of reading, understanding, and assessing Stella Adler's work.

Ellen Donkin provides such a model for feminist research in her essay "Mrs. Siddons Looks Back in Anger: Feminist Historiography for Eighteenth-Century British Theater." Donkin writes: "The feminist theater historian must identify material [which is] a form of politically unconscious theater history and begin the work of extricating the female performer from the ideological apparatus in which she worked. The story lies in the gaps and contradictions between the voices--not in what they tell us but in what they avoid or do not remember."[6] In conducting such a project, Donkin looks specifically for moments of conflict in history, arguing that these can be particularly revealing.

> Theater history is full of accounts of women performers in conflicts of various kinds. The history of women's performance has been shaped by these disparate incidents. Gathered up and taken as a whole, they tell a larger story. One such story is this: that in all areas of theater,

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> but particularly in performance, women have made repeated efforts to establish a point of view that is distinct from that of men. In performance these efforts usually took the form of subverting dramatic texts that failed to reflect the reality of women's lives. Some of these attempts to subvert were conscious; many were not. In theoretical terms we can formulate as follows: that the history of women's performance is the history of a struggle for a subject, rather than an object position in representation.[7]

Donkin's feminist theatre history project is far more complicated than mine, in that it reaches much further back in time. But her model can also be applied to more recent (and therefore more readily accessible) theatre history--and particularly to a feminist consideration of Stella Adler.

In the early 1970s, Stella Adler made this provocative statement in an interview with Helen Krich Chinoy: "The Group was really a man's theatre. It was male dominated. The theatre was aimed at plays for men. They understood men. There were really no women in the Group. The women were ruined, absolutely neglected. Any actress that stayed there was an idiot" (*RSP*, 509). Might the legendary conflict between Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg have an overlooked connection to gender politics? Might Stella Adler have been engaged in the very struggle (and subversion) Donkin describes, seeking for herself "a subject, rather than object position," not only in stage representation, but as a professional theatre practitioner? And might her response to Lee Strasberg and the subsequent emphases

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of her own teachings reveal something new when examined using gender as a category of inquiry?

In this chapter, I will not make the argument that Stella Adler was a feminist, nor will I argue that the Stella Adler technique is a feminist approach to acting. But I will suggest that within the "gaps and contradictions" in the documentation of Stella Adler's work, there are unexpected implications for feminist historians and practitioners. The first part of this chapter will revisit Stella Adler's history: her background, training, work in the Group Theatre, and career as an actor and teacher. I will attempt to establish and present the context from which Adler developed her own signature approach to actor training, suggesting that a (proto-) feminist impulse--whether conscious or not--may have been at the root of much of Stella Adler's work. In the second part of this chapter, I will outline Stella Adler's "technique of acting" itself, arguing that Adler's emphases, particularly on imagination and "the given circumstances" of the play, have potential utility for a feminist actor.

Adler's investments were these: to inspire actors to stretch themselves beyond the realm of personal experience through the use of the imagination; to teach actors to read and analyze plays; to encourage actors to *think*--and to think for themselves. In all of these emphases, Adler seeks above all to provide actors with a craft that enables them to function as independent artists, liberating them from unnecessary dependence on directors--and teachers--and empowering them to participate in the collaborative process of theatre in a freer and more forceful way. In doing so, Adler alters the relationships of actor and teacher, actor and director, and actor and text. I will also

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suggest that although Adler's work impacts *all* of her students, her shifts in focus from "Strasbergian" training may have special benefits for female actors in particular. If Adler's work was begun out of a (kind of) feminist impulse, might the fruits of her labors serve to feed the needs of contemporary female--and feminist--actors?

"Recovering" Stella Adler

Elaine Aston writes that one of the first projects of feminist theatre history was "the recovery of 'lost' female ancestors."[8] Since for centuries women had been excluded from theatrical participation and/or erased from its historical accounts, Aston suggests that "bringing the 'lost' tradition of women's theatre history into view is an important political step if feminist theatre scholarship is to change the future history of the stage."[9] This was very much the project of more than a decade ago, and is exemplified by Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre*. According to Case:

> The few women who have entered the annals of early theatre history were usually privileged in some way: by class, by their beauty, by their association with men of influence, or perhaps because their work manifested some similarities with works in the canon. In other words, even among women, class, race, sexual and social contacts and conformity to patriarchal codes have created great differences.[10]

Case notes, however, that "even the work of the so-called 'elite' women is scantily documented." One of the stated goals of her book is to redress this issue.

There are a number of ironies, therefore, in attempting to "recover" the work

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of Stella Adler, not the least of which is the fact that as a twentieth century practitioner, she is far less in need of "recovery" than her anonymous female forebears of centuries past. Perhaps more importantly, one must also immediately acknowledge the fact that Adler is precisely the kind of woman described by Case as most likely to be remembered in the annals of theatre history. She was privileged, and in all the ways Case suggests. Adler was born into a famous theatrical family, which placed her in a special "class." She says of her own heritage, "Well, the family was royalty, and they lived in a royal fashion."[11] Stella Adler was also known as a great beauty. Many of her contemporaries remark on her good looks; her one-time student, Marlon Brando, describes her at forty-one as "quite tall and very beautiful, with blue eyes, stunning blond hair, and a leonine presence."[12] Adler was also associated with a number of other men of influence: her father Jacob Adler, who was widely recognized as a "star" of the Yiddish theatre on the London and New York stages; her husband Harold Clurman, who was a founder of the Group Theatre and a prominent American director, author, and critic; and her teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky, whose tutelage provided her with the authority necessary to become a master teacher in her own right.[13] And since Adler's own technique of acting was drawn directly from the Russian master, it clearly "manifests similarities," as Case would say, with his now-canonical work. It could be argued that Stella Adler has never been "lost" at all. Why would she need to be "recovered"?

Although Stella Adler has been included in the annals of theatre history, she has never received the same kind of attention and fame--or scholarly study--as Lee

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Strasberg. There seems to be a curious revival of interest in Adler very recently, evidenced by the fact that three new books on or by her have been published since 1998. Although the "recovery" of female practitioners was an early phase of feminist theatre scholarship, Jill Dolan, in her introduction to Carol Martin's *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance*, says: "Those of us who teach young female students know the importance of role models, of being able to point to and to discuss women who have grappled with the continuing question of how to form oneself as a powerful, purposeful woman in the theatre."[14] By revisiting Stella Adler's history, I hope to highlight aspects of her life and work which demonstrate the ways in which Adler grappled with--and found answers to--that very question.

To begin this discussion, I find it useful to examine how Adler is remembered in a standard theatre reference book, *The Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*. The following extract from the biographical entry on Stella Adler serves as my point of departure:

> Daughter of the Yiddish actor-producer Jacob Adler, Stella grew up surrounded by great plays and bravura acting. . . . She joined the Group Theatre in 1931 because she believed in its founder, Harold Clurman, whom she married. A tall, statuesque blonde with imperial carriage and mid-Atlantic diction, Adler ironically had her greatest theatrical success playing downtrodden Depression-era housewives in the Group's productions of Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* (1935) and *Paradise Lost* (1935). . . . Reminiscing about her famous acting

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> family and her husband, recalling her experiences studying with Stanislavsky in Paris in 1934, rising from her thronelike chair to demonstrate an action, continuing to flay the memory of her archrival Lee Strasberg, issuing threats and portents, and regaling her students with advice about life as well as art, Adler was a witty, exhilarating teacher.[15]

Although the purpose of an encyclopedic entry is obviously not to conduct an in-depth inquiry into a subject's life, it is worth noting which aspects of Adler's life are featured in this sketch, and the point of view from which they are told. As Case suggests, Adler is remembered, at least in part, for her beauty and for her association with men of influence. Is there more to the story?

Stella Adler was born in 1901 in New York City. There is no question that her father was a tremendous influence on Stella's theatre ethics and aesthetics. But in addition to being the daughter of Jacob Adler, Stella Adler was also the daughter of Sara Adler, herself a famous actor on the Yiddish stage. (Sara Adler is not mentioned in the *Cambridge Guide*.) By Stella's own account, her childhood was unconventional and her mother untraditional. She claimed that she first recognized her mother not at home, but when she appeared on stage with her as a small child:

> It was playing a part with my brother Luther--I was one of the Children in *The Doll's House*, by Ibsen--that I first recognized my mother. I said, "I think that's my mother." I said that to my brother, under the table. Because she was supposed to play with the children on stage.

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> So I thought, "Well, that must be my mother." I was not intimate with her in life.[16]

Instead, Stella was cared for by servants and governesses. She likened her mother to a "queen," explaining Sara's distance from her children by saying, "I think the aristocrats in Europe also didn't take care of their own children."

But Sara Adler was still a formidable influence. Much has been made of Stella Adler's success in the roles of "Jewish mothers" (a subject which will be examined later in this chapter), but as Stella's role model, Sara was not a "Jewish housewife" or a "Jewish mother" but, as her daughter described her, "a tremendously great actress." Stella also remembered an independent mother whose marriage to her Jacob Adler was tumultuous, due not only to his extramarital affairs but also her own ambitions.

> Because he was such a great star, the plays often featured the star-ism of the man. And she knew that couldn't go on. She needed plays of her own. That made her go to Europe and play her plays while he was playing his here. They were independent in their theatrical lives after a while. She would not be part of his theater life. She needed to have complete control over her own theatrical life.

Following her mother's example as much as her father's, Stella Adler said of her childhood: "I didn't have the need for dolls and toys and baby carriages. I was already involved in a mature way in the theater." Stella Adler's childhood patterning was not to become a conventional wife and mother, but to become, like her father *and* her mother, a strong and independent theatre artist.

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The *Cambridge Guide*'s summary of Stella Adler's career also skims over her professional theatre work before joining the Group Theatre, noting simply that she was "an established performer." Unlike most of the Group Theatre members, she was born and raised in the theatre: "In my family, immediately, when you could barely walk, you were put on the stage" (*TA*, 127). She performed with her parents throughout her childhood and adolescence, made her Broadway debut in Karel Capek's *The World We Live In* in the 1922-23 season, and performed in London and around the world. According to her own biographical sketch in *The Technique of Acting*, in the four years between 1927 and 1931, Stella Adler starred in more than one hundred plays (*TA*, 128). She is also remembered by her colleagues in the Group Theatre as the most professionally accomplished among them. Even before Stella Adler's work with Stanislavsky, Bobby Lewis recalls "picking her brains about some acting point," noting that "Stella was most knowledgeable about the craft of acting."[17] No neophyte, she was a woman of thirty at the time the Group formed, with vast experience behind her.

Adler's reasons for joining the Group Theatre undoubtedly involved Harold Clurman, but they were also far more complex than her simple "belief" in the man. Adler's dissatisfaction with the commercial theatre predated both her relationship with Clurman and the founding of the Group. She longed to be part of something with a greater purpose. In the introduction to her father's memoirs, she speaks with great respect and appreciation for the environment in which she grew up, recalling the combination of plays by "revered authors of Yiddish literature" along with those of

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Tolstoy, Gorky, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Shaw, which created "a repertory superior to anything on the Broadway of that time."[18]

> That was the Yiddish theater I remember, the theatre of my youth. When the time came for me to spread my wings, to find my own way, it was perhaps this memory that made me hesitate, unsure of my path. For an aspiring young actress the road was clear; it led to Broadway. Yet I did not stay long on glamorous Broadway. It was somehow not the answer. I knew that in Russia, Stanislavsky had created a school for actors where new and revolutionary techniques were being explored. I wanted to know more about this new approach, this idea that, like a painter or a musician, there was *a course of action* for the actor, a *process* by which he could learn and develop his craft. I knew that a small experimental group had come together to study these new techniques, these new ideas. I joined them in this endeavor.[19]

Adler spent two years at the American Laboratory Theatre while continuing to act in other venues. She attended Richard Boleslavsky's lectures on the Stanislavsky System, Maria Ouspenskaya's technique classes, as well as movement and voice classes. She also participated as an actor in several plays (*TA*, 118).[20] It was at the American Laboratory Theatre that Adler first met both Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg.[21]

Harold Clurman's own account of his relationship with Stella Adler is undoubtedly the original source used by the *Cambridge Guide*, which suggests that she

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joined The Group Theatre because of her "belief" in him. Clurman describes falling in love with Adler, their tumultuous relationship, and his wooing her with ideas: "I was going to have a theatre someday and she believed."[22] Yet to some extent, *everyone* joined the Group Theatre because Harold Clurman persuaded them that the Group Theatre was possible. He got them all to believe. Adler said of her own motivations: "What interested me about the Group Theatre was the chance to continue working on the craft of acting" (*RSP*, 507). And, seeking the same kind of meaning she found in the theatre of her youth, she also chose the Group because it was a theatre with a message; a theatre with social purpose. "Here in the Group I found what I had been searching for--a theater that had come together for something more meaningful than another Broadway hit. . . . The plays . . . were chosen by the Group not because they would bring money into the box office, but because they had something to say about American life, something important that needed to be said."[23] Adler chose the Group because of its shared interest in Stanislavskian acting technique and its commitment to a creating a performing ensemble with a purpose.

Yet from the beginning, Stella Adler's feelings about the Group Theatre were ambivalent at best. In all of her published comments about her involvement with the Group, one detects what can only be described as a "love-hate relationship." She was passionate about the Group, but always tortured by it. And Adler's relationship with the Group was intertwined with her relations with Clurman, to be sure.[24] Theirs was also a passionate relationship which ran "hot and cold." But to read Adler's work in the Group Theatre solely through her romance with Clurman is dangerous. Since

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Clurman's book *The Fervent Years* is a key primary source for anyone working on the Group Theatre, such a reading is a real risk. The publication date of *The Fervent Years* is 1945, more than fifteen years after Clurman fell in love with Adler, but only a year before he was to marry her. Clurman's account is useful, but he also sees Adler through the eyes of a sometimes guilty, sometimes adoring lover--and a soon-to-be husband. His recollections about her role within the Group invariably involve--and often revolve around--himself. As Group member, Ruth Nelson says: "Harold has written a lovely book in *The Fervent Years*. But it's his book; it's not the book of the Group whatsoever."[25] Adler's role in the Group, therefore, must be assessed from more than one perspective in order to set the stage for her emergence as an influential teacher of acting. Among the issues to be explored are: Adler's role within the ensemble; the size and quality of the roles which she was asked to play; the nature and tenor of the training; and, tied to all of these, the role of women within the Group Theatre.

Stella's Role(s) in the Group Theatre

While Stella Adler claimed to have joined the Group Theatre out of a desire to be part of a theatrical ensemble, the reality of that experience was not all she desired. On the one hand, she idealized the very idea of an ensemble as: "a *group* of stars like the Moscow Art Theatre had. You'd go to see every one of their actors; every single actor in the company had the ability to be a star."[26] Yet the reality of being a company member--and not a star--was not always so rosy for Adler. As she said,

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"Repertory involved a lot of risks. You can either be developed in repertory or used up like an old rag." Unfortunately, Alder found her experience to be the latter: "I, myself, felt that the time of my life could have been better used, especially with a larger scope in the repertory" (*RSP*, 509). Commitment to an ensemble does entail risks. Adler felt that in an ideal circumstance one would develop and grow as an actor; in her actual experience, her roles were not numerous enough or appropriate for her talent and potential.

In fact, Adler was famously unhappy with the acting roles she was assigned to play for the Group Theatre--on that point there is little ambiguity. She did not like playing older women or mothers. The standard reading of her unhappiness, historically, points to her vanity as a woman. For example, Bobby Lewis offers this description of Stella in Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing* in 1935:

> Stella, as Bessie Berger, set a standard for Jewish mother parts that has not been approached since; omitting the usual self-pity and leavening the dominating nature of the woman with lofty humor. A strikingly beautiful woman, Stella hated to have to play an old character part. She was particularly exasperated when people would come backstage and address her as Luther's mother, when there was actually only a year's difference between them.[27]

Clurman corroborates this, adding more to the story by claiming that she played the role because he dared her to do it: "Stella Adler, though she first shrank from the idea of playing an unglamorous woman of fifty, took up the challenge because I

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suggested that perhaps after all she might not be able to do it. She wanted to prove that she could act virtually any role, no matter how removed from her type."[28] As Lewis and Clurman tell the story, Adler resisted the role because she would appear unattractive and unglamorous, but was ultimately coerced into playing it as a means of proving her versatility as an actress.

Bessie Berger was not her only "older woman" role. Later that same year, Clurman pushed her to play the role of another Odets mother in *Paradise Lost*. Several actors were unhappy with their roles but, according to Clurman, Stella didn't want to play at all.

> Stella's objections were the hardest to overcome. She had played the mother in *Awake* on a dare; she didn't wish to repeat this tour de force, since by doing so she might become identified with this sort of role. Her objections were wholly sound for the theatre world we lived in; but it was my desire to combat the practice of that world, and by this time I was convinced that it could be done. . . . So I insisted that Stella play the part for which she had been cast.[29]

Again, Stella complied. Years later, Adler said simply: "I was very young to do those things" (*RSP*, 509). Lulla Rosenfeld, Alder's niece and biographer of Jacob Adler, said of Adler in a 1975 interview: "'the most beautiful woman in New York was being made to play aging mothers. . . .. People thought her old. She never forgave Harold Clurman for that."[30]

But from a latter-day feminist perspective, one cannot help but read Adler's

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resistance to these roles somewhat differently. One cannot help but call to mind Jill Dolan's *Feminist Spectator*, who "sees women as mothers, relegated to supporting roles that enable the more important action of the male protagonist."[31] Might this not be what Adler saw--what she felt--in the repertory she was asked to *play*? Conventional thinking would be that she was *vain*, she was selfish, she wished to be the object of desire. Yet isn't it also possible that she wished not to be relegated to the sidelines--that she wished to play the larger and more active roles? Years later, Adler wrote: "I suffered a great deal in the Group being a tall woman. When I left I was asked to play a countess and a queen. When I was in the Group, I was asked to play a Jewish mother" (*RSP*, 509). What is revealing, here, is that Adler's preferred post-Group roles were not ingenues, but "leading ladies." Queens were more than likely the most powerful roles, the best that the repertory of her time could offer. For Adler, these were more exciting opportunities than the roles she was offered within the Group.

Even Harold Clurman acknowledged receiving criticism from a financial contributor during the years of the Group Theatre, suggesting that the ensemble was failing to develop "outstanding actresses to equal the men of our company," and he admitted, "for some reason most of our plays had much better roles for men--our actresses certainly noted it!" But Clurman went on to defend the Group, arguing that the range of roles that those such as Stella Adler played were far greater than what they would be able to do on the Broadway stage, where "their limitations might be exposed and their glamour diminish."[32] But this notion of "glamour" recurs. Was

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the lack of "glamour" the source of dissatisfaction for the women of the Group, or might they have been dissatisfied about being placed in the margins rather than the center of the dramatic action?

The best source for the women's point(s) of view on the Group Theatre continues to be the series of interviews conducted by Helen Krich Chinoy for a special issue of *Educational Theatre Journal* in the early 1970s. The reason for this is that, to the best of my knowledge, Chinoy is the only interviewer to ever ask specifically about the question of gender in connection with the Group Theatre. Forty years after the Group, in the height of the women's movement, the other women of the ensemble gave voice to their experiences as well. Phoebe Brand remained somewhat accepting of the gender imbalance in the Group, remembering having had "good roles," but at the same time understanding Stella Adler's feeling that her parts were not appropriate for her. Brand echoed Adler's vision of an ensemble, saying, "If you're going to have a company, you have to make a star of every one of them." She added, "I think we did that to a large extent" (*RSP*, 515). Yet at the same time, Brand seemed to imply that Adler held herself somehow apart from--or above--the ensemble. She pointed to the basic problem:

> They did not consider plays written for her, let's say. She wanted them to really think about her. But, you know, when Clifford wrote, he wrote for the whole group, and the whole group was mainly the men. . . . They never said, "Now what can we do for Phoebe or for Stella." I don't think they thought in any of those terms. (*RSP*, 515)

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If the "whole Group" was "mainly the men," actresses were sacrificed. As Ruth Nelson said, "Stella suffered . . . not being able to act the roles that she knew were right for her" (*RSP*, 528). But this problem was a part of the dues paid for Group Theatre membership. According to Nelson, "We didn't join to serve ourselves; we served the playwright; we served the theatre." And the result was that "The Group wrecked some people's lives."[33] As for her own career, Nelson said, The Group was "sort of a disaster" (*RSP*, 526).

Kathleen R. Downs, in her dissertation "Women in the Plays of the Group Theatre, 1931-1941," observes that the women's roles in these plays reflect the social effects of the Great Depression. She identifies the following four "social exigencies" that evolved from Depression-era events: "1) protection of the male ego and the reestablishment of the patriarchal hierarchy; 2) the need to prevent female backlash as opportunities for women were restricted; 3) a desire to displace the guilt associated with male job loss and loss of domestic status; 4) a need for men to band together for a sense of social unity."[34] Accordingly, Downs suggests the ways these issues are addressed in Group Theatre plays:

> First, the plays function to minimize male responsibility for the disruption of the family during the Depression, making either women, the Depression, or both, scapegoats for a situation men were powerless to control. Second, they place responsibility for a change in gender relations on the women of the period, allowing men to displace guilt onto women once again if change does not occur.[35]

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On the whole, Downs identifies negative portrayals of women throughout the plays of the Group Theatre. She says:

> Because of the backlash against women working, male unemployment, female unionization, women controlling household finances, families on welfare, and the male loss of self-worth, the images of women and men underwent a change in the dramatic literature of the day. In the mid-1930's there seems to have been an increase in women being portrayed as very strong and destructive, juxtaposed to weak, passive males. An example of this would be Bessie vs. Myron in Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing*. Alternately, females were portrayed as self-sacrificing heroines with strong procreative instincts, such as Gwyn, in John Howard Lawson's *Gentlewoman*. The prescriptive lines of what constitutes a "good" or "bad" woman became more clearly delineated as gender roles changed in the 1930's.[36]

Both of these roles, it must be noted, were played by Stella Adler. In *Awake and Sing*, Adler portrayed Bessie, who is described in the play as "arranging, shrewd, sick, yelling and a liar."[37] Downs also proposes that "what appears to make the [Berger] family dysfunctional is not the Depression, but Bessie's (the mother's) reaction to that crisis."[38] In *Gentlewoman*, Adler portrayed the role of Gwyn, described by Downs as one of the "supportive female characters who work[s] to reestablish the patriarchal authority. . . . Gwyn's service to the revolution is to become a mother."[39] Stella Adler may have resented the nature of these roles and

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their negative portrayal of women. She had other ambitions for herself as an actress. But the roles themselves were only part of Adler's dissatisfaction with the Group Theatre; equally important was her dislike of Strasberg and her distrust of his approach to acting.

Stella vs. Strasberg

Well before Stella Adler was cast in the roles of these "Jewish mothers," there is ample evidence that she was already unhappy with the Group Theatre experience. In *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*, a video documentary on Adler's teaching career, she makes these candid comments about the Group: "I expected what I would get if I joined--the familiarity and togetherness--a sense of camaraderie--and what I met was a group of strange people from different parts of the world and it was the damnedest experience of my life. [She laughs.] It was like living with strangers for ten years."[40] Seeking to replicate the kind of ensemble in which she had grown up in the Yiddish theatre, Adler was disappointed in the collection of people who comprised the Group, partly because they were mostly younger than she and far less experienced. Sharon M. Carnicke writes that "at 29, Morris Carnovsky was the oldest of the Group's twenty eight founding members, and Stella Adler . . . was the only experienced actress."[41] Adler's obituaries restore a few years which she more than likely shaved off her resumé, listing her birth year as 1901. So she was about thirty in 1931 when the Group was founded. If she was not the eldest in the Group, she was certainly among the older members.[42] Adler said that her Group colleagues:

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"were very young theatrically" (*RSP*, 507). And Harold Clurman recalled that upon their arrival at Brookfield Center, Connecticut on June 8, 1931 for the first summer of the Group: "I noticed that Stella Adler looked out from her window somewhat sadly, almost frightened. These people were strangers: they did not behave like actors. To her, the place was like a camp for overgrown high-school kids."[43]

While these "kids" were susceptible to Strasberg's authority for a time, Stella Adler was less so. From the start, Adler and Strasberg had different sensibilities. Having grown up in the theatre, Adler regarded herself as "theatrical." She remembered Strasberg (among others) as having quite a different theatrical sensibility: "Lee was kind of a fanatical, unsocial personality--untheatrical--and that made a big difference to people who had a certain theatrical flare. I had a flare. I didn't belong there. I was a complete stranger there because most of them were not very theatrical" (*RSP*, 507). In the early years of the Group Theatre, it was Lee Strasberg who had the primary responsibility for both play direction and the training of actors. Perhaps a clash was inevitable, given Strasberg and Adler's completely different sense of how to go about working.

Having studied with the same people that Strasberg did at the American Laboratory Theatre, Stella Adler may not have felt the same need for the training from Strasberg that the other actors were willing to receive. When asked by Helen Krich Chinoy how Strasberg was able to communicate his method, Adler replied:

> Well, I can't answer that. For myself, I was already an actress. He didn't have to struggle with me. I could guess what he wanted. I

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> wasn't brilliant, but I was smart. I thought you had to be. I thought some of the actors were terribly unsmart. They were beginners and I was impatient--with their lack of theatricality, their lack of experience. Most of the work was done with these people to get them to a point in their abilities where they could function. (*RSP*, 509)

Adler's use of the words "smart" and "unsmart" are both appropriate and revealing. For this introduction of the notion of intelligence--albeit theatrical intelligence--into the discussion of acting is something that marks a key difference between Strasberg and Adler. Strasberg's primary emphasis, true feeling and true emotion, needs very little intellectual work on the part of the actor. It also requires little understanding of the play in question. Adler's interests would develop in another direction.

Unrest between Adler and Strasberg began almost immediately. Harold Clurman remembered that by the end of the first season, "Stella Adler hinted of a vague dissatisfaction she felt with Lee Strasberg's technique in regard to the actor. That is, while she hinted at it to Strasberg, she hurled it at me."[44] Clurman attributed some of her unhappiness to the roles in which she had been cast. "Sometimes I thought the whole question reduced itself to the matter of parts: her first season had been very disappointing to her from this standpoint."[45] But for Adler, it was not only the nature of the roles which was troubling but the *process* of rehearsing and playing them under Strasberg's direction. She particularly disdained his use of affective memory. As she says in *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*: "I didn't want to think of when I was moved by my, my sister when she *vomited*. [She

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laughs.] I didn't like that whole thing. I wanted to be in the dramatic sense of the author and the author's characters. And I fought Strasberg like hell."[46]

Conflicts continued in the second season in 1932, when Strasberg chose to cast Adler against "type" in *Success Story* (as cited in the previous chapter), and against the wishes of the playwright. During rehearsals, he worked to extinguish her "natural tendency to 'burn up the stage'" and to replace that energy with what he sought: "a pure, lovely, ethereal quality." To do so, he gave her what he called the "shipboard adjustment," asking her to play the scene as though she were aboard a ship, effectively dousing her burning energy by floating her on an imaginary sea. And he judged his direction, this now famous "shipboard adjustment," a success, because Adler's friends told her she was "so different, so changed, so calm."[47] It's telling--and characteristic of Strasberg--that he should choose to take this actor (a woman actor), capable of ferocious emotion, and try to tame her.

By 1934, the mounting tensions between the two would grow even worse. John Howard Lawson's *Gentlewoman* would prove to be a pivotal production in terms of the working relationship between Strasberg and Adler--and the approach to acting within the Group Theatre. Actual evidence of what went on in rehearsals for *Gentlewoman* is anecdotal, with the testimony regarding the matter coming primarily from the two parties most involved. According to Wendy Smith's history of the Group, *Real Life Drama*, rehearsals began with general unhappiness about the casting of the play, particularly on the part of Eunice Stoddard, who felt that Stella Adler was cast in the lead role because she was "Harold's girl."[48] Smith says that Stoddard

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thought, rightly, "that she was far more suited to the role of a quiet, reticent gentlewoman."[49] Whatever the reason, once again Adler was cast in a role not suitable for her, and the decision would create another rehearsal drama.

Ironically, Strasberg, whose ultimate aesthetic for acting was always truthful emotion, protested once again that he found Adler *too* emotional. Quoted in David Garfield's *A Player's Place*, Strasberg recalls rehearsing *Gentlewoman*:

> It was the problem of clarifying and defining the precise emotional thing I wanted to get from her--not what she wanted to get. . . . I didn't want Stella's emotionalism. To put it quite simply: Jewish emotionalism. As a result, in that particular play, with her I worked on absolutely nothing. Her first reading was all I wanted. If she felt ill at ease, it was because she was not being permitted to do what she liked or wanted to do. I had to fight with Stella. I remember telling her, 'Godammit, if you cry, I'll kill you!'[50]

Strasberg denies "doing" anything to her; he claims he worked on nothing. Yet throughout this description there is clear conflict: Strasberg didn't want Adler doing what she did best.

Reviews of Stella Alder's performance in the role of Gwyn were mixed. The playwright, Lawson, was dissatisfied: "In trying to immerse herself in the part through such devices as affective memory, she gave Gwyn a 'soul' and made her love for Rudy pitiably sincere, and thus eliminated the basic reason for their separation, their inability to love."[51] According to Wendy Smith, Adler was, in effect, stuck

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between a rock and a hard place in terms of playing emotion:

> Strasberg was correct in his analysis that Gwyn wasn't the sort of woman who wept or displayed her feelings openly, but he didn't succeed in giving Adler a coherent attitude to play instead. She was miserable. She worked hard and invested her performance with carefully worked out gestures and speech rhythms designed to illuminate Gwyn's personality, but she remained unable to feel any real connection with the character. Her bitter dissatisfaction with her work and Strasberg's direction brought to a crisis Adler's longstanding doubts about the method.[52]

Nothing was working for Adler: the roles in which she was being cast, the nature of the direction she was receiving from Strasberg, the use of affective memory. Her unhappiness as an actor was growing.

The best summary of Stella Adler's state of mind at this point comes from her own assessment many years later. This is what she told Chinoy about the summer of 1934:

> I sensed that there was something wrong with our work because I was unhappy. I agree . . . that the work was unhealthy. There was a certain stress on the use of the actor's personal emotion which landed them in the booby-hatch and shattered them. It affected a lot of us. It affected me too. I was deeply disturbed and unhappy by the way the Stanislavsky ideas and methodology were used. The emphasis was a

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> sick one.
>
> You couldn't be on the stage thinking of your own personal life. It was just schizophrenic. I was an instrument that was emotionally fluent and I could manage it, although I was unhappy about it. It was due to Lee's emphasis that my personal unhappiness existed in the theatre. He was a very good director, but I didn't like that kind of sick approach to myself in my work. I coped with it as best I could and got out of it as soon as I could. I didn't leave the theatre, but I recognized the basic fallacy.
>
> This led to my work with Stanislavsky. (*RSP*, 508)

That summer, following her performance in *Gentlewoman*, Adler embarked on a trip to Russia to witness firsthand the ongoing work of the Moscow Art Theatre. On the way home she visited Paris, where she had the life-changing opportunity to study directly with Stanislavsky. Adler's work with Stanislavsky would change not only the course of Adler's career, but also of American acting.

Stella and Stanislavsky

There are several different versions of the meeting(s) between Stella Adler and Stanislavsky in the summer of 1934. And once again, the story reads somewhat differently depending on who is telling it. In Adler's version, as related in her 1987 book *The Technique of Acting*, the encounter had the quality of happenstance, and she does not portray herself as the initiator. She says that the whole idea was Harold

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Clurman's. What she *does* acknowledge is that the impetus for the meeting came directly out of her unhappiness with Strasberg's working method.

> In Paris, Harold said to me, 'You know, Stella, Stanislavski is here.' By this time, I had heard a great deal about Stanislavski. I myself was part of the Group Theatre, where the technique was supposedly being used. But as an actress who had a great deal of experience elsewhere, I resented acting with some of the principles that were used at the Group Theatre. Because of this, I became a stranger. I excluded myself from the way in which they rehearsed, and the way the plays were directed. All this was known to everyone. They knew that I was against what was happening in the Group Theatre.
>
> Harold also knew my feelings about the Group Theatre. He thought it was a good idea for me to meet Mr. Stanislavski.
>
> But I was hesitant. The idea frightened me, because I said to Harold, "If I meet him, I will have in me a sense that he was represented at the Group Theatre in a way I didn't want."
>
> In the end I went with Harold Clurman to Mr. Stanislavski's home. (*TA*, 119)

Clurman supports this account, saying, "Stella Adler had been worried for three years [since the inception of the Group Theatre and her work with Lee Strasberg] over certain aspects of the Stanislavsky system or method."[53] Clurman had heard through his former teacher, Jacques Copeau, that Stanislavsky was in Paris. What is clear in

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both of these versions is that Adler was unhappy with the System as it was being used by Strasberg and the Group at the time she met Stanislavsky. As she bluntly told Barry Paris shortly before she died in 1992, "I didn't like [Stanislavsky's] method because of Strasberg" (*ISC*, xiii).

Carnicke has recently pointed out discrepancies between Adler's (and Clurman's) version and that of Stanislavsky, who recalled their meeting(s) differently. Carnicke's comparisons are worth quoting here at length:

> Adler's and Stanislavsky's memories of this now mythological meeting vary greatly. Adler describes it as accidental, and herself as uncharacteristically "reticent" in the presence of such an overwhelming and influential person. In contrast, Stanislavsky recalls her as "a completely panic-stricken woman," who sought him out purposefully. "Frightened to death, she rushed off in pursuit of me. She went to Nice, did not find me there, and eventually caught up with me in Paris." In Adler's account, Stanislavsky gently persuaded her to confide in him: "'Young lady, everybody has spoken to me but you.' That was the moment that I looked at him, eye to eye, we were together. I heard myself saying, 'Mr. Stanislavski [*sic*], I loved the theatre until you came along, and now I hate it!'" Stanislavsky recalled a different emotional tenor: "She clutched me and cried, 'You've destroyed me! You must save me!'" He agreed to work with her on a scene which she was preparing from John Howard Lawson's *The*

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> *Gentlewoman*. "Stanislavsky knew America," Adler wrote. "He was very anxious to get some kind of clarity about his work through me." He too felt that his System was somehow at stake: "They say my method is being introduced in America, yet suddenly this talented actress who has studied my system 'withers away' before everyone's eyes. I had to take her on, if only to restore the reputation of my system. I wasted a whole month on it."[54]

Carnicke's primary source for Stanislavsky's version of events comes from Boris Filippov's *Actors Without Make-Up*.[55] Filippov, an organizer of a club for artistic intelligentsia, recounts a meeting at which Stanislavsky spoke about his work with an American actress.[56] And although Stanislavsky said he "wasted a whole month on it," he also said that once the actress learned the "through-line action and task," and they had broken her part into pieces, "she acted so brilliantly that we absolutely 'howled' with delight."[57] Carnicke goes on to say that "however recalled, this meeting was fateful in the emigration of Stanislavsky's ideas to the United States."[58]

From the perspective of this study, however, it is interesting to contemplate the possibility, suggested by Stanislavsky, that the meeting between him and Adler was *not* a matter of happenstance but rather something she actively pursued. And while the meeting may be perceived as "fateful" for American acting, it might also have been a calculated career move for Stella Adler. Although she positions herself in her own accounts as an initially somewhat reluctant participant, there is ample evidence that she did, in fact, pursue Stanislavsky rather boldly. She called on him and

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challenged his System; in effect, she baited him to work with her. She returned the next day, and the day after that; as Clurman says: "Day after day we returned. I was growing restless despite my enjoyment of these conversations."[59] (Clurman remained with her only the first week.) Adler even brought a secretary with her to facilitate communication, although she claims that she and Stanislavsky were able to converse together quite easily in French. The secretary documented the sessions in writing (*TA*, 120; *RSP*, 508). For at least four weeks (Adler and Clurman say five), she continued working with Stanislavsky until, even by her own account, he finally asked her to give him time to spend with his family (*TA*, 121).[60]

I suggest thinking of this meeting as purposeful because of the way(s) in which Stella Adler used it upon her return to the Group Theatre--and for the rest of her career. Undoubtedly the most important aspect of the meetings is what Stella Adler actually learned; the substance of her discoveries will be dealt with later. But the context from which she shared these new discoveries is also important to establish. For she used her meetings with Stanislavsky as a way of establishing a power base for herself, a new authority, acquired through her association with Stanislavsky. In her book *The Technique of Acting*, Adler says of Stanislavsky:

> I told him that I was very unhappy about a play I was in at that time called *The Gentle Woman* [*sic*]. . . . I told him that I failed in certain moments of the play when I could neither continue the character nor understand how to continue the character. Within a minute or two I realized he was very interested in me as an actress. He wanted me to

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> resolve my problem. Here was the one man in the world who could help! And so I opened up my whole heart to him (*TA*, 120).

She suggests that Stanislavsky had special interest in her because of her theatrical heritage; he had known her parents by reputation. And she implies that he wanted to work with her as much as she wanted to work with him: "Stanislavsky and I were in the greatest closeness of director and actress, and very soon it was just actor and actress!" Speaking with Helen Krich Chinoy, she described their working method:

> We worked on scenes that he had trouble with and that I had trouble with. He went over the entire craft of acting that he wanted to make clear to me. He was very concerned with clarifying his craft because he apparently had trouble with it also in Russia. . . . Stanislavsky knew America; he knew everybody and everything. He was very anxious to get some kind of clarity about his work through me since I was the only American who had contact with him at that time. (*RSP*, 508)

In this version of the story, it would appear that Stanislavsky needed her as much as she needed him. And perhaps this is true insofar as he had concerns regarding the ways in which his System was being transmitted in the United States. But Adler's description of her relationship to Stanislavsky as "just actor and actress" is revealing, for the phrase implies a shift in the power dynamic between teacher and student. Instead of feeling manipulated, as she did by Strasberg, Adler left her encounters with Stanislavsky feeling that he treated her with respect, as an artistic partner.

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During Adler's sessions with Stanislavsky, the emphasis of their work can be summed up in a word and a phrase which have entered the terminology of American acting: "imagination" and "given circumstances." Since Adler was so distraught over the emphasis Strasberg placed on "true emotion," and by the "affective memory" exercises--the stimulation of emotional memory from one's own past--which Strasberg used to induce it, Stanislavsky focused on alternative means to achieve similar ends. As Wendy Smith summarizes:

> In his work with Adler, the director turned her attention to the throughline of action that should inform her entire performance and the various tasks she had to perform in order to create that line. Truth onstage was still the goal, but Stanislavsky emphasized finding that truth within the given circumstances of the play, not in the actor's personal history. They broke her part into pieces and a made a chart of the main stages in the role; he explained each step to her. . . . For Adler, the four weeks had been a revelation and a liberation. . . . She returned to New York, armed with a chart outlining the various aspects of an actor's work on a part and detailed notes . . . determined to make the Group see the error of Strasberg's ways.[61]

Stella Adler's meetings with Stanislavsky were not mere serendipity in that she did not arrive without a point of view: she was already familiar with the System and outspoken in her unhappiness about the way in which it was being implemented by Strasberg and the Group Theatre. She was unhappy with her own recent

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performances and unhappy on the whole with her role in within the Group Theatre. She brought all of these issues with her when she met Stanislavsky, and challenged him to help her. The role she chose to work on was her most recent one: Gwyn, from *The Gentlewoman*, in which Strasberg had just directed her. She then spent five weeks learning a new way of working on the same role, setting up a direct contrast between Strasberg's approach and Stanislavsky's (and laying the groundwork for Stanislavsky to contradict Strasberg). If Stella Adler went to Stanislavsky with an axe to grind, she returned to the Group with it sharpened and ready to use.

Stella's Report

Upon her return from the time she spent studying with Stanislavsky, Stella Adler made a report to the members of the Group Theatre. By all accounts, it had a tremendous impact. "You could feel the fog lifting as she went from one technical point to another," Bobby Lewis said. "We were all so oppressed by this over-usage of emotional memory."[62] Phoebe Brand agreed: "We had it up to here with affective memory; we just couldn't stand it anymore. When Stella came back from the horse's mouth, we thought, Oh thank God! We don't have to do that nonsense anymore!"[63] And apparently mocking the time Strasberg spent on sense memory work, Margaret Barker said: "Oh, the battles we had the summer Stella came back from Russia. . . . They were hair-splitting. I remember we argued about 'can I really feel a fly crawl up my face?'"[64] Sanford Meisner, who was to become a prominent teacher in his own right (and is the subject of the next chapter of this study), summed

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up Adler's message:

> More important than our apparent misuse of emotional memory was the fact that we were using the circumstances from our own lives. What Stella told us was that Stanislavski concentrated on the circumstances in the play--or the background of the situation in the play. Until then the Group had always worked from sense memory but never from given circumstances.[65]

So among the Group members, it appears that there was both a sense of relief that the importance of affective memory exercises would diminish, and an excitement regarding the new attention to the script, imagination, and especially the given circumstances of the play.

The other inevitable result of Adler's report was a shift in authority. Exhibiting no modesty in appraising her own influence, Adler said: "My return from work with Stanislavsky was the most important moment in the Group's work. It was a revolutionary moment. The actors for the first time understood what Stanislavsky meant and then they applied it to their work" (*RSP*, 508). "Revolutionary" is exactly the right word to use. And it wasn't just that the new approach to acting was revolutionary; Adler's report was in and of itself something of a coup d'état. Strasberg claimed to be the authority on Stanislavsky, but had never studied with him. When Adler returned after having worked so closely with Stanislavsky for so many weeks, armed with evidence that Strasberg had been misinterpreting the System, she swiftly and effectively usurped Strasberg's role as acting guru. As Bobby Lewis says:

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> Stella's report was a breath of fresh air. It was right from the horse's mouth. Until that time Strasberg was considered a disciple of Stanislavski. To the Group, he was now excommunicated. All that we had been doing was digging, probing, "kvetching." We were all very excited--for this was more the theatre! It was a turning point, which eventually brought about the departure of Strasberg from the Group. The spell had been broken.[66]

In his own book *Slings and Arrows*, Bobby Lewis reiterates: "The net effect of Stella's report to the Group . . . was to drive a chink into what was, up to then, Lee's impenetrable armor and also to let some fresh air into the fetid atmosphere in America surrounding the theories of Stanislavski."[67] And he concludes that although Strasberg directed two more plays for the Group and did not resign until 1937, "after . . . the Stella Adler contretemps, his hold over actors was never the same."[68] So not only did Adler's report have the effect of changing the way the actors thought about their craft, it immediately shifted the balance of power within the organization away from Strasberg.[69]

Writing about that summer of 1934, Harold Clurman concurs with the other Group members' accounts, summarizing his own recollections:

> The outstanding feature of the summer was the influence of Stella Adler's report on her work with Stanislavsky. To put it bluntly, she had discovered that our use of the Stanislavsky system had been incorrect. An undue emphasis on the "exercises" of affective memory

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> had warped our work with the actor. . . . Stella herself began to give classes that summer.[70]

Aside from *Gold Eagle Guy*, which was already in rehearsal, Stella Adler would never again act for Lee Strasberg. And not only was she out from under her role as actress subject to Strasberg's authority, she was to assume a new and more influential role: acting teacher. It was a role that she would play very differently from Strasberg.

In 1934, then, Adler began teaching and coaching actors for the Group Theatre. Wendy Smith says, "Adler's classes were the talk of the summer."[71] She reports:

> Bobby Lewis, Gadget Kazan, Russell Collins, Luther Adler, Tony Kraber, and his wife, Willy Barton, were among those who found Stella Adler's classes more artistically stimulating than anything going on in rehearsal. . . . "Stella Adler was a good teacher, " said Phoebe Brand. "I enjoyed working in her class, because she had a lot of objective actions that were very exciting." When Adler directed her in a part, said Beany Barker, "I felt I'd learned more in a half-hour than I had in all the years with Strasberg."[72]

These accounts suggest that Adler was popular and clear as an instructor. Adler says:

> I did this kind of teaching and later directing because I felt I had the ability. I understood actors and acting. . . . It was important for me that I could help certain people in the Group, I could always put a play together.

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> No, they didn't mind being taught or directed by a woman. If you help actors, they accept you. (*RSP*, 509)

Teaching and directing would slowly begin to become her focus.

Stella Adler would act in only three more plays with the Group, all in the 1934-35 season. After *Gold Eagle Guy* in the fall of 1934, she would play the two "Jewish mothers" in the Odets plays in 1935. But these would be her final performances.[73] She left for Hollywood in 1935, where she appeared using the name Stella "Ardler" in a film called *Love on Toast*. Then, when she returned to the Group, it was to do more directing and coaching. Bobby Lewis, who asked Adler to direct him in a production of Chekhov's *The Marriage Proposal* in the summer of 1936, describes his unorthodox approach to the role--and Adler's support of him.

> Knowing that, left to my own devices, I'd either go too far in executing my metaphor, or fail to justify all the comic business I had in mind, I sought the restraining hand of Stella Adler and asked her to be my director. . . .
>
> Stella demanded, "What's your approach?" "Simple," I replied. "I see him as a mouse and the girl he's proposing to as a piece of cheese." "You're sure?" Stella's eyes widened but great coach that she was, she didn't try to change my mind but helped me to be the best damned mouse in the world.[74]

In 1938, she was also responsible for staging a replacement company for *Golden Boy*.

By the time the Group Theatre dissolved in 1941, Stella Adler was already

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teaching at the Dramatic Workshop of the New School for Social Research in New York. In the 1940s, she would appear in two more films in Hollywood and work as an associate producer at MGM. She would also play on Broadway and direct several productions. Her last New York performance was in Leonid Andreyev's *He Who Gets Slapped* in the mid-forties, and her final stage performance was in London in Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* in 1961. But as her own biographical statement claims: "In addition to her performances, Stella Adler's greatest gift to the American theatrical tradition is undoubtedly her educating thousands of actors from the time the doors of her Stella Adler Acting studio opened in 1949" (*TA*, 131). For the second half of her life, teaching would be Adler's most significant role.

Other members of the Group, like Strasberg, Meisner, and Lewis, also went on to teach. But several comments Adler made regarding this shift in her career--particularly the as it relates to her gender--are revealing. She told Helen Krich Chinoy: "When I started acting, there was nobody that had my approach. At that time I was unique in the American theatre, with my range of characters and emotional fluency. Later other young actresses caught up. I was no longer unique. I felt it was important to pass on the technique to other people" (*RSP*, 512). In an interview with Lawrence Christon in 1988, she explained why she left performing: "I started directing. There was a period when plays were written for men. I couldn't get enough starring roles. The period of Katherine Cornell had left."[75] Addressing the same issues in another interview, she said: "I didn't want a boss over me any more.

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I was an artist to the degree that I would collaborate with people but I didn't want a boss. And I directed on and off-Broadway. . . . I act all the time for the students. I'm with them all the time and I say that if I can do it they can do it."[76] One has the sense, reading these comments, that Adler's decision to make the transition into teaching results primarily from these two issues: a sense of her own opportunities (or lack thereof) as a female actor, and a reluctance to continue submitting to directorial authority once she had established herself as a theatrical authority in her own right.

Stella Adler's life, as one obituary noted, "spanned the whole century."[77] In re-reading her story, a number of hypotheses may be offered regarding the context from which she developed her acting theories; these may shed light on the nature of her teaching. Frustrated with both the quality of roles she was offered and the direction under which she was asked to play them, Adler equipped herself with a new expertise: that of teacher. But while one of her goals was to no longer "have a boss over her," one doesn't sense that she took on the role of teacher in order to *be* the boss. Instead, she seemed to want to establish a new way of teaching. Rather than creating a pedagogical model which makes actors dependent upon the teacher, Adler used phrases like "if I can do it they can do it." The story of her experiences as an actress led directly to the development of "The Technique of Acting," according to Stella Adler.

Stella Adler's "Technique of Acting": Feminist Implications

Throughout the first half of this chapter, I hint at the "feminist implications"

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which may be found in Stella Adler's career and in her teaching. A brief review of the widely accepted definitions of feminism(s) might be a useful map, at this point, for more precisely locating Adler's practice. Gayle Austin, in her *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*, provides an outline which succinctly summarizes work done by other theorists in categorizing three majors strains of feminist thought:

Liberal

1. Minimizes differences between men and women
2. Works for success within system; reform, not revolt
3. Individual more important than the group

Radical

1. Stresses superiority of female attributes and difference between male and female roles
2. Favors separate female systems
3. Individual more important than the group

Materialist

1. Minimizes biological differences between men and women
2. Stresses material conditions of production such as history, race, class, gender
3. Group more important than the individual[78]

I quote these definitions as a reference point in my discussion of Adler. Immediately clear is the fact that Radical (also known as "cultural") feminism has little applicability to Adler's work. Never does Adler talk about or seem to gravitate in any way

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towards a position of female superiority, nor does she favor "separate female systems."

In her career, as both actor and teacher, I would argue that Adler exhibited what might be considered liberal feminist tendencies. She worked to advance her own interests, wanting to be regarded as an equal in her theatre work. Even within the Group, she remained very much an individual. Her desire to play leading roles spoke to this individualism; she said of herself: "I didn't belong in *any* democratic situation. I didn't like *any* aspect of it, neither the clothes, or the ideas, or the way they dressed or their diction, I simply *am* an individual."[79] And Bobby Lewis tells a particularly amusing story in which Stella obliquely referred to the leftist leanings of the Group Theatre: "One of the great political statements that Stella ever made at that time was when she said, 'Well, of course I could live in *any* communist country--providing I was the *queen*.'[80] This statement captures Stella, and points to her competitive edge. Nobody's hand-maiden, Stella aspired always to the top position she could imagine. In that quest, one might say she "minimized differences between men and women," refusing to bow to male authority. And she ultimately moved as an equal in the theatrical world (as best she could in her time), directing plays; teaching at Yale; running her own school.

The content of Stella Adler's teaching--the very core of her approach--bears surprising resemblance to materialist feminism in that it "stresses material conditions of production such as history, race, class, gender." Jill Dolan offers a helpful definition of materialist feminism which I will draw on in my discussion of Stella

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Adler's approach to character and role-play. In *Feminist Spectator*, Dolan says: "Materialist feminism focuses on the construction of ideology in social formations influenced by gender, race, class, and categories of sexual preference. It views the power base in these relationships dialectically, as capable of change."[81] Although I will not suggest that Adler's technique is actually a materialist feminist approach to acting, the surprise in her teaching and writing is the amount of time she spends on and attention she pays to the social construction of character. This emphasis in her approach is a real departure from Strasberg's Method and has tremendous potential utility for a feminist actor. For instead of asking actors to "use themselves" in an uncomplicated way, Adler is uncompromising in her insistence that they look not at the similarities between themselves and the characters they play, but the *differences*. And Adler seems to believe that it is possible to *play* difference, through the use of observation and imagination. The very slipperiness of identity, in Adler's approach to acting, suggests that "change" is possible.

Years after her sessions with Stanislavsky, Stella Adler would describe her own impact on the Group Theatre, stressing the new values she offered. These assessments can be read as good summary statements on the essential philosophy of the Adler brand of Stanislavsky-based acting:

> The work was healthier. It was more externalized. It had to do with the *circumstances of the play, with using your imagination*, which contained all the emotion and all the background that you needed. It involved clarifying *the idea of the playwright*. I gave notes to the entire

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> Group Theatre, and everybody picked up what the central changes were to reconstruct the method as Stanislavsky wanted it done. It was startling because some of the things we had done were so personally interpreted. But when I came back, most of the people clarified their ideas. (*RSP*, 509) [Italics added.]

And in an essay entitled "The Actor in the Group Theatre," written especially for Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy's anthology *Actors on Acting*, Stella Adler refers in coded language to the "contretemps" between herself and Strasberg, and to the changes she brought about: "Beginning with the season of 1934, those people who joined the Group . . . began to grow as craftsmen in this alive enterprise. . . . They were able through their crafts to create a conscious structure for the spontaneous opening up of the subconscious. It was only then that the actor as an individual became an *independent creator*" [Italics added].[82]

The phrases to which I have added emphasis represent the elements of the Stanislavsky System which are most important in Stella Adler's practice. Her understanding of the System was not a complete departure from the work of Lee Strasberg; as Wendy Smith says, "Truth onstage was still the goal, but [according to Adler,] Stanislavsky emphasized finding that truth within the given circumstances of the play, not in the actor's personal history."[83] The essence of Stella Adler's approach to acting is this: the actor should study the play and the given circumstances of the character. Instead of just working on the "self," the actor must work on his or her imagination as a means of leaping into the circumstances of the character--and into

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the world of the play. Both of these values, "the given circumstances" and "imagination," are closely connected to the play itself: "the ideas of the playwright." In teaching actors to read plays, and to place themselves imaginatively into the character's given circumstances, Adler's stated goal is to assist actors in becoming "independent creators."

In the second half of this chapter, which concentrates on Stella Adler's technique of acting, the primary source material for my analysis of Stella Adler's approach to actor training will come from her three books: *The Technique of Acting*, published in 1988; *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov*, edited by Barry Paris and published posthumously in 1999; and *The Art of Acting*, compiled and edited by Howard Kissel and published posthumously in 2000.[84] The first book is designed as an actor's workbook. In it, Adler defines the acting terminology she derived from Stanislavsky, and she provides actors with a series of do-it-yourself style exercises which will help them to develop and sharpen acting skills. The second book is a newly available resource, a collection of some of Adler's New York lectures on script analysis from the 1970s and 1980s. The third book is even more recent, a compilation of audiotape transcripts and lecture notes from her acting technique classes. In addition, there are a number of interviews given by Adler over the years, first-hand reports by observers of her teaching, and a video documentary, *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*, which shows her at work in the classroom, performing for, responding to, and interacting with her students.[85] I will seek to uncover in these sources those elements of Adler's theories which either reveal a feminist impulse--or

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which might have potential usefulness for feminist practitioners.

On "Jewish Mothers": Playing (with) Race, Gender, and Ethnicity

Foster Hirsch, in his history of the Actors Studio, *A Method to Their Madness*, makes this comparison between the pedagogical approaches of Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler: "If Strasberg was the remote Jewish father, withholding approval behind a stolid mask, Adler is the domineering Jewish mother, forever tisking and scolding."[86] I quote this, here, for two reasons. The first is Hirsch's suggestion that Adler's practice is merely a "maternal" version of the patriarchal pedagogy she learned from Lee Strasberg. I would argue quite the opposite. If the "parental" model fits at all, one would have to say that while Strasberg was the kind of "parent" who demands the obedience and dependence of his (adult) "children" (as I assert in the previous chapter, positioning him as the "Big Daddy" of American actor training), Stella Adler's "parenting" model is a healthier one, in which success means providing students with skills which will enable them to grow independent of her and to become free thinkers.

The second reason I introduce Hirsch's comment, however, is the more important one. For this phrase, "Jewish mother," arises so often in connection with Stella Adler that it is impossible to ignore. And to ignore it would be a mistake. It hints at a whole area of study which has yet to be conducted, and which I will tentatively begin to explore here. For Stella Adler's Jewish identity--and this figuring of her as a "Jewish mother"--plays a critical role not only in her career (and career

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options), but also in the acting technique she ultimately developed and taught.

The Method has often been likened to a religion, and Strasberg to a "rabbi" with Talmudic devotion to his teaching. Similarities have also been observed between the emotional intensity of the Method and the acting style of the Yiddish theatre which preceded it. But only recently have scholars begun exploring even more important connections between the Method and the American Jews who created and practiced it. In the early part of the twentieth century, some of these actors experienced a tension between embracing their Jewish heritage and a desire to assimilate into American society, as well as into the American theatre. I will suggest that this tension--with the added element of gender--was a very significant factor in Stella Adler's professional development.

Bruce McConachie writes persuasively about why the Stanislavsky System--as incorporated into Strasberg's Method--held particular appeal and utility for some members of the Group Theatre, a "group" comprised primarily of Eastern European Jewish immigrants (or their children). McConachie describes how the Actors Studio, which grew out of the Group, created opportunities for these actors:

> [Strasberg] was . . . aware that the Broadway theatre in 1950 remained overwhelmingly WASP in orientation and image, if not always in reality. Despite injections from numerous ethnic groups over the years, the northern European names of the established stars--e.g., Lunt, Cornell, March, Fontanne, and Bankhead--still dominated theatre marquees. London stars made frequent tours to Broadway and the

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> "standard American English" spoken in most drawing room comedies contained a distinct English accent. Many Italian-, Jewish-, and Eastern-European-Americans had acting careers in New York in 1947, but few from these ethnic groups had made it to above-the-title stardom. Eastern European Jews with accents like Strasberg did not give voice lessons to Anglified Broadway Stars. . . . At the Studio, the sons of immigrants like Kazan and Strasberg aimed to crack open this largely anglified "elite" by redefining professional talent.[87]

In this passage, McConachie cracks open a huge area for study in the history and practice of Stella Adler, making it possible for me to consider ethnicity as well as gender as an important aspect of her work.

In the plays of Clifford Odets, Jewish actors in the Group Theatre were certainly relieved of any obligation to be "Anglified"; they could "play themselves" instead. But clearly, there was an undercurrent running through the Group Theatre regarding ethnic identity. Adler didn't want to play "Jewish mothers." She wanted to play (English?) queens. Meanwhile, Strasberg made strangely anti-Semitic comments about her acting. I have already made reference to his comments about Adler's "Jewish emotionalism," which, as Wendy Smith says, he was always battling to "subdue."[88] Although Strasberg was fanatical about "true emotion," Adler's emotion was too "Jewish" for him. This odd prejudice regarding Jewish identity--and Jewish female identity, in particular--is anecdotally supported by Dorothy Money, a friend of the Strasberg family. In an interview with Strasberg's daughter Susan, Money (who

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identifies herself as gentile) claims that non-Jewish women held particular attractions for Clurman, Odets, and Strasberg:

> Anyway, here they were trying to revolutionize the American theater, and yet they came from a very, very parochial group of Eastern European stock with a very strict morality connected to it. . . . They were very sheepish, guiltful about the very things that were making them artists. Anyway, if you weren't Jewish [meaning, "if you were gentile"] like me you already had it made because they all had this problem. I once asked Harold, who, of course, had been married before to Stella (Adler), but now only dated Christians: "Harold, why are you always going with these little Catholic girls?" And he said, "Well, because there's no such thing as a gentle Jewish woman. . . ." There was this underlying, unconscious anti-Semitism, so Marilyn Monroe was the epitome of all their masturbatory dreams. This poor little adorable waif who was as un-Jewish as she could possibly be.[89]

Actor and director Elia Kazan (who had an affair with Monroe himself) is also said to have disliked Adler; Smith notes that "Kazan found her aggressive and ambitious, and while he might have admired these qualities in a man, he preferred women to be nurturing and supportive, as his own intelligent and well-educated wife was."[90] (Kazan's wife was the former Molly Thacher, a WASP whose name was listed in the Social Register.)[91] Is it possible that Stella Adler was, at least to some extent, a victim of a kind of unconscious anti-Semitism--combined with sexism--within the

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Group Theatre, which saw this strong, aggressive, emotional, woman as a "Jewish mother"?

While it is certainly an ironic possibility to consider that Stella Adler may have encountered an unconscious anti-Semitism within the Group, it is perhaps less surprising to consider that she should have encountered it in the mainstream. Earlier in this chapter, I quote her as saying that one of the reasons she went into teaching was that "the period of Katherine Cornell had left."[92] But McConachie offers an important reminder that in the era of Katherine Cornell, the Anglophilia of the Broadway theatre may possibly have been an inhospitable environment for an actress from the Yiddish stage like Stella Adler; this may have been a contributing factor in her having joined the Group in the first place. In fact, Adler's former student, Marlon Brando, openly theorizes that her acting career came to an early end because she was the victim of anti-Semitism. He suggests that in her era, it was very difficult to work in New York or Hollywood if one "looked Jewish."[93] Indeed, there is some suggestion that when Adler left the Group for Hollywood in the 1930s, she was willing to make accommodations in an effort to erase her Jewishness. She changed her name (temporarily) to "Ardler," because, she says, "the producers decided they needed a 'goyishe' name for the marquee" (*TA*, 130). There is also evidence to suggest that while in Hollywood, she permanently altered her physical appearance. Adler's former student, Joanna Rotté, recalls noticing a "crook in the bridge of her nose that must have been the result of a nose fixing gone awry."[94] And a comparison of photographs of Stella Adler before and after her Hollywood sojourn supports

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Rotté's conclusion; her nose was clearly reshaped. It appears that Stella Adler did go to some lengths to "assimilate"--if only to be able work as an actress in the mainstream.

In the *Cambridge Guide* biographical entry quoted earlier, Adler is described as having "mid-Atlantic diction." When one listens to videotapes of her colleagues, Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Sanford Meisner, one notes immediately that all three retain heavy New York accents tinged with the Yiddish inflections of their youth. But Stella Adler has an altogether different sound, almost British in pronunciation. Yet rather than "passing" into a "WASP" identity, Adler played with--and played--"ethnic identity" very consciously. In the video documentary, *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*, she seems to derive real enjoyment recounting an anecdote about herself and her slippery identity, telling her audience repeatedly that "it's a good story." She says that while she was completing a purchase at the upscale, Fifth Avenue jeweler, Tiffany's, the store clerk asked her where in England the package should be sent. Adler told the clerk that she didn't live in England; she lived in New York. Remarking on Adler's accent, the clerk replied: "I thought you were English." Adler coyly smiles at her audience and delivers the punchline: "No. Just affected." Adler delights in the story, and tells it with an implied wink at her student audience.

This is not to say, however, that Adler denies her ethnic background. In another class session, speaking with the same "affected" accent, Adler asks her students: "Shall I tell you what I am? . . . Guess."[95] When they laugh and clamor,

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she announces, in the same accent but a slightly huskier tone: "I'm a Jewish broad from Odessa." Adler seems to think this is funny. She seems to imply that she knows she doesn't *seem* like a "Jewish broad from Odessa." (She's not, in fact, from Odessa--she's from New York.) But then, what *is* a "Jewish broad from Odessa"? The actress is clearly playing with the both the perceptions and the performativity of her ethnic, racial, religious, and gender identities.

Alisa Solomon offers new ways to read and understand Jewish theatrical identity--and this performance by Stella Adler--in her essay "Queering the Canon: Azoi Toot a Yid." She relates an old family joke about a "Mr. Goldberg," who arrives at an audition for a renowned director who is mounting a production of *Hamlet*.

> Goldberg, stooped and wizened, shows up for the try-out, approaches the director, and greets him: "Gut mornink mister direktor. I am never forget your plays already I've seen. Your virk, if you don't mind my saying so, is foist cless. . . ."
>
> Mr. Goldberg feebly inches up the steps and into the spotlight. He straightens up, seeming all at once to grow two feet taller and thirty years younger. In clarion English, he recites "To be or not to be" with Gielgud's sensitivity, Scofield's passion, Olivier's charm. The director is riveted. . . . "Mr. Goldberg," exclaims the director, "that was amazing. I have to confess, I never would have expected such a performance from you. Such beautiful pronunciation, such feel for the

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> poetry, such understanding, such depth. How did you do it?"
>
> "Vaddaya mean?" Mr. Goldberg replies with a shrug. "Dat's ektink."[96]

In Solomon's reading, several significant issues are illuminated through this joke. Solomon sees gender and Jewishness as overlapping issues in her essay (and in this story), noting that "modern Europe constructed the Jewish man as effeminate" and that it regarded "Hamlet as the most effeminate of tragic heroes." She says:

> By embodying a tragic hero who, despite his femininity, stands for Shakespeare, himself the icon of Western civilization, Mr. Goldberg rejects and ridicules the accusation that he is foreign and feminine. What's more, Mr. Goldberg both overcomes and sustains a reviled image of Jewish masculinity, thereby denaturalizing it: at will, he can drop his wimpiness, his accent, his smallness, but he reverts triumphantly to this stereotypical guise, retaining it in his offstage life. . . .
>
> The more subtle, but more monumental reversal in the joke is that Mr. Goldberg turns on its head the longstanding anti-Semitic accusation that Jews pass in dominant Western cultures, appearing to be like everyone else while cloaking their unshakable depravity beneath a veneer of normality. . . .
>
> In this paradigm, the Jew is always already acting—or, more precisely always already *ektink*, for the performance of the Jew on the

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> stage of the modern West always plays on the tension between disappearance and difference.[97]

Solomon concludes that "in our own out-of-joint times, Mr. Goldberg's 'ektink' may offer a liberating, inverting rebuke to fixed identity categories."[98] I would suggest that in her own way, Stella Adler offers American actors liberation from these fixed categories as well.

When Adler calls herself a "Jewish broad," she plays with ethnicity and gender--and with the ways in which these categories overlap--by combining these two words into a phrase. My old Webster's dictionary defines "broad" as a slang word for a woman: "a vulgar term of contempt."[99] The connotations of the word "broad," even when not vulgar, usually suggest someone tough and "brassy." And one thinks of the word as traditionally being used by a man to describe a woman (often in a derogatory manner). What is fascinating and provocative in the story about Stella Adler is the way in which she takes the word back; she reclaims the word "broad" and uses it to describe herself. Like Mr. Goldberg, she destabilizes fixed identity categories. She tells her audience in an English accent that she's a "Jewish broad"--and specifically a Russian-"Jewish broad." She alerts them that she's a force to be reckoned with, while simultaneously flirting with them. When Stella Adler says, "Shall I tell you what I am," she calls into question the very idea of "essential identity"--especially for an actress. Adler believes she can be--or *play*--whomever and whatever she damn well pleases.

This last statement is, in fact, at the core of Adler's teaching; it is also the

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biggest departure from the teaching of Strasberg. For while Strasberg places intense emphasis on using one's authentic self--possibly, as McConachie suggests, as a way of opening opportunities for non-WASP actors--Adler stresses not the similarities between oneself and one's character, but the *differences*. David Krasner, in his essay "I Hate Strasberg: Method Bashing in the Academy," takes Richard Hornby to task on what he believes to be a misreading of these issues--ethnicity and identity--in Method acting. He says:

> Hornby claims that Strasberg and Adler's immigrant background and fear of prejudice makes it "understandable that they would have embraced a theory of acting that stressed a rigid, unchanging self." This is misleading. Strasberg and Adler's teachings created the very *opposite* of a rigid self. They lived in a world of identity in crisis and no doubt found comfort in acting where change offers no surprise. Influenced by the Yiddish theatre and Yiddish life, Method actors are in fact mixtures of several consciousnesses at once.[100]

While I disagree with Krasner's eliding the differences between Strasberg and Adler (Strasberg did place emphasis on the actor's authentic "self"), his suggestion about "identity in crisis" is especially applicable to Stella Adler, who sees ethnicity and gender, to some extent, as identities that can be slipped on and off. The actor's job is to reach across the divide, and to play the "other" through the use of imagination. Adler celebrates ethnicity--she just doesn't believe that actors are confined to playing their own "essential" identities.

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One can detect a tension in Adler's teaching, however, between the idea of "essential" identity and an understanding of character as social construction. On the one hand, she does seem to subscribe to the notion that there is such a thing as ethnic character, but she sees ethnic characteristics almost as "costumes" which, like her "affected" accent, can be slipped on and off. She also sees ethnicity as an attitude; she uses it almost as a buzz-word for "life." In one of her videotaped class sessions, she works with an actor of "Italian background." Finding his work dull and uninspired, she theatrically proclaims, "I want the Italian in you!" In an interview, this same young man recalls: "She called me a gentile once. It was the worst thing she ever said. She said, 'Darling, you're so WASP, you're so boring! You gotta get some Italian in you; some Irish in you. Get Jewish.'" When rousing her students to "get" ethnicity, Adler seems also to be saying they should "get theatricality," "get some life!"

Adler is critical of "WASP" culture both in and out of the classroom. She dislikes the exclusivity, conformity, and lack of energy she associates with this group. In one class session she tells her students:

> I have a home near Southampton (on Long Island), and all the people there are absolutely Anglo-Saxon. There is not an Italian in the lot. I don't know where the minorities hide. I don't know where they put the Jews, where they put anybody.
>
> I went to a party there and I felt, "These are corpses, mental corpses." All of them are wealthy, and as a result, what happens

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> regarding their thinking is that they never exert themselves. Life comes to this particular crowd the same way food comes, the servants come, money comes. There is no effort. . . . They have land in perpetuum [*sic*]. Nobody else can buy or sell their land. So they have a great sense of control over something that is unchangeable, and it has affected that group. Being with them was like having doughnuts. Every one is the same.[101]

Perhaps this cookie-cutter "sameness" is what Adler finds dull in the theatre, when she incites her students to "get Jewish." She seeks to recapture and instill in her students the theatrical energy and intensity which she inherited from the Yiddish theatre in which she was raised; she doesn't like to see that energy washed out by white-bread, WASP culture.

Robert Brustein tells a story about hiring Stella Adler to be head of the acting department at the Yale University. Arriving on the campus of this Ivy League ivory tower, Adler immediately noted that she and Brustein were nearly the only Jews. This was a far cry from her New York theatre world. Brustein says:

> Stella certainly noticed a difference during her first visit to the Drama School: John Gassner was the only Jew on the entire faculty. Furthermore, the two or three homosexuals were in the closet, leading hidden lives as exemplary family men. "How can you have a theatre," she asked, "without Jews and homosexuals?"[102]

The comment is refreshing, even if coming from casual conversation rather than an

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acting classroom, because race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are subjects which are rarely addressed in conventional actor training. They are erased or ignored. But Stella Adler brings them up.

When Stella Adler played Bessie Berger in *Awake and Sing*, one report says that audiences "adored it when Stella Adler pulled off her gray wig to flaunt her golden hair as she took her bow; it infuriated her fellow actors, but it was the kind of flamboyant gesture Yiddish theatre audiences had always enjoyed."[103] It is also a curiously Brechtian gesture. For in removing her costume in full view of the audience, Adler also denaturalizes her own performance of the "Jewish mother." The audience is not allowed to rest with the realistic portrayal; Adler reminds them that it is a construction. "Shall I tell you what I *am*?" she seems to ask that audience, too. Her implied answer is, "I am an actress." While Adler may, indeed, have made a series of personal choices to "assimilate" into the American theatre, in the sense that she wanted opportunities to play a range of roles, her strategies for actors are not assimilationist. She merely refuses to be held to boundaries; she sees "identity" as something that can be played with--and *played*. She also seems to understand identity categories as socially constructed--perhaps because she constructs them herself, as an actor.

Adler and Authority

Perhaps the most important choice Stella Adler made in distinguishing her pedagogy from that of Lee Strasberg is the new model she created for herself (and her

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students) in terms of pedagogical authority. In their book *The Feminist Classroom*, Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault discuss the double-bind women educators have found themselves in with regard to the issue of authority. They say that feminists in the 1970s and early 1980s did not want to replicate the model of patriarchal authority in which they were educated, and instead they "viewed feminist pedagogy as an act of mutual consciousness-raising, in which the teacher could bypass the issue of her authority in the name of a common 'sisterhood.'"[104] But this approach proved problematic, as it devalued women's scholarship and undermined their power to teach. Maher and Tetreault describe the alternative path forged by many successful feminist educators: "They learned to define their authority in terms of their feminism by consciously positioning and modeling themselves as knowers and learners for their students. . . . Once teachers begin to view their students also as possessors of authority, the process of knowledge construction changes." I would argue that Stella Adler's approach to teaching bears more resemblance to this model of feminist pedagogy than to the patriarchal structure of Lee Strasberg's Method training.

In a transcript from one of Stella Adler's acting technique classes--the first class session of the year--she offers this introduction to her new students:

> Write this down: "My aim is to be independent from Miss Adler or anybody else. I know this as well as you do, I don't need you." And I will help you to achieve this independence. . . .
>
> The Method is something you'll find through me. I am one of the two million people who have been inspired by it. But my particular

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> contribution will be to make you *independent* of The Method. You will then have the strength to reformulate it in your own way. (*AA*, 12-14)

This is a huge departure from the kind of dependency created by Lee Strasberg; I would even suggest that it might be a response to that dependency. Adler doesn't undermine her own expertise, but even at the outset, she wants her students to develop their own.

Now, it must be acknowledged that Adler does not erase the patriarchal lineage of Stanislavsky in America. Much of her own authority is, in fact, based on her self-identification as a "daughter": she frequently refers to her "father figures in the theater," naming both Jacob Adler and Konstantin Stanislavsky (*ISC*, 147). And she constantly invokes Stanislavsky's name as a means of bolstering her authority, establishing her expertise. Yet invoking Stanislavsky's name is no different from what Strasberg does (when it suits him), or what Sanford Meisner does (which I will examine in the next chapter). In Stanislavsky-based training, his name is serves as a credential; Adler's studies with Stanislavsky provided her, in effect, with a specialized or advanced "degree."

In her teaching presence, Adler appears to have been a bit of an autocrat. There's no question who's in charge in Adler's classroom; this is evident in the video documentary *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!* She gets angry; she yells. She interrupts--often. She's imperious. She proclaims her own importance, in much the same manner as Strasberg and Meisner: "I am a pretty important teacher. There is nobody giving this class better that I know in America. You are stuck with me. So

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you better take what is good about me and shut up about the rest" (*ISC*, 95). She can be tough.

But her approach is ultimately different. For she articulates her strategy and prepares students for how she's going to work. She tells them:

> Let's talk about you and me now, and how we're going to work together. This is not a course for compliments. If you want to know how great you are, stay home and audition for your mother. I don't compliment myself and I'm certainly not going to compliment you.
>
> You can be afraid of me, afraid of the stage, of the audience. Fear can upstage your career. You can play supporting roles to Fear your whole life. Is that what you want? You can say, "I'm afraid of her and I don't know why. Maybe it's because I'm afraid of authority."
>
> Well, you have to tell yourself you're no longer a child and there is no Authority. You must not retreat into the selfish, crippled idea that "She scares me." Or the director scares me. Or the critic petrifies me. (*AA*, 24-25)

Here, Adler confronts the subject directly. She embraces her own power, but she exhorts her students to meet the challenges of the theatre--and the challenges she'll throw their way. Her statement that "there is no Authority" expresses bold confidence in herself; it also inspires students to develop their own sense of inner confidence.

In one videotaped episode, Stella Adler shouts at a student whose attire she

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deems inappropriate for the role he is rehearsing. She says that in the theatre (the real theatre, as opposed to her classroom), he would be asked to leave and never come back. "I don't want to be subjected to it," she says. The student apologizes. Adler says: "I accept your apology, knowing that it will help you." But before the exchange is over, she tells the actor that he has talent, she reminds him that he demonstrated that talent in a previous class, playing a scene from Chekhov. She expresses confidence that he will improve. She is hard on him, but she doesn't destroy or dismiss him.[105]

Foster Hirsch reports similar classroom outbursts from Adler: "Jesus Christ, you've got no talent: nothing affects you!" "You have no diction, no depth, no deportment: so what are they going to do with you?" "Everything is Hoboken to you!"[106] Pope Brock has witnessed others: "You're dull! You're faking!"[107] But Adler admits to being tough. "I ask a lot. There is no kindness in my demand. There's simply: 'We're in it together.'" But as evidenced--and contextualized--on videotape in *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*, Adler's "outbursts" often appear to be deliberately theatrical and even occasionally designed to entertain. She makes her students laugh; she plays for them. A sign in her studio read: "Miss Adler would like all actors to know that her criticism is not personal. Nothing in the theatre is personal. Theatre is for the world."[108] Adler's criticism is considerably less "personal" than Strasberg's, in the sense that she does not work so intimately with the personal experiences, memories, and mannerisms of her actors.

A few things about Adler's teaching of women in her classes are worth noting

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specifically. Brustein says:

> She was famously tough on female students, some of whom she bullied and cowed into near paralysis. (By contrast, she bewitched the men in her class, among them her most celebrated products, Robert De Niro, Warren Beatty and Marlon Brando.) This is not to say that women didn't adore her, but they usually felt intimidated by her powerful theatricalism.[109]

Erotic energy may enter the acting classroom, and Adler may have (unconsciously) favored male students. But it also seems slightly sexist for Brustein to suggest that Adler's female students were threatened by a powerful female teacher, when the male students were not. In sharp contrast to Lee Strasberg, there is virtually no evidence of Stella Adler coaching female students in the portrayal of "sex kittens." She may have been tough on women, but she also challenged them to step outside of their "girlish" behavior.

Although *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!* offers only a very small sampling of videotaped scenes, the actresses in the documentary work on *St. Joan* and *Mary of Scotland*. Adler coaches the women to be powerful stage presences. She tells one actress: "The name of the play is *St. Joan* and [you] can't be a kid."[110] In a transcript of another class session, she reminds students about *St. Joan*: "Her weapon was her intelligence. . . . There was nothing 'girlish' about Joan" (*AA*, 231). She tells the women playing Mary and Elizabeth: "Every queen is brought up to rule. They are not educated to be girls."[111] This is a fascinating comment that anticipates

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postmodern feminist perceptions about the construction of gender. Adler seems to understand that women are often "educated to be girls." This will not happen in her classroom. In another session, she even stops an exercise to say: "I have to interrupt you, Jennifer. You're speaking like a little girl" (*AA*, 69). And in a session witnessed by Lawrence Christon, a man and a woman rehearse a scene from Jean Anouilh's *Waltz of the Toreadors*. Adler pushes the actress to find greater size in her performance: "you must be . . . a *force!*" Using the woman as an example, she turns to the rest of the class: "I want all the women here to lose this baby quality."[112] The strong women Adler sought to play in her youth were ultimately played by the women in her classes.

Though Adler could be critical, she always claimed the purpose of her criticism was to give her students a craft--and a sense of confidence in that craft. "My work is mostly to give the actor a confidence in himself--a confidence which nothing can shatter."[113] Her former student Joanna Rotté testifies to this goal in her article "Stella Adler: Teacher Emeritus": "Adler's ultimate tutorial aim was independence."[114] This view is supported by the fact that her workbook, *The Technique of Acting*, is filled with exercises that an actor can use independently, while Strasberg's teaching seems to be filled with things that can only be done in his presence and under his guidance, as if labelled: "Don't try this at home." Holland Taylor, a successful stage, film, and television actress, discovered Adler's classes when she was already an established actress. "I was hearing someone who had a technique--repeatable, orderly, doable. It was rational."[115] Rather than setting up a

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structure which would require her ongoing presence in their lives, Adler's approach equips actors with skills they can own.

In addition, Adler's teaching seeks to disrupt directorial authority, placing the actor at the center of the production process. In fact, she positions the actor as creator of the role. "I think the actor creates a part, uses the material, and as Chekhov said, it's a marriage between the author and the actor. It's all dead on the page. It just as dead as death. Words are not the content of the play. The content is the actor, using the ideas."[116] When the words of the playwright are filtered through the interpretation and imagination of the actor, the actor becomes creator. Note that the figure left out of this "marriage" is the director. Responding to the suggestion that an actor has the director to rely on in interpreting a role, Adler retorts:

> If he's stupid. If he's smart he'll collaborate with the director. It's his job to understand the play. The most important thing you teach actors is to understand plays. You can't have a stupid actor. You have to be of absolute intelligence and you must understand plays. My God, the director is a baby in the theatre. He is only seventy-five years old. There had been a lot of very good theatre before he came along.[117]

Instead of positioning the director as the "father" of a production, Adler reverses the expected, "natural order," with the reminder that the director is just a "baby." This is an almost startling inversion of predominant assumptions in the way acting was taught--and theatre was produced--throughout most of the twentieth century. The statement boldly reclaims the role of actor as thinker. An intelligent participant in the

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collaborative process, the actor is nobody's prop--and nobody's "child." As Adler says, "It is not an extravagant claim to make that the actor, because he is the interpreter, is the most important element in the theatre" (*TA*, 5).

There's an old joke about (Strasbergian) Method actors in rehearsal. When told by the director of a production to execute some action, the Method actor stops, dumbstruck, and asks: "What's my motivation?" The cliché is meant to point to the self-indulgence of the Method actor, and his (or her) inability to follow a simple direction without a deep understanding of the impulse behind it. But the cliché also points to a potential weakness in the Strasbergian actor not found in the Adler actor. The Method actor in the joke needs the director--or teacher--to tell him what his motivation is. If Stella Adler fulfills her pedagogical mission, her student won't. For the student will create a sense of independence which enables her to answer that question for herself.

Stella Adler and Script Analysis

Stella Adler's emphasis on the playscript is one of her defining values. Her valuation of the text is another one of the most important shifts she makes away from Lee Strasberg's Method--it is also the most important tool she gives actors to empower them. By learning to read and understand plays, actors are not dependent upon other people--teachers or directors--to interpret scripts for them. That Adler's emphasis on dramatic literature is a move away from Strasberg might best be marked with an anecdote about his persistent anti-textual bias while working with Group Theatre

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actors. For *Flying Grouse*, a Group Theatre magazine which Chinoy describes as "a place to explores issues, to share ideas, to exercise literary talents, to take pot shots at one another--a place to grouse," Morris Carnovsky wrote a scene lampooning Lee Strasberg and his devaluation of scripted material in favor of actor emotion. In this playlet, entitled "Let's Understand Each Other," the actor Jules (John) Garfield comes to Lee Strasberg for help with his acting, and recites a speech from Shakespeare. The fictionalized Strasberg responds:

> You think you've said something? You haven't said anything. The great thing in Shakespeare is not to know what you're saying, but to know what you're not saying. You must not only read between the lines, you must read between the words. And you must not only read between the words, you must read between the punctuation marks. And it would still be better if there were no words on the page, then you begin to get true greatness. (*RSP*, 454-455)

Carnovsky's sketch is so funny because he gets Strasberg so right. To suggest that in Shakespeare--of all people--the words are insignificant, is to take Strasberg's emphasis on "truthful emotion" and the actor's self to the furthest extreme.

Richard Hornby agrees that "this perverse avoidance of plays was a habit of mind for Strasberg, both in his directing and his teaching."[118] And he connects this anti-textual bias specifically to Strasberg's work with Stella Adler on *Success Story*, picking up on Strasberg's (infamous) "shipboard adjustment." Taking Strasberg on, Hornby writes:

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> Why was the text itself insufficient? Why not try to make the *play* [*Success Story*] more vivid for [Stella] Adler, through verbal descriptions, or a costume, a prop, the scenery, the lighting? . . . In all [Strasberg's] writings, interviews, and transcribed teaching, he never discusses the play itself except in brief, general terms. The transcriptions of the tapes of his classes at the Actors Studio often show him commenting on a student's work in a scene for many pages without ever mentioning the play at all.[119]

This was one of Adler's chief grievances against Strasberg. She could never be accused of avoiding the play herself; instead, she argued that "the most important thing you teach actors is to understand plays."[120]

Stella Adler saw script analysis as one of the actor's most crucial tasks. This relationship between actor and author is a major theme in Adler's teaching, one which she articulates early in her book on script analysis: "There are two aspects of the theater. One belongs to the author and the other to the actor" (*ISC*, 3). But this is not to suggest that the two "aspects" are independent of one another; they are mutually interdependent. She charges the actor: "Script interpretation is your profession. What am I? Say 'I am a script interpreter.' It is much better to say than 'I am an actor,' because unless you can interpret a script you are not an actor. The whole point is interpretation" (*ISC*, 4). Adler is interested in the playwright, but she is also interested in what the actor does with the playwright's material.

So how does the actor develop this craft of "interpretation"? In *The Technique*

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of Acting, Adler says: "The text of the playwright is the only point from which the actor can conceivably start. He must approach the script with no prejudices or preconceived opinions" (*TA*, 115). In this workbook, she walks actors through the steps they need to take in approaching the text. Since this is a short volume, devoted not only to script analysis but also to many exercises developing other actor skills, some of her instructions and explanations are a bit general. "The first and foremost approach for the actor is to read the play and find out what the playwright wants to say to the world. The actor must discover the important ideas that the playwright reveals through his characters" (*TA*, 105).

She suggests beginning by asking basic questions about the text. These include: "Why did the author write the play?" and "What does the author want to say?" (*TA*, 105). She instructs actors to read Shaw's *Major Barbara*, *Pygmalion*, or *Candida*, then: "Find a big idea . . . and describe in three quarters of a page what he is saying" (*TA*, 109). These sound more like exercises for an English theme paper than an acting class, but this is precisely the point. Unlike Strasberg, Adler believes it is important for an actor to have some understanding of the *whole* of the play of which he or she is a part. This is a major change in actor training, placing the actor in the role of thinker and interpreter.

Elaine Aston devotes a third of her book, *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook*, to "dramatic texts." She almost apologizes for dealing with canonical texts, but explains why this is necessary--why she wants to examine "dramatic scripts in feminist contexts." She writes:

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> It may seem odd in a volume such as this to look at plays that have acquired canonical status, or drama that is working through a dominant dramatic form, even if authored by women. However, if we do not examine mainstream theatre or the politics of a conventional theatrical form, we leave them unchallenged. I've paid particular attention . . . to form and structure. This is not because I am advocating a structuralist position, rather, that if we can understand a structure, understand how a text is made and put together, we are equipped to "unmake" it, to pull it apart and to begin to make it our own.[121]

Aston argues the importance for feminist artists to be able to read and understand conventional texts; even if "deconstruction" is the project, one must understand how texts are constructed.

Granted, the purpose of Stella Adler's approach to script analysis is nearly always to support and fulfill the vision of the playwright. The notion of undermining a playwright's theme does not enter the framework of her discussion. But all the same, in teaching students to analyze scripts, she gives them a kind of power. For example, she recommends paraphrasing a text as a means of assimilating it. "Paraphrasing is taking the author's ideas and putting them into the actor's words, and thereby making them belong to the actor. Paraphrasing encourages you to use your mind and your voice and gives you some power that equals the author's power" (*TA*, 102). While this might seem to suggest that the actor is merely meant to absorb the meaning of the author's language, making it familiar by paraphrasing it with his or

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her own words, Adler also wants actors to *engage* with the ideas in an intellectual way--and even to dispute them.

As an example, she asks actors to take Kahlil Gibran's essay "On Marriage" from *The Prophet* and to react to it. She asks: "When marriage is entered into, do you think that it should be automatically forever?" and "Do you agree with Gibran's idea that marriage partners should not interfere with each other's personal freedom?" (*TA*, 103). This example is an interesting one for several reasons, not least of which is that Adler, in somewhat characteristic fashion, asks her students to debate the social institution of marriage and its meaning. This exercise is shorthand for the way she wants actors to approach a play: to read it, attempt to understand it, absorb it--and debate it.

In a chapter of her book entitled, "Working on the Text," Adler offers actors similar exercises, this time in "discussion." She begins by suggesting that "the discussion of ideas is at the center of the modern theatre":

> In any dramatic situation, one character may be for an idea under discussion and another may be against it. In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, when Nora announced that she was going to leave, her husband said, "Your first duty is to your husband and your children." Nora said, "No, I think my first duty is to myself."
>
> The discussive element entered the theatre with Ibsen. The middle class introduced accepted values of morality, manners, and ethics that were part of a defined class society. The middle class has

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> only "picked-up" values. This lack of certitude means that for every question that arises, there are two sides. In the theatre there is no one truth. (*TA*, 106)

From an acting perspective--and a feminist perspective--this notion that "there is no one truth" is very provocative. Instead of arguing that an actor's truthfully experienced emotion is enough to produce "truth on the stage," Adler is more aware of ideas and arguments--and the relativity of "truth"--and she wants actors to have that same awareness.

Similarly provocative are the discussion topics themselves. "These discussion exercises," she says, "are meant to help the actors understand the themes of modern playwrights, and to appreciate the opposition of ideas" (*TA*, 107). She suggests the following subjects for debate:

- The role of the woman
- Abortion
- Capital punishment
- The institution of marriage
- Whether marriage is good for actors

> Take one or two of these themes and discuss them with another actor. You should be able to live off your partner and be awakened to the theme of what you are discussing. The words come out of the theme. (*TA*, 108)

One cannot help but notice that most of the "discussion points" she chooses tend to

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concern social institutions and, specifically, women in society. But the actors do not rest with their own perspectives; Adler suggests that "the actor should be encouraged to use both points of view by reversing parts" (*TA*, 108).

There is something paradoxical in this approach. Adler wants actors to learn to handle what she calls the "the opposition of ideas." It's not enough to just say the words of the playwright; the actor must understand them--and the argument that lies beneath them. But what she seems to leave unaddressed is the quintessential actor's problem: what if he or she does not agree with the position of the author? Adler does seem to come down on the side of the author: "Compared to the idea, the individual personality is insignificant" (*TA*, 108). This would lead one to believe that ultimately, the actor's job is merely to understand the words well enough to make them his or her own. But in Adler's statement, one can also read a "subtextual" dig at Strasberg in her use of the phrase, "individual personality." By demanding that actors think, Adler reinforces her guiding principle that personal emotion alone does not make good acting. While Adler's intention does not appear to be to train actors to willfully subvert the meaning of a text, she certainly opens doors for a feminist subversion. By stressing the importance of reading a play, understanding it, thinking about it, debating it, and ultimately *interpreting* it, Adler provides actors with a set of intellectual skills which might be applied in any number of unexpected ways.

Stella and "Style": Realism

Stella Adler's "discussion exercises," and her statement that "the discussion of

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ideas is at the center of the modern theatre," are not accidental or casual. Adler was more forthright than Strasberg in addressing the fact that her approach to script analysis and actor training is mostly (if not exclusively) derived from and designed for realistic theatre. "Realism," she says, "has everything to do with thinking. All serious playwrights now fall into the category of what we call modern realism" (*ISC*, 16). As Foster Hirsch notes, "refreshingly, she calls realism a style."[122] Although Adler refers to Shakespeare and the Greeks, and although aspects of her training are certainly applicable to other forms, she readily acknowledged that she trained actors primarily for the realistic theatre. Style was a subject on which Lee Strasberg was notoriously evasive. He had a huge investment in the assertion that his Method was suitable for any style of play or performance: "Certainly one of the most important aspects of the Method concerns its universal approach to the actor's problem and, at the same time, its flexibility."[123] Strasberg often offered this defense of "universality" against accusations that his approach was suitable only for realism. And since Strasberg so rarely spoke of plays at all, he spoke of style typically only when defending the Method against such accusations.

Stella Adler, by contrast, expressly acknowledged that her training approach is intended primarily for analyzing—and ultimately enacting—realistic plays. And in Adler's view, the realistic theatre is where the actor is able to make the greatest contribution. The reason for this is not merely the fact that the realistic theatre is where actors would have had the greatest numbers of opportunities while Adler was teaching (and may continue to find the most employment today). In a shockingly

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brash proposition (for an acting teacher), she declares: "Shakespeare doesn't need you" (*ISC*, 140). She explains why:

> With Shakespeare, it doesn't matter about you so much. If you're pretty, you can say, "The quality of mercy is not strain'd." Shakespeare doesn't need such great acting--his words carry you. He doesn't trust you, you see. . . .
>
> A Shakespeare play doesn't need you. A modern play does. (*ISC*, 140)

Throughout most of Adler's teaching she doesn't take such an extreme stance; her book includes many references to Shakespeare; she also draws a throughline from the ancient Greeks to the late twentieth century theatre, saying: "We still talk about the Oedipal complex, which was first explored in ancient Greek Drama. The ideas that come from the stage take hold and are enduring" (*TA*, 109). Yet, clearly, her greatest passion was for the realistic theatre; she truly believed that this is where an actor's gifts are most needed. What is it about realism that requires a special kind of actor?

It would seem that, in Adler's view, the special contribution an actor makes is a kind of "filling in." Although one might reasonably argue that this is what actors *always* do--and have always done--Adler seizes hold of the concept, wanting to explore more deeply the actor's special power to become a kind of second author in realistic theatre. The playwright writes the play, but the actor is the "author" of the performance, filling in, adding what is not on paper. And for Adler, this responsibility requires not just feeling, but thought and research.

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> The realistic style has certain problems that do not have an easy solution. It is dead on the page. The actor has to create it. The text has to be filled. The emptiness of the text is nobody's fault. It is not within the means of the author or the style to fill in and give you everything you want in a modern text outright. (*ISC*, 76)

When Adler refers to the "modern text," which she believes creates the need for a new kind of actor, she cites Ibsen as a turning point. She says of the realistic actor: "Like Ibsen, he must think. He must ask questions. . . . No actor before Ibsen had to truly *experience* his part" (*ISC*, 78).

While I have demonstrated Adler's attention to the text of a play, it must also be understood that the text is only a starting point; from there one must create the character's experience. For as committed as Adler is to an analysis of the text, she also says: "Every text is bare" (*ISC*, 217).

> The text is a skeleton for the histrionic art. It is not in the text to do it. It is said in such a way that you must pick up on it yourself. The past is what you act. The present comes out of the past, which you must have with you all the time. . . . The actor has to have secrets that aren't in the text. (*ISC*, 108)

Among the things that the actor needs to "fill in," Adler cites the past as one of the most important.

Interestingly, Gay Gibson Cima mentions similar aspects of realistic drama--and specifically Ibsen--in recovering the special contributions which nineteenth century

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female performers made to the new realistic style of acting. In her book *Performing Women*, Cima is mostly interested in locating historical moments where new acting styles were created through the work of women. She says:

> Despite the undeniable power of male playwrights and the theatrical and cultural systems they at once reflect and enforce, female actors since the late nineteenth century have actually assumed a collaborative and potentially disruptive role in creating new ways of performing the idea of woman.[124]

For Cima, a change in acting style creates a space for feminist intervention: "To critique conventional behavior, an acting style must be visible to actors and audiences as a departure from the norm."[125] Elizabeth Robins is one of the actors studied by Cima, whom she credits with "creating a style of acting in Ibsen's realistic, narrative plays that allowed her to reveal and critique the roles expected of women."[126]

Yet I would suggest that "new" styles of acting are not necessarily the only way that such critiques might take place. In her chapter entitled, "Ibsen and the Critical Actor," Cima looks specifically at the ways in which nineteenth century actors "investigated Ibsen's use of retrospective action, collaborating with the playwright to convey past, present, and future dramatic action simultaneously."[127] She says:

> What I am concerned with is the position of female actors staging these characters. Whereas many feminist theatre scholars have dismissed all women's work in the canon as a process of simple victimization and others have tried to redeem the male playwrights as geniuses who write

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> "universal" women's roles, I see a complex intertwining of hegemonic scripting and feminist countermovements. The implications for future theories of feminist theatre are significant. One cannot simply dismiss realism and psychologically based acting as patriarchal. . . .[128]

Cima notes that Ibsen's "retrospective" structure "jolted actors into revising their attitude toward character and performance" and that the "prime movers in this revolution were women."[129] But are such collaborations between female actors and playwrights meaningful only in one historic moment--the moment of introduction of a new style? Or might these same "openings" in the script continue to offer actors the possibility of playing "disruptive roles" if they should so choose?

Cima's central argument in this chapter--that a new acting style was named for Ibsen rather than for the female actors who created the style while playing *in* Ibsen--is a much-needed recovery of specific women artists. But it is also a recovery of the ongoing role that actors can potentially play: collaborating with the playwright and changing theatrical style. Of the historical Ibsen actors, Cima says:

> These actors, then, developed a new and more complex attitude toward the script and toward collaboration with the playwright. Responding to the demands of Ibsen's use of retrospective action, they studied their scripts with care, finding keys to elusive dramatic actions suggested by the playwright himself, but to be discovered and created onstage by the women themselves. Paradoxically, Ibsen, the master builder of a new structure, provided them with what they experienced as a novel freedom

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> in performance: the ability to demonstrate, and to critique, the performative nature of the role of women.[130]

This is exactly the same kind of collaboration that Adler's model of training makes possible. Though Adler may not have invented this collaboration (and Cima credits Stanislavsky with formalizing it), Adler nevertheless provides actors with similar possibilities.[131]

There were moments in Adler's teaching life, however, when her zeal for realistic acting was not shared by her students. Robert Brustein, who became dean of the Yale School of Drama in 1966, wanted Adler to play a large role in his program. He says,

> Stella was the obvious choice to head the acting department. She stood at the very heart of the American theatre--which, in one sense, meant that her techniques were designed for realism. But she also knew and appreciated Shakespeare, and she had a deep understanding of Ibsen, Strindberg, and especially, Chekhov, all of whom she taught in a famous script breakdown course. . . . Of all the New York acting teachers who had come from the Group Theatre, Stella was clearly the most versatile, the most demanding, the most passionate--and, I thought, the most open to a continually changing theatre.[132]

Whether Adler was not open enough to a changing theatre--or whether the changing theatre was not open enough to the tradition Adler represented--is debatable. But she stayed at Yale for only about a year, teaching there from 1966-1967. During this

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period of political unrest and theatrical experimentation, Adler and her students clashed.

Robert Lewis, who taught at Yale before and after Adler's tenure, says of the students' attitude: "Stella was a thirties product, therefore old-fashioned. That epithet was also hurled at me."[133] Brustein notes that student directors were exploring the avant garde, and says, "I had to agree with the directing department that the acting training devised by Stanislavsky, valuable though it might be, was not fully appropriate to the new theatre, and I had to agree with the acting department that the [directing] ensembles were virtually preempting the formal training at the school."[134] Adler's own summary of her Yale experience echoes these other reports, while reiterating her fundamental belief system regarding theatrical discipline and tradition:

> A student made me know that he was not there to pick up anything traditional. He was going to make his own tradition. It lasted a week or ten days. It was not symptomatic of my own students [in New York]; they get the idea immediately that their work is not concerned with 1972, or 1962, but with a tradition that lasts two thousand years and they have to equip themselves to be fit to join this company of artists that has existed over the ages.[135]

While Adler always had this sense that she was linked to an ancient tradition, her special expertise--and enthusiasm--was certainly directed toward text-based theatre, and particularly modern realism.

Ironically, though she was deemed "old-fashioned" by Yale students of the late

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1960s, Adler was certainly back in vogue by the 1970s and 1980s, when she conducted popular lectures on script analysis to actors in New York; she also seems to be in vogue today, with the publication of three new books on her approach to acting. Perhaps there *is* an enduring value in her emphais on script analysis. She includes in her book, *The Technique of Acting*, a list of suggested scenes and characters for actor exploration, and while most of the playwrights represented in both her script analysis and technique classes were from drawn mid-twentieth century American realism, the list also reflects some diversity. She taught not only Odets, Williams, Miller, Hellman, Inge, Wilder, and O'Neill, but also Albee, Beckett, and Pinter, as well as Chekhov, Shaw, Strindberg, and Ibsen (*ISC*, vii; *AA*, 97; *TA*, 123-126).

One wonders, in fact, whether Stella Adler was drawn to the realistic theatre--and to writers like Ibsen--for some of the same reasons Cima cites as the motivating factors for Elizabeth Robins and Minnie Maddern Fiske. Perhaps the key is to be found in Cima's chapter title: "Ibsen and the *Critical Actor*" [Emphasis added]. Certain aspects of the realistic theatrical style invite the actor to bring his or her critical faculties to the playing of a role. And while there is undeniably a certain power in being the first to do so, as Cima suggests, Stella Adler's critical approach to actor training empowers actors to continue using their critical faculties in their acting. One must also note that though Adler finds the critical role of the actor especially potent in the realistic theatre, she also regards it as a part of the centuries-old tradition of acting.

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"The Given Circumstances": Geography, Gender, Class, and Character

For Stella Adler, "the given circumstances" of any play are primarily these: "The social, cultural, political, historical, and geographical situation" in which the author places the characters.[136] Note that character "psychology" does not appear on this particular list. Instead, Adler examines the "circumstances" in which the character finds himself or herself; character "psychology" will emerge from those circumstances. Discovering the meaning of these factors involves research not only into the play itself, but also into the playwright, the period, and the locale of the play. Only when one has an understanding of these can one begin to consider playing the role; these are the ways into character.

On the most basic level, the "given circumstances," Adler says in *The Technique of Acting*, can be located by the actor first through conducting a sort of fact-finding survey. The background of the character is created out of the "five W's":

> "Who" are you?
>
> "What" is your action?
>
> "When" is this happening?
>
> "Where" is this happening?
>
> "Why" are you there? (*TA*, 72)

Adler says: "When these 'W' questions are answered, the background falls into place" (*TA*, 72). But it's always clear that the playwright provides only the outline; the rest is to be "filled in" with the actor's outside research and creative imagination. In all of this, one thing is clear to Adler: the actor is not to be confused with the

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character. It's not a straightforward equation. An actor cannot trust that by experiencing true feelings he or she will fill the character; that requires a different kind of work. An excellent example of Adler's work on the given circumstances can be found in her analysis of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

That Stella Adler is drawn specifically to Ibsen is clear; his plays appear not only in her *Technique of Acting*, which gestures at script analysis techniques, but in her later book, which claims him in its title: *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov*. This collection provides an opportunity to gain further insight into Adler's approach to script analysis, and includes finely detailed discussions of characters and circumstances. What one also notices is Adler's own bias in reading these plays: "Most of Ibsen's plays are about women," she says (*ISC*, 122). While any number of Ibsen's plays are arguably not "about women," Adler pays especially close attention to the female characters, placing them in their social and historical contexts.

Robert Brustein suggests that Adler's lectures show the influence of his own book, *The Theatre of Revolt*. He writes in his review of *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov* that he is "flattered to note that some of her thoughts about Ibsen and Strindberg are borrowed from [his] own book."[137] But a comparison of Brustein's and Adler's books reveals a very different perspective regarding the role(s) of women. Instead of mirroring Brustein, Adler's analysis of the social situation of the play anticipates Alisa Solomon's recent reading in *Re-Dressing the Canon*. Solomon says that "Ibsen's disruption of dramatic and social conventions challenged contemporary assertions about the inevitability and incontrovertibility of gender roles."

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She argues:

> Ibsen's innovative dramatic structures, the new acting style his work demanded, the resonance of his settings, and his invocation and rerouting of well-made strategies are as important as the stories the plays tell and the characters they represent. . . . In sum, Ibsen's plays engaged the roiling controversy over gender through their self-scrutinizing dramatic actions, questioning the representation of women by questioning the means of representation itself.[138]

Adler makes similar connections between Ibsen's dramatic structure and the social structure: "Ibsen was a pioneer in many ways but primarily because he wrote for a specific class--the middle class--which was created by the institutions of marriage, church, civil life, and law" (*ISC*, 5). Adler places importance on the idea that Ibsen represents "a new school of playwriting" and "a strong, healthy, violent opening up of ideas" (*ISC*, 7). This "violent" opening up of ideas is Ibsen's attack on social institutions--an area which excites Adler. She says of Ibsen: "He is the prophet who made us understand that we were led down every drain in the world, and still are, by the institutionalism of the middle class--its politics, religion, morality, family life, economics" (*ISC*, 12). At the very beginning of the analysis, Adler asks actors not to take these institutions for granted, but to examine them--and the playwright's perspective on them. Then the actor inevitably adds his or her *own* perspective, through the use of imagination and embodiment.

For the purposes of this study, Adler's analysis of *A Doll's House* (and

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particularly the character, Nora) is a most useful example, not only of how the concept of "given circumstances" works, but of Adler's special attention to women within the social, political, economic, geographic, and moral environment. The following are illustrations of the kind of research actors must do into the various "given circumstances" of *A Doll's House*, and Adler's instructions on how to conduct the analysis. In her discussion of this play, no detail is too small to shed light on the characters.

A sense of place is critical to Adler; it encompasses both the character's immediate environment and the larger one that surrounds her. She is quick to establish the larger circumstances, which lie outside the play:

> There were no railroads in Norway in Ibsen's day. How did people get around? You cannot go into your own life or your own 'instinct' to answer this. You will be forced to do some research, to read and look at pictures. How did people go to work and travel and transport things without a railroad? (*ISC*, 24)

Adler does this kind of research herself, providing long descriptions of nineteenth century Norway and its "threatening" fjords (*ISC*, 90). And she points out the meaning of the landscape to the characters: "if you get to a scene where someone has to flee, you will see the waterfalls, see the difficulties" (*ISC*, 90).

> The fingers of water reach seventy miles into the land from the sea. That makes quite an obstacle if you are thinking of leaving Norway. To cross the sea from the north and come south means that you have

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> risked death to get there, and when you arrive you must arrive with death in you. In Mrs. Linde's entrance [in *Doll's House*], when she says, "I have just arrived from the North," and somebody says, "How did you do it?"--it does not mean by what conveyance. It means, "How did you *survive*?" (*ISC*, 91).

Adler makes it clear that the landscape has significance for all of the characters. Here, she demonstrates the risks Mrs. Linde has taken in her travels; these also point ahead to the risks Nora will take when she leaves at the end of the play. Where will she go? How? Materialist feminist theorists offer frequent reminders that feminist artists must ask "the questions that the cultural historian asks about women, about the cultural and material conditions of their creative and social lives."[139] This is the work that Stella Adler does.

In *Doll's House*, the historical, political, cultural, and social circumstances intersect. Adler reminds her students about the "political situation" underlying the play and period: "There is no vote for women" (*ISC*, 83). "Before 1900, if a woman left her husband it was considered dirty" (*ISC*, 26). "Where men dominate the economic and social life," she says, "women get the short end" (*ISC*, 50). Class plays an important role as well.

> We are dealing with the middle class male and female. The female is responsible for the indoors--housekeeping, raising a family. She could be a teacher or an old maid, but otherwise she has no other way except marriage. The wife is in the home. The husband is outside the home.

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> Most of the rules were the same for the middle class as for the aristocracy: the woman has the responsibility to the home and children. (*ISC*, 84-85)

"You cannot play without knowing the class," Adler says (*ISC*, 85). Adler asks the actor to consider carefully the situation in which the character is placed, as a way into understanding (and creating) his or her behavior and choices.

Adler uses this background to frame the actions of the characters and to ensure that actors are not merely responding "intuitively" to the circumstances based on their own life experiences. She admonishes: "Their middle class is not *your* middle class. Ibsen's plays were written from 1860. He analyzed that society. Do not always think it is you" (*ISC*, 85). Again, one hears faint echoes of Strasberg's emphasis on the use of one's self, and Adler's insistence on reading, research, and imagination.

One remarkable example of Adler's attention to character, and specifically the character of a woman, comes in her detailed investigation of "Emma" in Strindberg's *The Father*. Referring to an episode when the captain mentions that Nojd has been involved with a kitchen worker called Emma, Adler begins by asking, "Who is Emma?" She says, "I want to open up her class of people: who demoralizes them and what their impulses are and the fact that they have no place to go or change--nobody cares" (*ISC*, 148). Adler describes Emma's free sexuality. She says Emma has the idea, "I am leading my life the way I want to lead it. I want to go to the dance. I want to go to the barn with Nojd. It's not just something *he* wants. *I* want it too" (*ISC*, 149). For Emma, religion has no hold; she rejects social models she has

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been given to follow: "there is nobody there that she wants to copy" (*ISC*, 148).

Adler then investigates the meaning behind the Pastor's comment that it would be "difficult" for Emma if she were to become pregnant. Adler says:

> This is a fact. It makes you go into the social situation of that girl. If she has a baby, she won't remain in service; she'll have to go to the poorhouse. The child will be given away so she can continue working. The servant girl who is pregnant is going to have to face a lot that you [the actor] have to supply her with. (*ISC*, 151)

After considering Emma's social and economic situation, Stella Adler theatrically reminds her class: "Oh, did anybody notice that Emma doesn't even appear on stage?" She asks, "What, am I crazy? All this about a character who never appears, who you'll never play?" And she answers her own question. "I'm crazy for your acting. For the fact is that she is important and you must know her, even if you and the audience don't see her" (*ISC*, 151).

For Adler, the male actors must not even mention the name "Emma" without knowing who she is--and what it means to be Emma in her "given circumstances." She charges the actors:

> Go deeply into the social situation of that girl. This is the work the author did, but he left it out because it could not be included in the style. Get behind the situation that produces the words. That is what gives you the chance to go to your artistic imagination. If you know a servant girl has no money, that men sleep around with servant girls in

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> Sweden and there is no way for this girl to avoid that, then the actor with his artistic imagination can honestly say, "She is going to have a hard time." It doesn't make any sense to say that . . . unless the truth of the situation behind the words is in you. The situation behind the words gives you the ability to say the words. If you don't use that creative background to know what that girl is, you have no right to talk about her. (*ISC*, 151-152)

While on one level this is ostensibly a lesson in actor research and imagination, on another level this is a challenge to the actor not to take for granted social situations as "natural," but to look at the economic hardships and gender biases that construct character--in drama and in life. And what is especially noticeable in Adler's work is the attention she pays to female characters. She is interested in the truthful staging their drama--even when they remain offstage.

Stella Adler and "The Truth"

The most fascinating aspect of Stella Adler's use of the word "truth" is that it is often equivocal. Unlike Strasberg--and Meisner--who seem to feel that if an actor gets at a core experience of emotional truth or natural impulse, this will produce "truth" on stage, Adler seems to have a number of different categories for truth. Her truth is multiple, in an almost postmodern way.

Very early in her book *The Technique of Acting*, Adler makes a statement to this effect, distinguishing her work (once again) from Strasberg's. "There is a

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difference between the truth of life and the truth of the theatre. And you must learn not to mix them up. You are going to learn how to express yourself in size" (*TA*, 7). For Adler, theatrical life is also somehow *larger* than life. It has size and scope. Yet this is not her only equivocation on the subject of truth. Although part of the language of her teaching employs the Stanislavskian rhetoric of the "universality" of truth, the content of her teaching often reveals a deeper understanding of the relativity of "truth." And this relativity is often connected to cultural construction: time period, gender, class, ethnicity--the given circumstances.

> There are many truths and they change: "A wife should obey her husband." "As a man, I am head of the family." "As a priest, I am the head of the church." Somebody else comes along and says, "I do not know if you are the head of the family. I don't think you can be the head of anything but yourself. I don't think anybody can own anybody else or ask anybody else to belong to him." (*ISC*, 16)

This notion of shifting truths is potentially very useful. Instead of asserting that there is "one truth" which an emotionally connected actor will inevitably produce, Adler believes that there are multiple truths, and the revelation of these multiple truths on the stage will be through the combination of play reading, outside research, and an imaginative leap on the part of the actor.

Adler's sense of truth onstage is also connected specifically to the "discussion" for which she trains actors; the debate of realistic theatre:

> In the discussion, you have to try to distinguish between truths. You

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> listen to all the truths and then you make your own choice. Each person is saying honestly what he believes to be the truth. There is no "solution." You cannot "win." You can only do what you think is right. Truth must be individual for each person--you can only represent yourself. (*ISC*, 11)

Using Ibsen as an example, she says:

> Ibsen says no truth lasts longer than seventeen or eighteen years. After that, another truth comes along. He has no illusions about the permanence of truth. No matter how persuasive, all intellectual postulates are invariably reduced to lifeless conventions in time. The ultimate truth lies only in the perpetual conflict of truth. (*ISC*, 37)

There is something surprising in these statements, particularly the notion that "the ultimate truth lies only in the perpetual *conflict* of truth. " But Adler didn't mind holding apparently contradictory perspectives; she was able to perceive both the contemporary context and the timelessness of various human experiences. Different people experience different truths at different times; these "truths" can be culturally constructed.

This ability to maintain contradictory perspectives makes it not unusual for Adler to make sweeping statements about cultural "truths." She can say that "no truth lasts longer than seventeen or eighteen years" at the same time she makes claims about the "universality" of human experience, and general comments which seem to essentialize truthful behavior according to categories--usually of class and ethnicity.

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She attributes to Stanislavsky this quote: "The truth in art is the truth of your circumstances" (*TA*, 31). For example, she argues:

> Acting is largely based on the differences between characters. An Italian designer, a Russian peasant, a Chinese diplomat all behave in specific ways. They hold themselves differently, walk, talk, think, smoke cigarettes, and laugh differently. Their backgrounds, education, physical manner, moralities, and conditioning are wholly dissimilar.
>
> The actors must not only create these national and occupational traits, but he [*sic*] must also show the differences between characters. Acting is human behavior assembled in novel and interesting ways. (*TA*, 66)

This sense of culturally informed behavior offers both opportunities and risks: the "truthful" portrayal of a Russian peasant may be different from that of a Chinese diplomat. A recognition of difference seems potentially useful, but the danger of making blanket attributions about behavioral categories is also inherent.

Adler's statements on this subject are also contradictory. In the guidelines above, she says an actor must "show the differences between characters," suggesting that not all "Chinese diplomats" would be alike. Yet she also seems to argue the opposite: "However idiosyncratic and individual his characters, the problem in an Ibsen play is everybody's problem. It is not about a single character. Nora is every woman. Dr. Stockmann is every man. They are archetypes. They have a universality" (*ISC*, 53). To view characters as influenced by their circumstances

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offers one set of possibilities; to see them as "universal" or as "archetypes" because of those circumstances may be reductive.

This notion of "archetypes" is more than likely derived from the teachings of Michael Chekhov. Joanna Rotté writes in *Acting with Adler*, "when Stella Adler taught characterization, . . she invoked the ideas of Michael Chekhov, a noted character actor throughout his life."[140] And Michael Chekhov, according to Mel Gordon, actually taught actors to work from the concept of archetypes. Gordon says:

> To begin with, Chekhov said, the actor must define the specific type of character he is to play: "Tough Guy," "Angry Woman," "Sexy Girl," and so forth. These models, or Archetypes, are found in human nature. The playwright develops the individual within the type. But it is the function of the actor to make the character-creation come alive. The very first step an actor should take is to find the difference between himself and his character.[141]

This may account for Adler's notion of the archetype; it may also account for her interest in focusing on the *difference* between actor and character.

But Stanislavsky warned actors about generalizing character types. In *Building a Character*, he writes:

> It is possible to portray on the stage a character in general terms--a merchant, a soldier, an aristocrat, a peasant, etc. for the purpose of superficial observation of a series of categories into which people were formerly divided, it is not difficult to work out striking mannerisms,

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> and types of carriage. For example, a professional soldier as a general rule holds himself stiffly erect. . . . A peasant spits. . . . An aristocrat always carries a top hat. . . . These are all generalized clichés supposed to portray characters. They are taken from life, they actually exist. But they do not contain the essence of a character and they are not individualized.[142]

It is possible, therefore, to locate a historical tension between generality and specificity; between the universal and the individual. It is ultimately up to the actor, through thorough research, detailed observation--and specific choices--to bring a character to life on the stage.

In the end, Adler clearly believes that there is such a thing as "truthful acting." But instead of seeking it in the actor himself or herself, she seeks it in behavior that would be true for the character.

> You must know the difference between the play you are playing and your own life--between the person you are portraying and yourself. Hamlet . . . is not a person such as yourself; he owns Denmark. You cannot play Hamlet without working on class differences. The possible overall action that Hamlet takes--to search for his truth in his time--requires a lot of background. (*TA*, 86)

Yet even her description of Hamlet's action--to seek "his truth" in "his time"--makes the notion of truth very specific rather than universal.

Truth also seems for Adler to be connected to the style. And the style she

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talks about most is, of course, realism. "Realism is after the truth--of middle-class or communist or working-class life" (*ISC*, 183). In realism, she says, a single character "is in flux between good and bad" but is never "good or bad." "It is your job from now on to see that the character has both sides in him. This gives you profound characters who are made up of psychological truth" (*ISC*, 88). Yet even if each character has his or her own "truth," of a play like *Doll's House*, Adler reiterates: "There are two points of view, two truths" (*ISC*, 44). And the following could be read as her summary statement on truth in the realistic theatre: "for every question that arises, there are two sides. In the modern theatre there is no one truth" (*TA*, 106).

Does this leave enough latitude for the feminist, Stanislavsky-trained actor? It certainly seems a shift away from the absolute notion of "truthful" acting, complicating it on any number of levels. It's no longer enough to find one's own truthful emotion, from one's own life, and layer it into a script without *thinking*. "Truth" is dependent upon circumstances which include gender and class. And above all, Adler is most interested in seeing "truths" debated on the stage, within characters and between characters. She implicitly acknowledges there is no one truth, and that truths are ideologically based.

* * *

I would argue that many aspects of "the Adler technique" are invaluable to *any* actor, and particularly to the feminist actor. Might one look at script analysis as a

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kind of "consciousness raising" for actors? The Stanislavsky System, as taught in the United States, is predominantly "anti-textual" and "anti-intellectual." But Stella Adler insists that actors be thinkers, researchers, observers, interpreters, and creators. Can it be a negative thing to learn to read a script? And especially to learn to read a script while asking questions about the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious environments which construct character and situation?

From a feminist perspective, one danger would be that the female actor might feel obliged to "serve" the author, regardless of the content of the play and the "message" of the playwright. There is the possibility that she may feel compelled to fulfill demeaning roles in misogynist pieces. Yet learning to *read* is also to raise consciousness; it may make an actor more likely to *recognize* demeaning roles in misogynist plays. Learning to read with a feminist sensibility may also make it more likely for an actor to learn not only about the role she plays in the drama, but the role she plays as a participant in the entire production process. If knowledge offers some kind of power, Stella Adler's views on acting potentially provide the actor with a new agency. For the feminist actor, script analysis may enhance her ability to choose or refuse roles; it can also strengthen her skills in resisting, reinterpreting, or subverting them.

I would also suggest that Stella Adler's script analysis training might prove useful to the Brechtian actor. Brechtian acting style, with its "alienation effect," has often been advanced by feminist theorists and practitioners as a form which allows actors to "comment" on social roles--and society itself. Again, does it not seem that

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the "smart" actor (as Adler would say), would be the one best able to make such a comment? The actor who has read a script critically may also be the actor who can give a socially critical performance.

Although Adler's pedagogical style bears the marks of its patriarchal heritage, the aspect of her teaching which is potentially most valuable to the feminist actor is her emphasis on independent thinking. Adler teaches the actor to be a craftsperson, and she endeavors to instill actors with a sense of self-confidence. The ideal result of such an approach would be actors educated not to be puppets, easily manipulated or misused within the production process, but instead independent artists, and full collaborators in the making of theatre.

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Notes

1. Pope Brock, "Stella Adler: The Fiery First Lady of American Acting," *People Weekly*, 17 July 1989, 66. See also Marc Gordon, "Salvaging Strasberg at the Fin de Siècle," in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 48. Gordon quotes Elia Kazan's version of the story, in which Adler says: "It will take a hundred years before the harm that man [Strasberg] has done to the art of acting can be corrected."

2. See Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 61. Carnicke quite rightly points out that although many theorists and historians claim that Stanislavsky "changed his mind" on emphasis, "Stanislavsky remained all-encompassing. . . . He could see both Strasberg and Adler as right, while they bitterly argued with each other."

3. Stella Adler, *The Technique of Acting* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 120 (hereafter cited as *TA*).

4. Two compilations of Adler's teachings have been published in her name since 1999: *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov*, ed. Barry Paris (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999) (hereafter cited as *ISC*); and *The Art of Acting*, comp. and ed. Howard Kissel (New York: Applause, 2000) (hereafter cited as *AA*).

5. Stroppel, "Acting Theory, Training, and Practice," 13-14. Subsequent quotations, *ibid.* and 14.

6. Ellen Donkin, "Mrs. Siddons Looks Back in Anger: Feminist Historiography for Eighteenth-Century British Theater," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 287.

7. Donkin, "Mrs. Siddons," 276.

8. Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 15.

9. Aston, 34.

10. Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 28. Subsequent quotation, *ibid.*

11. Maralyn Lois Polak, "Stella Adler Granting an Audience," *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, Sunday, 29 May 1988.

12. Marlon Brando with Robert Lindsey, *Brando: Songs My Mother Taught Me* (New York: Random House, 1994), 78.

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13. See Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, translated, edited and with commentary by Lulla Rosenfeld, with an introduction by Stella Adler (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years*; Joanna Rotté, "Stella Adler: Teacher Emeritus" in *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 11 (Fall 1999): 63-79 ; and Stella Adler, *TA*, 127-132 for biographical information on Adler and her relationships with Jacob Adler, Harold Clurman, and Konstantin Stanislavsky.

14. Jill Dolan, "Fathom Languages: Feminist Performance Theory, Pedagogy, and Practice," in *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre*, 6.

15. *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 27. This entry was written by Actors Studio historian, Foster Hirsch. See also Hirsch, *A Method to their Madness*.

16. Polak, 9. Subsequent quotations, *ibid.*

17. Robert Lewis, *Slings and Arrows* (New York: Stein and Day), 40.

18. Stella Adler, "Introduction" to Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, xv.

19. Stella Adler in Jacob Adler, xix.

20. See also: Hirsch, 58-59; 62-63.

21. Stella Adler in Jacob Adler, xix; Clurman, 16.

22. Clurman, 29.

23. Stella Adler in Jacob Adler, xix.

24. I must point out that although Clurman is not my (only) source for this conclusion, he makes it himself (and connects it to himself): "No doubt this drama between Stella and me was a personal one. . . . But it was a personal drama in which was mirrored my whole attitude toward the Group, Stella's love and hatred of it, her self-torment over it, her objective battle against it, symbolized for me all that the Group had to overcome within itself, within the world, and each member within his own nature" (Clurman, 85-86).

25. Quoted in Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 423.

26. Quoted in Hirsch, 55.

27. Lewis, 83.

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28. Clurman, 147.

29. Clurman, 165-166.

30. Rotté, "Stella Adler: Teacher Emeritus," 74.

31. Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, 2.

32. Clurman, 192.

33. Quoted in Hirsch, 73.

34. Kathleen R. Downs, "Women in the Plays of the Group Theatre, 1931-1941" (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1992), 91.

35. Downs, 99.

36. Downs, 56.

37. Downs, 96.

38. Downs, 100-101.

39. Downs, 94.

40. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*, a co-production of WNET/New York and the Center for Documentary Media, Inc., broadcast on WNET, 1989, videotape.

41. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 46.

42. According to *Cambridge Guide*, Carnovsky was born in 1897 and was therefore older than 29 the first summer of the Group Theatre; Clurman is also listed as having been born in 1901.

43. Clurman, 39.

44. Clurman, 84.

45. Clurman, 85.

46. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*

47. Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion*, 88.

48. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 164.

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49. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 164.

50. Garfield, *The Actors Studio: A Player's Place*, 34-35.

51. Quoted in Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 166.

52. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 166.

53. Clurman, 138.

54. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 59-60.

55. Boris Filippov, *Actors Without Make-Up*, trans. Kathelene Cook (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977).

56. Although Filippov does not identify the actress in the story as Stella Adler, there are enough matching details between Stanislavsky's version and those of Adler and Clurman to find the identification unmistakable, as Carnicke does.

57. Quoted in Filippov, 59.

58. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 60.

59. Clurman, 138.

60. While one might want to consider the possibility of gender bias in the different versions of this story, with Stanislavsky painting Adler as a "completely panic-stricken woman," Adler's own account--and her theatrical personality--suggest that she may, indeed, have appeared "panic-stricken." It is also possible that Adler positioned herself as a "damsel in distress" in order to get Stanislavsky's attention.

61. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 179-180. Smith also reviewed notes made by Harold Clurman on Stella Adler's talks with Stanislavsky (Smith, 448, note to page 179). See also Filippov, 59.

62. Quoted in Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 181.

63. Quoted in Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 181.

64. Hirsch, 79.

65. Paul Gray, "Stanislavski and America: A Critical Chronology," in *Stanislavsky and America*, 34.

66. Quoted in Gray, 34.

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67. Lewis, 72.

68. Lewis, 83.

69. Although some of the power shifted directly to Adler, Smith says: "Adler wasn't the only actor assuming more responsibility: Meisner, Lewis, and Carnovksy continued the classes they had begun in New York, and Odets taught acting to the apprentices. The Group Theatre was being decentralized, whether Strasberg like it or not" (Smith, 185). And although Strasberg had done all of the directing for the Group Theatre up until 1934 (with the exception of the Group's first production, *The House of Connelly*, for which he shared credit with Cheryl Crawford, and *Big Night*, which Crawford directed alone), in 1935 several others stepped up to assume that task. Following Adler's work with Stanislavsky, Clifford Odets, Sanford Meisner and, most importantly, Harold Clurman all directed Group Theatre productions for the first time (Smith, 430-431).

70. Clurman, 139.

71. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 185.

72. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 184-185.

73. Although it might be tempting to read the casting of Adler in these roles as an attempt to tame her in the wake of the Stanislavsky/Strasberg contretemps of 1934, since Strasberg was not involved in this set of casting decisions, retaliation is an unlikely explanation. *Awake and Sing* and *Paradise Lost* were the first directing projects of Adler's lover, Harold Clurman, who may have had his own (numerous) reasons for wanting her to play these "Jewish mothers."

74. Lewis, 68-69.

75. Lawrence Christon, "Stella Adler Sums Up a Life in the Theatre," *Los Angeles Times*, Tuesday, 9 June 1988, part 6, p. 1.

76. Stella Adler, an interview by Russell Vandenbroucke, *Yale Theatre* 8, nos. 2 & 3 (Spring 1977): 34.

77. Robert Brustein, "Stella for Star," *New Republic*, 1 February 1993, 52.

78. Gayle Austin, *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 6.

79. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*

80. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*

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81. Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, 16.

82. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, *Actors on Acting* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1970), 606.

83. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 179-180.

84. See notes 3 and 4, above.

85. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*

86. Hirsch, 19.

87. Bruce McConachie, "Method Acting and the Cold War," *Theatre Survey* 41, no. 1 (May 2000): 61-62.

88. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 166.

89. Susan Strasberg, *Marilyn and Me: Sisters, Rivals, Friends* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 53.

90. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 287.

91. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 123.

92. Quoted in Christon, 1.

93. Brando, 78.

94. Rotté, *Acting with Adler*, 22.

95. All quotes in this paragraph are from *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*

96. Alisa Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 95-96.

97. Solomon, 96-97.

98. Solomon, 129.

99. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 179.

100. Krasner, *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 31.

101. Quoted in Rotté, *Acting with Adler*, 138.

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102. Robert Brustein, *Making Scenes: A Personal History of the Turbulent Years at Yale 1966-1979* (New York: Random House, 1981; New York: Limelight Editions, 1984), 18.

103. Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 209.

104. This and subsequent quotation from Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, *The Feminist Classroom* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 128-129.

105. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!* The class session in question is from 1983; although the student is not named, I believe him to be (a very young) Mark Ruffalo, who has recently received critical acclaim for his performance in the film *Count on Me*. (Thank you to Laurie Norton for making the identification, and Joanna Rotté for relating it.)

106. Hirsch, 218.

107. Brock, 66.

108. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*

109. Brustein, "Stella for Star."

110. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*

111. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*

112. Christon, 1.

113. *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*

114. Rotté, "Stella Adler: Teacher Emeritus," 65.

115. Diane Haithman, "After 50 Years, It's Still a Class Act," *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, 31 January 1999, 40.

116. Quoted in Vandenbroucke, 34.

117. Quoted in Vandenbroucke, 35.

118. Hornby, *The End of Acting*, 175.

119. Hornby, *The End of Acting*, 176.

120. Quoted in Vandenbroucke, 30.

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121. Elaine Aston, *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 79.

122. Hirsch, 216.

123. Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion*, 175.

124. Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Women* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 7.

125. Cima, 12.

126. Cima, 11.

127. Cima, 17.

128. Cima, 19.

129. Cima, 21.

130. Cima, 30.

131. Cima, 35.

132. Brustein, *Making Scenes*, 15.

133. Lewis, 269.

134. Brustein, *Making Scenes*, 56-57.

135. Quoted in Vandenbroucke, 34.

136. Paul Gray, "The Reality of Doing," in *Stanislavski and America*, 222.

137. Robert Brustein, "Stella by Lamplight," *New Republic*, 10 May 1999, 38.

138. Solomon, 47.

139. Aston, *Feminist Theatre Practice*, 113.

140. Rotté, *Acting With Adler*, 132.

141. Mel Gordon, *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia, A Workbook for Actors* (New York: Applause, 1987), 155-156.

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142. Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1949), 26-27.

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Chapter 4

Exercises in Repetition: Sanford Meisner and "Instinct"

Sanford Meisner's theorem of acting rests on a single, balanced equation: truthful acting is *instinctual* acting. All aspects of his approach to actor training follow from this postulation. The Meisner Technique is a sequential series of exercises designed to disconnect actors from dialectical thought processes and to reconnect them with their more basic instincts. Meisner's stated goal is to teach actors to respond spontaneously to outside stimuli, to act on *impulse*. And since "outside stimuli" frequently emanate from one's acting partner(s), Meisner also aims to connect actors with one another; he believes a good actor is one who is *re*active. Throughout his career, Meisner frequently articulated the core of his theory, but never more summarily than in the following statement, which might be read as the Meisner credo: "I'm a very nonintellectual teacher of acting. My approach is based on bringing the actor back to his emotional impulses and to acting that is firmly rooted in the instinctive. It is based on the fact that all good acting comes from the heart, as it were, and that there's no mentality in it."[1] Meisner's firm conviction is that the brain gets in the way of authentic acting. His task is to remove the interference. He insists on the elimination of reasoning, breaking down actors' mental resistance to "natural impulses." But Meisner's privileging of instinct over intellect has a number of profound consequences for those who study his technique, and the very basis of his

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approach to actor training raises red flags for feminists. What happens to actors--and particularly, women actors--who are directed to feel but not to think? Actors trained to *respond* and to *react* may also be conditioned to follow. Where does Meisner lead them?

First, in seeking to break down actors' mental resistance to their "natural" impulses, Meisner also breaks down their resistance to the training itself. Acting teachers are often likened to "gurus" and their organizations of followers to "cults." The removal of a subject's thought-process is itself a removal of resistance and can be said to pave the way for a sort of "brainwashing." One set of values is replaced with another. Second, though Meisner believes that he is removing obstacles in order to restore "natural" behavior, he uses words and concepts like "instinct" and "impulse" in ways that suggest they represent some universally agreed upon, pure human condition. He seems to assure student actors that his training will return them to the "blank slate" of human existence. But who are we before we bear society's marks? And how does Meisner know? Jill Dolan's critique of realism is useful, here: "Its form masks the ideology of the author, whose position is mystified by the seemingly transparent text."[2] So, too, is Meisner's ideology masked beneath deceptively neutral rhetoric. And his determined anti-intellectuality is not limited to admonishments that actors not think; Meisner disavows critical thought in his own theoretical process, claiming that he refined his technique chiefly through "instinct" (*SM*, 183). This mystification of his own theory--whether deliberate or not--functions like a "keep out" sign, defying attempts to analyze or interpret the ideological implications of the

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Meisner Technique.

Meisner's basic belief is that instincts are "honest." He observes the ways in socialization processes can obscure human instinct, encouraging people to repress socially unacceptable responses and to behave in a "civilized" manner. And at first glance, his reasons for "getting back to basics" do not appear to be entirely at odds with materialist feminist concerns. Keenly aware of and resistant to the constrictive codes of "polite society," Meisner says: "*Fuck* polite!" (*SM*, 33). One can easily imagine those words spoken by feminist performance artists like Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, or Deb Margolin. In an anecdote that addresses both gender and class, Meisner points to the restrictions of traditionally feminine, upper-crust, "finishing school" manners:

> The tendency nowadays is to follow your instincts only when they are socially acceptable. We fear being branded as uncivilized for liking or disliking something. Think of the girl from Miss Finch's School. She was taught to say only what was acceptable socially. A girl from Miss Finch's School goes to see her friend in a play, and her real reaction is that the performance was *terrible*. Yet when she goes backstage she smiles and through gritted teeth says, 'Marvelous!'" (*SM*, 30)

By playing her social role, the "girl" in Meisner's allegory is rendered incapable of honest exchange. Meisner concludes that such control "is the opposite of spontaneous, deeply instinctive behavior" (*SM*, 30). An actor who censors his or her reactions in a similar fashion cannot be truthful. Meisner's mission, therefore, is to strip away

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preconceived patterns of behavior and to lead the actor to a more neutral place from which to work.

But when Meisner says, "Fuck polite," he means simply that the young woman should "tell the truth." She should simply say she didn't like her friend's performance rather than deliver false flattery. Meisner doesn't even begin to imagine the kind of "truths" feminist performance artists might tell--and have told--when they take license to "fuck polite." Karen Finley, for example, says: "People are scared of my information. They really don't know what I'm going to do, they don't like me dealing with sexual issues or political issues. . . . I think I stir people to be responsible for what's going on their own personal lives, in their one-to-one relationships, interweaving this into the whole society's corruption. That's very disturbing. I destroy the games people live on."[3] Artists such as Finley make political performance choices which seek to take apart or topple the social structure. But Meisner seeks instead to return actors to a "neutral" state from which they can behave honestly, which is to say, instinctually.

Underlying Meisner's apparently "neutral" premise, however, one can detect several potentially meaningful biases. First, his plan for actors is predicated on the assumption that it is actually *possible* to reach beyond socially constructed conduct to reveal the "true" human being. Second, in making this assumption, Meisner creates his own specific hierarchy of human behavior: Intuition is truer than insight; the heart is more honest than the head. The truest human being, for Meisner, is also likely to be the most primitive. These essentialist values prove to have extended implications

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regarding gender and sexuality. Third, in establishing ground rules which prohibit his student actors from thinking, Meisner robs them of the critical apparatus which might enable them to identify, examine, and dismantle--or at least comment on--culturally constructed behavior. Finally, and possibly most worrisome, is Meisner's hidden assertion that he, as acting teacher, is the one who possesses the power to strip away what he deems to be false behavior. With what does he replace it? By what authority does he determine the truthfulness of the emergent "natural" impulses? In establishing himself as the leader of a group of compliant followers, the power Meisner wields in actually shaping their "instincts" is formidable.

Another anecdote drawn from Meisner's classroom serves to illustrate this point--and to introduce the body of this chapter. "I want to show you something," Meisner tells the class. "John, come over here." Meisner asks his student to stand as rigidly as he can, to try to make himself immovable. "If necessary, hold on to the desk but make yourself absolutely steadfast." Meisner then places both of his hands on John's shoulders and attempts to shove him off balance. John does not budge. Next, Meisner alters his instructions to John, asking him instead to relax. Obeying the command, John shakes out his physical tension and, having relinquished his resistance, is easily moved by Meisner's push. Meisner explains the lesson: "Now, if you are neutral . . . Neutral--what's that mean? Open to any influence, right? If you are neutral, you will achieve a kind of emotional flexibility, won't you? If you're tense, if you're unrelaxed . . . you're not responsive to the influence of my push" (*SM*, 68-69). I adopt this story here as a allegory of my own. In Meisner's

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classroom, the neutral starting point is where students give up their own ideas and become susceptible to his influence. Their flexibility is the result of Meisner's demand that they stop questioning and resisting and become--literally and figuratively--responsive to his push.

A feminist consideration of the Meisner Technique cannot afford to make similar concessions, to accept without question or evaluation. In this chapter, I will attempt to uncover the multiple and complicated meanings obscured by Meisner's facile use of his favorite catch-all word, "instinct." Since his technique did not spring *wholly* from instinct (as even he acknowledges), I will examine its history, development, and most significant elements. I will study Meisner's concept of "human nature," arguing that it is not, in fact, a neutral state, but a notion heavily influenced by Freudian psychology, dominant cultural traditions, and traditional gender roles. I will suggest the ways in which exercises allegedly designed to free actor impulse construct it instead, as they draw heavily on Aristotelian precepts and conventional dramaturgical structures. I will also investigate the operations of Meisner's historical classroom, assessing the effects of its patriarchal power dynamics; this will include an examination of the teaching prejudices which lead to the differing treatment of women and men. Does the Meisner Technique restore actors to their freest, truest, most "instinctive" selves, or does it condition them to rehearse and repeat deeply ingrained--and easily recognizable--social patterns of behavior?

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Sanford Meisner

For much of the twentieth century, the third teacher included in this study was also the "third name" in American actor training. As a *New York Times* profile of Sanford Meisner observed in 1985, a year which marked both his eightieth birthday and his fiftieth year of teaching, "while a great deal has been written about Strasberg and Miss Adler, little is known about Sanford Meisner outside of the confines of the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theater."[4] But that was about to change. Meisner's milestones were celebrated that year with a commemorative documentary, appropriately titled "Sanford Meisner, The Theater's Best Kept Secret."[5] The film was screened at the Public Theatre in New York and subsequently broadcast as part of the "American Masters" series on public television. 1985 was also the year in which Meisner began collaborating on his long-delayed book about acting. Over a period of fifteen months, co-author Dennis Longwell observed and documented a series of Meisner's classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse, resulting in the publication of *Sanford Meisner On Acting* in 1987.[6] The "secret" was out. And in recent years, as a proliferation of books and classes have continued to popularize the "Meisner Technique," the name and reputation of Sanford Meisner have not only rivalled those of Strasberg and Adler but often eclipsed them.[7]

Though Sanford Meisner may not have previously received the same kind of widespread notice as the publicity-seeking Lee Strasberg, or the general recognition of Stanislavsky's pupil and Strasberg's nemesis, Stella Adler, his name and work were never really a secret within the American theatre community. An aspiring actor from

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childhood, Meisner received a scholarship to study at the Theatre Guild School of Acting in New York in the 1920s and became a founding member of the Group Theatre in 1931. As an actor with the Group, he appeared in most of the major productions and received critical acclaim particularly for roles in Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing* and *Paradise Lost*. Although Meisner continued to act professionally following the dissolution of the Group (his last stage appearance was in 1958), his most significant role in the theatre was as a teacher of actors. He began his teaching career at the Neighborhood Playhouse in 1935 and was made its director the following year. With a break of only a few years spent in California as a film actor and teacher for Twentieth Century Fox (1959-1961), he continued teaching at the Neighborhood Playhouse for fifty-five years. His roster of Neighborhood Playhouse alumni is filled with celebrity names. He retired in 1990 and served as Director Emeritus until his death in 1997.[8]

Although Meisner himself is no longer alive, one might say that the Meisner Technique is more alive than ever. Brant L. Pope, director of the Florida State University/Aosolo Conservatory for Actor Training says: "Untold wealth would be mine had I a dollar for every prospective student . . . who claimed to have studied 'a little Meisner.'"[9] Although Pope means to criticize those with only a partial understanding of the technique, his comment attests to Meisner's widespread influence today. Actors everywhere have studied "a little Meisner." According to Diane Clayre Cecchini Holub's 1994 study, "The Meisner Technique has emerged as the single-most widely-used method of actor-training in New York City's professional

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actor training programs." Following the genealogical tradition of Stanislavsky-based training, she hypothesizes that "the number of studios will likely increase geometrically as these studios continue to train teachers for the next generation."[10] The Meisner Technique is also currently popular in university training: it has been institutionalized in M.F.A. programs, among them, Florida State University and Rutgers University. It has a presence in individual classrooms--and in the textbooks used in those classrooms--across the country.[11] Since the Meisner Technique remains a powerful--and possibly, growing--force in actor training, it certainly merits a feminist examination.

The Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre in New York, "birthplace" of the Meisner Technique, continues to claim Sanford Meisner's legacy by placing his image on the cover of its seventieth anniversary brochure (1998-1999), and declaring that its two year program "offers a unique and specific method of professional actor training known as the 'Meisner Technique.'"[12] The brochure offers the following brief historical sketch describing both Meisner's connection to the school and the evolution of his approach to acting:

> In 1935, Sanford Meisner joined the faculty and over the years developed and refined what is now known as the "Meisner Technique." Based upon some of the original theories and principles of the great Russian teacher-director, Constantine Stanislavsky, and his work with the Moscow Art Theatre, the Meisner Technique is a step-by-step procedure of self-investigation for the young adult actor-in-training.[13]

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This statement is as much of interest for what it omits as for what it reports. In making the leap from Stanislavsky to the Neighborhood Playhouse, this skeletal outline excludes the strongest influences on Meisner's thinking: the Group Theatre and its members.

Sanford Meisner was himself never reluctant to cite the origins of his knowledge. He often referred to Strasberg and Adler, acknowledging the impact they had on his career. When asked in 1964 how he was first introduced to the Stanislavsky System, Meisner responded: "In the Group Theatre--by the pioneer leadership of Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg, from Stella Adler who worked with Stanislavski and to whom I listened attentively and rewardingly."[14] In a 1977 interview with his former student Suzanne Shepherd, Meisner further elucidated his relationship with Strasberg and the Method.

> I think that the biggest single influence in my life was Strasberg and I say so gratefully. The fact that we went in different directions--well, that's life, isn't it? Obviously, now I disagree with him on the approach to acting in every conceivable way. Although we have no difference regarding the ultimate results. If I may say so, my approach is a hell of a lot healthier than Strasberg's. I think he takes an introverted person and introverts him fu.ther.[15]

Indeed, though Meisner first became acquainted with the Stanislavsky System through his association with Strasberg, and though he readily admits that both seek the same "results" from their training, the notion that Strasberg's Method leads to

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"introversion" in an actor is a recurring theme in Meisner's comments. Meisner's own emphasis, accordingly, leads the actor in the opposite direction. His basic premise, as he puts it, is this: "What you do doesn't depend upon you--it depends upon the other person."[16] Rather than asking actors to focus primarily on themselves, Meisner asks always that they be outwardly directed, focusing on and responding to the acting partner(s). In both his theorizing and his teaching, therefore, it can be said that Meisner, not unlike Stella Adler, carved out some portion of his identity by claiming to be, in effect, the "anti-Strasberg." But how much different--and healthier--is his approach?

Although I will argue that Meisner's energies were often spent placing himself in opposition to Lee Strasberg (and claiming superiority over him as an acting teacher and actor), I will demonstrate not only the ways in which Meisner's work departs from Strasberg's teachings but also the ways in which it appropriates them. Sanford Meisner began teaching as many others do--by following a model. "I was imitating Strasberg," he admits. "I was imitating the kind of theatrical concentration that he had."[17] To a large extent, Meisner's experimentation as a teacher consisted of rejecting elements of what he had learned from Strasberg in favor of different approaches, while retaining elements of the teaching style. And to a greater degree than either Strasberg or Adler, Meisner invented new exercises which were based on Stanislavskian precepts but not directly drawn from Stanislavsky's writings or practices. In Meisner's words:

> Stanislavski evolved a set of principles and standards. His unique

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> personal application of his values constituted his method. A current and prolific Russian translator of Russian theatre books announced that nowhere in the United States is the Stanislavski System truly practiced. He is of course absolutely right. We are Americans. We are not nineteenth-century Russians. We create from ourselves and from our world. Where the Stanislavski System has been taken over literally from his books, it has failed, as all imitations always do. Stanislavski's essential formulations are either universal or they are not. They are. If they weren't they would never have been useful to us.
>
> The creative teacher in America finds his own style, that is to say his own method, as indeed every artist must. Otherwise he is a copyist. Copyists and creators are mutually exclusive.[18]

This statement is of interest for several reasons. First, Meisner embraces the "universality" of Stanislavsky's essential ideas while simultaneously proclaiming that twentieth century Americans are different--and accordingly, have different needs--from nineteenth century Russians. Meisner's dilemma bears resemblance to Strasberg's (articulated in Chapter 1), and they seem to walk the same fine line: Meisner wishes to claim the Stanislavsky legacy, but also to claim ownership of his own technique. Drawing a distinction between "copyist" and "creator," Meisner implicitly criticizes other American teachers, specifically, Strasberg and Adler, as "copyists," while positioning himself as a "creator." He invokes the essential "universality" of Stanislavsky's ideas, but he sets out to make them his own.

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Acting Authority

With this last assertion, I begin a feminist critique of Meisner and his technique. For although Meisner's technique is markedly different from Strasberg's Method, the patriarchal authority of Meisner's teaching bears a striking resemblance to that of Strasberg. And Meisner's sense of his own authority as an acting teacher is central to everything that follows. Meisner's self-designation as patriarch of American actor training, and his appropriation of the authority which that title represents, is more than rhetorical; it figures prominently in the power dynamic of the classroom and has material effect on its proceedings.

In order to establish the ways in which Meisner's authority plays an important role in Meisner training, it is necessary to discuss the document which serves as a "window" into Meisner's (historical) classes. The primary source for any investigation into the Meisner Technique, and indeed for my own analysis, is his only book: *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. It consists of transcribed excerpts from classroom sessions conducted by Meisner, chronologically following the progress of one group of students from September 1985 through December 1986. As co-author, Dennis Longwell observed the classes and provides a connecting narrative for the transcribed material. Longwell describes what he saw: the actors' faces, bodies, clothing, and demeanors; he also characterizes the emotional tenor of their work and their exchanges with Meisner. These depictions are often valuable in providing context for the dialogue. The endings of most chapters are set apart from the classroom transcripts and appear to be drawn from continuing conversations between and among Meisner,

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his teaching assistant, and Dennis Longwell, following the classes. These discussions occur in the hallways of the school, in Meisner's office and apartment, and even in the street. The chapter endings function as afterwords to the classroom sessions; they provide space for Meisner's candid musings about the students readers come to know through his class, and about acting in general.

In her book *Actors and Onlookers*, Natalie Crohn Schmitt makes connections between Stanislavsky's theories and the books he wrote to represent them, noting that Stanislavsky's own writing "is of a piece with the ideas he presents."[19] Written in fictional form, *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and much of *Creating a Role* are narrated from the point of view of a student, Kostya, who frequently quotes his teacher, Tortsov, both of whom are alter-egos for Stanislavsky. As Schmitt points out, "Kostya is ostensibly recording in detailed diary form his experiences in acting class with the master. The master never errs and never needs to hunt for a solution to the various acting problems the student actors have."[20] Schmitt concludes that "Stanislavski's style seems less modest and . . . Tortsov's teaching more authoritarian than would be acceptable today," but amends her own conclusion in an endnote to the chapter, admitting, "nonetheless, I am always surprised at how authoritarian contemporary acting classes based on Stanislavski are."[21] Schmitt's apparently contradictory statements are actually illuminating from a feminist perspective. One would *think* that certain expressions of classroom authority are no longer acceptable, but indeed they are accepted in acting classrooms everyday. And both Meisner's book and the classroom it represents follow (and perhaps exceed) the model of authority

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established by Stanislavsky and practiced by Strasberg.

As seen in the classroom in the pages of his book, Meisner unquestionably establishes himself as *the* master teacher of acting. Though not written in fictional form, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* borrows the classroom model of Stanislavsky's books (and Strasberg's *Strasberg at the Actors Studio*), using interactions between teacher and students as the means of conveying lessons about acting problems and solutions. In doing so, however, it might be argued that Meisner adopts an even more authoritative--and autocratic--voice than Stanislavsky (or Strasberg). In the prologue to *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, he explains the form his book takes: "If I risk censure for making myself the central character in the chronicle that follows, I do so in the name of the art of theatrical self-revelation, which is exactly the role I play in my classroom. Stage center!" (*SM*, xix). While one might consider it entirely normal for any teacher to take center stage in his or her own classroom, the manner in which Meisner casts himself as the central character--not only in his book and in his class, but in all of American actor training--creates a very specific power structure.

"Authority" is a key issue in feminist pedagogy, and one which must be examined in American actor training. Kathleen Weiler writes about "the role and authority of the teacher" in her essay "Freire and a Feminist Pedagogy of Difference."[22] Citing Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as an influence in feminist pedagogy, Weiler remarks:

> In many respects, the feminist vision of the teacher's authority echoes the Freirean image of the teacher who is a joint learner with students

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> and who holds authority by virtue of greater knowledge and experience. But as we have seen, Freire fails to address the various forms of power held by teachers depending on their race, gender, and the historical and institutional settings in which they work. In the Freirean account, they are in this sense "transparent." In the actual practice of feminist pedagogy, the central issues of difference, positionality, and the need to recognize the implications of subjectivity or identity for teachers and students have become central.[23]

In Meisner's classroom, the teacher is certainly never a "joint learner." Further, what is never addressed--or destabilized--is Meisner's position of power, which derives from race, gender, *and* his place in the historical and institutional settings of American actor training.

One of Meisner's strategies in establishing his power is to boldly discredit other prominent teachers of acting. Bemoaning the contemporary state of actor training, Meisner proclaims: "I'll tell you something . . . and I'm really speaking objectively--there are practically no acting teachers who *see*. . . . There are no teachers of acting around. They're fakers! I say this impersonally. I've seen their work" (*SM*, 186). He supports his claims by berating his own teacher, (the deceased) Lee Strasberg, and ridiculing his "friend" and mentor, Stella Adler. While Meisner has established that he disagrees with Strasberg on his approach to acting, his comments reveal both jealousy and rancor. He elaborates on his concerns regarding Strasberg's introversion of actors:

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> I told Lee that when he was alive. I said to him, "You introvert the already introverted. All actors . . . are introverted because they live on what's going on in their instincts, and to attempt to make that conscious is to confuse the actor." Needless to say, he didn't pay attention to me, but that's the reason I'm a better teacher than he was. (*SM*, 59)

But Meisner goes further than this. He more than disagrees with Strasberg philosophically; he clearly loathes the man and does not hesitate to denigrate him. Calling Strasberg a "terrible actor," he dismisses his contributions to the Group Theatre and labels him an opportunist.

> He was the librarian; that's what he was. I don't want to go into it, but in the back of the Neighborhood Playhouse brochure which we send to prospective students there's a list of the graduates. If you want to amuse yourself in a sickening kind of way, go through that list and see how many people he invited to the Studio and then said, "He was my student." It's amazing. (*SM*, 184)

Here, Meisner indicts Strasberg for stealing his students. With his penchant for publicity, Strasberg would invite the most talented Neighborhood Playhouse graduates to the Studio, then take the credit for "producing" these great actors.

Meisner is not wrong about Strasberg. When one examines the list of actors printed in the Neighborhood Playhouse brochure, as Meisner suggests, it does include names of numerous people who are also members of the Actors Studio. But Meisner--like Strasberg--attempts to take the credit where he can. This is evident from the

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simple fact that he, too, publicized a list of famous students. And when Meisner is asked whether Strasberg tried to take the credit for teaching Robert Duvall, who studied with both teachers, Meisner answers, "Duvall studied with me," claiming the actor as his own. Arguing that he, and not Strasberg, taught Duvall to act, Meisner admits that Duvall went to the Actors Studio but insists it was: "To work on himself, not to learn to act! It's quite different!" (*SM*, 183). It's not possible, in Meisner's view, that Strasberg could have made a contribution to Duvall's acting skills. But in effect, Meisner is guilty of the same sort of self-aggrandizement of which he accuses Strasberg.

Meisner invokes Stella Adler's name for agreement in his attack on Lee Strasberg: "Stella and Strasberg were enemies even before we started the Group. She said, 'He's a fake' before we even began" (*SM*, 182). Yet while Meisner publicly aligns himself with Adler, having taken her side in the historical debate with Strasberg and acknowledging her influence in a series of interviews, he also has an insidious way of making fun of her. On a day when Meisner spends most of his time lecturing, a student remarks that the session was run a bit like Stella Adler's class. Meisner concurs, but with a twist of mockery: "Yes, Stella does a lot of talking. I love Stella. . . . I really do! She's my best friend! She is! I learned an enormous amount from her. Do you know that at the end of her classes she turns to the hordes of students before her and says, 'Do you love me?'" (*SM*, 144-145). Then, in imitation of her, he raises his arms and the students affirm their love for him while he cries, "Swear it!" Though he overtly claims to admire Adler, he covertly undermines her

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authority with this display (*SM*, 145).

The strangest comment Meisner makes in asserting his authority as the only genuine teacher of acting pertains to the legacy of the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theater. When asked what he thinks should become of the school upon his retirement, he replies: "Objectively? Impersonally? I hope they close it down. It will have done its work" (*SM*, 186). Meisner thereby establishes himself as another patriarch of American acting, expressing ambivalence about being succeeded. By effectively dismissing his own teachers, those who teach along with him, and those who will follow him, he identifies himself as the only "authentic" American acting teacher.

Classroom Authority

Having established his authority on a large scale, Meisner used it in his classroom, exerting total control over the sessions and the students in them. In Meisner's exchanges with his students, as recorded in his book, the actors frequently become deferential and child-like, frightened by his power. Meisner tells them what to do, then tells them whether they did it right or not. More alarming, he asks them to respond to situations instinctively, then indicates whether their instincts were "right" or "wrong." Moreover, his responses are not removed or objective, but personal and peevish.

For example, when dissatisfied with the performance of his student-actors, Meisner's demeanor cannot always be characterized as professional; he frequently

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explodes. Such is the case in his interactions with Lila, a woman described as the oldest student in the class, once a successful musical comedy ingenue, now trying to develop her skills as an actress. During an exercise between Lila and her male partner, Meisner interrupts, apparently unable to continue watching. He asks about her choice of costume, and she obediently answers his questions. The following exchange exemplifies the parent-child quality of the interaction which frequently occurs.

> "What did you wear when you came to class?"
>
> "Black sweater and pants."
>
> "That's what you should have done the exercise in."
>
> "Right," Lila says simply.
>
> "In other words, if you don't give up acting out your cliches, I can't help you to learn how to act. I'm trying to get you to do an exercise, not play a part."
>
> "I understand. I knew I was way off base--"
>
> "No talking!" Meisner exclaims, and the extent of his distress is evident in the sharpness of his tone. "Yes, you were way off base. You were way off base." (*SM*, 53)

In front of the class, a professional actress--the oldest in the group--is first berated then treated like a little child, forbidden to talk or ask questions. Note the apologetic quality of her response and how quickly she blames herself. The exercise is for her benefit, occurring in a class for which she has paid, yet this actress describes her own

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behavior not as a mistake--an error in judgment perhaps detrimental to her growth--but as "way off base." Meisner then turns his attention to her male partner, issuing a less hostile critique of his work. But the incident is not concluded, for he turns back to Lila and exclaims, "God almighty woman, stop acting! I can't stand it!" He continues his diatribe: "Don't throw something at me as if I were an amateur that didn't know the difference! I repeat. Lila, don't *act*" (*SM*, 54). Meisner's behavior begins to suggest that indeed, as "central character" in the drama of his acting class, the work is as much about him as it is about his students. Lila is there to learn, but humiliation is the means by which lessons are taught. Meisner's paternalistic response is best articulated in his own closing of that class session:

> Well, okay my friends. . . . I have all the sympathy that you need, but please give me back a percentage of what I give you instead of kicking me in the ass and thinking you are going to get away with it. I won't have it. This country is full of actors who have been trained beautifully--by me! But they worked! I say, "Don't act, don't fake, don't pretend--work!" That will train your concentration, your actor's faith and, maybe, your emotion. Then you can hold your head up and say you're learning how to act, and I can hold up mine and say I'm teaching you. (*SM*, 55)

Like an angry, disappointed father, Meisner chides his "children" to appreciate all he has done for them, and demands that they behave in a manner that will reflect well on him. And he confuses his acting students by telling them firmly *not to act*. His

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directions are disorienting and disarming--this is his way of removing resistance to the training.

In fact, Meisner acknowledges his paternalistic approach elsewhere within the book, in a conversation with his assistant in the presence of his co-author. Meisner explains the reason why he never pursued a directing career: "I don't handle adults very well. I don't have confidence. Something in my psyche makes me restricted and inhibited by adults, and so I was timid about my authority" (*SM*, 174). He goes further, admitting of his relationship with Lila:

> I treat her like a young child. . . . I don't treat her like somebody with a reputation. I know what her problems are as an actor, and I go after them. But all those people have a certain relationship to me, which is that of teacher/student. Within that, where I am and have to be the authority, I function. (*SM*, 174)

Meisner also says that he doesn't like actors very much, and that he never liked what acting brought out in his own personality: "self-centeredness, childish vanity, infantilism," concluding "that's what an actor has to have" (*SM*, 174). Meisner's belief in the child-like status of actors, joined with his assumption of the paternal role, together create a training environment which imposes a very particular value system on its student actors. And Meisner's position as acting authority--in both a general and an immediate sense--figures not only into the mode of training but into the substance of the technique itself. For although Meisner endeavors to release "instinctual" acting, he actively *produces* those instincts himself through the

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implementation of his authoritative judgments.

The Repetition Exercise

In *Actors and Onlookers*, Natalie Crohn Schmitt points out that Stanislavsky "never succeeded in making his system fully systematic."[24] One of the things that makes the Meisner Technique unique in American actor training traditions is the fact that it attempts to create a sequence of instruction more systematic than the System itself. Cecchini Holub argues that this accounts for the continuing--and expanding--popularity of the Meisner Technique. She documents that among teachers practicing Meisner's approach in the early 1990s, "those interviewed cited a single factor which, in their opinion, accounts for the widespread adoption of the Meisner Technique: the absence of a systematic step-by-step, teachable procedure in the approaches of Strasberg and Adler."[25] She describes what Meisner offers instead:

> The inventiveness of Meisner's approach lies in the fact that he created a single exercise in which all actor-training tools are presented to the student, each at the appropriate point in the process of development in order for the actor to underscore all characterization work with a craft. In this single exercise, Meisner exhibits the elements acquired from Stanislavski's System. . . : relaxation, concentration, observation, listening, inter-influence, analysis of justification and motivation, given circumstances, substitution (the magic "if"), right line of the imagination (instinct), heightened reality, public solitude, vocal

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> flexibility, improvisation, and co-existence of the internal and external aspects.[26]

This single exercise is the "Repetition Exercise," the signature of the Meisner Technique.

The most important part of Meisner training, the Repetition Exercise is the element of his practice most clearly and definitively his own innovation, and the one most frequently associated with his name; it is also the foundation for everything that happens in Meisner training. The design of the Repetition Exercise is the culmination of Meisner's quest to discover "ways in which the actor had to be spontaneous, exercises that discouraged the need to think."[27] Dissatisfied with Strasberg's Group Theatre improvisations, which Meisner thought led to "general verbalizations" of predetermined dramatic situations and which he believed to be "intellectual nonsense," Meisner says:

> I decided I wanted an exercise for actors where there is no intellectuality. I wanted to eliminate all that "head" work, to take away all the mental manipulation and get to where the impulses come from. And I began with the premise that if I repeat what I hear you saying, my head is not working. I'm listening, and there is an absolute elimination of the brain. If you say, "Your glasses are dirty," and I say, "My glasses are dirty," and you say, "Yes, your glasses are dirty," there's no intellectuality in that. (*SM*, 36)

Meisner's goal was to "get to where the impulses come from," and the Repetition

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Exercise was his way to get there.

But what is being repeated in the Repetition Exercise? Is it as neutral a project as Meisner would have his students believe? The first level of the Repetition Exercise functions precisely as Meisner describes it above. He begins by building the actors' skills in observing and especially listening; his goal is that they might begin to react truthfully to one another rather than to an imaginary situation. Meisner's assumption--direction, even--is that the actors are not to think of themselves as "characters." They are to be themselves; they observe and listen as themselves (*SM*, 19). Actors are partnered together and one is asked to make and voice an observation about the other. The partner then answers by repeating the statement verbatim. The observation should be specific but emotionally neutral; all of the examples Meisner offers his students are based upon physical appearance. He establishes the model by saying to Rose Marie, one of the women in the class, "Your hair is long." She repeats his exact words. When Meisner asks Rose Marie's partner, John, to make an observation about her, John says, "I was going to say she's very fresh and open." Meisner discourages this comment, calling it an "emotional observation." He suggests instead: "I see that she has a pink sweater" (*SM*, 21). As the students attempt the exercise on their own, John tells Rose Marie, "your hair is shiny" and then, in another round, "your earring is small" (*SM*, 21). Other couples around the room repeat, "your eyes are blue" and "you have bright earrings" (*SM*, 22). Meisner describes this level of the work as "mechanical" and "inhuman," but says that it is "the basis of something." He calls it a "Ping-Pong game," but one which will eventually lead to "emotional dialogue" (*SM*,

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22). While Meisner doesn't want his students to make emotional observations as of yet, he acknowledges that the observations they do make will lead to emotional dialogue.

Louise M. Stinespring, in an essay entitled "Just Be Yourself: Derrida, Difference, and the Meisner Technique," offers the tantalizing possibility that the Meisner Technique may actually offer an answer to postmodern concerns about Stanislavsky-based acting. She argues:

> Meisner's "repetition exercise" functions as a destabilizer of truth in a Derridian sense because the principle that actors behave truthfully is an underlying theoretic subject to interpretation. Rather than pre-planned behavior, actors' instincts or emotional impulses are the driving force behind this truthful behavior. Instinct and impulse are not something preconceived but ephemeral. . . . Two actors who perform the word repetition game are charged with the responsibility of responding instinctually to each other's behavior. What emerges is a constantly shifting perspective on the truth as each actor attempts to react honestly to his partner from his own point of view. This "ping pong game" of impulses becomes a venue for total freedom of spontaneous self-expression as it simultaneously disallows any one perspective to be privileged.[28]

In her analysis, Stinespring seems to accept at face value Meisner's basic premise--that instinct and impulse are not preconceived--rather than to question it. But this concept

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is inherently flawed. I would argue that the Repetition Exercise is not nearly as open as Stinepring (and Meisner) suggest, and the actors not so "free." First, beginning the exercise with observations based on physical appearance has a number of essentialist--and gender-based--implications for the participants. Second, both Meisner and Stinespring assume an "honesty" and openness in actor response which I believe may not actually occur.

One might anticipate, even in early stages of the Repetition Exercise, that these exchanges could ultimately become emotional. When an exercise begins by having one actor focus and comment on the other's physical appearance, the person observed is surely rendered vulnerable. The next thing one notes is that while the observations are intended to be randomly made and without inherent meaning of their own, as Stinespring would hope, such an open invitation may lead in unexpected directions. For example, at one point, Meisner suggests to a student: "Do you see that her hair needs combing?" (*SM*, 21). This particular observation includes a judgment, and the kind of scrutiny it represents might prove unsettling.

From a feminist perspective, perhaps the most troubling aspect of this phase of the exercise is that the actor's vulnerability may potentially be gender-based. Peggy Phelan writes about the perils of "reading" the body and the dangers of mistaking visibility for representation of the "real" in her book *Unmarked*. She warns: "The focus on skin as the visible marker of race is itself a form of feminizing those races which are not white. Reading the body as the sign of identity is the way men regulate the bodies of women."[29] One notes that the catalyst for the Repetition Exercise is the

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naming of the thing observed, and the thing observed is often a mark of gender. This is certainly the case in the majority of examples included in Meisner's book. Meisner reinforces the model when he demonstrates the next level of the exercise. In this level, the partner is permitted to respond from his or her own point of view. The shift consists simply of a change in personal pronouns. Meisner's partner is described by Longwell as "the young woman with luxurious dark hair" (*SM*, 23). Meisner begins with the observation, "You curl your hair" (*SM*, 23). They continue as follows:

> "Yes, I curl my hair."
>
> "Yes, you do."
>
> "Yes, I curl my hair."
>
> "I said, 'Yes, you do.'"
>
> "Yes, I do."
>
> "Yes, I can see you do."
>
> "Yes, you can see I do." (*SM*, 23)

The "text" of the Repetition Exercise is not meant to have meaning in and of itself. The meaning is derived from the *subtext*--from the tone and demeanor of the actors as they make a real connection with one another, observing and listening closely. They are not to respond with artificial line readings, or to alter their tone for variety; they are to react instinctively to their partners. But is it really possible for the actors to react only to the subtext but not to the text itself? How does the woman hear the comment that she artificially adds curl to her hair? How does another woman hear the

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comment that her hair "needs combing"? What of the fact that these comments are often personal, and potentially based on gender markers?

Although Meisner's observations include gender-neutral comments such as the dirty glasses above, or the simple comment to one female student, "you're carrying a pen" (though a Freudian analysis might reveal gender-laden meaning in that comment), one cannot help but notice that many of the other comments are more loaded. Shiny hair, long hair, curly hair; bright earrings, shiny earrings; pink sweaters--these are images that would not seem out of place in television commercials, images that suggest things traditionally feminine. Though these images may seem innocuous enough, they subtly set the stage for more profoundly gendered observations and responses. For while Meisner professes interest in getting at the human instincts hidden beneath superficial social behavior, his foundational exercise asks actors to begin by focusing on superficial physical traits.

Stinespring says that the benefit of this exercise is that "one actor, in stating observations of another actor, dislocates and displaces the presence of the other, noting the latter's simulacrum within the living presence of the actor's gaze."[30] She argues that "what is at stake here is not the 'truth' of the observation but the blurring of identities, the endless destabilization of self while the self is being observed."[31] But Peggy Phelan's observations in *Unmarked*, though they refer to the relationship between the self and other in representational art, are of unexpected value when applied to Meisner's Repetition Exercise and its own attempt at a "reciprocal gaze."[32]

The "politics" of the imagined and actual exchange of gaze are most

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> clearly exposed in relation to sexual difference. At once an attempt to stabilize "difference" and an attempt to repress the "sexual" itself, cultural representation seeks both to conceal and reveal a real that will "prove" that sexual difference is a real difference.[33]

Perhaps one notices the feminine gender markers in Meisner's exercise in particular because nearly all of the basic word repetition examples included in this portion of the book are observations made *by* men *about* women. Only one instance of the opposite situation occurs. This imbalance must surely be coincidental--the actors do take turns. And the primary source for this research is admittedly Meisner's book; in years of classroom sessions, presumably the women comment on the men as well. Still, Meisner offers this book as a document of his teaching and as a text to be studied by actors and teachers alike. And in the book, a clear pattern emerges, leaving an imprint on the reader's mind: the women are observed and commented on by men.

The second concern I have about the validity of the Repetition Exercise is the notion that the participants are necessarily "honest" in their observations. While my primary concern is what *might* be expressed--commentary on essential physical characteristics--it is also worth exploring what might *not* be expressed in the Repetition Exercise. Meisner directs students to speak their observations spontaneously. To censor one's remarks would be to inhibit instinct and impulse. And Meisner's guideline, as mentioned earlier, is to "Fuck polite!" Yet when I administered this exercise with a group of students as part of a demonstration of the Meisner Technique, my own observations of student behavior caused me to question

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that premise. Patricia T. Clough writes: "If the participant observer is to depict the empirical world through the eyes of those he observes, he must do so by narrating his own struggle to gain the common or totalizing vision of science, a struggle to realize his identity in gaining an author(izing) vision."[34] I will, therefore, describe the exercise from my position as an involved participant. And while I do not claim that my perception of events reaches a "totalizing vision of science," it certainly raises a series of questions--if not concrete "evidence"--about the way the Repetition Exercise works.

A young man and woman sat facing one another, directed to begin the Meisner exercise by making random observations about one another's physical appearance. What I noticed, as I observed the two actors observing one another, was this: I saw a small, young woman with what appeared to me to be enormous breasts for a woman her size. She wore a tight, tiny tank top which exposed the naked flesh of her cleavage. I also saw a young man with bright red hair and a face covered with acne. Before the exercise commenced, I found myself thinking these thoughts: "Will he comment on her breasts? He won't, will he? I can't imagine that he will. . . . I'm sure she won't mention his bad skin . . . it would be too painful. What if she comments on his red hair? He's sensitive about it, isn't he? She knows that. She won't say anything." I felt fearful that these students would voice aloud my own observations at the same time I felt certain that they would not. They did not. Now, my thoughts are obviously a reflection of my own subjectivity, and I do not mean to suggest that everyone viewing these two actors would see the same things I did. Yet

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my own interior monologue--and my students' behavior--led me to ask a number of questions about the premise and workings of the Repetition Exercise.

Why did these students avoid making what might be considered socially inappropriate mention of certain physical attributes? Were they "instinctively" protecting one another from harm? Larry Silverberg, a former student of Meisner's and author of a series of books on the Meisner Technique, stipulates that in the Repetition Exercise, "When you look over at your partner, you must say the very first thing that you are aware of."[35] Silverberg also anticipates and addresses the problem of social inappropriateness in comments, with the strong admonition that one must *not* censor oneself.

> Right now, you may encounter resistance to saying the first thing. In other words, you are censoring your first response. My partner might look at me and see "big nose" but not want to say it for fear of hurting my feelings. It's not nice to say "You've got a big nose" and it is urgent that she does! Why do you think? In our acting, we must get beyond the *act* you and I have so carefully mastered in life.[36]

But Silverberg immediately proceeds to send students a mixed message:

> In our work together, the beginning of becoming the full expression of ALL that we are, starts with saying the first thing and dropping the nice routine--and I'm not saying don't be nice. You must give up being nice and I AM NOT SAYING DON'T BE NICE. Do you get that? Acting has no room for niceties, reasonableness or "being appropriate."[37]

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What does Silverberg mean when he says, "You must give up being nice," and immediately counters by saying, "I'M NOT SAYING DON'T BE NICE"? At the very least, he points to an inherent problem in the Repetition Exercise without offering a real solution. Meisner and Silverberg are adamant that students *not* censor themselves, yet most of their examples of the "first thing" observed (by real students in Meisner's book and fictional ones in Silverberg's) do not go so far as to be "not nice." And neither Meisner nor Silverberg addresses in any detail how participants (or facilitators) should handle the fallout when students tell one another they have big noses--or big breasts. The idea is that each party should simply act on impulse.

If asked to comment on the first thing *I* noticed about the young woman in the exercise I facilitated, if I were honest I would have to say that I noticed her breasts. Yet had I been performing the exercise, I am certain I would have censored myself and not mentioned them. In fact, even if directed to notice the "first thing," I would not have spoken it aloud. It would have seemed to me inappropriate. If one believes in the Repetition Exercise as a means of truthful exchange, either of its possible outcomes is disconcerting. If I mention her breasts, the exercise reduces the young woman to an essentialized--and possibly, sexualized--object: her *body* is the object of my gaze, to be observed and commented on. How this will release her "instincts" or "impulses" is unclear to me; it seems that she is automatically reduced to a very specific social-biological reading of her, one to which she is forced to respond. This is equally true if I comment on the male student's "bad skin." In doing so, I am inherently making a judgment about what young men "should" look like, noting the

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acne as an aberration (when, in fact, it may not be). The same is true about the red hair, a feature which marks this young man as "different" and which is sometimes a source of ridicule--especially in young men. If, on the other hand, I censor myself--as I suspect both of my students did--the exercise isn't "honest" at all. Students make a "truthful" observation (though not a "neutral" one, I would argue), then they judge it. They may decide in a split second what to say, what not to say; what might be hurtful and what seems "appropriate." If one is not "honest," the work is entirely invalidated. If one *is* "honest," the ramifications may be worse. No matter how it is implemented, the basis for the Repetition Exercise--commentary on another's physical appearance, is troubling.

Repetition and Aggression

A more certain and even more defining pattern found in the Repetition Exercise materializes as Meisner advances the class to the next level. Once students master basic repetition, they are permitted to respond by using different language when an impulse strikes. Again, Meisner participates in the exercise as a way of demonstrating it, this time with a young man. What is significant about Meisner's participation is that it sets up a "follow-the-leader" model. Having already established the power that Meisner wields, one must observe the ways in which he uses it to teach lessons. Though the exercise is designed to free the impulse, Meisner's set-up actually determines the form the impulse might take. Meisner begins by saying to the young man, "You're staring at me." The young man responds, and the repetition

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proceeds:

"I'm staring at you."

"You're staring at me."

"I'm staring at you."

"You admit it?"

"I admit it."

"I don't like it."

"You don't like it."

"You don't care?"

"I don't care."

"You don't care?"

"I don't care!" (*SM*, 23)

Here, Longwell's description of the conclusion to the exercise is crucial: "Meisner sticks out his tongue at the young man, and he and the class laugh" (*SM*, 23). The exchange is significant for a number of reasons. First, the stakes have been raised. The opening comment is no longer just about physical facade; it observes what the partner is *doing*. And the text itself might easily be considered slightly confrontational. But the most important shift in the exercise is the emergence of a new element of tension between the participants, escalating to a moment of climax epitomized by Meisner's sticking out his tongue at his acting partner. By functioning as teacher-participant, Meisner again establishes a pattern which will be followed throughout the training: the Repetition Exercise nearly always consists of tension and

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conflict, culminating in an explosive, "topping" finish.

In fact, the Repetition Exercise has only one trajectory represented within the entire acting text: an escalation of tension until a final insult, action, or dismissive statement climaxes the mini "scene." Regardless of the initial question, the repetition always leads in the same direction. Meisner sets the tone, sticking out his tongue. Since the exercise is designed to release impulse, the fact that the *only* impulse it ever releases is one of frustration and aggression is revealing--the response is built into the model. Stinespring suggests that it is the tedium of the repetition which inevitably leads its participants to conflict. She sees this as a good thing, saying: "Students become frustrated as they perform this exercise and this frustration forms an integral part of Meisner's grand design. There is a purpose for creating an exercise that causes frustration in its practitioners: Frustration is an emotional impulse that lies at the base of specific behavioral reactions."[38] But I would counter that this built-in frustration is part of the problem; it is one of the reasons why those who enact the Repetition Exercise are not entirely free. For the "specific behavioral reactions" seem always to be about conflict, and this may be in itself a "preconception." Even if one accepts the premise that an acting exercise might, in theory, release an actor's truthful impulses, it seems that this particular exercise releases only a very specific range of impulses--a range familiar to Western dramaturgy..

While frustration appears to be built into the model, Meisner's demonstrations likely set the pattern in stone; his students understand that their repetitions are to follow the conflict/crisis structure. But one thing appears to be certain: when the

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students don't follow the model, Meisner corrects them, insisting that they do. What often emerges is the force of *Meisner's* impulses, rather than those of his students. And his "impulses" are clearly formed by traditional gender roles. Feminist criticism has observed such traits as endemic to the structure of Western drama, and some have labeled the pattern inherently "male."

> The structure of Western drama, an "imitation of an action," is linear, leading through conflict and tension to a major climax and resolution. . . . One could even say that this aggressive build-up, sudden big climax, and cathartic resolution suggests specifically the male *sexual* response.[39]

I do not wish to make an essentialist argument that all of Western drama is "male," but I am willing to acknowledge that the crisis model is one of the most recognizable structures in Western dramatic literature. Whether the model is inherently *sexual* or not, it is inherently conflict-based. Meisner does not articulate that his exercises are designed to mirror Aristotelian plot structure, but they do. In his exercise to "free impulse," Meisner actually teaches actors to pattern their behavior along Aristotelian lines. This is done through the structure of the exercise itself, which seems to invite conflict between partners, and through Meisner's reinforcement of the *correct* responses, with both positive and negative feedback to pupils.

Aristotle has, himself, been the subject of study by feminist theorists in connection with the social construction of emotion. In *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, Megan Boler draws on Elizabeth Spelman's essay "Anger and

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Subordination" to demonstrate gender inequity in emotional expression:

> Elizabeth Spelman begins with Aristotle's maxim that "anyone who does not get angry when there is reason to be angry, or does not get angry in the right way at the right time and with the right people, is a dolt. . . ." Spelman begins by pointing out that the "person who should get angry" was not, in Aristotle's world, women or slaves but the Greek men. Spelman persuasively argues that women are not in fact permitted to express anger. This prohibition functions to maintain women in her subordinate status [*sic*].[40]

The notion that "natural" emotional responses are actually socially constructed is useful, whether considering the structure of dramatic literature or the structure of the society which produces it--and which it reflects. Boler says, "When women are prevented from expressing anger at injustice, transgression, or violence, they are forced to submit without expressing resistance."[41] "Natural" emotions may be similarly controlled in the acting classroom.

Whenever students fail to manifest the model response--which is built into the exercises and his demonstrations of them--Meisner actively directs his actors to the aggressive or hostile reaction. The following exchange, with a male actor in the active role, is illustrative. Frustrated by the progress of a more advanced exercise, Meisner criticizes the student:

> "John, take her by the left arm and throw her out! Right now!"
>
> John grabs Wendy's arm, coolly pushes her out the door and

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slams it shut.

"Now, you should have done that without my suggesting it. Why didn't you?"

"Because it didn't seem valid in terms of doing the exercise. I know what you're saying--that my impulse should have been to throw her out because she was really bothering me."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because I didn't."

"So why didn't you?" [Note the repetition, even here.]

"Because I was working in my head. I was doing what I *thought* I *should* be doing." (*SM*, 66) [Original emphasis.]

The key words in this dialogue are John's: "my impulse *should have been*" [emphasis added]. The actor is clearly in a state of confusion, and his desire to please Meisner seems to be at the root of the problem. In a class designed to free impulse, John is apologetic that his impulse isn't what *Meisner* thinks it should be. Further, Meisner thinks the actor's impulse should have been to eject a woman from his room by use of physical force. And presumably her impulse should have been to accept that treatment from her partner. In another exercise between a man and a woman, Meisner similarly laments the conclusion the actors reach, offering his own preferred result: "This could easily have ended in your giving her the old heave-ho and going to the party with some other girl. How I would have loved that! That would have been marvelous!" (*SM*, 63). Whenever his students' impulses disappoint, Meisner suggests

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the alternatives that would have been more pleasing to him. And hostility towards women sometimes emerges as one of the more pleasing alternatives. The man's impulse "should" be to express anger, and the woman's impulse "should" be to receive it.

Meisner and Freud

Underlying Meisner's pedagogy is a value system which Meisner acknowledges is based in Freudian psychology. Meisner refers to Freud as often as he refers to Stanislavsky, citing the primary human motivators: "Ambition or sex. That's according to Dr. Freud and I believe it" (*SM*, 119). To open his chapter on improvisation, Meisner uses a lengthy extract from Freud's "The Relation of the Poet to Day-dreaming." What follows is a portion of that quotation:

> The impelling wishes vary according to the sex, character and circumstances of the creator; they may be easily divided, however, into two principal groups. Either they are ambitious wishes, serving to exalt the person creating them, or they are erotic. In young women erotic wishes dominate the fantasies almost exclusively, for their ambition is generally comprised in their erotic longings; in young men egoistic and ambitious wishes assert themselves plainly enough alongside their erotic desires. But we will not lay stress on the distinction between those two trends; we prefer to emphasize the fact that they are often united. In many altar-pieces the portrait of the donor is to be found in one corner

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> of the picture; and in the greater number of ambitious day-dreams, too, we can discover a woman in some corner, for whom the dreamer performs all his heroic deeds and at whose feet all his triumphs are to be laid. (*SM*, 96)[42]

In much Western drama and acting theory, the notion of *action* is central. Though there is much any feminist might find disturbing in the quotation above, of special significance is the positioning of the woman "in some corner," as the passive object for whom the dreamer-subject "performs all his heroic deeds." What are the ramifications in actor-training? Is the man the only do-er? Meisner holds in high regard the role of fantasy for the actor and quotes in his classroom Freud's view of man's desire to win "honor, power, and the love of women" as primary human motivators (*SM*, 135). Since he so plainly acknowledges Freudian psychology as a guiding principle in his approach to acting and teaching, one cannot help but see Freudian patterns emerge in the non-textual exercises invented by Meisner to free the actor's impulses. The "impulses" Meisner seeks to free are not unformed, but rather *in*formed by Meisner's understanding of Freudian notions of human desire.

Sue-Ellen Case criticizes specifically the Freudian basis of American actor training, demonstrating its implicit biases. For if "ambition and sex" are the guiding human motivations, for whom is ambition a motivation and who is assigned the function of sex (object)?

> Freud's gender-specific notions of psychological development are central to many of the operations of theatre. For example, they provide

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> the basis of Method acting. The psychological construction of character, using techniques adapted from Stanislavsky, places the female actor within the range of systems that have oppressed her very representation on stage. The techniques for the inner construction of a character rely on Freudian principles, leading the female actor into that misogynistic view of female sexuality.[43]

Unfortunately, Case's insight into the impact of Freudian psychological assumptions proves meaningful not only in the dramatic texts and roles to which she refers, but also within the acting classroom--and particularly that of Sanford Meisner.

Case's theory is borne out throughout the pages of Meisner's book. Male "instinct" is consistently and insistently tied to ambition, money, or to the pursuit of sex--and always sex with a woman. The pursuit leads toward sexual fulfillment through possession of the woman as sex *object*. For example, early in the sequence of class sessions, Meisner explains the very concept of instinct to a male student. This is a defining moment, as he is just beginning the process of instructing students on their goals.

> *Instinct*. I'll show you what I mean by that. Imagine, Vince, that you walk into a department store with a friend of yours, and you say, "do you see that tie? I want it!" Or you go to a party and across the room you see a girl and you say to yourself, "I'm going to have her!" That comes from your instincts. Do you follow? (*SM*, 27)

Meisner defines instincts according to Freudian principles, and these definitions reveal

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sex-based double standards.

Such double standards are made glaringly obvious in two more executions of the Repetition Exercise. Conducting these rounds sequentially, first with a male student and then with a female, Meisner again acts as participant-demonstrator. With the first student, he establishes the ground rules: "Vince, whatever I ask you for, the answer is 'No'" (*SM*, 12). Meisner begins:

> "Can you lend me twenty dollars?"
>
> "Can I lend you twenty dollars?"
>
> "Can you lend me twenty dollars?"
>
> "No, I can't lend you twenty dollars."
>
> "You can't lend me twenty dollars?"
>
> "I can't lend you twenty dollars."
>
> "You can't?"
>
> "I can't!"
>
> "You're a big shit!"
>
> "I'm a big shit!"
>
> "That's what *I* said!" (*SM*, 28)

The class laughs, and Meisner summarizes the lesson they are to learn: "that change was caused by instinct" (*SM*, 28). This exchange is helpful in assessing the operation of Meisner's exercises. First, the question initiated by Meisner as asked of a male student is financially motivated. He wants money. Second, as demonstrated earlier, the exchange--which might have taken any number of directions--instead turns quickly

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to conflict. One reason is that Meisner has directed the student as to what his impulse *should be*--he should refuse Meisner no matter what--respond "no" to whatever Meisner asks him. This limits the exercise considerably, contributing to the pattern of conflict. It also leads to Meisner's own impulse, which moves the dialogue to a climax with a foul insult.

A damning counterpoint to this exchange follows immediately in a second demonstration, this time with a female student. Longwell describes Meisner's behavior: "After a moment, he peers at Anna, comically leering at her from behind his thick lenses" (*SM*, 28). Meisner asks:

> "Will you come to my house tonight?"
>
> "Will I come to your house tonight?"
>
> "Will you come to my house tonight?"
>
> "Will I come to your house tonight?"
>
> "No, I will not come to your house tonight."
>
> "You won't come to my house tonight? . . . You're a professional virgin!" (*SM*, 28)

Again, the class responds with laughter. Now, allowing for the possibility that Meisner is using these examples comically--that he is attempting to entertain while teaching--his choices for these imaginative, spontaneous exchanges are still alarming. For he uses these examples to demonstrate the meaning of instinct--the very foundation of his training. He says to Vince, "You wouldn't lend me twenty dollars, so I called you a big shit. She said she wouldn't come to my house in such a way

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that tells me she's a professional virgin" (*SM*, 28). The offensiveness of the comment, delivered by a teacher to a student in the guise of revealing pure acting instinct, is nothing short of shocking. The man is sought for money; the woman sought for sex. And Meisner's calculated engineering of the demonstration exercise passes his hostile remarks off as honest impulse. He could *sense* that Anna's refusal of his proposition indicated that she fits into the retrograde stereotype, "professional virgin." The man's refusal to surrender his money renders him a "shit." Of the myriad possible reactions one might instinctively have to these situations, Meisner's choices tell his students to go on the offensive. And even if Anna had not been following his instructions (as she was), is there no room for the possibility that she may have any number of "instinctual" reasons of her own for refusing Meisner's overtures? Might she find her eighty year old, invalid teacher unattractive?[44] Might her instinctive response be fear--or repulsion? Or might she, instead, be attracted to women? Does she not simply have the right to her own impulsive response, without explanation, without being labelled--and especially labelled "a professional virgin?"

Boler cites Sue Campbell to discuss the ways in which emotional "labels" are collaboratively formed. Citing Campbell's essay "Being Dismissed: The Politics of Emotional Expression," Boler talks about recent feminist analyses of "bitterness."

> Bitterness is usually viewed as an "undesirable" emotion that should be avoided. . . . Campbell demonstrates how bitterness is *collaboratively* formed. It's not that you knew you felt bitter, and then happened to decide to express it. Rather, you expressed your anger and then were

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> told, "You're just bitter." Once accused of bitterness, you must justify your reasons. Further, she argues, to be told "you're bitter" is a dismissal and a silencing. Even if you then articulate your reasons for being bitter, the other is no longer listening. If, instead, we recognize that bitterness is collaboratively and publicly formed, it does not make sense to require the bitter individual to justify her reasons. Rather, what is called for is a *full social accountability on everyone's part for the interpretive context*.[45] [Original emphasis.]

This notion of the "social accountability" for interpreting and labeling emotional behavior has resonance for the acting classroom, and particularly the ways in which Meisner labels his actor's responses as true or false. What needs to be taken into account is *his* interpretive context.

Glaring examples of sexism and gendered double-standards accrue in the pages in Meisner's text. The chapter entitled, "The Pinch and the Ouch" is predicated on Meisner's belief that what matters most is, as he says, "what the other fellow does."[46] Meisner instructs his students that they are not to do anything "unless something happens to make you do it" (*SM*, 34). The purpose is to train the actors to become responsive and reactive to the actions of their partners. He gives two students, one male and one female, the same "text," which consists solely of his name: "Mr. Meisner." First, Meisner asks John to turn his back. When he does, Meisner "reaches up and gives John's back a big pinch" to which John responds by shouting, "Mr. Meisner!" (*SM*, 34). The stimulus in this example consists of an

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unprovoked act of aggression on the part of one man towards another. When Rose Marie is asked to perform the same exercise, Meisner repeats his admonition not to do anything until something *makes* her do it. Longwell recounts Meisner's instructions and actions:

> "Don't *do* anything, never mind about saying, until something happens to make you do it! . . . Turn around with your back to me, please. Concentrate on the text. Don't do anything till something happens. . . ." Casually he reaches around her shoulder and slips his hand into her blouse.
>
> "*Mr. Meisner*!" she giggles, drawing away from his touch.
>
> "You see how true that acting is, how full emotionally," Meisner says. (*SM*, 35)

In another act of aggression, this time sexual, the woman is again made the object of unwanted advances, effectively crippled by her teacher's directive that she turn her back and not do anything until she is forced. Her resulting response is deemed by Meisner to be "true" acting, emotionally full. But she does not *act*, in fact, she barely *re*acts to his inappropriate gesture. Surely her "true" response is hidden from the authority figure whom she fears and/or reveres? Here, Meisner's manipulation of the actor's instinct takes the form of sexual assault.

(Hetero)Sexual Impulse

One begins to suspect that not only are impulses actively patterned by Meisner,

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but they are also actively repressed. Just as I suggest that students do not mention "big breasts" or "bad skin," they do not protest when the teacher manipulates them like puppets. And in an acting class which makes the location and expression of human instinct a guiding priority, one might reasonably expect that sexuality would play a role. Human sexuality is understood by many to be one of the most basic, primitive, and instinctual human drives. My intention, here, is not to take a position which essentializes sexual orientation. My thinking on this subject is informed by Lynda Hart, who points out that "sexual identities are . . . less stable 'objects' than gender identities." She says:

> Deciding when and where to deploy a constructionist or essentialist account of "homosexuality" has taken on heightened political import. Giving credence to them both simultaneously is necessarily an anxious affair. The essentialist/constructionist debate is in some sense a red herring, for it is not the "truth" of sexualities and their identities that we seek; rather, it is the *effects* of producing one discourse or the other in the material lives of those persons who identify themselves as members of a sexual minority that concerns us.[47]

Accordingly, I am less concerned with the "truths" of sexual identities than I am with what happens to those who identify themselves (or do *not* identify themselves) as sexual minorities in the process of actor training. In reports of Meisner's classroom interactions, when sexual impulses manifest, they follow a conventional pattern. The primary representation of human sexuality is the repeated example of male desire for

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the sexual possession of a woman. Female desire appears rarely; homosexual impulse only as a negative, something to be either hidden or conjured through substitution. The normative model for instinctual behavior in this arena is male heterosexuality. Though presumably a professional acting class in New York City in the mid-1980s *must* have included gay and lesbian actors, *no* scenario constructed by Meisner ever includes homosexual desire.

This is, perhaps, not surprising. Gay men and lesbians continue to fight a battle for mainstream cultural acceptance; that their identities would be closeted within this context is part of the routine. But that routine must be exposed. Since the acting classroom is the training ground for entry into the profession (read: marketplace), the revelation of homosexual orientation may prove dangerous. Jill Dolan's observations about lesbian performers in the mainstream are equally true for gay men:

> Generally, because of the economics of production and the mainstream's preference for heterosexual realism, many professional lesbian performers act straight. Unlike race and gender, sexuality must be seen to be known, must be performed to be read. Because the signs of sexuality are inherently performative, the assumption of heterosexuality prevails unless homosexual or lesbian practice is made textual.
>
> Casting across sexuality occurs continually in professional theater. . . . The unspoken assumption is that a performer's sexual preference is irrelevant to casting decisions and that lesbian and gay

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performers will protect their careers by acting straight.[48]

That gay and lesbian performers feel the need to "act straight" to protect their careers is bad enough. But if one must "act straight" in a classroom designed to free honest "instincts" and "impulses," that such impulses and acts must be covered is a particularly dirty secret, for it renders the whole process preposterous. In assuming that the men in the class are sexually oriented to desire women, Meisner implicitly asks gay men to hide and to falsify their instinctive or impulsive or honest behavior. So in exercises where actors are supposed to be releasing their own "real" reactions to situations, isn't it logical that on occasion, homosexual impulses or actions might occur? Are the actors conditioned to hide such responses, or to convert them to more socially acceptable behaviors?

Meisner hints at the dilemma of the homosexual actor once within the book that represents his classroom sessions, in the context of discussing emotional preparation for a scene. His emphasis is on the privacy of actor preparation; one is to use fantasies from one's own life, but no one else ever needs to know their source. Meisner refers to a performance by Charles Laughton in the film, *If I Had a Million*, by means of example. Laughton enters the room with an air of triumph; this is a moment, says Meisner, which requires emotional preparation.

> Laughton's interpretation was that he was walking on the top of the world! He was triumphant! So before he knocked on the door and entered the boss's office, he had to have a sense of triumph. If he were Vince [a student in the class], he might get that feeling of being on top

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> of the world from his experience with girls. That usually gives you a feeling of being unconquerable. But suppose Laughton got that feeling from boys? He's not going to reveal his preparation, but he's going to have it! (*SM*, 86)

The moral of Meisner's story is twofold: an actor must prepare emotionally, and that the preparation may be kept secret. But he immediately makes a leap from Laughton's presumably *shameful* homosexual secret to another secret preparation, suggesting: "Suppose there were an actor . . . who comes from South Dakota, and the nearest farmhouse is a hundred and seventy-five miles away, but between those two houses are thousands of available sheep?" (*SM*, 86). By underscoring the privacy of emotional preparation, Meisner appears to equate homosexuality with zoophilia. And in assuming his student, Vince, gets a "feeling of being on top of the world from his experience with girls," he sends a strong message to the rest of the class which is based on a very specific heterosexual model with its assigned gender roles and relations. Those whose own instincts do not align with this model must hide their "perversions."

Meisner's own sexuality is not overtly discussed in the text, nor did he discuss his personal life in the very few interviews he gave during the course of his life. This privacy makes any exploration of the subject a delicate project. But the recurring questions regarding what can be revealed and what must be hidden within an acting class may also pertain to the person teaching it. For I wonder what the effects have been when gay and lesbian teachers have historically felt compelled to give what

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Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra call "passing performances, ones that enabled them to circulate as acceptable in mainstream culture."[49] Might gay and lesbian teachers engage in role-play designed to support their "strategies of self-concealment"?[50] And what kinds of lessons might be unwittingly conveyed through such role-play?

Schanke and Marra acknowledge the difficulty of documenting and discussing sexual orientation of biographical subjects in their introduction to *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Performers in American Theatre History*:

> Even more vexed than the issue of what to call our subjects is the question of evidence. How do we know they desired members of the same sex? Most people's sexual desires--straight or queer--have not been conclusively documented with direct forms of proof, like eyewitness accounts and explicit photographs. Moreover, an individual's sexual behavior and desire may neither coincide nor remain consistent. The standard of "hard" evidence is elusive for different-sex desire as well, but biographers have not traditionally been faced with having to prove heterosexual subjects' sexuality; it is simply presumed, automatically buttressed less by facts than by hegemonic assumptions. Historically, many subjects never stated their subaltern desires publicly; most often these subjects vehemently eschewed any imputations of sexual abnormality.[51]

Shanke and Marra conclude that "to recover [their] subjects' subaltern desires and their historical impact, [they] have had to build circumstantial cases in which all

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evidence is relative and most is ersatz. The process is one of reading multiple signs."[52]

Sanford Meisner left some signs to be read. While he was clearly a very private person, he also seems to have been (quietly) open about his very close, longtime relationship with another man. Meisner's *New York Times* obituary mentions that his two marriages ended in divorce, and says that he was survived by "Mr. [James] Carville, his companion," who was also a co-founder of the Meisner/Carville School of Acting in North Hollywood, California.[53] In Meisner's book, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, several references are made to his "close friend, James Carville," with whom Meisner built a home (on the Island of Bequia) which the two shared for more than twenty years (*SM*, 12-13). Meisner also dedicated the book to Carville. My purpose is not to gossip about Meisner's personal life, but nor do I want to ignore the ways his public persona (which either reflected or covered the personal) impinged upon his teaching.

In the classroom sessions in his book, Meisner always adopts the traditional male role, making sexual advances (albeit theatrical ones) towards the female students and adopting stereotypical male attitudes toward women and sex. And while it may not be possible to *prove* Meisner's sexual orientation or behavior, the ambiguity surrounding his sexuality is interesting to explore. For in behaving so overtly as a heterosexual man in his classroom, Meisner is likely to be doing one of two things. He is either dealing with his students from the subject position of a heterosexual man, which in his model seems to include a particular mode of interaction with women and

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a rejection of homosexuality or, conversely, it seems *possible* that Meisner (or someone in such a position) might find it necessary or desirable to *play* a "straight man," hiding aspects of his own identity as a means of conforming to his own (or others') sense of propriety. In either case, the role he plays, whether "naturally" or deliberately, is one which is socially "acceptable"– but also stereotypical.[54]

For the shamefulness of homosexuality is the only aspect to emerge in Meisner's teaching, and it is addressed just once more, late in the progress of Meisner's sessions with students when two women prepare for a scene from Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*. The play's text dictates that one character experiences lesbian desire for the other. Meisner suggests: "Let's say this doesn't mean anything to you as a person. You don't know the sensation of being a lesbian, or the experience of it" (*SM*, 137). In fact, the role she is preparing for is that of the woman *accused* of being a lesbian but not the character who has those feelings. Perhaps quite rightly in terms of the role, Meisner asks that she find an "as if," a particularization for herself so that she can empathize with the character and find analogous feelings. So he tells her to seek a situation in which she is accused of something "horrifying" (*SM*, 137). But the hypothetical situation he concocts for her is disturbing.

> Suppose that when the actress playing this part was five years old, a gang of four or five local ruffians dragged her into a deserted lot and ripped off her clothes. The horror, the disgrace of this experience is still so alive in her that whenever she recalls it she breaks down. So

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> that might be a useful preparation for the opening of this scene. (*SM*, 137)

The scenario is horrifying, but not for the reasons Meisner thinks. Here, he constructs two appalling responses for the female actor playing a lesbian: first, that to be accused of such a thing is so horrifying as to produce abject humiliation; second, that the source of such feelings of shame and degradation might come from the recollection of the sexual attack on a young child. Now, Meisner *does* conclude that his example is just that--a hypothetical scenario that he has constructed--and that the actors in question will ultimately have to draw on their own lives for relevant scenarios. Still, he sends powerful messages to his students regarding women, sexuality, and homosexual impulse.

Though a textual analysis of *The Children's Hour* might lead one to conclude that shame is, in fact, what the character does indeed feel upon being accused of being a lesbian, Meisner characteristically resists any sort of critical analysis of the text to support his conclusion. Potentially, the character's response might be different and/or more complex. This possibility is actually raised by one of the students in the class. A man named Ray offers this alternative: "I want to say that an equally valid reading would be if she were pissed off at the woman she lives with because of what has happened, and so anger comes out instead." But Meisner replies, "That would be a mischoice." And when Ray asks how an actor can be sure he or she is making the "*right* choice," Meisner predictably responds: "Your instinct!" (*SM*, 141). This is the trouble. Meisner claims to revere actor instinct above all else, but Ray's intuition--

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that there might be more than one plausible human reaction in this scenario (even within the confines of the script)--is resisted. Meisner's choice is presented as the *only* choice, and it is not supported by the kind of script analysis that Stella Adler offers. In this way, Meisner's students are alternately told to follow their instincts, then told that their instincts are wrong. What they are not told is how to go about making choices, since any intellectual or critical choice is forbidden. This also places actors at the mercy of Meisner within the class, coercing them to make the kinds of choices which he supports--choices which may be confining to both the women and men of the classroom.

Meisner and the Text

Questions about dramatic "texts" and their representation of women have always been central to feminist theatre and its theory. Beginning with the awareness that female roles are traditionally written by male playwrights, according to male-created rules of dramatic structure, and (in)formed by the world views of men, feminist practitioners and critics have long sought to redress this imbalance in a variety of ways. These include the recovery of lost texts by female playwrights, the nurturing of new plays--and dramatic structures--by latter-day feminist writers, and the reinterpretation and/or subversion of misogynist texts through feminist production strategies. Such projects call for the contributions of feminist collaborative artists from all areas: producers, directors, writers, designers, and actors. One must investigate, therefore, the extent to which a Meisner-trained actor would be equipped

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to participate in such a project.[55]

Elaine Aston, in *Feminist Practice: A Handbook*, follows Jill Dolan's application of Judith Fetterly's concept of the "resisting reader," suggesting: "You might extend this further to describe the role of the performer. Your task will be to take on the role of resisting agent or performer who functions as an ideological, cultural and theatrical demonstrator--empowered as the feminist critic (rather than female victim) of the 'master' text."[56] The first question one must ask about Meisner training in this context, then, is whether and how the actor is prepared to analyze a text. For surely one must comprehend a script before one is able to interpret it, or reinterpret it, much less subvert it. Meisner's view of the text is somewhat different. A chapter epigraph in *Sanford Meisner on Acting* clearly articulates the uneasy relationship between actors and playscripts within the Meisner Technique: "The text is your greatest enemy," he says (*SM*, 136). But Meisner's concerns are a far cry from those of feminist critics; he sees the text as something that can potentially interfere with actor impulse. The high premium Meisner places on cultivating the actor's instinct *does*, in fact, seem to preclude any sort of traditional script analysis on the part of the actor. And although Stanislavskian acting theory is often unjustly criticized in a generalized fashion for being anti-textual in its orientation, it would be difficult to defend Meisner's teachings against such an accusation. Meisner emphasizes actor impulse not only in improvisatory exercises, he also looks to intuition as a means of making acting "choices." Scripts are to be brought to life not through an analytical model, as in Stella Adler's approach, but according to instinct.

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The problem is not that text work has no role in Meisner training; it does. As Cecchini Holub describes Meisner's process, text is introduced in "Level 6" of the training, when "the actor is asked to combine both the internal and external aspects while working on the first scene from a script."[57] At "Level 7," the end of the first year of training, actors work on monologues from Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*. But in her thirty-five page outline of Meisner's technique, Cecchini Holub devotes little more than one page to her discussion of his work on text. She begins by using Meisner's metaphorical definition of the actor's relationship to text, which I quote here directly from his book:

> The text is like a canoe . . . and the river on which it sits is the emotion. The text floats on the river. If the water of the river is turbulent, the words will come out like a canoe on a rough river. It all depends on the flow of the river which is your emotion. The text takes on the character of your emotion. That's what this exercise is for: how to let the river of your emotion flow untrammeled, with the words floating on top of it. (*SM*, 115)

Throughout his teaching, Meisner frequently refers back to this metaphor of the canoe and the river. The actor, one must note, is not the canoe--the actor is not even *in* the canoe. The actor is the river. Following this analogy, an actor need not worry much about the canoe, for it just floats along on his or her current. The influence is one-way: the river moves the canoe, but the canoe has no effect on the river. As Meisner says, "the text takes on the character of your emotion." So although his training is

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clearly intended to prepare actors to work in a text-based theatre, Meisner's focus is not on the text itself but on what runs beneath it.

This is evident from the moment Meisner introduces scripts into his classroom. His instructions to his students deliberately disrupt the normal reading process, as he encourages them to digest the material in an unfamiliar way: "I want you to take your script and learn it *without* meaning, *without* readings, *without* interpretation, without *anything*. Just learn the lines by rote, mechanically. I want that to be very clear. "To/be/or/not/to/be/that/is/the/question" (*SM*, 67). Meisner advocates this rote memorization in order to prevent actors from imposing meanings through forced line readings and artificial interpretations. But what is his goal? Meisner explains:

> In order to build up performances which are coming out of you, which are coming out of your emotional grasp of the material, I choose to reduce you to a neutral, meaningless, inhuman object--a robot, call it what you like. In order to fill those words with the truth of your emotional life you're first going to learn the text coldly, without expression, in a completely neutral way. (*SM*, 68)

Note how there is no discussion of authorial intent, character analysis, or even comprehension of basic relationships and plot lines. It's not really necessary to understand the play. Meisner's goal is for the actor to come to an "emotional grasp of the material"--not an intellectual one. But what does that mean?

The answer is not found in the secondary text of the plays. In addition to learning lines by rote, Meisner encourages actors to ignore stage directions, which he

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claims, "are aids for *readers* of plays, not for *actors* of them" (*SM*, 191). Actors are to cross any indicators of character behavior out of their scripts because such descriptions are "anti-intuitive" (*SM*, 191).

> Did you ever read any of the late plays by Eugene O'Neill? They have so many stage directions that, if you're cast in one, the first thing you have to do is buy a pencil and cross them all out, because nobody, not even the playwright, can determine how a life is going to live itself out sensitively, instinctively, on the stage. But I add this caveat: the life of the actor *must not* annihilate the deeper implications of the play which the playwright has written. (*SM*, 191)

Meisner creates a paradoxical predicament for his actors. They are to resist interpretation in their initial contact with a play, learning lines by rote and ignoring--no, blotting out--secondary text so that it will not invade their consciousness. Yet actors *must not* annihilate "deeper implications" of the play. How are they to know what these implications are?

Again, the answer seems to be found in Meisner's mantra: Instinct. Although Meisner claims to have been influenced by Stella Adler, particularly by her delivery of Stanislavsky's lessons on the given circumstances of the play, these circumstances are filtered through actor intuition rather than understanding or intellect. Meisner baldly states this when he criticizes his students for attempting analysis of the scripts they're using: "You people are judging material from your heads, not from your hearts. You judge from what you understand, and because all of you, unfortunately,

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have been to college there are no words in these texts that are difficult for you to understand" (*SM*, 160). For Meisner, it would actually be better if the text were meaningless to the actor, so it could be filled with pure "instinct."

An outstanding illustration of this can be found in Meisner's intuitive counterpoint to Adler's more critical approach to character analysis. Instead of examining carefully the circumstances of character embedded in a playscript, Meisner asks actors to act on more randomly formed impressions. For example, how does an actor approach the "externals" of characterization, as in the case of a French character?

> The man who recently arrived in America from France might have a heavy, distinctly French accent. But if the author tells us that he has spoken English for most of his life, he might have only a trace of an accent. But neither circumstance would mitigate the fact that at heart he is *French:* cosmopolitan, witty, cynical in love--whatever the idea of being French *might instinctively mean to you*. (*SM*, 97) [Emphasis added.]

Meisner concedes that there are characters who will require certain external adjustments on the part of the actor, but even these are to be determined not through an analysis of the character, or even through the kind of research Stella Adler conducts on the "given circumstances" (e.g. are *all* Frenchmen cosmopolitan, witty and cynical in love?), but instead through the actor's uninformed (and possibly ignorant), generalized sense of what it is to be "French."

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Needless to say, acting according to stereotype has far-reaching implications for the female actor. What is most surprising about Meisner's approach to the text is this: not only does it not equip an actor to *re*interpret texts creatively from a feminist perspective, it is difficult to imagine how the actor is able to intelligently interpret and enact roles even according to conventional theatrical demands. The meaning of the play comes not from the writing, but from within each actor and through their spontaneous encounters with one another. The lines of the text are just the uppermost layer, almost incidental. Meanings are to be intuited--almost through osmosis. Yet when Meisner's student actors *do* intuit an interpretation, they're often wrong. Meisner's instinct--and interpretation--is the only infallible one.

It may be possible to trace Meisner's point of view on text to his own work as an actor. Although the Group Theatre was known for its commitment to politically oriented drama, Meisner admits that his own participation was somewhat differently motivated. Describing himself as "a-political," he says: "I have to tell you in all frankness that I was never really overpoweringly affected by the sociological meanings of the plays. The thing that got me were the plays themselves and the acting. Being an actor in it--that was the main thing" (*RSP*, 501). He also admits that after the Group Theatre days, "I was primarily concerned with myself in the theatre and not . . . the theatre as a weapon" (*RSP*, 502). While it is not necessarily unusual for an actor to be unconcerned with the political content of the pieces in which he or she appears, one may note that Meisner acknowledges that his interest in content of the dramatic material was far less than that of his Group Theatre peers. Meisner's

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approach, then, is not content-driven. His approach as a teacher, therefore, may be best suited to apolitical actors like himself.

Emotional "Preparation"

Since Meisner's primary interest in theatrical representation is not in the meaning or political impact of plays, emotional fullness in performance is one of his chief aesthetic goals. Another facet of Meisner's training, therefore, is his approach to actor emotion. In reaction against Strasberg's use of affective memory, which Meisner finds dangerous, he turns instead to what he calls "preparation." Meisner's preparation might be considered, in some ways, a combination of Strasberg's emphasis on emotion and Adler's counter-emphasis on imagination. Instead of asking actors to *remember* an incident which produces emotion, Meisner suggests that they *imagine* such an incident, in a process he likens to "daydreaming." Ironically, however, Meisner's valuation of profound emotion closely mirrors that of Strasberg. Like Strasberg (and more than Adler), he acknowledges that it is often necessary for the actor to enter a scene already at an emotional pitch, but he seeks an alternative approach to achieve a similar result.

When Meisner first introduces the concept of emotional preparation to his students, he includes his own historical overview of its evolution by referring back to Stanislavsky and invoking his authority.

> In the early days of the Stanislavsky System, Mr. S. was looking for true behavior, and if what he wanted was great pleasure, he asked

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> where you look for the reality of great pleasure. His answer was simple: you *remember* a time when you were under the influence of great pleasure. That's called "emotion memory." I don't use it, and neither did he after thirty years of experimentation. The reason? If you are twenty and work in a delicatessen, the chances are very slim that you can remember that glorious night you had with Sophia Loren. The chances are slight that you know the full pleasure of that kind of glorified sex. Am I making myself clear? (*SM*, 79)

Meisner's chosen examples always make his gender biases clear, but his point here is that "what you're looking for is not necessarily confined to the reality of your life" and that an actor can find the emotion needed through imagination, which can be even stronger than remembered experience (*SM*, 79).

This is the way that preparation is intended to work. First, the actor intuits what emotion is needed in the scene. Unlike Adler's approach, which relies on using the given circumstances of the play, "the source of where you find that inner life is not necessarily related to the needs of the scene" (*SM*, 80). The actor conjures the necessary images offstage, achieves the desired emotion on his or her own, then enters the scene "prepared" for the spontaneous interaction to follow. Meisner stresses that preparation is just that: "A preparation is only for the *beginning* of the scene, and each moment feeds it and changes it. You're not going to get it from the text!" (*SM*, 199). By way of example, he instructs Lila (the older actress earlier chided for her choice of clothing) on how to use preparation with her partner, Sarah, in a scene from

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Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening*: "Prepare for the hysteria, gradually learn the lines, put the two together. If you prepare and then work moment by moment off her and with her, you'll always be riding on a very stormy river" (*SM*, 199). Lila is to work herself into a fever pitch through preparation, then allow the river of that emotion to be the current which carries the text.

What is confusing about Meisner's teaching on emotional preparation is that so little of it happens in the classroom. If, in fact, actors are to "prepare," little instruction is given on how that preparation can actually be achieved. Meisner simply states that actors are to think of stimulating and evocative situations or images, but offers very little in the way of demonstrating how actors can become susceptible to their own internal suggestions. What emerges in the classroom, instead, is Meisner's frequent dissatisfaction with what he deems inadequate preparation. His subsequent direction of the work often takes the form of badgering. His coaching for the scene from *Spring's Awakening* is an extreme but representative example.

The emotion he requires of the female actors in this scene might be characterized as "hysteria." This is not the emotional quality chosen or sought by the actors in question--or even necessarily by the demands of the play--but by Meisner. In workshopping the scene, Meisner is disappointed in the emotional quality. The text is then abandoned while the actors live in an imaginary situation of Meisner's making. Lila (who might still be shaken from the incident which occurred several months earlier, and more than likely fears rebuke) and her partner are directed to cry.

Stay where you are. Put your book away. Lila, sit down. Sarah, take

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> that bedcover off you. Lila, you've just found out--I'm talking about imagination--that your daughter is going to prison. Anything! I don't care! See? I don't care what you think of. Cry! And don't stop crying until I tell you to. That's right. Begin to cry! Now, Sarah, you're an actress. If a doctor told you that you had lung cancer, would it upset you? . . . That's right. Sarah, if somebody told you that your mother was about to die, would it upset you? . . . Okay, so start to cry. (*SM*, 197)

The women attempt to begin the scene but Meisner stops them, wanting them to work on the emotion but not the scene: "No text! No text! Only emotion! If you want to use words, you can use them based on what I said about cancer or prison" (*SM*, 197). Suddenly, the actors are no longer working on *Spring's Awakening* but on imaginary, volatile emotional circumstances suggested by Meisner, with the sole purpose of getting them to cry.

As the work progresses, Lila begins to cry; Longwell describes her. "The crying increases. Lila is weeping openly; the tears stream from her large blue eyes and the mascara on her lashes begins to run." But Sarah is still not crying, and Meisner directs her: "Cry, Sarah!" (*SM*, 197). Only when both women are sobbing is Meisner satisfied, but he stops them again because they have reverted to using the words of the play.

> That's out of the book! . . . I feel good about this because *that's* the scene--the scene without those screwy words. The scene is about two

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> people going through a terrible experience, and I don't know any floozy—I'm not talking about either of you—who can't learn those lines if she's asked to. . . . *This is the scene*. No book. No text. I don't have to say any more. Can you grasp that? (*SM*, 199)

The meaning is easy to grasp. Meisner is interested in emotion, and his path for achieving it is what he calls "preparation." He summarizes his meaning in case it is missed: "Cry, both of you, *then* talk. That's my method of acting: cry, then talk. Don't talk and *then* expect to cry, because you won't!" (*SM*, 199-200).

Yet it does not appear in this instance that the actors' "preparation" is what induces the tears. Meisner does. It's disturbing that the women are not allowed to make the acting choices; they are also discouraged from analyzing and playing Wedekind's text as a way of finding the emotion. Meisner suggests they find the emotion first, then add the words. "When you rehearse, you should prepare, play it freely with no book, then quit. Talk about the President, have a cup of tea, then rehearse again" (*SM*, 198-199). Lila tries to understand, tries to make a connection. But Meisner discourages her. "Don't talk about it. I told you that *this* is the scene. In time, tack on the text. Talk to each other. What's so mysterious about that? You don't understand?" (*SM*, 199).

As the arbiter of truth in this acting classroom, Meisner determines the believability of each moment and occasionally produces his version of reality by badgering, humiliating, and even assaulting his students into exhibiting the desired behavior. Particularly for the women in the scene, the notion of *action* seems erased

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from the acting process. They are reactive in every sense of the word, reacting not only to one another, but to the real stimulus provided by the teacher in the form of hostile critique and demand for emotional display. The emotion may be "real" or "truthful," but it results from the teacher's bullying. One wonders how the training prepares these actors to work on their own. Forbidden to analyze or interpret the text, and reliant on their teacher to provoke their emotion, what is their acting technique?

* * *

Cynthia Jessica Pang, in her dissertation "The Angst of American Acting: An Assessment of Acting Texts," argues persuasively that though based in Stanislavskian theory, the Meisner Technique makes radical departures which dramatically alter the acting process. She notes that though "the foundation of Meisner's technique lies in 'the reality of doing'. . . Meisner is not referring to the Stanislavsky principle of Action, but the simple act of doing what is real."[58] For Meisner, what is "real" is emotional, anti-intellectual, apolitical, and gender-based. Dependent on teacher and partner, the power to act taken from her, the actor is left only to *react* to the stimuli which are out of her control; her reaction is passive and emotional.

Contemporary feminist practitioners must be on their guard as they continue to teach from the traditions in which they were taught. Elizabeth Stroppel explores the dilemma in which many feminist teachers of acting find themselves, and particularly the dilemma of the Meisner-trained actor.

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> American interpretations of Stanislavski's work, such as that of Sanford Meisner . . . persist in keeping realistic acting approaches securely in classrooms, sometimes with dubious effects. Independent teacher/actor Martha Jacobs, for example, professes to have a feminist outlook in many ways. Yet utilizing Meisner's repetition exercise, which Jacobs triggers by whispering in one actor's ear that something has just occurred as a result of the other actor's actions, seems manipulative and contradictory to feminist goals concerned with the ethics of the process more than the product at all costs. Rather than seeking to validate women's own emotional control as subjects, this exercise has the potential to continue treating women as victims of their emotions, particularly if gendered tendencies of reactions remain unhighlighted, as Jacobs stated she generally leaves them.[59]

Though self-identified as a feminist, Jacobs articulates an awareness that her own teaching of the Repetition Exercise replicates Meisner's manipulativeness; she repeats herself the patterns he established.

In 1998, following Meisner's death, several of his famous students reminisced about his work. Their stories (unwittingly) support many of the arguments of this study. Gregory Peck and Joanne Woodward, respectively, shared their most vivid recollections of being students in Sanford Meisner's classroom at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Gregory Peck recalled an improvisation Meisner assigned him, in which a young man who needs money for an operation for his mother comes to his sister and

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her husband for help. Peck said: "The husband was totally indifferent to my pleas, disdainful. I was getting frustrated and I didn't know where to take it, so I literally attacked him. I grabbed him by the throat and wrestled him to the floor. . . . [Meisner] liked that one. You know why? Because it had conflict from the moment I walked in." Joanne Woodward, on the other hand, was assigned an improvisation in which she had to ask someone for two hundred dollars because she is pregnant. Woodward recalled, "I couldn't get the word 'pregnant' out of my mouth. The other actor looked at me and started to laugh, and I just felt terrible. I started to cry and ran out of the room. This was anathema. Finally, Sandy sent someone to drag me back in. I stood there quaking. 'Well, Joanne,' he said to me, 'that's the best thing you've done in six months.'"[60] These actors may have felt they were responding "instinctively" and "impulsively," but they also were repeating predictable--and gender-based--behaviors. The man is angry and confrontational, the woman weak and ashamed. Aggression and hysteria, respectively, are the instinctive responses Meisner cultivates and applauds.

In my introduction to this study, I quoted Judith Butler's definition of gender as "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*."[61] That phrase is particularly resonant in this discussion of the Meisner Technique and its signature approach, the Repetition Exercise. For rather than freeing the actor, the act of repetition instead ensures the recurrence of deeply entrenched social patterns of interaction. Butler demonstrates the ways in which "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo."[62] Citing

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Victor Turner, Butler suggests that the repeated performance is "at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established."[63] When Meisner sanctions the truthfulness of an actor's impulse, he reinforces long-held patterns of expectations--and taboos--for human behavior, often according to gender roles. In his efforts to release actors to their pure "instinct," Meisner fails to acknowledge or apparently even to understand that what he is seeking is really an "act," a repetition of longstanding social and cultural performances.

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Notes

1. Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 37 (hereafter cited as *SM*).

2. Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, 84.

3. Karen Finley, "A Constant State of Becoming: An Interview by Richard Schechner," in *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre*, 254-255.

4. Stephen Fife, "Dedicated to the Religion of Acting," *New York Times*, 7 April 1997, sec. 2, p. 5.

5. *Sanford Meisner, the Theater's Best Kept Secret*, 16 mm, 56 min., produced by Kent Paul and Columbia Pictures (New York, 1984); and 56 min. videocassette, Films for the Humanities (1985).

6. Dennis Longwell states in his acknowledgments that the idea for the book came from Kent Paul, producer of *Sanford Meisner, the Theater's Best Kept Secret*.

7. See Diane Clayre Cecchini Holub, "The Actor Training Legacy of Sanford Meisner" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1994) for extensive documentation of Meisner's prevalence in professional and academic actor training. See also Larry Silverberg's four books on Meisner: *The Sanford Meisner Approach: An Actor's Workbook* (Lyme, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 1994); *The Sanford Meisner Approach, Workbook Two: Emotional Freedom* (Lyme, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 1997); *The Sanford Meisner Approach, Workbook Three: Tackling the Text* (Lyme, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 1998); and *The Sanford Meisner Approach, Workbook Four: Playing the Part* (Lyme, N.H.: Smith and Kraus, 2000).

8. Biographical information on Sanford Meisner is culled from the following sources: Meisner and Longwell, 5-13; Cecchini Holub, 62-68; Cecilia Jessica Pang, "The Angst of American Acting: An Assessment of Acting Texts" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1991), 285-294; Sanford Meisner, an interview by Suzanne Shepherd, *Yale Theatre 8*, nos. 2 and 3 (1977): 38-43; *RSP*, 501-505.

9. Brant L. Pope, "Redefining Acting: The Implications of the Meisner Method," in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 147.

10. Cecchini Holub, 224.

11. See Cecchini Holub; Joyce Spivey Aldridge, "The Tradition of American Actor Training and its Current Practice in Undergraduate Education", (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 1993); and Pope, 147-148.

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12. The Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre Brochure, 1998-1999, 11.

13. The Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre Brochure, 1998-1999, 4.

14. Paul Gray, "The Reality of Doing: Interviews with Vera Soloviova, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner," in *Stanislavski and America*, 213.

15. Quoted in Shepherd, 40.

16. Quoted in Shepherd, 40.

17. Quoted in Shepherd, 42.

18. Quoted in Gray, 140.

19. Natalie Crohn Schmitt, *Actors and Onlookers* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 109.

20. Schmitt, 109.

21. Schmitt, 110; 151 n. 92.

22. Kathleen Weiler, "Freire and a Feminist Pedagogy of Difference," in *Debates and Issues in Feminist Research and Pedagogy*, ed. Janet Holland and Maud Blair, with Sue Sheldon (Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1995), 23-44.

23. Weiler, 32.

24. Schmitt, 95.

25. Cecchini Holub, 214.

26. Cecchini Holub, 69-70.

27. Shepherd, 43.

28. Louise M. Stinespring, "Just Be Yourself: Derrida, Difference, and the Meisner Technique," in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 98-99.

29. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 10.

30. Stinespring, 103.

31. Stinespring, 104.

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32. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 16. Phelan borrows this phrase from Lacan, noting: "While Lacan theorized a potential reciprocal gaze he also recognized that such an exchange took place within an unequal political, linguistic, and psychic field."

33. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 4.

34. Patricia Ticineto Clough, *The End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism* (Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage Publications, 1992), 34.

35. Silverberg, *The Sanford Meisner Approach*, 12.

36. Silverberg, *The Sanford Meisner Approach*, 24.

37. Silverberg, *The Sanford Meisner Approach*, 24.

38. Stinespring, 103.

39. Nancy S. Reinhardt, "New Directions for Feminist Criticism in Theatre and the Related Arts," in *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: The Difference it Makes*, ed. Elizabeth Langland and Walter Gove (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 36-37.

40. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 12.

41. Boler, 12.

42. Meisner and Longwell provide this citation: *On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion*, selected by Benjamin Nelson (New York: Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, 1958), 47-48.

43. Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 122. Case's use of the phrase "Method acting" can be understood to refer not exclusively to Strasberg's Method but to "the American approach," which I identify in the first chapter as the group of related (though not identical) American, Stanislavsky-based techniques"

44. At the time of this class session, Meisner was not only quite old (about eighty) but he was also in very bad physical condition. Longwell describes him in 1985: "Advanced age and accidents have produced awesome physical disabilities in Meisner. He wears thick glasses as a result of multiple operations for cataracts and detached retinas of both eyes. Even more devastating have been the two operations he sustained for cancer of the larynx, the first more than ten years ago, which left him literally without a voice. With great difficulty he subsequently learned to speak again by inhaling air into his esophagus and releasing it in controlled burps. This

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esophageal speech may be disturbing to those hearing for the first time. . . . When Meisner teaches now, this 'voice' is amplified by a microphone attached to the left temple of his glasses, and connected to a small transmitter, which sends it to a loudspeaker across the room from his desk, thereby emphasizing its eerie, disembodied quality. As if these blows had not been enough, three years ago an out-of-control delivery truck struck him while he was crossing the street, smashing his left femur and hip in twelve places. After surgical reconstruction, he walks stiffly with the help of a cane (*SM*, 12)."

45. Boler, 13-14.

46. Quoted in Shepherd, 40.

47. Lynda Hart, "Identity and Seduction: Lesbians in the Mainstream," in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993), 119.

48. Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993), 139.

49. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra, eds., *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 8.

50. Schanke and Marra, 8.

51. Schanke and Marra, 7.

52. Schanke and Marra, 7.

53. Peter B. Flint, "Sanford Meisner, A Mentor Who Guided Actors and Directors Toward Truth, Dies at 91," *New York Times*, 4 February 1997, sec. A, p. 21.

54. The idea that Meisner might have been deliberately "passing" by actively playing a heterosexual role in his classroom was first suggested to me by Bob Schanke when he was a session leader for the panel "Unofficial Rules and Unruly Sexualities in Performance History," where I presented an early version of this chapter at the 1998 conference of the American Society for Theatre Research in Washington, D.C. In the reading I have done on and by members of the Group Theatre, while there is much reminiscing about who was after whom, who was sleeping with whom, and who married whom (Harold Clurman and Stella Adler are the subjects of much discussion), Meisner's personal life is not mentioned. This might possibly be evidence of a code of silence surrounding the relationships of gay men and lesbian women in an earlier era. For example, Cheryl Crawford's lesbian identity is not directly addressed by any

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of the Group Theatre members in their various memoirs, but is suggested (documented?) by others. See Jay Plum, "Cheryl Crawford: One Not So Naked Individual," in *Passing Performances*, 239-261.

55. See Elaine Aston, *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and *Upstaging Big Daddy*.

56. Aston, 83.

57. Cecchini Holub, 87.

58. Pang, 295-296.

59. Stroppel, "Acting Theory, Training, and Practice," 66.

60. Rick Lyman, "The Lives They Lived: Sanford Meisner; The Proof is in the Protege, *New York Times*, 4 January 1998, sec. 6, p. 43.

61. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 270.

62. Butler, 271.

63. Butler, 277.

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Chapter 5

Simple Object Lessons: Uta Hagen and "Substitution"

"My husband used to say, 'Never study with a teacher you haven't seen on stage.'"[1] This is Uta Hagen's advice to aspiring actors, advice which has been followed by countless people who have studied with the legendary actress over the last fifty-four years at the Herbert Berghof Studio, the New York school founded by her husband and bearing his name. This bit of advice is also Uta Hagen's calling card. As one prescient critic said of her 1948 portrayal of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it was "the kind of performance [that] acting textbooks can be built around."[2] To a far greater degree than any of the other teachers in this study, Uta Hagen has, for more than half of the twentieth century (and into the twenty-first), maintained two distinct but intertwined identities: she is not only one of America's most renowned "master teachers" of acting--and author of what may be the most widely read American book on acting technique--she is also a two-time Tony award-winning "star" of the stage. She continues to teach and perform to this, her eighty-second year. And the fact that Hagen has always been both actor *and* teacher is more than her leading credential; it characterizes her entire approach to actor training. Uta Hagen practices what she teaches--and she teaches from the ongoing experience of her practice.

Like the other teachers included in this study, Hagen prizes and privileges

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"truth" on the stage. "My standard for performance," she says, "is that I forget I'm seeing an actor and think I'm watching a human being. I believe this in my bones."[3] For Hagen, such a performance occurs when an actor is able to recreate the behavior of "real life" on stage. The means of (re)producing this behavior is to draw on the actor's own "self." The term most often associated with this process--and with Hagen herself--is "substitution." In this process, the actor "substitutes" his or her own relationships, experiences, feelings, and behavior for those of the character. The Hagen actor never refers to a scripted character as "he" or "she," but instead as "I." The goal is for the actor to make total identification with the character, merging his or her "self" with the role. In doing so, the actor fulfills Hagen's artistic aesthetic, maintaining the theatrical illusion that the audience is watching not a "performer" but a *real* human being onstage.

My purpose is not to investigate the efficacy of Uta Hagen's approach; in fact, if Hagen's own performances are any "proof" of her theories, both the acting and the technique that produces it are undoubtedly effective. Since she made her professional debut in 1937, Hagen has won popular and critical acclaim for numerous stage roles, several of which she originated. Most notable among these are Georgie in Clifford Odets' *Country Girl* (1950), and Martha in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962). Hagen is equally known for making a mark in roles which she did not originate, among them, Blanche in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948) and, quite recently, Ruth in Donald Margulies' *Collected Stories* (1998). The last of these performances is the only one which I am old enough to have witnessed

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firsthand; I found Hagen's work to be extraordinary and affecting--and all the more so because of her advanced age. From my aisle seat in the tiny Lucille Lortel theatre during the 1998 run of the play, I could easily see Hagen sobbing "real tears"; I even saw her wiping them away as she stood in the wings, composing herself to return to the stage for her curtain call. I certainly felt that I was watching a "real human being," who was obviously experiencing "real emotion." I was aware of Hagen's "acting" mostly in connection with my research: I marveled at how her technique appeared to be a living representation of her textbook *Respect for Acting*, and wondered whether (and how) she could, at seventy-nine, give (and live) this performance eight times per week.

I am more than willing, therefore, to concede the efficacy question. Uta Hagen's system of substitution "works." But is there a potential cost--especially for a female actor? In the introduction to this dissertation, I cite the concerns of feminist critics who note that since Stanislavskian acting requires an actor to align herself with a role, female actors will frequently be asked to "align with an unhealthy gender role" and to "search for self-revelations that are demeaning."[4] I would suggest that the kind of total identification advocated by Hagen, while "effective," often risks these very concerns. When an approach to acting is based on observation of the self in "real life," leading to the total identification of that self with the scripted role, the training of the actor may be gender-biased. For such an approach relies on cultural constructions of truth in two ways. First, it assumes that observation of one's own emotions and behavior provides the basis for expressing the emotions and behavior of

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all human beings, minimizing the differences in individual human experience. By restricting source material for creating a character to his or her own experience, an actor's range of expression may be severely limited. If men and women are already socialized to behave and emote in gendered ways, these will form a template for the enacted role. Second, this approach accepts the notion that scripted roles reveal human truth, thereby evading questions about underlying ideologies in the script and in the role. When men and women "identify" with many of the roles traditionally scripted for them, they may be likely to identify with traditional gender roles. For while society makes (some) advances in changing the roles that men and women play in "real life," theatrical life lags behind: men and women are still routinely asked to play their traditional roles, including archetypal sex roles dating back centuries. And while there are, of course, new plays which may redress some of these issues, there is still the whole of the canon, as well as many new plays which do not. What effect might this have on the skills of the actor?

Uta Hagen shares Stella Adler's interest in and emphasis on the playscript--a value which distinguishes both teachers from Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner. On the surface, it might appear that Adler and Hagen encourage similar kinds of analysis and research in approaching a role. Yet there are important differences. For Hagen's work also bears a strong resemblance (and relationship) to Strasberg's Method; Hagen shares Strasberg's intense interest in emotion, which derives from the observation and use of the "self." What Hagen adds is a much greater emphasis on the merging of the self with the role. Where Adler focuses on the construction of character, with minute

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attention to the myriad contextual circumstances in which the character finds himself or herself--and which, in fact, define the character--Uta Hagen emphasizes the actor's identification with a role and advocates a total immersion of the actor into the character. In Hagen's model, there is no distance between the actor and the character, and therefore not much perspective--and certainly no room for "comment." The ways in which Uta Hagen seems to combine elements of Lee Strasberg's emphasis on truthful emotion and truthful behavior with Stella Adler's emphasis on the playscript make her an excellent subject for this study, providing an opportunity to see what happens when women actors are asked to "use themselves" to prepare to enact scripted roles.

In this chapter, I will begin by discussing Uta Hagen's background and influences, tracing her connection to the American Stanislavskian heritage, and establishing her importance as an actress and teacher. I will outline Hagen's acting technique, as laid out in her two books, *Respect for Acting* and *A Challenge for the Actor*, investigating the implications of self-observation and "substitution" from a feminist point of view. I will also examine the ramifications of "identification" with a role by analyzing Uta Hagen's detailed examples. In her books, Hagen's emphasis (like Adler's) tends to be on female roles; she draws heavily on her own acting experience to create object lessons. While these personal stories are vivid articulations of her technique and the way it works, they also reveal the immanent dangers for female actors making emotional connections to female roles in dramatic literature. For even Hagen, one of the most respected of American stage actresses--whose life is

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about and who demands "respect for acting"--has, throughout her career, often prepared for her roles by drawing on the weaker and more wounded aspects of herself. Is this a built-in danger for an actress training to perform in the mainstream American theatre?

Uta Hagen: Background

Although Uta Hagen is the only teacher in this study who was not a member of the Group Theatre, and though she is a generation younger than Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner, she, too, became a prominent actor in the American theatre in the 1930s, and began her long teaching career in New York in 1947, at almost exactly the same time that the other three were becoming established fixtures in their own New York training centers. And although Hagen did not begin her career as a practitioner of Stanislavsky-based acting, she soon adopted Stanislavskian practices which completely altered her approach to acting. For example, she credits Harold Clurman with opening a "new world" for her in the theatre, and Herbert Berghof (a member of the Actors Studio) with helping her to "explore more deeply" what she had learned from Clurman, leading her to what she calls "a true technique of acting."[5] She stands, then, as one of the most important figures in America's second generation of "Method" actors and teachers.

Uta Hagen was born in Germany in 1919. She emigrated with her parents to the United States as a small child in 1926, when her father was hired as a professor of art history at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Although she was not born

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into a theatrical family, both of Hagen's parents were artists; in addition to his career as an academic, her father was a composer and musicologist and her mother a professional singer and vocal instructor. Hagen acknowledges that her parents created a home environment which nurtured her artistic sensibilities. The house was filled with music, and she says, "reading was considered as important as eating."[6] At only nine years of age, Hagen says her "determination to be an actress set in" after seeing Elizabeth Bergner play the title role in Shaw's *St. Joan*. From that early age, Hagen began to devour actor biographies and classic plays; make herself up as various characters and playact scenarios; study dance and movement. She prepared herself for her chosen career (*CA*, xvi).[7]

Hagen's father took the family to Europe from time to time while conducting his research, and at age sixteen, following her high school graduation, Uta had the opportunity to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London during one of her father's sabbaticals. She recalls that "the training was poor," and her retrospective remarks seem characteristic of many American criticisms of English acting. "I knew," she says, "that there was something wrong with being lined up against the barre to recite the speeches of Rosalind or Gertrude in unison with twenty others, with the same gestures and inflections" (*CA*, xviii-xix). This early reaction predicts the highly individualistic acting technique that Hagen would later embrace and teach. But in spite of the fact that the quality of the RADA training was not all that she hoped, Hagen became even more determined to pursue an acting career.

Several instances of very rare good fortune led Hagen to make the leap from

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her Wisconsin high school to the Broadway stage in only three short years. Although she had promised her parents to attend college, she was restless in Madison. As she remembers, "From February till June of 1937, while attending school, I balked, complained, and cried that I wanted to *act*" (*CA*, xix). She wrote to actress/director/producer, Eva Le Gallienne, requesting the opportunity to audition for her. Hagen's first stroke of luck came when, "to everyone's amazement," Le Gallienne not only answered her letter but agreed to see her.[8] Her parents allowed Uta to travel east during her spring break to audition, and they financed her trip. Hagen's second stroke of luck was that although Le Gallienne found the young girl's reading "artificial and stilted," she also saw promise: "I felt that here was a real talent, crude and groping, but obviously sensitive to direction."[9] Several months later, when Le Gallienne was searching for a young woman to play Ophelia to her own Hamlet, she thought of Uta Hagen and summoned her to Westport, Connecticut to spend the summer rehearsing for an August performance on Cape Cod (*CA*, xix). This was Hagen's first professional job, and an opportunity to prove herself as an actress--at age 18.[10]

In *A Challenge for the Actor*, Hagen writes a brief overview of the changing role of the actor in theatre history entitled, "The Actor's World." In this chapter, she rues the passing of the actor-manager, when power shifted away from the artist into the hands of what she calls the "nonperforming producer" (*CA*, 10). It would appear that this centuries-old title, "actor-manager," is very close to the role that Eva Le Gallienne played during the summer Hagen spent with her. By all accounts,

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Le Gallienne helped Hagen not only by "discovering" her, she also spent extraordinary time and energy nurturing and tutoring the young actress, initiating her into the world of the theatre.[11]

The critical response to Uta Hagen's professional debut was very positive, though the young actress learned as much about her limitations that summer as she did about her talent, finding her own performances erratic.[12] But equally important to Hagen's future as her work on *Hamlet* was the time she spent with Le Gallienne studying *The Seagull*. Eva Le Gallienne had planned a production of Chekhov's play for that fall and spent a good bit of time rehearsing the role of Nina that summer with Uta at her side. This would prove to be unexpectedly fortuitous for Hagen.
Le Gallienne cancelled her season, but in January 1938, Hagen had the opportunity to audition for Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, who were themselves producing *The Seagull*--and looking for a Nina. With that, says Hagen, "my Broadway career was launched" (*CA*, xix).

Eva Le Gallienne recalls these events in her memoir, *With a Quiet Heart*.

> *The Seagull* had been one of the plays we had worked on most during those months in Westport. I myself was rehearsing the part of Nina, and Uta was studying it along with me. She was present at all our discussions of the play and knew it by heart. When the Lunts started trying out young actresses for this role--and they tried out a great number--Uta succeeded in persuading them to give her an audition and, instead of the usual reading, was actually able to present them with a

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> performance. Her knowledge of the play and the part, combined with her natural talent, impressed them so favorably that they decided to let her play it, and it was the first important step in her career.
>
> I cannot bring myself to believe that such things happen by mere chance. There is a curiously definite line of destiny traceable in the lives of nearly all prominent people in any field.[13]

Whether by chance or destiny, there is no disputing that Uta Hagen "broke into the business" with unusual ease. Her first professional audition led to her first professional job, which led within the year to her first Broadway role. Hagen clearly benefitted from her associations with the prominent artists who took such a personal interest in her talents.

Worth noting is the fact that Hagen was initially nurtured by two powerful female figures in the American theatre: Eva Le Gallienne and Lynn Fontanne. Each woman, in the style of an old-fashioned actor-manager, took Hagen under her wing and taught her lasting lessons in professionalism. Yet while Hagen credits them with giving her her start, and with instilling in her a set a values for a life in the theatre, she does not credit them with teaching her an acting technique.

> I am grateful to Eva Le Gallienne for first believing in my talent, for putting me on the professional stage, for upholding a reverence for the theater, for helping me to believe that the theater should contribute to the spiritual life of a nation. I am grateful to the Lunts for endowing me with a rigorous theater discipline which is still in the marrow of my

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bones. (*RA*, 7)

In fact, if anything, she rejects the acting style she developed following her work with Le Gallienne and the Lunts, ultimately deriving her own approach to acting from Stanislavsky, specifically as handed down to her via Harold Clurman and Herbert Berghof.

When speaking of those early years, which were quite successful for her by commercial standards, Hagen derides her own work:

> I think of the next nine years from the summer of 1938 until the spring of 1947 as the transitional years of my career, during which time I sadly became a Broadway "pro," a slick hack, during which I lost my way and a love of acting until I finally regained it to begin a true life in the theatre. During each of those years I played six to ten weeks of summer stock, even managing to butcher a few beautiful Shaw plays with only one week of rehearsal. I played in seven Broadway productions. . . . I toured extensively. . . .
>
> . . . I had been strongly influenced by the Broadway scene, the "lingo," and the work habits that surrounded me. Once I had left the Lunts, I became enmeshed in a professionalism that is based on external shapes and styles, tricks used to shape a performance almost at the first rehearsal. This resulted in the kind of acceptable cliches I had already rejected when I saw them on stage as a child. (*CA*, xx)

Hagen's language describing her work hints at her own value system: she is ashamed

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of "external shapes," "tricks," and "cliches." She "lost her way" but then was ultimately able to discover her "true life" in the theatre.

Although Uta Hagen says she learned more about work ethic than acting aesthetic from Lunt and Fontanne, the acting lessons she did learn from them are surprisingly Stanislavskian in nature. Hagen is careful to point out that although the Lunts were not "Method" actors, certain elements of their practice bore a resemblance to that approach:

> It is said that the Lunts reject "method" acting, and yet I had an experience with them that went beyond the method of most "method" actors. In the last act of Chekhov's *The Sea Gull* during the big scene between Nina and Konstantin, the rest of the household is supposed to be eating supper in the adjoining room. . . . In performance, when the Lunts left the stage, they actually sat down at a dinner table in the wings, ate food, chatted, and reentered with the reality of having had a meal. (*RA*, 5)

And in a 1979 interview, reflecting on her time with Lunt and Fontanne, Hagen again draws on elements which might be considered Stanislavskian in nature--and elements which are very much the signature of her own "object exercises." "What did I learn from them, as I look back? What I couldn't get over with them--and didn't understand it until I was much older--was their work on detail with objects. It was in their bones that some *thing* should breathe and live and be alive."[14] In singling out such aspects of these actors' work, Hagen also points to an aspect of Stanislavsky's

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system which is too often lost: "We may forget that Stanislavsky went to the finest actors of his day and observed them and questioned them about their approach to their work and from these findings he built his precepts. (He didn't invent them!)" (*RA*, 6). Although there are aspects of the Lunts' "theatricality" which Hagen ultimately rejected, she cites "real acts" with objects and offstage dinners as positive lessons she learned in her quest for a truthful life on stage.

Susan Spector's biographical dissertation, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years: 1919-1951," reconstructs this period in Hagen's career, aided by unusual access to the actress and her papers. Spector's materials include Hagen's journals and letters, as well as personal interviews she conducted with the actress, focusing on this era. These invaluable sources document Hagen's interest in Stanislavskian acting from an early point in her career. In 1937, on a three week visit home to Madison, Hagen studied Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares*. One of her journal entries describes the book as "the most valuable one I ever possessed" and its author as "a man I would love to know and have for a teacher."[15] And in March of 1938, while working on *The Sea Gull*, a fellow actor loaned Hagen his copy of *My Life in Art*, in which Stanislavsky comments on the role of Nina. In a letter to her mother, Hagen wrote: "It is fabulous . . . and I'm going to copy parts of it now."[16] So from a fairly early age, Hagen had an awareness of Stanislavsky and his System.

Hagen also had an awareness of the Group Theatre and its members. During the same year, 1938, Hagen wrote to her parents: "I am still quite shaken from the matinee I saw this afternoon alone, the next to the last performance of *Golden Boy*. I

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tell you--Clifford Odets, he can write. And the players of the Group Theatre, they can play. Dammit! I sat on the edge of my seat and was breathless from beginning to end."[17] So Hagen was in New York early enough to have seen the work of the Group, and to have been impressed by what she saw. Hagen also had personal contact with members of the Group Theatre (including Strasberg, Clurman and Meisner) fairly early in her career.

In 1937, on her trip east to audition for Eva Le Gallienne in Connecticut, Hagen stopped along the way to visit her brother in New York City. According to Susan Spector, Hagen arranged to meet Alexander Kirkland, an actor then working with the Group: "He gave her beer and much advice, and she performed one of her audition pieces for him, Shaw's *St. Joan*. Then she did it again for Lee Strasberg, director of the Group Theatre, who happened to come up to see Kirkland while she was there."[18] While one might be tempted to infer that Strasberg coached Hagen for her successful audition with Le Gallienne, Spector documents only the fact of their meeting but nothing about Hagen's reactions to it.

Hagen was to encounter Strasberg again only two years later, in 1939, this time as an actress working under his direction in Pearl Buck's *Flight into China* at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Milburn, New Jersey. In a 1979 interview with Susan Spector, Hagen is less circumspect regarding her dealings with Strasberg. Spector makes this report:

> Hagen remembers this as one of the worst-cast shows in which she ever appeared. A play about Jewish refugees in China, it seemed to Hagen

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> that all the Jewish characters were played by gentiles, and all the Chinese were played by Jews, except for the two Chinese roles played by herself and [her first husband, José] Ferrer. Working with Strasberg was "strange." Hagen felt that he said little in rehearsal that she was able to use.[19]

Hagen's system of substitution is often likened to Strasberg's Method; Richard Hornby, for one, describes her theory as: "simply a cruder version of the Boleslavsky/Strasberg technique of affective memory."[20] John Harrop identifies Hagen as a "former pupil of Lee Strasberg, . . . a successful professional who presents the basic ideas of the 'method' as filtered through her own experience."[21] But in spite of Hagen's encounters with Strasberg, there is no evidence that she was ever his "pupil"--nor does she ever acknowledge any direct influence. She never gives Strasberg credit for teaching her anything about acting; in fact, she has been quoted as saying of his direction, "Lee Strasberg talked for 19 hours and I never knew what he was talking about."[22] Whatever values the two teachers share, they do not appear to have been passed directly from Strasberg to Hagen.

Hagen also worked with Sanford Meisner early in her career. In the summer of 1941, she and José Ferrer rehearsed a production of Molnar's *The Guardsman* at the Suffern County Playhouse under Meisner's direction. In a letter to her parents in August of that year, she describes herself as "excited and thrilled" to be working on the production. Again, Spector documents the fact that Meisner directed Hagen, but she does not suggest that he had any special effect on Hagen or her approach to

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acting. But Meisner would play a (small) role in another production which would prove to be a turning point in Uta Hagen's career.

In 1947 Hagen was cast in *The Whole World Over*, a Soviet comedy written by Konstantine Simonov and directed by Harold Clurman. Also in the cast was Sanford Meisner.[23] In an interview with Spector, Hagen recalls her trepidation about working with Clurman, and describes how his direction began to lead her to a new way of working.

> After having worked with Strasberg I was very afraid of Clurman because I thought "I won't understand!" Everything Strasberg had said seemed to me "theory." There was nothing he said that I could *do* anything about. But everything Harold said during rehearsals for *The Whole World Over*--and he talked endlessly--stimulated me to *do* something about it. That was to me the big difference, the giant difference.[24]

Since Clurman and Strasberg began in the same place and shared many beliefs about acting in terms of both approach and aesthetics--all derived from Stanislavsky--it is not unlikely that what made the difference to Hagen was the way in which the Stanislavsky-based technique was communicated to her. Instead of being all "theory," Clurman gave her something practical to work on as an actor--something to *do* (which also reflects Stella Adler's thinking as well as Sanford Meisner's catch phrase: "the reality of doing"). Clearly, in her rehearsals with Clurman, Hagen experienced something of a "breakthrough" in her thinking about--and execution of--acting

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technique. Through her work with Clurman, Hagen became a "Method actor."

I have referred to Uta Hagen's good fortune in working with Le Gallienne, Lunt, and Fontanne, but she regards her work and associations in *The Whole World Over* as the best "luck" of her career--and the greatest influence on her acting, when she says: "In 1947 my luck changed--twice" (*CA*, xxi):

> I worked in a play under the direction of Harold Clurman. He opened a new world in the professional theater for me. He took away my "tricks." He imposed no line readings, no gestures, no positions on the actors. At first I floundered badly because for many years I had become accustomed to using specific outer directions as the material from which to construct the mask for my character, the mask behind which I would hide throughout the performance. Mr. Clurman refused to accept a mask. He demanded *me* in the role. My love of acting slowly reawakened as I began to deal with a strange new technique of evolving in the character. I was not allowed to begin with, or concern myself at any time with, a preconceived form. I was assured that a form would *result* from the work we were doing.
>
> I went on to explore more deeply with Herbert Berghof what I had begun to learn from Harold. Herbert gave me painstaking help in how to develop and make use of these discoveries, how to find a true technique of acting, how to make a character flow through me. (*RA*, 8)[25]

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Although she was already a professional actor with ten years of experience and multiple Broadway roles, Hagen believes that she really began to flourish through her use of the Stanislavskian approach to acting, as taught to her by Clurman and nurtured in her by Berghof. The key change, for Hagen, was learning to work from "the inside out," forming the internal world of the character and trusting that the external would follow.

Hagen often names Clurman as the one who transformed her acting by introducing her to this new technique. But there is no question that the most important person in her life, professionally and personally, was Herbert Berghof. Berghof, a Vienna-born actor, was a founding member of the Actors Studio in 1947. He was in the first class headed by Robert Lewis, the advanced group comprised of Broadway and experienced actors; Elia Kazan led the group of younger, less experienced actors.[26] (Bobby Lewis, of course, was an original member of the Group Theatre who had himself trained with Strasberg, but who had sided with Stella Adler in the contretemps of 1934.) Berghof had played numerous leading roles in Europe and on Broadway, had directed in New York, and had begun his own teaching career in 1941 at the Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research (where Stella Adler also taught at that time). He subsequently taught at the Neighborhood Playhouse (where Sanford Meisner taught), and in 1945 founded his own acting school, which became "Herbert Berghof Studio," commonly referred to today as "H.B. Studio," or simply, "H.B." Berghof was the one who led Hagen to her second career: teaching.[27]

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Herbert Berghof was already familiar with Hagen's work before he met her; he had seen her and her first husband, José Ferrer, in a production of *Key Largo*. According to Hagen, Berghof did not think much of her work. "He thought that . . . I was a very boring, sentimental, European, tedious actress. I probably was. I worked very formalistically: literally line-reading, setting every shape, sound, form and movement."[28] Once they met, her acting and her life would change. She says of Berghof:

> A renowned European actor with a total understanding of contemporary acting, he helped me almost at once in the understanding and development of the new techniques I was testing. . . .
>
> Herbert and I fell in love, and, as our lives became ever more closely linked, he invited me to join him in teaching at his studio. I was stunned. What did I know about teaching? He reminded me that as an actress who had worked continuously for almost ten years, having achieved a certain skill and the awareness of many errors as well, I should be willing to share this experience with less knowledgeable colleagues. The concept of sharing appealed to my desire to be of service to others, which was, in fact, a prime motivation for my having wanted to be a part of the theatre in the first place. (*CA*, xxii)

From 1947, then, influenced by Clurman and by Berghof, who shared his Actors Studio training with her, Uta Hagen began to develop her own Stanislavsky-based technique of acting, using it in her roles on the stage--and teaching it in the

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classroom.

The following year, Hagen was cast as Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. When she went into the New York production as a summer replacement for Jessica Tandy, she was directed briefly by Elia Kazan, with whom she argued over interpretation. She was delighted, therefore, to discover that Harold Clurman would be assuming control of the national company of *Streetcar* (albeit without credit), and would be directing her as she prepared to play the role of Blanche in the touring production.[29] Hagen says of her work with Clurman, "We were absolutely *one*--in terms of the meaning of the play, the functioning of Blanche, what should happen--throughout."[30] Hagen received good notices for her performance and taught other professional actors while on the road. When she returned to New York, she took over the role of Blanche in the Broadway production of *Streetcar* and resumed her teaching at H.B. Studio. Her journal reveals her boundless energy and her love of teaching during this period: "I just came home from the third session of the Beginners' Group. God, I learn a lot from teaching."[31] This connection between acting and teaching is characteristic of Hagen. As she told Spector in 1979, "Whenever I had a class during the day, my performance at night was better. I would pose problems in class which presented themselves to me onstage and would try out solutions to them with my students. It fascinated me that I was continuously learning from them."[32]

Hagen is known for her selectivity in choosing her roles; as a result, she has not been seen in every Broadway season in New York, but when she does appear she usually makes an impact. She won her first Tony award for creating the role of

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Georgie in *The Country Girl* (1950), written and directed by another Group Theatre member, Clifford Odets. Hagen's second Tony award was for her creation of the role of Martha in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962). Among her other notable performances are the title roles in *Saint Joan* (1951), *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1956), *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1985), and *Mrs. Klein* (1995). Hagen's selectivity is also reflected in her valuation of art over money. She has avoided Hollywood throughout most of her career, despite the opportunities offered to her, appearing only on rare occasions and usually for financial reasons. Her film credits include roles in *The Other* (1972), *The Boys from Brazil* (1978), and *Reversal of Fortune* (1990). She has instead appeared in countless lesser-known (and doubtless, low-paying or non-paying) productions at H.B. Playwrights Foundation.[33]

Uta Hagen tells a personal anecdote which reveals a great deal about her value system as an artist. In 1980, she appeared in a Broadway production of "Charlotta," a play about Goethe's mistress. This piece was turned into a one-woman vehicle in which Hagen "toured," driving herself in her own station wagon to regional theatres, colleges, and universities for the next two years. Following one performance, she was visited backstage by the renowned producer, Joseph Papp, founder of the Public Theatre. Hagen remembers: "He was wildly enthusiastic, crying and carrying on. And he said to me, 'Isn't it a shame you're not working!' I said, 'What did I just do up there? That was not working?' Really! It gets me so mad. But if you're not being paid big bucks or getting wide exposure, you're not working in this country."[34] Uta Hagen is *always* working. She never stops. As she said in 1996, "I've never

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stopped working at the studio. I teach there all the time. I act in plays there all the time for our playwrights' unit. In fact, I can't recall a time I've not been busy. I'm a real workaholic."[35] "Acting is my work," she says, "but the studio is my life."[36] Hagen's life has never been about fame or being a star. Her life is all about truthful acting: on the stage--and in her H.B. Studio classrooms.

Uta Hagen: Her Influence

As recently as 1998, Vincent Canby, critic for the *New York Times*, announced that Uta Hagen was the number one "best thing" in the New York theatre season with the caption, "UTA!"[37] But as memorable as Hagen's performances have been, her widest influence has been through her teaching, both in the classroom and via her two popular books on acting technique. Since Hagen has taught nearly continuously for more than fifty years, she has influenced literally countless numbers of actors. And as with the other teachers in this study, Hagen's reach extends even further as her students go on to teach students of their own. Many of the current faculty of the H.B. Studio list their studies with Herbert Berghof and Uta Hagen among their leading credentials and say that they use Hagen's exercises in their classes.[38] The H.B. Studio continues to be one of the most affordable--and popular--places for actors to train in New York; this has always been a part of its mission.

The cost of classes at H.B. Studio has always been low, suggesting that the institution intends not to bleed dry the young hopefuls who arrive there to study, but to make it an affordable place for them to work on their craft.[39] Students need not

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enroll on a full-time or even part-time basis, but can take one class at a time. Auditing is permitted. In the fall of 1998, most 19 week courses at H.B. Studio cost either $133.00 or $180.50. In the same semester, the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute required enrollment in two twelve-week courses for part time status at $800.00 for both classes, plus a $150.00 registration fee. The total for two classes was $950.00--nearly four times what two courses would cost at H.B. Studio. The Strasberg courses are also *seven weeks shorter* than those at H.B.[40] During the same time period, The Stella Adler Institute offered eight week workshops which cost from $375 to $625 per course.[41] The Neighborhood Playhouse does not accept students on a per-course basis.[42] The expense of the courses is noted in the H.B. Studio Spring 1999 Brochure, reminding students: "Your teachers are performing artists who gain their livelihood from the theatre, *not* from teaching. Their work is an offering to you, therefore we are able to provide classes at minimal rates."[43] The opening quotation of this chapter, suggesting that one should not trust acting teachers who are not actors, is echoed throughout Uta Hagen's practice, down to the people she employs at the school and the manner in which she pays them.

Uta Hagen's furthest reach as a teacher, however, more than likely comes from her books on acting: *Respect for Acting*, published in 1973, and *A Challenge for the Actor*, published in 1991. *Respect for Acting*, written with Haskel Frankel, was available to actors fourteen years before the written work of Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner had entered the marketplace. And according to the dust cover of the second book, by the time of its publication more than 150,000 copies of *Respect for Acting*

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had already been sold. As Cecilia Jessica Pang has observed, "*Respect for Acting* is the recommended text for all the students at the H.B. Studio, which with its large annual enrollment ensures a large built-in readership. The influence of *Respect for Acting* is unqualified."[44] And according to Hagen, it not only continues to sell, but it outsells her later book, *A Challenge for the Actor*. Both are still in print, and widely used.

Joyce Spivey Aldridge's 1993 dissertation, "The Tradition of American Actor Training and its Current Practice in Undergraduate Education," continues to be an excellent source documenting which acting texts have been strong influences in university classrooms across the country. She discovered that among the six hundred and ten instructors who responded to her survey, *Respect for Acting* ranked as the number three text, used by one hundred and four respondents. (It follows Robert Cohen's textbook *Acting One*, used by one hundred and thirteen instructors, and Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares*, used by one hundred and eleven.)[45] Hagen's second book, *A Challenge for the Actor*, also made the list, ranking as the number seventeen text, required by thirty-seven instructors.[46] Of those instructors who do not require acting textbooks, one hundred and thirty-two said that if they were to consider using one, they would use *Respect for Acting*.[47] Aldridge also reports that many respondents said that even when they don't assign *Respect for Acting* to their students, they nevertheless use it as a supplement to their own teaching.[48] Clearly, Hagen's teachings are widespread--whether or not her "students" have actually entered her classroom.

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Hagen's intention seems to have been that her second book, *A Challenge for the Actor*, should replace her first book, *Respect for Acting*. In a 1998 interview with Alvin Klein, she went so far as to disown the first. "I reject the first book. . . . It was convenient and cute and superficial. But it sells and they won't let it go. I was appalled when I learned it's still selling better than the second and I can't get them to discontinue it."[49] This comment is intriguing in that the differences between the two books are really very slight. *A Challenge for the Actor* reads so much like a revised edition of *Respect for Acting* that I combed the facts of publication for such an indication, but there is none. The structure and theories of each book are ostensibly the same, down to nearly identical exercises, examples, and anecdotes. Many of the roles Hagen explicates are repeated; they are the roles she has played. And although she expands and elaborates on various concepts, and makes changes in terminology (e.g., "substitution" becomes "transference"), the ideas presented in each book, and the technique they represent, are virtually the same.[50]

Respect for Acting is laid out in three sections: "Part One: The Actor"; "Part Two: The Object Exercises"; and "Part Three: The Play and the Role." *A Challenge for the Actor* is laid out in four sections: "Part One: The Actor"; "Part Two: The Human Techniques"; Part Three: The Exercises"; and "Part Four: The Role." The section titles are self explanatory and, though in *Challenge* Hagen splits the second section into two parts, the structure essentially mirrors *Respect*. In each of the books, Hagen begins with an overview of acting: the actor and his instrument; the next portion deals with specific acting exercises; and the third the actor's work on the

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role. Her books are somewhat more comprehensive than those of the other three teachers in this study. Written in careful sequence with learning reader-actors in mind, the books provide actors not only with a set of theoretical tools, but also with a series of exercises that can be performed independently (as well as under the supervision of a teacher). These books, then, are the primary sources on Uta Hagen's technique of acting, and for my discussion of her theories and practices from a feminist perspective.

"Substitution": Observing and Using the Self

Uta Hagen believes that the way to approach external "truth" on the stage is through internal truth. In many ways, her basic theories bear a striking resemblance to those of Lee Strasberg. Like Strasberg, Hagen spends a great deal of time asking actors to observe themselves, and she believes that the truth of the role will be found in the truth of the actor's own life. Hagen combines elements of Strasberg's Method with Stella Adler's attention to the script. But where Adler investigates the script from an intellectual perspective and suggests the imagination as a way of filling the given circumstances, Uta Hagen makes detailed examples of how an actor might substitute his or her own experiences for those of the character.

The basic premise of Uta Hagen's technique of acting is that very nearly everything that one is called upon to produce onstage--all emotions and behaviors--can be found within one's own life. Every dramatic situation has a corollary in every human life. So the first step to producing truthful life onstage is to begin carefully

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observing oneself in real life. The next step is devoted to developing the ability to reproduce one's own real life behavior in a workshop setting. Finally, aspects of one's own behavior (under various conditions) are selected for a particular role, and enacted within a scripted dramatic situation. What one discovers fairly quickly, however, is the fact that this apparently neutral training process immediately becomes gender-specific.

In her introduction to *Feminisms and Pedagogies of Everyday Life*, Carmen Luke remarks on how even educational strategies (in regular schools) that purport to be equal are not. She says: "How the cultural, gender, and class bias of curriculum texts and tests, pedagogy, and policy, work to transform the discourses of equal access and equal participation into unequal material outcomes and the reproduction of class, gender, and race divisions is not part of the official promise and ethos of democratic education."[51] Certainly, this is also the case in an acting classroom that relies so heavily on the reproduction of "real life," and the ultimate channeling of real-life experiences and feelings into scripted material. For as long as dramatic texts require of men and women different emotional experiences and behaviors; accordingly, the exercises actors to prepare for those roles may also rehearse those differences.

The first exercises in Uta Hagen's training have to do with "knowing who you are." They are exercises in self-observation and self-discovery. These are the "object exercises." In the "Basic Object Exercise," the goal is essentially to "watch" oneself in real life, then recreate one's behavior in another setting. As an exercise, actors are charged with "finding and re-creating two minutes out of your own life when you

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were alone" (*RA*, 82). The first part of the exercise is written; an actor should record in minute detail his or her own behavior. In *Respect for Acting*, Hagen demonstrates this by documenting her own behavior while writing her book: "I type. I make typos. I race ahead. I light a cigarette after emptying the ashtray. I battle with content. I battle with order. I take a breather outdoors, and sniff the clematis. I yell at the poodles. I write ten sentences with clarity. I deserve a drink" (*RA*, 85). The second phase of the exercise is the practical component:

> In turning this examination of a few minutes of your life alone into a practical exercise, I ask you not only to test all aspects mentioned above but to pinpoint all of the physical and psychological sensations inherent in them, and then to make a layout of the action for the two minutes you have examined. Then see if you can recreate them as if for the first time. (*RA*, 85)

Using the Stanislavskian "as if," the actor is asked to recreate his or her *own* behavior as a training exercise, long before attempting to execute the behavior of a character.

In some ways, this "object exercise" bears a resemblance to Strasberg's "private moment," but without its more salacious associations. Still, the principle is much the same. Can one behave "naturally" in front of others, executing even the most mundane task "as if" one were alone, exactly as one would in "real life"? And can one see how one's own behavior changes depending upon the circumstances in which one finds oneself? For Hagen, the means to achieving this is through asking a series of who/what/when/where/why questions which consider motivation and need:

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Why do I do what I do? How does my motivation affect the *way* I perform tasks? In this way, the "object exercise" resembles Adler's emphasis on "given circumstances," with the difference being Hagen's emphasis on the "given circumstances" of various moments in one's own life.

The ten object exercises in *Respect for Acting* are these: 1) "The Basic Object Exercise," described above, in which an actor recreates behavior which "leads to the achievement of a simple objective"; 2) "Three Entrances," in which an actor enters a room three times, each with different circumstances which affect the way he or she enters; 3) "Immediacy," which Hagen describes as "dealing with the problems of anticipation while searching for something lost or mislaid; 4) "The Fourth Wall," in which the actor places imaginary objects on the imaginary "fourth wall" between himself or herself and the audience, in order to create a sense of reality; 5) "Endowment," in which one deals with objects *as if* they were other than they are; 6) "Talking to Yourself," which she calls the "problem of the monologue"; 7) "Outdoors," in which an actor works on specific details to recreate the experience of being outside; 8) "Conditioning Forces," in which an actor learns to "put together three or more sensory influences"; 9) "History," in which the actor finds a way to "identify with" historical time and place; and 10) "Character Action," which is about dealing with physical objects as two very different characters would (*RA*, 89-90). Only the last two exercises deal with a character other than oneself; the first eight are all about observing, then recreating one's own behavior in different sets of circumstances. Once one learns to recreate one's own behavior, one can make use of

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that skill in "substitution."

But by now it should be clear that observation of one's "self" is not likely to be a gender-neutral project. This becomes even clearer when one examines Uta Hagen's examples for many of the object lessons. In "The Basic Object Exercise," a woman is lying in bed the morning after a "hot date." She lingers there before preparing for an audition. In the exercise, "you" (the actor) are "the woman":

> You see a man in an apartment across the street watching you in bed. You wonder how to get your robe and slippers. . . .
>
> RELATIONSHIP: . . . To the peeping Tom--he's done this before, and you'll give him his money's worth. . . . MAIN OBJECTIVE: . . . To prepare for the reading. . . . ACTIONS: You leap out of bed and flaunt your behind in your thin nightie at the peeping Tom, before yanking the curtains together and putting on your gorgeous robe. You turn the clock to the wall so that your lateness won't rattle you. You empty your friend's ashtray in the attempt to get him off your mind. You look for an aspirin for your headache, etc., etc. (*RA*, 93)

This exercise is meant simply to illustrate how an actor might observe the minute details of daily life, record them, practice them at home, then repeat them in acting class. The points for feminist concern in the example above are almost too obvious to require explication. The blasé attitude towards the "peeping Tom," the apparent normalcy of his intrusion in the woman's life, and her strange reaction to him are just part of "your" day-to-day life, which are repeated and enacted without analysis. To

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be fair to Hagen, this particular scenario was written in the early 1970s, and it may reflect the thinking of an earlier generation. Still, my concern is that exercises which call upon actors to rehearse their own lives require them to work within a very narrow (and personal) range of material; they may also cause actors to rehearse their social gender roles without question.

"Endowment" is a large part of Hagen's work, in which actors learn to work with props. But Hagen's examples of this work are also gendered, and read almost like *Respect for Acting* meets *Hints From Heloise*--or *Glamour* "Dos and Don'ts." Hagen assumes that women playing women's roles must learn to handle women's objects. This is evident when she talks about "dangerous" objects--those which cannot easily be controlled on stage. Instead of using the "real" thing, the actor endows an object with imaginary properties to make it "believable" to the audience. Hagen says:

> I might not even want to apply real lipstick on stage, because with nervous hands on an opening night it could slip over the edge of my mouth. If there is no room in my stage action for getting cold cream and tissues and fresh powder to repair the damage, I would rather endow a model, a plastic lipstick with color and greasiness as I stretch my lips (already made up) and smear it on evenly. (*RA*, 113)

She warns:

> There are other kinds of "dangerous" objects. Let's say that in an exercise or a play you are getting ready for a heavy date and have to apply makeup. Objects such as mascara, eyeliners, eyebrow pencils,

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> eyedrops, cold cream, lotions, hair spray or pomade, perfume, etc., can all take on a life of their own. (*CA*, 173)

And in great detail she describes another unexpected acting hazard and her solution for dealing with it:

> Start experimenting--let's say, with polishing your nails (real nail polish on stage could create a major hazard if it spilled or got on your hands). First, really polish your nails, and then take an empty bottle with its little brush and see if you can reconstruct the behavior of carefully and evenly smoothing the polish on your nails until you find such belief that, by reflex, you will blow on your nails to make sure they are dry, and you will handle the next object delicately for fear of marring the polish. (*RA*, 115)

It seems that female actors must also be cosmetologists, possessing the skills required to convincingly apply all manner of beauty products (even imaginary ones)--before setting foot onstage. This, too, more than likely reflects the assumptions of an earlier era. The theory of endowment is not what is at issue, here; it is the manner in which it is applied. For Hagen assumes (perhaps rightly, at least in her time) that women will be called upon to handle all of these "feminine" objects; Hagen's training, accordingly, prepares them to meet this requirement.

Hagen also offers numerous examples about other tasks (female) actors should practice: "sewing and threading needles" (*RA*, 114), "prepar[ing] a splendid meal for your lover" (*RA*, 115), and "set[ting] a *perfect* table" (*RA*, 181). In order to

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complicate the exercise, Hagen suggests that the actress might imagine "obstacles" to the task: "Your husband is asleep in the next room" and "The guests are your husband's employers or relatives. They are very fussy and you need to impress them" (*RA*, 181-182). Suddenly, a simple object exercise becomes fraught with all kinds of assumptions about gender roles and power dynamics. "You" can't wake your sleeping husband, while "you" prepare a meal to impress *his* parents and employers. The act of setting the table is no longer an act of merely setting the table.

In another example of endowment, Hagen discusses the problem shoe polish presents. But once again, the surrounding circumstances are cause for concern:

> I remember seeing the final dress rehearsal of a play in which a lover was walking out on his mistress. During the course of the action, she had to polish his shoes as one way of preventing his leaving her. The actress was wearing a pearl-grey dress, and the shoe polish was black. As she knelt on the floor, a shoe in one hand, the cloth with polish in the other, the can of black polish on the floor in front of her, she was crying and pleading with him to stay with her. Soon she had globs of polish on her face, hands, and all over her gray costume. It was quite realistic except for one thing. At the end of the scene, the curtain was lowered for only a second and rose again for the next scene which took place a few days later. Her costume and face were still covered with black. In following performances, the inside of the shoe polish can was painted black, without real polish in it, and the actress had found the

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> correct behavior of working with it, the cloth and the shoe, so that not only she but the audience believed she was actually using shoe polish. (*RA*, 113)

The audience must also have believed, I surmise, that to get on her knees and polish a man's shoes is a plausible--and possibly appropriate--way for a woman to keep her lover.

Observing oneself in real life seems, at face value, to be a fairly innocuous assignment. Yet, as demonstrated above, it can be far more complex a project. For in so many of these examples, Hagen assumes not only that simple, daily tasks will be assigned by gender; it also seems that these tasks are performed by women *for men*. Hagen provides very few--if any--examples which assume a male actor in the exercise. But in all of the examples for women, daily behavior includes beautifying oneself for and attending to the needs of men. To act is to serve. These exercises do not engage the imagination or test boundaries. And presumably, if one observes oneself in life, and repeats in class, one maintains the status quo. One's role "in life" becomes the role one plays in the acting classroom. The "self" is at the center of the work.

While it is essentially a Stanislavskian precept that one only has oneself on the stage--an actor's physical, intellectual, and emotional apparatus are his or hers and no one else's--Stanislavsky also allows for the observation of other people as models for behavior onstage (as does Stella Adler), as well as the use of imagination. This is less the case with Uta Hagen. She is adamant that actors must always draw on their own behavior. If one observes others it is to "identify" with what they are experiencing; if

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one uses imagination, it is to project one's self into an imaginary situation which bears resemblance to something one has experienced or felt in real life. Part of the actor's job is to build up a "warehouse" of experiences which can be used to play character: "The continuing job of learning to find out who you *really* are, of learning to pinpoint your responses--and even more important--the myriad, consequent behaviorisms which result--will help you begin to fill your warehouse with sources upon which to draw for the construction of a character (the new *you* selected for your character on stage)." (*RA*, 26).

What this approach does not consider, however, is the possibility that the personal experience and behavior of each individual human being may *not* contain within itself the entire range of human experience and behavior. This is a weakness in American Method acting which has often been cited by its critics; Method actors are often accused of "playing themselves" and of being incapable of playing "characters." No one has been more vociferous in this criticism than Richard Hornby in *The End of Acting: A Radical View.* Hornby remarks that while one myth of acting is that the realistic actor holds a mirror up to nature, "analyzing the behavior of his fellow human beings," the contemporary American actor is more likely to "[hold] the mirror up to his *own* nature, analyzing his own behavior."[52] He comments specifically about Uta Hagen, who has developed this approach into her own method called "substitution." But Hornby is skeptical: "Theories like this are dubious."[53] Theories like this are dubious from a feminist perspective, too. For as Hornby says:

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> Agonizing, observing, or remembering are not really central to an actor's work, though all actors do these things occasionally. To stress them as a basis for acting is misleading, especially in teaching where it can lead to disastrous results. The theory of the suffering actor is of course just the "real, honest emotion" approach all over again.[54]

Hornby is not particularly concerned with the female actor, but his comments have relevance for her. For even if one's self-observation in real life reveals a strong and "liberated" subjectivity, that identity may not always be expressed--or exercised--in a traditional acting classroom. The roles for which an actress prepares herself are female roles, roles which will more than likely require an altogether different set of personal skills.

"The Play and the [Female] Role": Playing Women

At the very beginning of *A Challenge for the Actor* (1991), in a section entitled, "Acknowledgments, An Apology, and a Little Advice," the apology to which Uta Hagen refers is addressed to feminists, although it might be more accurately described as a justification (rather than an apology) for her refusal to employ gender inclusive language in her narrative.

> My apologies to feminists who may take offense at continual references to members of the profession as "the actor" and "he." They must understand how tedious it would be if I always had to mention both sexes--"he or she," "the actor or actress." I call myself an actor, rarely

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> an actress, and think of myself as a member of mankind--not of personkind. Ladies are definitely included. (*CA*, xii)

Hagen is not alone in finding gender inclusive language a bit of a nuisance; many writers find the construction awkward. She explains her choice by asserting that it's only a matter of semantics. But she doesn't really sound sorry; the passage looks something like an afterthought, possibly suggested by an editor who might have recognized, in 1991, that such a disclaimer was necessary.

But it is ironic that Hagen chose the male "universal" pronouns in writing her books, for the examples she uses in each are far more likely to be of women's roles than men's. And in the field of acting--and especially in an acting text--the use of masculine pronouns has a somewhat more complex effect than to subtly exclude the female reader. Hagen makes the assumption that the acting process--and the techniques she is transmitting--are the same for men and women, for the actor *or* the actress. She also sends a curiously mixed message about her own point of view on the subject. On the one hand, she is clearly a strong, accomplished, professional woman who identifies herself not by the diminutive term, "actress," but as an "actor"--one who acts. As she says, "*To act* means to do" (*CA*, 286). On the other hand, she apologizes not to women but to *feminists*; she appears to distance herself from feminism by referring to feminists as "them," and asking that "they must understand" the "tediousness" of inclusive language. It is seems likely that Hagen's statement that "ladies are definitely included" reflects her generation's use of words rather than an outright rejection of feminism. I will argue, however, that in Hagen's

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system of "substitution," women actors may often be asked to conjure the "ladies" within themselves, and to behave in a "ladylike" fashion.

Nowhere is this clearer than when Hagen specifically addresses the work that actors must do to prepare to play a role. Many of the roles she discusses are, quite logically, roles she has played herself. In discussing these characters, Hagen obviously brings a very rich background to her students. This is the quality for which her teaching is so often prized: she speaks from her own experience. The roles she has prepared and played are roles which were scripted for women. But as Hagen explicates the preparation for one role after another, an unmistakable pattern begins to emerge. The female characters she discusses are rarely active and powerful in the way that male characters are. They represent feminist theatre theorists' most profound concerns about representations of women on the stage.

Hélène Cixous expresses concern about the victimization of women in canonical works of theatre in her essay "Aller à la mer." She argues that women like Electra, Antigone, Ophelia, and Cordelia are always condemned:

> It is always necessary for a women to die in order for the play to begin. Only when she has disappeared can the curtain go up; she is relegated to repression, to the grave, the asylum, oblivion and silence. When she does make an appearance, she is doomed, ostracized or in a waiting room. She is loved only when absent or abused, a phantom or a fascinating abyss. Outside and also beside herself. That is why I stopped going to the theatre; it was like going to my own funeral, and

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> it does not produce a living woman or (and this is no accident) her body or even her unconscious.[55]

Cixous' feminist argument of the 1980s was (naively) prefigured by Uta Hagen's six year old daughter, Letty, nearly forty years earlier. Hagen tells a story about her young daughter's reluctance to go to the theatre, and Letty's mounting hysteria while watching her mother perform onstage:

> Once I did a play with Herbert. This was in 1947, and Letty was in the audience. She was very verbal and I told the nurse, if she starts talking, take her out. At one point, I heard this wild sobbing. The nurse brought her backstage and I said, "Letty, what is the matter?" And she cried, "When are you going to die?" And I said, "I don't die in this one." But she cried, "You do! You always die!"[56]

Even as a little girl, Letty's recognized the fact that her mother, as a leading actress, nearly always played characters who are "doomed."

While this territory has been mined by theorists exploring questions about representation of women in the theatre and the effects on the spectator, there has been relatively little discussion of what it takes to *play* these roles. And although feminist theorists may have left the debate about realism behind, female actors are not in a similar position; they continue to encounter and enact these roles everyday.[57] A major component of Hagen's teaching is the preparation of roles; her own examples, therefore, provide strong evidence of how the roles themselves restrict the range of the female actor's expression. Since Hagen demands that actors observe *themselves* to

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find source material for the enacted role, the women are asked to mine a very particular strip.

The simple fact is this: in the Stanislavsky-based tradition of American actor training, women actors typically train to perform female roles. Of course. This is simply logical. But it is not without meaning. For many female actors continue to prepare for particular *kinds* of roles on stage in much the same way that their mothers and grandmothers prepared for their *social* roles in life. Hagen talks about the ways in which actors can make use of biographies, histories, and travel in preparing roles. But her imagination has its limits; she envisions herself almost exclusively as the *women* of history. And historically, the place of women in society--even great women--was often limited. In *Respect for Acting*, she says: "I went to the block with Marie Antoinette. . . . I was married to Kaiser Franz Joseph. . . . I prepared myself for the block dressing all in red so the blood wouldn't show, as Mary Queen of Scots, and I had all of Queen Victoria's endless children" (*RA*, 31). In *A Challenge for the Actor*, she says that in Rome, she sees herself as "Calpurnia accompanying Caesar on his way to the senate," and as a "Vestal Virgin--or her slave" (*CA*, 218). In England, she imagines she is Elizabeth the First, "being brought as a prisoner through Traitor's Gate" (*CA*, 218). She sees herself as Anne Boleyn in the place where she loses her head, and as "a lady in attendance," or the "mistress of a courtier" (*CA*, 218-219). Nearly every one of these figures is identified principally as wife, mother, daughter, mistress, or slave. But as Gayle Rubin says, "A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human

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dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money."[58] Just as Rubin argues that women only become these various identities through (gender) relations to men, women also assume those identities as female characters in (gender) relations to the male characters in plays. The characters Hagen imagines she can play only have identities insofar as they are in relationship to men; worse, most of the women are completely at the mercy of men--more "doomed" figures.[59]

To all outward appearances, Hagen is nobody's slave. So how does she act the slave? In Hagen's theory of substitution, the argument would be that we all have a slave within us. There are certain circumstances--different for each person--which will bring out the inner slave. This is also true for a strong woman asked to play a fluffy, feminine part.

> If I am to play a silly, fluffy creature, and I think I am not such a person. I cannot use myself. I mistakenly believe I can only *indicate* what *she* would do. Yet if I watch myself greeting the dogs with gushes of baby talk and little giggles, I am silly. If I talk to a scientist, even to an electrician, *I* am stupid, though my cliche image tells me I am brilliant. If a drunken, bigoted doorman gives me a hard time, I appear snobbish and I pull rank. I think I am fearless, but you should see me with a mouse. (*RA*, 26)

Hagen's suggestions for identifying with the role make sense; she claims that this is a way to play a character whom one perceives as different from oneself: find the

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similarities. But what is of concern for the female actor-in-training is the qualities she is asked to practice. How often is a man called upon to play silliness and fluffiness, stupidity and fear? A woman, on the other hand, must "dumb down," imagining herself as stupid as she would be with a scientist; snobbish as if harassed by a drunken doorman; frightened by a mouse. In the examples Hagen draws, she works primarily on becoming less than she is.

Hagen takes this same advice and applies it to a specific role, that of Laura in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. How does an actress playing Laura play shyness, when she feels that she (the actress) has never been shy? Hagen says, "I have only to suggest a time when she may have been to a high school dance with a big pimple on her chin, and the memory will turn the unshy actress into a blushing wallflower" (*RA*, 29). The actress need not imagine shyness; she digs within herself for an experience of shyness so that she might reexperience it--replicate it.

Hagen offers other lessons in substitution, among them the role of Georgie in Clifford Odets' *The Country Girl*. She refers to a moment in the play when another character insults Georgie and describes what she did as an actress to create the necessary response:

> In *The Country Girl*, there is a point where Bernie Dodd calls George Elgin a "bitch." This should act on me as deeply wounding, insulting, and produce a shocked gasp. But the word itself does not mean much to me. I substituted another word. What if he called me a ". . . . "? That word does shock and wound me. I imagined that Bernie hurled

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> that word at me, and it drove me up from my chair. (*RA*, 41)

Hagen leaves her readers to imagine what the word is--and imagine it we do. But what is troubling, once again, is that the actress has to work on responding to a "wounding" and "insulting" gesture. In this case, she conjures an even worse vulgarity than the one in the script, meant specifically to humiliate a woman.

In another part of *The Country Girl*, Hagen recalls having difficulty knowing how to behave towards her husband in the wake of his betrayal. Hagen would not, herself, deal with her husband in the same manner that Georgie does. So she uses a "substitution":

> I was able to receive the betrayal correctly, but somehow it didn't seem to make the consequent dealing with him specific enough. But what if I thought of myself as a put-upon mother with a naughty child? How would I then deal with my own daughter? The moment I applied this substitution to my Frank, I discovered the *how* of taking his hand, the *how* of almost *pulling him along with me, the* how of giving him the glass of water; these actions became specific, in fact, loaded. And I must give special emphasis to the fact that Frank was, at this moment, like a child to me, and something brand new happened between me and the actor. I *no longer* needed to use my daughter. I *had used* her to find *this* reality on stage. (*RA*, 41-42) (Hagen's emphases.)

Here, in order to justify this wife's behavior towards her husband, Hagen finds it useful to regard him as a child. The scripted character is betrayed by her husband,

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but she remains with him, babying him. While this may be what is needed in the script, the point, here, is that the female actress isn't allowed to react to betrayal with anger, aggression, power, or strength--she must substitute her "natural" maternal impulses to create the necessary effect.

Finding "shame" seems to be a recurring theme for the female actress. And in Uta Hagen's approach, it is not enough to indicate shame, or to draw on the experience of having seen someone in shame; one must *reexperience* shame, by either recalling an actual incident or by imagining a situation in one's own life which did or would produce shameful feelings. Hagen describes working with a young actress who was having difficulty with such a moment in a play called *Children in Uniform*. The character, Manuela, is ashamed to be scolded by her teacher about a torn chemise. Hagen says:

> Manuela must react with deep shame and humiliation. The actress could not make this moment meaningful. Neither the garment nor the actress playing the teacher seemed to matter enough to her. Accidentally, I supplied her with a stimulating substitution for both teacher and chemise. I said, "What if Lynn Fontanne had a pair of your soiled panties in her hand and showed them to you?" The actress turned beet red, snatched the chemise from her Fraulein von Bernberg and hid it frantically behind her back. (*RA*, 35)

The image Hagen chooses, "soiled panties," is a curious one, with all sorts of very private (and possibly female) connotations. That soiled panties are themselves a

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source of "shame" is something both Hagen and her student actress seem to assume and understand. But whatever the chosen image, the point is that "shame" is the emotion the young actress has to work on. Is it possible that women become more "skilled" than men in getting at truthful moments of shame, humiliation, and degradation? Of course men must also enact--and therefore experience--moments of shame and humiliation in many plays, but I would argue that the *source* of that shame is less likely to be gender-based for male characters than it is for female.

Hagen also talks about how important it is for an actor to accept--and enact--the author's premise. In some cases, it becomes necessary for a woman to guard against imposing her own understanding of female experience if it conflicts with what is represented by the character and the play. One clear example of this is offered by Hagen in her explication of the female role in Murray Schisgal's *The Tiger*.

> The actors [in this play] often sink into a morass of heavy-handed, illogical actions when they fail to examine the whole truth of the material. The actress will only be able to justify that being abducted and dragged to a man's apartment can be an exciting adventure if she remembers that her character is a bored, suburban housewife whose sole entertainment is a weekly trip to town to shop and play bridge and, more importantly, when she considers that her abductor is a *sheep* in tiger's clothing, who is rather like Woody Allen. And the [male] actor must not forget that his character is desperately *trying* to fulfill his fantasy of being a tiger. If he behaves instead like a sadistic Jack

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> Palance, the play will become ugly, illogical, and pointlessly frightening. (*CA*, 243)

Here, the female actress is asked to imagine abduction as an adventure, while the male actor works on carrying out his fantasy--which appears to be holding a woman against her will. Hagen demands that the actors find ways of "justifying" these actions. That she does so is implication itself that most women might read the play and *not* see the "adventure" in the scenario--particularly if they approach the role "truthfully." *Truthfully*, being abducted against one's will is not everyone's dream of alleviating boredom. But the actor's job is to act *as if* abduction were an "adventure." In each situation, the actress is asked to lay her critical skills aside. She must not question the premise, but find a way to fulfill it.

That there are gender differences in the way actors train, and in the kind of substitutions they must make, is reinforced by Uta Hagen's discussion of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Early in her career, Hagen played Desdemona to Paul Robeson's Othello, with her husband, José Ferrer, in the role of Iago. Drawing on her own experience of the play, she addresses a frequently encountered acting problem: How do actors play experiences they claim they have never had?

> Faced with Othello's final scene with Desdemona, an actor may protest, "But how can I find a substitution when I've never had the desire to murder anyone?" Or the Desdemona may complain, "I know I should be terrified, but no one has ever threatened to kill me!" In both instances my answer would be, "I hope not!" (*RA*, 39-40)

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Her advice is that actors seek out the proper psychological objective for the scene, then find a personal substitution for it:

> If I am Desdemona in this scene, I should see that I want to cope with a foreboding of an unspecified disaster. I want to rid myself of a sense of mounting terror. As illogical as it may sound, I can use an experience of waiting in a hospital room prior to surgery, even a dentist's office prior to a tooth extraction. The fears that rush in on me are larger and less static than some fictional, preconceived fear for *a* Desdemona. (*RA*, 40)

Then, Hagen turns her attention to Othello:

> Othello, in turn, should look for the psychological need for retribution, for having to fulfill a great obligation which tortures him and gives him pain. The actor is stopped over and over again by his sense of hunting for a similarity of events in the play and in his own life, rather than a similarity of psychological experiences (for example, the need to punish a child) which then should allow him to accept the events with faith. (*RA*, 40)

There are two layers of interest here when examining gender issues in actor training. The first is how often the actors playing such roles claim not to have had analogous experiences in their own lives. The Desdemona has not had anyone try to kill her, and in this instance, has not been in an abusive relationship or something "analogous." Similarly, the Othello has never had the desire to murder anyone. This calls into

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question the "truth" of the experiences. The actors don't *feel* these truths; in Hagen's technique, they cannot play them without finding them first. The "timeless" (gender) roles of the jealous, murderous husband and his fearful, unjustly accused, victimized wife must be enacted. And the way for that to happen is for the woman to substitute her fear with one she knows--fear of a dentist--and for the man to substitute Othello's murderous rage with the "need to punish a child." The male and female actors are "working on" different emotions, and "getting at" different "truths." What effect(s) does this have on the learning actor?

Suzanne Burgoyne, a university theatre director and teacher, and Karen Poulin, a psychologist, have recently collaborated on a study which examines how students are emotionally affected by actor-training: "The Impact of Acting on Student Actors: Boundary Blurring, Growth, and Emotional Distress."[60] Conducting in-depth interviews with university students across a range of ages and experience, Burgoyne and Poulin sought to discover how a "boundary blurring" between the actor and the character he or she plays may affect student actors. They say:

> In the context of an inside-out approach [to acting], actors may use strategies for connecting emotionally with their characters (such as comparing themselves to their characters and personalizing) that, in interaction with other conditions, may result in the blurring of role/self boundaries and the activation of what we describe as the life/theatre feedback loop. When this process is activated negatively, the actor's personal life may supplant the character in performance, leading the

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> actor to lose control onstage. Conversely, the actor's character may take over offstage, with the actor carrying over character behavior into everyday life. A consequence of both processes is emotional distress.[61]

The process they describe--"connecting emotionally" and "personalizing"--is exactly what Hagen advocates. And while Burgoyne and Poulin's article does not explicitly examine feminist concerns regarding actor training, their findings about the emotional experiences of actors-in-training raises a number of very important issues for feminist practitioners.

In several instances in Burgoyne and Poulin's study, male actors report having lost control when playing violent scenes; their female counterparts (and acting partners) report feeling victimized when playing the "victim" in the scene. For example, they say:

> Barb told of playing a nun in *Marat/Sade* and having to perform a violent rape scene with an actor who "often was completely out of control." No matter how many times Barb tried to establish safety procedures with her acting partner--and in spite of the cast having worked with a fight choreographer--she reported that her partner "would often bruise me, hurt me, just throw me too hard; whatever it was, he would often cross those lines between, 'This is safe and this is not safe.'" Barb noted that this incident occurred very early in her acting career. Not knowing how to deal with the situation, she never approached the director for help but blamed herself: "I thought, 'Oh, I

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> must be stupid . . . maybe it's my fault and he's doing this or maybe . . . that's how it's supposed to be.'"[62]

Here, in spite of the fact that the scene was "staged" with a fight choreographer, when the male actor is asked to identify with the aggressor the boundary lines get blurred; he loses control. And when the female actor identifies with his victim, a nun, she experiences her own blurring of boundaries, assuming the assault is somehow her fault. In enacting a fictional scene--an "imaginary" set of circumstances--the actress is *really* bruised. The ramifications of this are far reaching; they affect the young woman as an actor and a person.

Another area Burgoyne and Poulin touch upon pertains to casting--and stereotyping--of women. This is an issue that should be of real concern to anyone teaching young actors. They discuss the fact that several of the women they interviewed expressed feelings that the way(s) in which they were cast had impact upon their "real-life" self-images:

> Monica's recognition of her typecasting resulted in personal growth. Her realization that she tended to be cast in cold, bitchy roles led her to reflect upon her real-life behavior, and her improvement in expressing vulnerability onstage led to similar changes in her offstage responses. . . . Other respondents, however, viewed their typecasting as negative. Both women described themselves as "large" and discussed how their typecasting, by confirming the stereotype of what is and is not physically attractive in a female, has had a negative impact on their

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> self-concepts. Jennifer, who is usually cast in maternal roles, said she has to struggle to maintain her personal self-image as a sexual being. She finds particularly rewarding those roles that allow her to show another side of herself and challenge cultural stereotypes. Mary, a former professional actor, recounted what may be a different kind of boundary blurring, in terms not of individual role but typecasting. From her first roles in her teenage years, she was cast as old women, unattractive younger women, or men. Mary explained that her casting, combined with family issues and several abusive relationships, "pretty much destroyed" any "sense of myself as a woman and being attractive."[63]

The notion of what a woman "should be" persists. Monica works on becoming more "vulnerable" in life so that she can avoid being perceived as "bitchy" and therefore cast only in cold, bitchy roles. The other two women represent the flip-side of Lee Strasberg's predilection for sexually attractive female students; instead of receiving encouragement to play "sex kittens," they are encouraged to play desexualized women.

Burgoyne and Poulin concern themselves primarily with the emotional effects of actor training, and particularly the emotional effects on university students. I must stipulate that there are--and should be--some important differences between college acting classes and professional actor training. The need to monitor the emotional impact of all aspects of acting, including casting, may be more pressing on the

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university level, where inexperienced adolescents and post-adolescents may have identities which are still fragile and forming. But my concern regarding casting of acting students relates to the power of the individual acting teacher's perceptions in determining what roles an actress might play. In an under-studied phenomenon, many women are routinely deprived of the opportunity to play sexually desirable--and desiring--women. Women who, for whatever reasons, do not conform to conventional standards of beauty may not be granted the opportunity explore certain kinds of roles. Conversely, pretty girls may be kept from playing gritty women--just because the teacher doesn't see them that way. While I don't dispute the fact that casting decisions in the professional theatre are usually out of the actor's hands, and while it may be somehow empowering for actors to have a sense of their "type" in order to better prepare themselves (and their expectations) for auditions, it also seems possible that actors may be "held back" in all kinds of ways by the individual perceptions of not only professional directors, but subjective acting teachers.

Ironically, Uta Hagen has herself described the limitations of typecasting, especially for older women: "At my age, it's very hard to find a challenging role that's not about Alzheimer's or something like that."[64] She claims to have hated playing the German housekeeper in the film, *Reversal of Fortune*, saying: "I did it for the money." The only film offers she receives are for "little old Jewish ladies, little old German ladies."[65] In her most recent work, Hagen has played the title role of the psychoanalyst in *Mrs. Klein*, and a writer and university instructor in *Collected Stories*--both professional women in all-woman plays. What Hagen is not playing are

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"little old ladies"—or somebody's grandmother. The problem of available roles for women in the American (or even English language) theatre is certainly a much larger issue than this project can address. But the implementation of scripted roles for women in acting classes is of material concern. For the ways in which female students think of themselves—as actors and as women—may become debilitated by the roles they are asked to play; their acting skills may become negatively affected and narrowly defined.

Playing Blanche

Within this case study of Uta Hagen, perhaps the most effective way to illustrate her approach to playing a role is with another case study: the role of Blanche DuBois. Although Uta Hagen did not originate the role of Blanche in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, she received critical acclaim for her performance and was often favorably contrasted with her predecessor, Jessica Tandy.[66] In both of her books on acting, Hagen uses this role as an example for actors, clearly drawing on her own preparation as a means of instruction.

The role of Blanche is a famous one, and one which has been seen as emblematic of the kinds of concerns many feminist theatre theorists have regarding the representation of women in realism. Sue-Ellen Case says of the play, "A feminist review of the sexuality of Blanche in Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* . . . could reveal the ways in which [this] character [was] drawn from Freudian biases." Observing the relationship between Blanche and Stanley in *Streetcar*, she argues that

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such texts "portray women's sexuality as subordinate and derivative in relation to that of the leading male characters, reflecting the subject position of male sexuality within the Freudian-based theatrical domain."[67] This is the "big picture" of female sexuality in realism. But a close reading of the role of Blanche--and specifically of Uta Hagen's approach to playing her--will reveal other problems for the female actor.

In *Respect for Acting*, Uta Hagen outlines the ways in which an actor might use her system of "substitution" to play Blanche. Hagen's own approach to the role becomes a "how to"--an object lesson for her students.

> Let me illustrate some of the substitution areas and approximately how you must deal with them. . . . Suppose I am going to work on the part of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I have to hunt for an understanding of--and an identification with--the character's main needs: a need for perfection (and always *when* and *how* have I needed these things); a romantic need for beauty; a desire for gentleness, tenderness, delicacy, elegance, decorum; a need to be loved and protected; a strong sensual need; a need for delusion when things go wrong, etc. (*RA*, 37) (Hagen's emphases.)

One notes immediately that the quality of the "needs" with which the actor playing Blanche must identify might be described as either "feminine"--or neurotic. While these may indeed be Blanche's qualities, the Hagen actor cannot create this character through observation of others, nor is she allowed to think of these qualities as "Blanche's." She must instead draw on her own life and emotional experience to

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locate the occasions when she has experienced analogous needs, so that her own feelings may be *substituted* for those of Blanche.

Uta Hagen elaborates on this concept in her later book, *A Challenge for the Actor*, when she specifically details the attitude an actor must take towards the character of Blanche. She cannot regard Blanche as a character separate from herself; the character's experiences are created through the actor's re-creations of her own. (At the time of her writing of *A Challenge for the Actor*, Uta Hagen changed her terminology, replacing the word "substitution" with "transference." The concepts are the same.)

> Let me take Blanche DuBois as an example since most of you will be familiar with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. . . . The facts about Blanche's life, which are revealed through the action, will eventually be made personal by transferences from your own life. In the first scene you learn that "you" were raised at Belle Reve, . . "you" had to become a schoolteacher, using "your" meager salary in an attempt to hang on to "your" home. You learn that "your mother, father, and other relatives died, some of them in your arms after gruesome illnesses . . . through which "you" nursed them. . . . Later you will read that "you" had married a beautiful young gentleman, that "you" had idolized him until "you" surprised him in a compromising position with an older man, after which "your" young, homosexual husband committed suicide.
>
> In an attempt to recapture this lost love, "you" began to seduce

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> young men and to drink more and more. . . . "You" were virtually run out of town. At the play's opening, then, "you" are homeless, penniless, seeking refuge with "your" sister and brother-in-law. . . . *That* is where "your" life in the play begins! (*CA*, 61-62) (Hagen's emphases.)

This section on finding "transferences" for Blanche runs approximately ten pages in Hagen's book; it is quoted here at length (though in much abbreviated form) in order to demonstrate Hagen's hammering away at her central point: "you" are Blanche. An actor is not allowed third-person distance in even thinking about the character; her past is "your" past.

One might argue that this phase of the actor's preparation is somewhat akin to Stella Adler's emphasis on the "given circumstances" of the play. But Hagen takes the concept in a significantly different direction. Instead of beginning by conducting a literary analysis of the play, or even an investigation into the sociopolitical environment in which the character finds herself (and is constructed), Hagen formulates different kinds of questions. Where Adler might talk specifically about the economic circumstances which contextualize Blanche's background and choices, Hagen bypasses this line of inquiry, instead asking the actor to merely accept the character's desperation and to search her own experience for similar feelings of despair. The intellectual and imaginative understanding of the given circumstances is replaced with emotional identification. As Hagen says,

> It is unlikely that your imagination will have been powerful enough to

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> have turned all these overwhelming facts into a sufficient reality for you to have identified with them, but it *will* serve you *now* if you slowly **begin to make transferences from your own experiences to those in the play until they become *synonymous* with them.** (*CA*, 62) (Hagen's emphases.)

What proves troubling, once again, is the type of personal experiences on which actors must draw to play a role such as Blanche.

At the start of the play, Blanche is, as Hagen details, frightened, shamed, and deluded. How does the actor fill these emotions? Hagen suggests the following substitutions: "You must find a substitute for this loss of roots, for the despair that takes hold when your home is lost or threatened. Moving away--even if it is to a better place--can be a frightening experience, creating a sense of insecurity and panic comparable to Blanche's feelings" (*CA*, 63). In order to evoke the memory of Blanche's discovery of her young husband in a sexual interlude with another man, and to feel Blanche's guilt at provoking his subsequent suicide, Hagen suggests:

> To her it was an aberration, something repulsive, comparable to coming across a slithering snake, a giant spider, or a snarling, scruffy rat. You can transfer whatever spells out revulsion to you. In other words, you will want a psychological trigger for that moment of recall. It will be necessary to link the suicide of "your" husband to a disaster for which you feel responsible, for which you carry the blame because he shot himself after "you" had accused him of disgusting "you." Try to recall

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> if someone was fired because of something you said or did. . . . Actually *anything* horrible you feel you could have prevented can now be transferred to the sense of guilt "you" have for Allan Grey's death. (*CA*, 64)

In addition to finding substitutions for fear and guilt, the actress playing Blanche must also locate feelings of shame connected with her "sexual exploits," "escape into alcohol," and exposure to "scandalous behavior" (*CA*, 64). Reading the role from a feminist perspective, one cannot help but note that each of these emotional circumstances requires the actor to delve into the parts of herself which are utterly lacking in self-esteem.

Hagen recalls, for example, an incident from her childhood which she found useful for the ninth scene of *Streetcar*, when Mitch confronts Blanche with accusations of her shameful doings and deceit. Hagen remembers being attacked by a group of children on her way home from school, pelted with frozen snowballs.

> As I tried to flee from them, the snowballs' impact on my back and shoulders almost knocked the breath out of me. One that hit the side of my face drew blood. But even more terrifying was the epithet the children yowled at me like snarling wolves--"Atheist! Atheist! Atheist!"--because they knew we didn't go to church. I noticed one with frost-spotted spectacles that made him appear blind. The recall of those spectacles brings back a flood of terror, of senseless shame, of being hounded, of never reaching safety. (*CA*, 91)

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Hagen says she used the memory of those eyeglasses as a substitution for Mitch's accusations. This childhood memory provided her with the shame and fear—the "flood of terror" she needed to play Blanche. This story bears a striking resemblance to Sanford Meisner's in the last chapter, when he asks one of his students to recall a childhood sexual assault as a means of re-experiencing the feeling of deep shame.[68] Again, an actress must draw on feelings of weakness, vulnerability, and shame. And like Meisner, Hagen seems more concerned with the emotional identification, here, than with determining how emotion is translated into action.

To find Blanche's delicacy, Hagen instructs the actor to discover those aspects of "*your* reality" (*CA*, 64). She suggests that the actress playing Blanche might try wearing white gloves, taking a bubble bath, perfuming herself with a floral scent and dressing in lingerie, "while imagining that this is habitual behavior to maintain confidence in your femininity" (*CA*, 65). Here, confidence in one's actual femininity is seen as crucial for playing femininity. To find Blanche's delusional qualities, Hagen suggests that the actor should "Try to recall a time when you lied about your age because you believed you were too old to be cast in a wonderful role" (*CA*, 65). Again, she encourages the actress to indulge in her feelings of unworthiness. Hagen argues that we all have many daily experiences of self-deception, as we look in the mirror and "see what we *want* to see rather than what is actually reflected" (*CA*, 65-66). And she points out that "The need to be loved and protected is at a peak when we feel abandoned and are particularly vulnerable to difficult circumstances" (*CA*, 65). But the question that I would pose is this: how often are men called upon to

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identify with these feelings and concerns? Are women more likely to be required to stimulate the most fragile, feminine, *vulnerable* aspects of themselves--and without distancing themselves from the characters they portray?[69]

The second phase of preparation for the role of Blanche (and any role, for that matter) is what Hagen terms "particularization." Where "substitution" (or "transference") helps the actor to prepare the character's past circumstances, merging "real" experiences with the fictional ones, particularization does the same for the events of the play. "Particularization," says Hagen, is "*not* homework but a part of the actual rehearsal procedure. . . . the making of each event, each person, and each place down to the smallest physical object as particular as possible" (*CA*, 66). Such particularizations extend not only to objects but to people--to onstage relationships. This is a departure from Sanford Meisner's insistence on relating with the *actual* human being who is the acting partner. Instead, Hagen suggests that the actor substitute equivalent relationships from her own life.

For Blanche's relationship to Stella, for example, Hagen suggests "using a substitution of an actual younger sister, cousin, or friend whom you enjoyed caring for and, at times, lorded it over" (*CA*, 68). Early in rehearsals, she says, the actor playing Stanley will not have yet developed his character. So the actress playing Blanche must "endow him with the qualities of the brawny, dirty, bigoted mechanic at the corner filling station, imagining this man to be married to 'your' gentle little sister" (*CA*, 69). The character of the young newspaper collector, Hagen believes, "must symbolize romantic dreams and evoke in Blanche all the nostalgia for her lost

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youth, her yearnings for gentility" (*CA*, 69). Again departing from Meisner's "reality of doing," Hagen asserts: "It is unlikely that the actor playing this role will supply all the needed elements to provide your Blanche with a sufficient stimulus to induce the correct actions. You will want to transfer to him a person from your own past" (*CA*, 69). (Hagen's choice was the French actor, Gerard Philipe, to whom she was attracted [*CA*, 69; *RA*, 173].) In every aspect of the role--feelings, experiences, and even relationships--the actress must find parallels from her own life and substitute them for those of the character.

Hagen is careful to warn actors about developing an inflexible reading of this (or any) play; she cautions that her reading of *Streetcar* is not a "definitive interpretation" (*CA*, 70). Instead, her discussion of the role of Blanche is intended not so much as a model for playing her, but instead as a model for *how to go about* playing her. The lesson is that actors must build what she calls a "storehouse of transferences," learning to "make them an integral part of [their] homework and rehearsal procedures" (*CA*, 70). But it must be noted that to some extent, Hagen's use of "transference" and "substitution" essentially seems to bypass the actor's critical faculties. While the actor *does* need to read the play closely enough to know what the character's circumstances and needs are, her job is not to question them but to go about filling them. And the means of filling them is through total identification.

It is through the "truth" of the actor's experience, then, that the onstage life of the character will become "true." Hagen charges: "Making everything true to yourself remains the actor's job" (*CA*, 59). What follows is her "summation" of both

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the purpose and the technique of "transference" (a.k.a. "substitution"):

> First, to *find identification* **with all the aspects of the character's past and present, *to substantiate your faith* in the time, place, detailed surroundings, and circumstances in which your character will be living, and to endow the relationships to the other characters with appropriate realities**. . . . It is the CHARACTER'S ACTIONS which will REVEAL the new "you." Each stage of this work should ultimately bring about personal, relevant, justified, revealing actions. It is, in a literal sense, a process of 'make believe,' to make you believe in "your" existence. Then the audience will have been made to believe in it, too. (*CA*, 73) (Hagen's emphases.)

Faith and belief again take center stage in creating a truthful performance; Hagen seems to believe that truthful action will ensue from that sense of faith and belief. But what if the female actor is asked to "believe" things which are painful and degrading?

A disturbing story about Uta Hagen's portrayal of the role of Blanche epitomizes feminist concerns about asking actors to "identify" completely with the "truth" of the role. According to Rex Reed, who interviewed Hagen in the 1960s, "Once, while playing opposite Anthony Quinn in a tour of *Streetcar*, the lights did not go out in the scene where Stanley is supposed to attack Blanche. Quinn dragged her to the bed, where he remained stupefied, not knowing what to do next. Uta knew. 'Rape me, you idiot,' she gasped, 'rape me!'"[70] Now, while one can safely assume that Hagen does not *literally* mean that the actor playing Stanley should rape her, for

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an actress who identifies so completely with this role, is there a metaphorical violation that takes place? How much "truth" is too much truth? To what extent does the actor relinquish too much control, and participate in her own victimization? If "real" emotions are involved, to what harm does the actor expose herself?

The concern here is not Hagen's technique alone, but the way it is applied. What does the technique require of actors--and particularly, female actors--as they prepare for scripted roles? Once again, feminist concerns about much of the theatrical canon return. One must ask how often women are called upon to "identify" with qualities of strength, power, confidence, self-esteem--and action. If acting classrooms and rehearsal rooms consistently ask actors to draw upon different aspects of themselves based on the sex of the characters they play, acting technique will be gender-biased. Male and female actors will be treated differently, will develop different sets of skills, and may experience the ramifications in both their personal and professional lives.

A word must be said, however, about Hagen's own work as an actress--particularly on the role of Blanche. For there is evidence to suggest that Hagen's performance exhibited more analytical work (like Adler's) than the foregoing might suggest. Susan Spector's article, "Alternative Visions of Blanche DuBois: Uta Hagen and Jessica Tandy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*," compares critical responses to both performances. Spector also documents Hagen's work on the role. According to Spector, *Streetcar* became a very different play through Hagen's performance, and Blanche a very different character. In fact, the changes in the performance are

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fascinating from a feminist perspective.

Spector reports that director Elia Kazan's notes on the play demonstrate that "for Kazan, no matter what [Blanche] may have signified, in her function she was reduced to the prototypically frail woman who parasitically usurps the independence of the man in order to survive."[71] Hagen disagreed openly with Kazan. Harold Clurman took over the direction of the road company, and he and Hagen "agreed that Blanche was the victim of a destructive society rather than a madwoman disrupting a healthy world."[72] The result, says Spector, was this: "audiences [felt] they had watched a delicate woman driven insane by a brutish environment epitomized by Stanley Kowalski. Tandy's Blanche under Kazan's direction left audience feeling that a madwoman had entered an alien world and after shaking that world had been fully exorcized."[73] The overall effect was that in the hands of Tandy, Brando, and Kazan, audience sympathy lay with the brutish Stanley Kowalski; in the hands of Hagen, Quinn, and Clurman, the play belonged to Blanche. And while in either instance the end result is the same--Blanche is driven mad--one might even make the argument that Hagen's Blanche was ultimately a more *feminist* Blanche. For by portraying her as a healthy, intelligent woman who was destroyed by the forces around her, the problems are social rather than psychological; the performance becomes a commentary on society.

Within her acting and teaching, then, Uta Hagen may (unwittingly) offer some answers to feminist questions about her methodology. In a discussion about how actors create pain onstage, she says that actors working on "real" feelings can be

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affected in "real life" by what they do on stage:

> On occasion, actors complain that they have been so successful in recalling a sensation such as that of a headache that they actually get one. Then I always suggest that, since they have dictated the pain, they might just as readily suggest to themselves than an aspirin had just taken effect. Then they can experience the pleasure and relaxation that sets in when you realize the pain is gone. (*CA*, 81)

I have expressed concern that actresses who work so hard on shame, humiliation, fear, degradation, etc., might begin to assimilate these traits in their acting (and in their lives)--like a headache. But might actors, instead, use the remedy Hagen suggests?

What if the female actor "works on" *other* traits and behaviors? When was she strongest, proudest, most active? If the acting student and acting teacher seek different *kinds* of material--kinds of roles to play--might some of the imbalance shift? What if the female actor thinks about roles in unexpected ways, searching for alternative responses with which she might identify? Within Uta Hagen's system of substitution, the presumption is that *everything* we need to play is contained within our own experience or imagination. Of course for Hagen, the imagination is still rooted in our own real lives, rather than the life of another. Given the opportunity to play different kinds of roles, or to play familiar roles in new ways, women might develop different skills (as might men). Instead of the endless parade of victimized women (and acting students), female actors might find themselves experiencing "the pleasure and relaxation that sets in when you realize the pain is gone."

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Uta Hagen: The Role of Teacher

Throughout this dissertation, as important as the acting theories themselves are the various pedagogical models established by each subject. Uta Hagen goes further than Strasberg, Adler, or Meisner in her explicit discussion of the role of the teacher--and in her direct address to those whose job it is to train actors.[74] The paradigm she proposes for shaping an acting student's growth seems healthy and empowering for male and female students alike. Rather than expecting student actors to follow directions slavishly, she provides guidance for them about what they should expect. And she addresses teachers specifically with both suggestions and admonitions; her second book, *A Challenge for the Actor*, concludes with a special section entitled, "For the Teacher" (*CA*, 291-298).

The first and most important aspect of Uta Hagen's notion of the role of acting teacher is that she is there to help the student to acquire a set of tools which will enable him or her to function independently. She sees the teacher as a guide:

> It is the teacher or moderator's function to help you develop the techniques that make you believe in your existence on the stage, that animate your senses, that make you walk and talk, and consequently make you believable. The teacher is *not* there to act as an interpreter or as a director or to "fix up" your performance for public consumption. (*CA*, 244)

This is a significant point. The teacher leads the student to his or her *own* belief--in order to be believable--but does not fix them.

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Hagen is also very clear on the point that it is not the acting teacher's job to function as a director. It is easy to provide an actor with a "quick fix" to a scene, but this does not address the deeper problems he or she may face.

> My first year as a teacher consisted of my mistakenly "helping" the actor by giving him a directorial score rather than dealing with his technical problems as an actor. After his scene had been interpreted and directed for him, the actor not only felt better, but looked better to his colleagues--but only for that scene! At the end of the semester he had the identical difficulties with which he'd begun. His execution of a scene was dependent on *my* technique instead of on the development of his own. (*RA*, 15)

What is notable here is Hagen's understanding that the role of teacher is different from the role of director; she expresses a commitment to leading the actor to a development of his or her own technique. She responds to the actors' work but without directing them.

The acting student's vulnerability is another area of which Uta Hagen is acutely aware. Perhaps because she continues to act herself and is not entirely consumed with the authority of her position as teacher, Hagen is sensitive to the experience of the student who opens himself or herself to criticism in the acting class. Accordingly, she establishes rules for her own classroom that follow her own value system. She suggests that teachers not allow applause in the acting class. It must be clear that students are not there to "perform" or "impress" but "to learn a noble

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craft" (*CA*, 298). She also asks teachers not to bombard the actor with comments, but to "select the most relevant criticism as it pertains to the individual actor's problems" (*CA*, 293). In this way, the actor is not overwhelmed but is able to work on the areas of challenge one step at a time.

Hagen is also acutely aware of the acting student's vulnerability when it comes to working on emotionally sensitive issues. Like Adler and Meisner, many of Hagen's comments on the role of the teacher seem to include implicit criticisms of Lee Strasberg's (and his disciples') worst excesses. This is especially clear in her discussion of emotion memory. While her approach to emotion is theoretically much the same as Strasberg's, she does not lead her students through emotional memories in the way that Strasberg does, and cautions other teachers against doing so.

> I ask you to make use of my advice to the actor who misuses emotional recall by trying to tap a shattering past experience, one which he had previously kept hidden, even from himself. Steer him clear of such dangerous territory. I have observed classes in which teachers, without scientific or clinical qualifications, have actually tried to break down a student's psychological defenses by *forcing* him to delve into traumatic experiences such as the death of a parent--all in the name of "emotional exercising." This can easily lead to hysteria or a *new* trauma--now experienced in a classroom. In any event, **it serves no artistic purpose.** (*CA*, 293-294) (Hagen's emphases.)

The fact that Hagen recognizes that the acting teacher possesses the power to

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traumatize the student is, in itself, a step forward from the behaviors of Strasberg and Meisner. Instead of shifting responsibility to the student, on whom both Strasberg and Meisner tend to place the blame for emotional imbalance, Hagen understands that she wields the authority to create trauma herself.

She therefore not only steers teachers away from such behavior, but warns student readers about the dangers of placing themselves under the emotional control of any authority figure who might abuse his or her power.

> I must warn you, at this point, to avoid the examination of any past experience which you have never talked about or wanted to talk about. Here you will be on dangerous ground because you will not know what can happen to you, and without an understanding or a degree of objectivity to the experience it is useless to you artistically. There are teachers who actually force actors into dealing with something buried (their response to the death of a parent, or the trauma of a bad accident). What results is hysteria or worse, and is, in my opinion, anti-art. We are not pursuing psychotherapy. If you feel mentally sick or disturbed and in need of it, by all means go to a trained doctor or therapist, but *not* to an acting teacher. (*RA*, 49-50)

This is a somewhat revolutionary stand for an acting teacher to take--to warn students about acting teachers. In doing so, Hagen empowers them to trust their own instincts and not be led into dangerous areas against their better instincts or judgment, like lambs to the slaughter.

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There are other aspects of Uta Hagen's teaching values that merit mention. She not only suggests, she "implores" teachers of acting to allow students to work on material that is familiar to them. Later, she says, they may move on to the classics. While one might read this as a statement that really means actors must work on realism first, then classical material (and one might not be altogether wrong), Hagen also wants students to work on material that touches them, "that has a meaning for them that they will *want* to express" (*CA*). Her emphasis that teachers assign material that stimulates students individually--material that they will *want* to do--might be extended to mean that actors need not work on sexist material that victimizes them. They can choose material that offers them better things to explore, to "work on."

The title of Uta Hagen's first book, *Respect for Acting*, pleads for a better understanding of the complexities of acting as an art. But her value system extends to the way she suggests students should be treated; she seems to argue for respect for the acting student. She see students as potentially dependent on their teachers, and argues for students' freedom. They should:

> Develop the *self-evaluation* of their work. I always ask them for it immediately after a presentation of a scene or exercise and *before* I have offered my own criticism. Self-evaluation is an important part of the actor's growth in any event. Since neither teacher nor director is likely to be present at the performances following an opening night, the actors will cease to improve in their parts unless they themselves have learned to recognize their flaws and how to correct them. (*CA*, 292)

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She tells students not to work to please either the gas station attendant or Brooks Atkinson. "Set your own goals, set them for your own approval, and those of your colleagues whom you truly respect" (*RA*, 18). She tells teachers not to quarrel with actors' interpretations of a role--or to give them one. "As long as you lead the actors into their own identification with the author's world, their interpretations will evolve into ones which might even surprise, enlighten, or teach *you* a thing or two" (*CA*, 294). Here, she seems to regard the students in her class not only as artists-in-the-making, but as potential colleagues.

Just as she argues against controlling and manipulating actors, she cautions about forming relationships that are too chummy--or worshipful. Regardless of her popularity and status as an acting teacher, she does not advocate the "guru" approach--even as a mentor. She says as much in a 1998 an interview with Blake Green for New York *News Day*. "'I don't believe in mentorship--if there is such a word,' Hagen says. 'Young people want to put you in that position, but I've avoided it--from both ends.'" She clarifies that though she was very much influenced by Le Gallienne, the Lunts, Clurman, and Berghof, they were never her "mentors."[75]

Like Strasberg, Meisner, and Adler, Hagen has taught numerous famous actors of the stage and screen. And perhaps unsurprisingly, there are many "crossover" names on her list, too. Geraldine Page, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, and Eli Wallach are all on it; all studied with both Strasberg and Hagen. Geraldine Page studied with Hagen first, for seven years. She says, "With Uta you get things you can retain and repeat."[76] Alice Spivak, a professional actor and teacher, recalls, "I also felt that

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Uta's approach to the craft of acting was very refreshing, very healthy and sane."[77]

Uta Hagen's awareness of the acting teacher's power--and its potential hazards--is what makes her, perhaps, a "sane" teacher. In the closing pages of *A Challenge for the Actor*, she offers this concise advice for teachers. It speaks to her own practice:

> Don't abuse your title, don't pull rank or sit on a throne. I have always heeded my husband's warning that **the teacher's chair is a dangerous one.** It can inflate the ego, make for feelings of omnipotence and a belief that one knows everything. It can lead to a development of coteries, of pseudo-cultism. I always try to remember that my students are my colleagues or potential ones. Don't fall prey to their admiration. Set them on their own feet. Don't allow them to become dependent on you.
>
> And stay out of their personal lives. (*CA*, 292)

In this passage, Hagen directly addresses some of the pedagogical concerns central to this study. Without embracing feminism as an ideology, Hagen nevertheless makes great strides in adopting a number of feminist principles in her approach to teaching. If one of the "buzz words" of feminist thinking is "empowerment," Hagen's very goal is to empower her students. From a pedagogical standpoint, her awareness of her power and its perils, her respect for her students, and her respect for the craft of acting make her *approach* to teaching a better model than many.

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Notes

1. Mark Steyn, "An Elegant Toughie in Defense of Her Art," *New York Times*, Sunday, 22 October 1995, sec. 2, p. 4, col. 1.

2. Quoted in Susan Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years: 1919-1951," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1982), 309.

3. Helen Dudar, "A 'Choosy' Actress is Matched with a Shavian Drama," *New York Times*, Sunday, 15 December 1985, sec. 2, p. 6, col. 5.

4. Linda Walsh Jenkins and Susan Ogden-Malouf, "The (Female) Actor Prepares," *Theater* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 66.

5. Uta Hagen with Haskel Frankel, *Respect for Acting* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1972), 8 (hereafter cited as *RA*).

6. Uta Hagen, *A Challenge for the Actor* (New York: Scribner, 1991), xvi (hereafter cited as *CA*). In this section of her book, "Prologue: What Does it Take," Uta Hagen provides readers with an autobiographical sketch, focusing on her artistic life. Other biographical sources on Hagen include her memoir, *Sources* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983) and Susan Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years."

7. See also Hagen, *Sources*, 80-81.

8. Hagen, *Sources*, 83.

9. Eva Le Gallienne, *With a Quiet Heart* (New York: Viking Press, 1953), 110.

10. See also Susan Spector and Steven Urkowitz, "Uta Hagen and Eva Le Gallienne," in *Women in American Theater*, ed. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (New York: Crown Publishers, 1981), 119-123.

11. Susan Spector and Steven Urkowitz draw on Uta Hagen's personal journals in their essay, "Uta Hagen and Eva Le Gallienne." All of Hagen's books refer to Le Gallienne's influence; Hagen's own recollections are confirmed by those of Le Gallienne in her memoir, *With a Quiet Heart*.

12. Spector and Urkowitz, 122-123.

13. Le Gallienne, 118.

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14. Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 111.

15. Quoted in Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 66.

16. Quoted in Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 97.

17. Quoted in Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 116.

18. Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 38.

19. Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 154. It is interesting, here, to contrast Hagen's views on character with those of Stella Adler. Hagen seems to feel it would be more appropriate to cast Jewish roles with Jewish actors; Adler's approach suggests that differences between character and actor can be bridged through observation and imagination.

20. Hornby, *End of Acting*, 283.

21. John Harrop, "Texts for Actor Training: A Survey and an Assessment," *Theatre Quarterly* 7, no. 25 (1977): 49.

22. Quoted in Mark Steyn.

23. Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 264-265.

24. Quoted in Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 266.

25. See also Hagen, *CA*, xxi. Her later book contains a nearly identical passage describing Clurman and Berghof's influence on her acting.

26. David Garfield, *The Actors Studio: A Player's Place* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 51-52.

27. Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 272.

28. Quoted in Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 159.

29. See Susan Spector, "Alternative Visions of Blanche DuBois: Uta Hagen and Jessica Tandy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*," *Modern Drama* 32, no. 4 (December 1989): 545-560. Spector details the two different interpretations of Blanche DuBois, as played by Jessica Tandy and Uta Hagen, directed respectively by Elia Kazan and Harold Clurman.

30. Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 306.

31. Quoted in Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 323.

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32. Quoted in Spector, "Uta Hagen: The Early Years," 348.

33. Herbert Berghof Studio Brochure, 1998-1999, 45.

34. David Richards, "Uta Hagen: Still Railing, Still Working," *Washington Post*, Sunday, 8 September 1996, sec. G, p. 1.

35. Richards, 1.

36. Quoted in Rex Reed, *Conversations in the Raw: Dialogues, Monologues, and Selected Short Subjects* (New York: New World Publishing Company, 1969), 66.

37. Vincent Canby, "The Year in Review: Theater," *New York Times*, Sunday, 27 December 1998, sec. 2, p. 5, col. 1.

38. H.B. Studio Brochure, Spring 1999.

39. Cecilia Jessica Pang, "The Angst of American Acting: An Assessment of Acting Texts" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1991), 340.

40. Lee Strasberg Institute Brochure, 1998-1999.

41. Stella Adler Conservatory Brochure, 1998-1999.

42. The Neighborhood Playhouse Brochure, 1998-1999.

43. H.B. Studio Brochure, Spring 1999, 4.

44. Pang, 354.

45. Aldridge, 38.

46. Aldridge, 286.

47. Aldridge, 288.

48. Aldridge, 298.

49. Alvin Klein, "Uta Hagen: A Legend in the Theater, *New York Times*, 17 May 1998, sec. 14LI, p. 60, col. 1, Long Island Weekly Desk.

50. One change between *Respect for Acting* and *A Challenge for the Actor* is that while the first is co-authored (with Haskel Frankel), the second is not. I wonder whether another motivation for writing a second book might have been Hagen's growing reluctance to share the credit--and the profits--for the very popular first book.

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51. Carmen Luke, ed., *Feminisms and Pedagogies of Everyday Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 3.

52. Hornby, *End of Acting*, 66-67.

53. Hornby, *End of Acting*, 67.

54. Hornby, *End of Acting*, 67.

55. Hélène Cixous, "Aller à la mer," *Modern Drama* 27, no. 4 (December 1984): 546.

56. Mary Talbot, "A Bitter Dish of Hagen-Ma: Actress Uta Hagen and Daughter Letty Reveal Their Stormy Past, *Daily News* (New York), Sunday, 28 April 1996, p. 22.

57. For a very good recapitulation of feminist theoretical debates about theatrical realism, see Patricia R. Schroeder, *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 15-43.

58. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 28.

59. Hagen also makes a brief allusion to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, which she places in parentheses after her list of women: "(I also built myself a cabin in Concord!)" (RA, 31). This is the only historical male figure to whom she makes reference; it is telling that it occurs as an afterthought, in parentheses, and with an exclamation point at the end--as if to suggest that it is more daring to imagine herself building a cabin than being beheaded as any number of women in history. One must also note that the women are primarily passive in their histories: "accompanying," "being brought." Only the male figure *builds*.

60. Suzanne Burgoyne and Karen Poulin, with Ashley Rearden, "The Impact of Acting on Student Actors: Boundary Blurring, Growth, and Emotional Distress," *Theatre Topics* 9, no. 2 (1999): 157-179.

61. Burgoyne and Poulin, 168.

62. Burgoyne and Poulin, 162.

63. Burgoyne and Poulin, 166.

64. Blake Green, "No Proteges Need Apply: Uta Hagen is Not a Mentor, Thank You," *Newsday* (New York), 12 August 1998, sec. B, p. 3.

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65. Megan Rosenfeld, "Offstage With Uta Hagen: The Legendary Actress and Teacher on the 'Noble Craft,' Blacklisting and More," *Washington Post*, Sunday, 20 October 1991, sec. G, p. 1.

66. See Susan Spector, "Alternative Visions of Blanche DuBois," 545-560.

67. Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 123-124.

68. Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner On Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 137.

69. My primary concern, here, regards female actors. But one might also investigate the ways in which actors identifying with male roles, such as Stanley Kowalski, must find within themselves their most brutal and misogynist qualities.

70. Quoted in Reed, 66.

71. Spector, "Alternative Visions of Blanche DuBois," 550.

72. Spector, "Alternative Visions of Blanche DuBois," 553.

73. Spector, "Alternative Visions of Blanche DuBois," 558.

74. This also demonstrates that Hagen (quite rightly) expects her books to be read by teachers as well as actors.

75. Green, "No Proteges Need Apply."

76. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, *Actors on Acting* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1970), 640.

77. Eva Mekler, *The New Generation of Acting Teachers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 173.

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Chapter 6

The "Magic If": Forward-Looking Conclusion(s)

In an essay entitled "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," Jane Flax offers an important reminder regarding postmodern pursuit of the truth. She says: "We cannot simultaneously claim (1) that the mind, the self, and knowledge are socially constituted and that what we know depends upon our social practices and contexts and (2) that feminist theory can uncover the truth of the whole once and for all."[1] It would be both presumptuous and contrary to the spirit of this study, then, to claim that I have uncovered "the truth of the whole (of American actor training) once and for all." One of the lessons learned from postmodernism and feminism is the impossibility of getting at an "absolute" or "objective" truth. Yet I hope that I have uncovered *a* truth about American actor training: in the history of Stanislavsky-based practice, getting at "*the* truth" has often been a project riddled with gender biases. I also hope that by analyzing and exposing the ways in which such biases have (perhaps unconsciously) been a part of American actor training, this study might contribute to the "consciousness raising" of actors, teachers, and scholars who continue to be engaged in the theory and practice of Stanislavskian technique.

I am aware, however, that the nature and scope of this study have, of necessity, left a number of issues unaddressed. Consequently, there are several areas of American actor training which I will explore briefly in my conclusion, and which I

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will target as potential subjects for future research. Among these are: race, class, ethnicity, and multiculturalism in the acting classroom; work on the actor's body, voice, and speech; training derived from non-Stanislavskian traditions; the difference(s) between professional preparation and college classes for actors; and the continuing relationship between plays and players--dramatic texts and the techniques designed to enact them.

Throughout this dissertation, in addition to exposing the gender biases in the history of American, Stanislavskian training, I have also attempted to point to aspects of the practices of Strasberg, Adler, Meisner, and Hagen which are (or might be) empowering to actors, and which might offer potential utility for feminist actors in particular. Yet I am aware that my attention to the negative elements of these historical practices may have tended to overshadow their more positive features, some of which have already been successfully adopted and adapted by feminist actors and teachers. In the conclusion to this dissertation, therefore, I look forward to the ways in which Stanislavskian actor training might continue to be interrogated by feminist scholars, and continue to be profitably used and transformed by feminist practitioners.

Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Multiculturalism in the Actor Training

Jill Dolan points out that "that materialist [feminist] emphasis on representation as a producer of meaning also takes into account the reception and interpretation of cultural signs by spectators differentiated by gender, race, class, and sexual preference."[2] In this dissertation, I have examined the ways in which Stanislavsky-

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based actor training has, on the whole, been inclined to ignore its own gender-biases while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender roles. I have also made mention of the ways in which Stanislavsky-based training has tended to reinscribe "compulsory heterosexuality" as the basis of human impulse and behavior. But I realize that I have spent less time analyzing race, class, ethnicity, and multiculturalism in the acting classroom. The reason for this is simple: these issues are almost never raised in the literature I have examined. Although students are nearly always identified in the textual material as men or women, they are virtually never identified as other than white, middle-class Americans; this is what they appear to be in the video documentaries as well. Issues facing black actors are not mentioned--nor are plays by African-American authors. And while there are occasional references to the ethnic heritage of students (as in the mention of the young man of "Italian background" in Adler's class), the assumption is that these actors have assimilated into mainstream American culture. How do acting teachers "get at" truthful behavior for all people, regardless of their differences? Is what appears "truthful" for white, mainstream, middle-class American culture (if there is such a thing) true for *everyone*?

Frances Foster, an African-American actress (who passed away only recently), told a wonderfully provocative story about cultural difference in performance and spectatorship in an interview conducted by Holly Hill. Foster had been an understudy in the original Broadway production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and was a founding member of the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC). She was also the recipient of a 1985 Obie Award for Sustained Excellence of Performance. When she

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appeared in Philip Hayes Dean's *Sty of the Blind Pig* with the NEC, she experienced racial-bias in a critical response to her performance:

> I played a frustrated young woman who loved a man but never consummated that love. He dies in a plane crash, and there is a highly charged scene in which I start reading the obituary of this young man in my church and go off into a wild dybbuk-like kind of behavior, screaming and yelling and crying and writhing on the floor. We got great reviews for the play, but the *Village Voice* critic said he was appalled that they allowed me to overact so in the funeral scene.
>
> Now black people who came to the play sometimes had to be taken out of the auditorium because it reminded them of a funeral they had been to and brought back the whole emotional experience for them. Black people *do* try to climb into the grave, *do* try to pull the body out of the casket.
>
> . . . When we read that review about how the funeral was overacted, we laughed, because we understood that the critic didn't know. He had never been to a black funeral.[3]

Foster's universalizing statements about "black people" may be immoderate. But through the wisdom of her experience as an African-American actor, she hits on an issue central to my study. If one extrapolates Foster's comments about the theatre critic to the acting teacher, one must ask the question: how does the white acting teacher judge the "truthfulness" of a black acting student performing a scene? How

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easy it is to say: "people don't act that way" or "she wouldn't wail like that." Definitions of "realistic" and "believable" behavior may derive from very subjective understandings of "how people behave."

This has become very clear to me in my own classroom. Since 1995, I have taught Stanislavsky-based acting (among other things) for the Theatre Arts Program at the University of Pennsylvania, where I am a full-time faculty member. Although my own teaching is not a part of my formal research project, and although I do not train students for the professional theatre (an important distinction which I will address later), my direct experience working with students enables me to formulate even more questions about American actor training, and to identify areas which might merit further research.

At Penn, my Introduction to Acting classes consistently and increasingly resemble the United Nations in microcosm: they are full of representatives from around the world. My student population includes many white, "hyphenated" Americans of various ethnic and class backgrounds, but also international students: Chinese, Russian, German, Spanish, English, Pakistani, Indian, Vietnamese, Japanese, Roumanian, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Israeli, and Korean--to name some of the nationalities that come quickly to mind. They are "foreign" students. They have names I don't recognize and find difficult pronounce; cultural backgrounds of which I know very little. I'm aware of their "ethnicities" because they don't speak fluent English--or speak it with a heavy accent; they don't "speak" American cultural behavior--or speak it with a "heavy accent" from home, wherever that may be. And

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their very presence in the classroom challenges basic assumptions about the "universality" of Stanislavsky-based acting--the "universality" of "truthful" human behavior.

These questions are especially important in actor training which relies heavily on improvisations rather than scripted performances. For in an open improvisation, what constitutes "honesty"? Daily, I witness the ways in which routine human exchanges are different in different cultures. What seems a comfortable, friendly distance between two people in one culture is a terrible violation of "personal space" in another: as one student approaches, the other backs away; what the first student perceives as socially appropriate, the second perceives as a social violation. In scenes which would "logically" be expected to provoke a response of anger and confrontation, some students smile and nod. In their cultural language, a public display of anger or confrontation would be unspeakably impolite. Does this mean that the student is not behaving with verisimilitude? "Honest" social exchange is different from one culture to the next. This can also be said of class difference. Students come to class socialized to behave in very different ways. Even when they are behaving "truthfully" within the context of their own cultures, how is someone from outside the culture in question to recognize the truth of the exchange? And if a teacher coaches a student by saying: "don't stand so close to him" or "get angry--confront her," isn't this really an indoctrination into the "truth" of a particular kind of American social behavior?

Rhonda Blair, who has herself written on feminist performance, has recently

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participated in a reconsideration of Method acting in which she "consider[s] the Method from the perspective of some current research in cognitive science and its links to evolutionary biology."[4] Blair argues that the most recent research bolsters arguments for the scientific basis of Stanislavskian acting: "Cognitive scientists, neurophysiologists, and psychologists are proving that Stanislavsky, seventy-five years ago, began intuiting something fundamental about how we, as human beings and as actors, work."[5] She says:

> It would be helpful if actors viewed emotions as physiologically grounded tactics--conscious or otherwise--that are responses to specific information (given circumstances) rather than essences or "truths" of an intangible and merely cultural self. Humans have developed increasingly refined skills for discerning trustworthy ("real") emotions are [*sic*] untrustworthy ("fake") ones. Evolution has played a trick for, in order to guarantee "trustworthiness" or believability, it has placed the responsibility for some of these feelings in the limbic system, a part of the brain generally beyond our control. As a result, many strong emotions, such as fear and anger, involve facial and other muscles that cannot be completely controlled voluntarily. (Think about the subtle but powerful differences between a genuine smile and a social one.)[6]

Blair continues to say that the purpose of much American, Stanislavsky-based training is to negotiate an "end-run around the cognitive and limbic system's firewall."[7] I have no doubt that Blair is right about why the Method works--why it so often

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produces verisimilitude--why and how, for example, Uta Hagen is able to cry "real tears" on stage. But can human emotional reactions really be redacted from the social, cultural--and dramatic--situations which produce them? And might a Darwinian understanding of acting theory have worrisome implications for student actors? I have conducted "animal exercises" in my own classes and have seen that when student-"animals" come into contact with one another, the "animal behavior" that emerges may revert to a primitive notion of "survival of the fittest," in which the "fittest" are the largest, strongest, and most aggressive men. Should this be a model for truthful acting?

As human beings we *are* animals. And we do share some "universal" human experiences: We all feel pleasure and pain; joy and sorrow; love and anger. But do we feel these things for the same reasons--or express them in the same ways? And are our emotions (and their expression) unfettered by race, class, ethnicity, and culture--not to mention gender? Frances Foster, in response to her white critic, says:

> What people need to do when they see something on the stage that is from black culture is understand that we are not exaggerating. We are presenting it to you as it is, just as they do in the Yiddish theatre and the Irish theatre and the Latino theatre. What you see is their knowledge and their experience and the background of their culture. But for some reason, when we as African-Americans do something, white critics tell us what's right and wrong about our culture. They don't realize it, but that's what they're doing. It annoys us that they

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trivialize it, because they have not experienced it.[8]

Foster argues for the possibility of truthful acting, but also the difficulty of recognizing it cross-culturally--and especially cross-racially. In pursuing truthful acting in the classroom, acting teachers might benefit from Foster's observations. Every student who comes to class brings with himself or herself his or her own knowledge, experience, and cultural background. Not to acknowledge difference is to trivialize otherness, to erase identity, and to deny the multiplicity of human truth(s).

(Type)Casting the Acting Class

Elin Diamond says the project of her book, *Unmaking Mimesis*, is to "put into dialogue what I believe to be the most pressing questions in feminist theory with the oldest questions of theatrical representation: Who is speaking and who is listening? Whose body is in view and whose is not? What is being represented, how, and with what effects? Who or what is in control?"[9] Following Diamond, I would ask these questions about the actor's training ground: "Who gets to play which roles? Why? What does casting in the acting classroom mean?" In the preceding chapters, I have explored some of the ways in which gender differences in scripted roles may lead to gendered differences in acting skills when texts are used in the acting classroom. But this, too, is an area for further study.

In a tradition that is all about "truthful acting," the desired result of training is "believability." Audience reception is always an implied (if rarely discussed) factor in actor training. The premise of Stanislavskian acting is this: "If the actor believes, the

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audience will believe." But this basic precept elides other factors having to do with audience reception--and typecasting. In my discussion of Lee Strasberg, I cite an example where Strasberg suggests that any actress playing Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* must be sexually desirable--to Brick and to the audience--if the play is to work. And in my discussion of Uta Hagen and "Female Roles," I have also described the negative experiences of some "heavy" or "unattractive" women, who feel limited when cast according to "type." But these examples are really the tip of the iceberg.

Gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference are all factors in the ways in which actors are cast in theatre, film, and television. This is an issue which has received some attention in discussions of and experiments in "nontraditional casting." But less attention has been paid to the ways in which identity politics factors into actor training. When the goal is for an actor to be "believable," acting teachers may choose not to cast openly gay men in the roles of straight men; "unattractive" women in the roles of sexually desiring or desirable women; etc. The acting classroom can be a minefield in terms of identity politics. Whom might I exclude, as an acting teacher? Whom might I (unintentionally) presume upon--define--confine by my casting? Which roles are "appropriate" for students to work on? How does a teacher acknowledge difference without singling out "different" students?

Just as my classes include students of many nationalities, they also include straight students, openly gay and lesbian students, "closeted" gay and lesbian students--and homophobic students. They include Orthodox Jews, fundamentalist Christians, Catholics, Protestants, Hindus. Among these are students who can't or

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won't play particular scenes because of their sense of themselves, or because of their religious convictions. In my own classroom, I attempt to address all of these issues by offering choice. Students have as much power as they desire in selecting roles for study. But they often choose not to exercise that power. I am aware, then, of my role in negotiating issues related to personal identity which persist in the acting classroom. For example, I attempt to acknowledge difference by offering black students the opportunity to be cast "nontraditionally" *or* to work on African American plays. But both of these options are fraught with unintended implications. One black student refused the opportunity to work on a play by August Wilson, saying, "I only ever get to play black men." Other black students express a preference for working on African American material. But since roles written for black actors often come from unintegrated scripts, this may mean that black students can only be paired only with other black actors. I worry that this may result in an insidious, though well-intentioned, segregation in the classroom. For example, if a black woman wants to play the role of Ruth in *Raisin in the Sun*, can a white man be cast as Walter Lee? And what is the answer for a white student who wants to play the role of a black man in *The Amen Corner*? What can one say to a woman who refuses to attempt cross-gender (or gender-blind) casting because she finds a role "too masculine"? Is it "appropriate" to offer gay students the opportunity to work on gay characters--or does this typecast and marginalize them--or single them out as gay? What happens when straight students are offered gay and lesbian characters to play? To play only what we *are* seems antithetical to the art of acting (and to the intentions of this study); but to

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ignore student identities in casting might also lead toward their erasure. If casting can be a "Catch-22" for politically aware teachers, it is especially hazardous in the hands of those who are not.

In the world of professional theatre, one actor might be considered "right" for a role--for a whole range of reasons--and another "wrong." But in the acting classroom, should students already be cast according to "type"? Or should they be able to explore an entire range of scripted roles--in spite of their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference? These are all questions worthy of further consideration. For part of the power the acting teacher wields involves identity formation; the teacher contributes to the actor's sense of self, as an actor and a person. In a cultural environment where teachers in all disciplines should step carefully, moving forward with sensitivity to assumptions about student identities and identity politics, acting teachers must often tiptoe across the minefield, careful to avoid the traps.

What About the Body?

"What about the body?" one might reasonably ask. Or, for that matter, "What about the voice?" These are, in fact, questions that have always been asked about Method acting, but which take on new significance in a feminist discussion of American actor training. The body has not received much attention in this study for the reason that it does not receive much attention in the teaching(s) of Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, or Uta Hagen; the same is true of the voice. This is not to say that these teachers do not believe that actors require strong, expressive

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bodies and voices; they do. But their own specialties have more to do with the psychological, emotional, communicative, and textual tasks of the actor than with the physical and vocal. To a large extent, the assumption within these practices is that if one works from the inside, the outside will follow.

Stanislavsky was, himself, more attentive to working on the body than were his American disciples. As Sharon M. Carnicke says:

> Stanislavsky's holistic belief [was] that mind and body represent a psychophysical continuum. . . . Stanislavsky insists that: "In every physical action there is something psychological, and in the psychological, something physical."
>
> Many critics and teachers privilege one element in this continuum over the other. In the United States, Stanislavsky's work with emotion answered the American fascination with Freudian psychology.[10]

Since my feminist consideration of American actor training focuses on the American practitioners, accordingly, it also focuses more on psychological issues than physical ones. But physical aspects of actor training might also be examined from a feminist perspective.

Deanna Jent began such a project with her dissertation, "Sex Roles in the Acting Class: Exploring the Effects of Actor Training on Nonverbal Gender Display," and her article, "Sex Roles in the Acting Class: Nonverbal Gender Display in Performance."[11] Jent had the unusual opportunity to observe university acting

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classes over a six month period in 1987. I say "unusual" because most acting classes in this country are not open. An aura of privacy and sometimes even secrecy is often seen as a necessary part of actor training. One reason for this is that the acting classroom is meant to be a "safe place" for actors to experiment and explore--but not "perform." There is a theatre adage about "open rehearsals": There is no such thing as an open rehearsal; the moment anyone from outside the production process observes, a rehearsal becomes a performance. Lee Strasberg was so secretive about his classroom process that students were often forbidden to discuss it. Even in my own classes, I find myself allowing prospective students to observe only with real reluctance; I am acutely aware of the ways in which an outside observer disturbs the chemistry of the ensemble I am attempting to build and threatens the safe environment I am striving to create. Actors-in-training are vulnerable; outside observers create new pressures.

But Jent not only had open access to a series of classes; she was able to preserve the secrecy of her own project. She says: "neither teachers nor students were aware of my research intentions; they knew only that I was observing the classes for my dissertation."[12] This, too, is unusual; it is difficult to imagine many classroom environments in which researchers would be given access to observe without disclosing the purpose and nature of the research being conducted, which might in itself be prejudicial. What Jent observed, then--without tipping off subjects to what she was looking for--was that students began the class by exhibiting stereotypical masculine and feminine behavior, and that such behavior only increased

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as the semester progressed.

> [T]he men showed more strong, far reach movements and displayed traditional body positionings, such as sitting or standing with legs apart, sprawling across several chairs, taking up more stage space than did the female students and more often taking center stage during performances and warm-up exercises. The women sat with their legs together or crossed tightly and with arms close to the body (they often looked posed, as if for a photo); they exhibited fewer movements than did the men and those movements were mostly light and indirect and in the near reach range. During performances and warm-up exercises the women tended to stay at the outer edges of the stage and usually used much less stage space than did the men.[13]

These are details which can only be gleaned by an observer who is either physically present in the classroom or who has access to videotaped recordings of classroom proceedings. And although the classes Jent observed were Stanislavsky-based university sessions, one wonders what lessons might be gleaned from observing non-Stanislavskian--and more physically-based--acting traditions.

What about Grotowski-based acting? What about actor training influenced by other experiments of the 1960s, like Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre or Richard Schechner's Performance Group? Certainly, documentary evidence of both of those groups reveals some sexism in the rehearsal processes. Does the sexism persist in approaches to training derived from those experiments? What about the international

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work of Eugenio Barba?[14] Although none of these "alternative" forms of training are as widely institutionalized in the United States as Stanislavsky-based actor training, they are still influential. Especially since Method acting has been so widely questioned by feminist practitioners, it would be a worthwhile project to investigate what other traditions have to offer female--and feminist--performers; it would also be worthwhile to investigate the ways in which non-Stanislavskian traditions may reveal their own sexist bases.

Voice training is another area which does not receive a great deal of attention in the Method acting classroom, but which might be subject to further study. Sarah Werner considers English training traditions in her essay, "Performing Shakespeare: Voice Training and the Feminist Actor."[15] Werner examines the work of such teachers as Cicely Berry, a long-time teacher at the Central School of Speech and voice coach for the Royal Shakespeare Company; Patsy Rodenburgh, head of the Voice Departments at the Royal National Theatre and Guildhall School of Music and Drama; and Kristin Linklater, who "brought voice work to the United States."[16] Among Werner's feminist concerns about "voice work" are: the notion that actors can "free themselves" through the voice, that the way to enter a play is "through feeling," and the notion that Shakespearean characters are "universal." Werner argues that books on voice training "present themselves as neutral tools that will help us to reveal Shakespeare effectively."[17] And some of her criticisms of English voice training resemble my own conclusions about Method actor training:

> These voice teachers emphasize working from your heart and gut (often

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> literally, in the case of breathing exercises) instead of from your head: Rodenburgh tells actors that these vocal cues will help them find their characters "in ways that are more immediate than intellectual means"--an anti-intellectual bias that is repeated by all these voice coaches and that discourages the actor from thinking about the play instead of just feeling it. . . .
>
> Even for an actor who is not looking to access a deeper earlier self, these prescriptions (breathing=thinking=feeling) invite the assumption that Shakespeare's characters are universal, and that their feelings are ahistorical and readily accessible to twentieth-century actors: the emotions that the rhythms produce in us now are the same emotions that they produced then.[18]

Once again, anti-intellectualism and the need to organically connect with a role may hinder the growth of the female actor.

What Werner does not examine in detail is speech training; this is another area with potential concerns for feminist practitioners. In Great Britain and in the United States, conservatory training typically includes "standard" speech for the stage. In England, this is known as "Received Pronunciation" or "R.P." In the United States, it is called "Standard American Speech for the Stage." I received such speech training both in England and in the United States; its goal is to erase any traces of regional--or class--difference, and to create a neutral and flexible dialect. The benefit is that actors are not limited to playing only their own regional or class backgrounds. But in both

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English and American culture, multiculturalism is now a part of the culture. What are the political implications of asking actors to erase their own dialects and to affect a "neutral" sound? What does it mean for an African-American actor to speak with a slightly British accent? While one goal of actor-training is malleability, enabling anyone to play anything, the acting classroom is a place where people's bodies, voices, and emotions are subject to constant tampering.

The first issue of *American Theatre* for the year 2001 contains a special section: "Approaches to Theatre Training 2001." It profiles two prominent female teacher-practitioners, both of whom happen to be on the faculty at Columbia University: Anne Bogart and Kristin Linklater. In a dialogue moderated by David Diamond, the two women "[d]ebate current trends in American actor-training."[19] They discuss American acting, the heritage of Lee Strasberg, and multi-cultural influences and approaches to training. But a subject which does not come up in the debate is gender. I have already referred to Sarah Werner's discussion of voice work; Linklater's practices and their current impact on American acting could receive further examination from a feminist perspective. And Anne Bogart is a very popular figure in actor training at the moment; "Viewpoints" has become something of a buzz-word for physically-based training--especially as Bogart combines it with the rigorous body work of Tadashi Suzuki. At my own institution, we are currently offering a course taught by a member of Bogart and Suzuki's Saratoga International Theatre Institute. These new, exciting alternatives to the training I have investigated might also be examined with feminist questions in mind. It would be easy to turn to non-

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Stanislavskian approaches as a panacea, as some feminist critics do, but there is really not yet enough collected evidence to determine whether physically-based theatre training programs free actresses from the sexist practices of the past, or whether they might (unwittingly) reinscribe them.[20]

American Actor Training: Professional Preparation v. College Classes

In the foregoing, and throughout this dissertation, I have used the term "American actor training" to refer to *all* Stanislavsky-derived approaches to teaching the craft of acting, in whatever forum they may occur. In doing so, I may have unintentionally elided important distinctions. For in actuality, actor training is not a "one-size-fits-all" proposition. Students take acting classes in many different places for a variety of different reasons. And though the theories and practices of Stanislavsky and his disciples continue to be taught across the country, their purpose and function are different when implemented to prepare actors for the professional stage than when "introducing" college students to the art of acting. While my feminist concerns pertain to actor training wherever it occurs, I must acknowledge that standards and practices are--and should be--different, depending upon the educational venue and mission of the training.

My own "Introduction to Acting" classes, to which I have referred, are exactly what the course title suggests: an *introduction* to the art of acting. Most of the students I encounter have never set foot on a stage; they haven't the faintest notion of what it takes to be an actor. In many ways, it is with this group that I gain an even

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greater appreciation for some of Stanislavsky's basic precepts. Where else but in an introductory class are acting problems such as the inability to relax, concentrate, listen, analyze, act, and react more in evidence? This is largely due to the fact that the members of the class are not really actors; they are mostly students from across the university who have always wanted to "try" acting. The miracle of Stanislavskian training is that by the end of the course, although students do not become actors, they are able to make their way through scenes--sometimes with surprising effectiveness. This is also true, I would imagine, for the majority of such acting classes offered in liberal arts institutions across the country.

In colleges which, for the most part, do *not* prepare students for the professional theatre, acting courses can be designed to serve a variety of purposes. There can be dabbling and game-playing. And perhaps there, more than anywhere else, acting teachers must be aware of the various issues pertaining to identity politics which I have mentioned above. For college students are more in need of certain kinds of "protection" than their professional counterparts; young and vulnerable, adolescents and post-adolescents, their identities are still in formation, and they are even more susceptible to the teacher's power than older students might be. College students do not bear the burden of equipping themselves with acting skills which will form their livelihoods; they also do not bear the burden of preparing themselves for a life filled with harsh rejection.

The four case studies which comprise my dissertation focus on professional actor training. And while it is important to consider the ways in which those

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professional traditions trickle down to college students, I must also state that professional students are driven by an entirely different set of demands and desires. Among these, it must be acknowledged, is the need to *work* as an actor, and working as an actor unfortunately necessitates the consideration of marketplace demands. Although I have discussed the "dangers" of typecasting, I must concede that professional actors cannot afford to ignore a consideration of how they might be cast. For in considering his or her "range," an actor can exercise some choice by playing "according to type"--or by working and stretching to increase his or her range in order to avoid the trap of typecasting.

Plays and Players: Realism and Realists

Within theatre academia, there has been a great deal of discussion about "alternative" approaches to acting and the theatre. Yet, as I state in my introduction, these "alternatives" remain just that; they are adjunct to the dominant mode of acting (and representation), which is realism. And while some feminist practitioners eschew realism, forging their own way in the theatre, they do so with the knowledge that they decrease their "marketability"--that they may not earn a living through their acting. And though *all* actors face the possibility that they will never earn a living through their craft, this may be even truer for the actor who does not learn to practice realistic acting. (I wonder, for example, about actors who train exclusively in Viewpoints and/or Suzuki work: they may work for Anne Bogart's company, but will they work elsewhere without also possessing basic Stanislavskian skills?) Stanislavskian training

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addresses so many acting issues that leaving it behind completely does not seem an option for the professional actor--nor should it be. While my purpose has been to "get at" the sexist, gender-biased implications of Stanislavskian practice, my own belief is that the System continues to be extremely valuable to actors everywhere.

For which comes first: The play or the player? Historically, this question may be open to debate. And in the contemporary theatre, some "plays" and players are nearly indistinguishable from one another; they emerge simultaneously in the solo performance pieces created by "performance artists." The message and the messenger are one. But this study, as I said at the outset, concerns itself with those actors who are *not* writers but interpreters of scripted material. For those artists, the play comes first; the player's task is to acquires the skills to enact the script. For the "realistic" theatre professional, the essential acting methodology remains realism.

Since my focus, in this dissertation, has been primarily on acting techniques, dramatic texts have been, to some extent, a secondary consideration. I have deliberately referred to only a narrow range of plays, specifically those that are used as examples by the four master teachers I study. Another area I would identify for further investigation is how these techniques might work if applied to different texts--or if applied differently to the same or similar texts. While I have examined some of the "doomed" women played by Uta Hagen, I do not by any means wish to suggest that the *only* roles for women are similarly restrictive. One solution to the "problem" of the use of conventional realistic texts in actor training is to search for roles that are empowering to women--or to challenge actors to locate the more powerful aspects of

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roles traditionally considered weak.

Many contemporary texts--even by female and feminist playwrights--may still require actors to possess Stanislavsky-derived abilities. The need to delve into one's emotions, to "identify" with a character--these are skills which can be helpful to the enactment of many (if not most) contemporary playscripts. Margaret Edson's *Wit*, with its portrayal of a strong female scholar, is also a portrayal of physical and emotional pain and suffering. Suzan-Lori Parks' highly theatrical *Venus* and Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* cannot be regarded as "realistic" plays, yet each still calls upon the female figure at its center to experience the events of the play--and to play the emotions of the character.

Stanislavskian training has many potential uses, both conventional and unconventional. In her book *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism*, Patricia Schroeder asks feminists to reconsider the form of realism. She writes: "To label a dramatic form as inherently repressive and politically inefficacious is to confuse a tool with its potential uses. Who among us has never hammered a nail with the end of a heavy stapling gun, or pried open a bottle cap with a penknife?"[21] And she concludes: "If we endorse the goal of empowerment for women, and if we accept that feminism is and must be polyvocal and evolving, then it seems crucial to me that we recognize realism as one of many inherited tools at a feminist artist's disposal."[22] Perhaps this is also a way to regard realistic acting technique--as one of many "inherited tools at a feminist artist's disposal." For if the "System" or the "Method" are really sets of "tools" at the actor's disposal, actors should be able to choose which

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ones to use--or not to use. And they may put these tools to the use for which they were designed--or towards a different use altogether.

Feminist Practitioners and Stanislavsky-Based Technique

Although common understanding of "feminist performance" might have it that most feminist practitioners have abandoned Stanislavsky-based technique, there is ample evidence to suggest the contrary. This study is predicated on the assertion that Stanislavskian technique continues to dominate American training--and performance--into the twenty-first century. As feminists enter classrooms as both teachers and students, and step upon the professional stages, elements of Stanislavskian technique are being implemented by feminist practitioners every day. Elizabeth Stroppel conducted a survey seeking to establish how feminism critically uses the Method, and she documents the ways in which theatre professionals around the country teach from the Method they were taught, but with adjustments: "[M]any of them seek ways of accommodating feminist perspectives within prior procedures of acting with which they are most familiar as well as newer ones that they continue to explore."[23] She says that: "Many of the interviewees attempt to insert an awareness of gender (often as a social construct) within realistic training. Doing this enables students to be alert to ideological superstructures."[24] Stroppel's hopefulness regarding the Method may already be finding fulfillment on professional stages.

Through their powers of interpretation and artistic creation, contemporary actresses often invite us to reconsider canonical stage roles. In her introduction to

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Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama, a collection of essays devoted to feminist rereadings of canonical literary texts, June Schlueter says that: "Linda Loman has provided a silent subtitle for this collection, registering a similar plea by feminist critics that attention be paid, not to the has-been drummer [her husband, Willy] who seems to have found a permanent place in American culture, but to the gender constructs of that culture and its literature."[25] But much has been made in recent years of Elizabeth Franz's embodied "rereading" of Linda Loman in the Broadway revival of the American classic, *Death of a Salesman*. Trained at the American Academy of Dramatic Art, Franz employs an acting methodology clearly drawn from Stanislavsky, and bearing particular resemblance to the strategies of Uta Hagen. To prepare for the role of Linda, she wrote an extensive biography of her character, which also drew on her own life experiences and relationships. Dinitia Smith interviewed Franz and makes this report about her "secrets" of preparation:

> "I write a novel about the characters I play," Franz confided. "Linda," she said, "was very close to her parents. She fell head over heels in love with Willy. Her parents were very strongly against this marriage, but she defied them and never saw them again. . . ." She insists that her performance derives from Miller's text and quotes Happy, who wants to marry: "Somebody with character, with resistance! Like mom."[26]

Combining the tools of script analysis, identification with the role, and relationship to the other actors, by many accounts Franz took the role of Linda in a new direction.

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Dinitia Smith observes: "Linda Loman is usually played as a beaten-down figure, a dishrag. She is a prop for her husband's despair over losing his job and his worries about his sons." But Smith describes Franz's Linda as "no passive victim."[27] Terry Byrne of the *Boston Herald* says, "this Linda is no doormat."[28] And Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* says of her work: "Ms. Franz's astonishing portrayal shatters that character's traditional passivity to create a searing image of a woman fighting for her life, for that is what Willy is to Linda. She also emerges as the only realist in the family, even as she does everything she can to bolster Willy's sagging illusions."[29] Many spectators noted this Linda's anger and rage in the performance. While it might be a stretch to consider Franz's portrayal a feminist interpretation (I could imagine a performance of the role that might go further than hers), certainly there was a feminist impulse connected to her work. As Franz says, "Willy's wife is a female in a very male world. She has to make her voice heard over theirs."[30]

Cherry Jones is another actress who imbues her work with a similar sensibility. Her 1995 portrayal of Catherine Sloper in *The Heiress* struck me at the time as a surprisingly feminist interpretation. Jones clearly drew on "Method" techniques to play the role; in particular, she describes the use of emotional memory in the moment of realization that her suitor, Morris, has jilted her:

> You can only cry over a particular situation for so long, and then you've mourned and you have to move on. What I found fascinating in playing Catherine was, I was able to use little personal emotional buttons to get myself where I needed to be. I found I could hook into a

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> scene through a kind of tremulous emotionality that I had concocted offstage in the wings or on stage while others were talking. With Catherine it was fairly easy because she didn't say a lot. I could be sitting there imagining all sorts of horrible personal dilemmas and then say something every few minutes. I realized that my mind as an older actress is starting to do a wonderful thing where I can literally be using something from my own life to fuel me and crosswire it with the situation I'm playing.[31]

Jones' goal was to create real emotion every night; her approach was through Method-based technique. But at the same time, one of her rewards as an actress was to provoke *thought* as well as feeling in her audiences. She says:

> Playing *The Heiress* was very satisfying to do nightly because of the effect it had on people. It's such a simple story, but the way that it would touch people was amazing. Literate, well-educated men and women would leave the theatre in these heated debates over the fate of Catherine Sloper: Had she done the right thing? That is so rare in any form of entertainment--to get people involved.[32]

Indeed, audiences were involved in thinking about the gender role of this nineteenth century woman, the choices allowed her, and her steely character in the face of social constraints.

While it may be expected that actors in canonical texts, like Franz and Jones, might continue to use Stanislavskian techniques to imbue old works with new life,

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what is less expected--and less examined--are the ways in which feminist performance artists also make use of elements of the Stanislavsky System in their work. Deb Margolin has recently said: "Acting is an emergency, and in an emergency you do whatever works. What you do in a fire drill may bear no resemblance to what you do in an actual fire, but your odds of survival are greatly improved by a past *enactment* of the drills. And so we have the Method and lots of things, pro and con, to say about it."[33] What a refreshing and unexpected image Margolin offers: acting as an "emergency." For indeed, acting *is* something of an emergency. Live theatre is dangerous and unpredictable. And when on stage, in front of an audience, isn't this what actors do--whatever works?

Margolin also offers a feminist possibility for making use of Method acting techniques. She makes this connection between Method acting and her work with the feminist/lesbian performance group, with Split Britches:

> I will leave definitions of Method acting to the scholars, but I feel clear for myself that Method is all about the problem of redistributing autobiography. We cannot perform what we do not imagine, and we cannot imagine that which is not within us to be conceived. We have nothing but ourselves, which is the same as to say there is nothing to say about acting. Split Britches, the theatre company, was often described as "radical" in its aesthetic, in its approach to creating character, to creating theatre. The jagged juncture between actor and character was the metaphysical site of our performances, and it felt

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> dangerous to some critics, as if we ourselves might burst forth out of the play at any moment and infest them with life, with tragedy, with sex. I think we were just Method actors who didn't bother to clean up. We conducted our fire drills during the fire, and we survived those fires together for fifteen years.[34]

Margolin also asserts: "I bet Lee Strasberg would have laughed his head off at Split Britches' antics. Say whatever you want. Scholars will argue. Strasberg would have laughed."[35] The link Margolin makes between the work of Split Britches and the Method is a provocative one. For she suggests that there are basic tasks all actors perform, and the Method is just one tool that can be used--in a number of ways--to perform those tasks.

Another feminist performance artist, Karen Finley has, perhaps surprisingly, been quoted as saying, "I like old-fashioned stuff, I like Uta Hagen a lot."[36] When Richard Schechner comments, in an interview with Finely, on the "trancelike state" into which she enters on stage, Finley offers this response:

> That state of being is very natural, so I'm surprised when people call it a trance state. . . . When one is emotional, when an event takes someone by surprise, whether it's a death, a birth, or anything, it breaks that nine-to-five type of behavior. That's what I want to be showing. I do go into somewhat of a trance because when I perform I want it to be different than acting. I hope this doesn't sound too dorky or trite--I'm really interested in being a medium, and I have done a lot

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> of psychic type of work. I put myself into a state, for some reason it's important, so that things come in and out of me, I'm almost like a vehicle. And so when I'm talking it's just coming through me. And it's very exhausting. After I perform I have to vomit, my whole body shakes. I have to be picked up and sat down. It takes me about an hour before I stop shaking. When performing I really pick up the energies from the people. I got to completely psych into them because I want them to feel that I am really feeling it.[37]

Although Finley's performance aesthetic--and purpose--is entirely different from that of Method-based realistic acting, this urgency to "really feel it," to be awash in emotion--and to express it--bears a strong relationship to Lee Strasberg's Method. Surely any performer who vomits after every performance is achieving a level of "real" emotional and physical involvement which is even more extreme than the Method, which seeks to enable actors to manage their emotions so that they are not rendered violently ill or out-of-control.

Anna Deavere Smith is yet another performance artist whose work evidences some unmarked connections to Stanislavskian technique. Where artists like Margolin and Finley tap into aspects of themselves, drawing on "autobiographical" elements of acting technique, Smith's approach is to play "the Other." Smith's work is considered revolutionary in that she compiles her material through tape-recorded interviews of real people, and embodies multiple personalities across race, ethnicity, and gender through her own female, African American body and voice. Yet the question I am

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interested in, here, is this: how revolutionary is Anna Deavere Smith's acting technique? Smith says that her work is the opposite of psychological realism. As an example, she talks about Leonard Jeffries, one of the characters--and interview subjects--in *Fires in the Mirror*. She says:

> Psychological realism is about--this is a real oversimplification of Stanislavsky--saying: here's Leonard Jeffries. You have to play Leonard Jeffries now. Let's look at Leonard. Let's look at his circumstances. Let's look at your circumstances? How are you two alike? How can you draw from your own experience? Contrary to that, I say this is what Leonard Jeffries said. Don't even write it down. Put on your headphones, repeat what he said. That's all. That's it.[38]

Yet there is something slightly disingenuous in Smith's oversimplification--not of Stanislavsky's work, but of her own. For although she says all she needs to do is to put on her headphones and repeat, she leaves out elements which undoubtedly inform her performance.

A Stanislavskian like Stella Adler tells her students that the actor's work is this: "Meet and create these people, these characters. Analyze them and learn their psychology. Answer all the questions: Who am I? How old am I? What is my profession? Who are the members of my family? What is my disposition? Where do I live? . . . How did I spend yesterday? How did I spend today until this evening?"[39] Anna Deavere Smith *literally* meets her characters and in those encounters learns a tremendous amount about their "given circumstances." For she

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interviews them, asking them the things that will tell the story she wants to hear. Smith says: "I'm not the other and can never be the other. . . . I can only try to bridge the gap, and I'm looking for ways to bridge the gap."[40] But isn't this what acting is? Isn't this what acting does? And isn't Anna Deavere Smith an example of someone who may reject elements of her Stanislavskian training while simultaneously borrowing others, transforming them to create something new?[41]

The "Magic *If*"

I conclude this dissertation by returning to one of the basic precepts of Stanislavskian acting theory: the Magic *If*. The *Stanislavsky Handbook* offers this definition of the term: "From the moment of the appearance of [the Magic] *If* the actor passes from the plane of actual reality into the plane of another life, created and imagined by him. . . . The secret of the effect of *If* [is] that it does not use fear or force."[42] The proposition, "if," is a powerful tool for actors *and* feminists. "If" offers us all the possibility to transform "reality," to make dramatic changes--and to change things dramatically. "What *if*" allows one to imagine all possibilities. So what *if* training could be conducted without patriarchal prejudice? What *if* young actors could use Stanislavskian techniques to equip themselves to become competent professionals, able to make free decisions in their professional work, and to become powerful collaborators in the theatre-making process? What *if* their acting work could be used to effect political change?

In spite of the troubling aspects within the history of American, Stanislavsky-

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based acting, there are also many elements which are potentially useful. What *if* Stanislavskian training were implemented without "fear or force"? Lee Strasberg's Method potentially offers actors skills in sensory awareness, self–awareness, and emotional connectedness. The biggest problem in Strasberg's Method, in my view, is the patriarchal structure of the teaching. In a model where students are rendered dependent upon their teacher to define and validate their very "selves," there is an ever-present danger that they will become weak and vulnerable rather than strong, that they will see themselves only through his (or her) eyes. But there is no question that "the Method" has been enormously successful for many actors who have integrated it, learning to draw upon their sensory and emotional apparatus to create intense feeling onstage. These skills can be exploited–or they can be harnessed and put to good use.

Stella Adler's technique offers one of the most hopeful avenues from this study's perspective, providing an invaluable approach for analyzing scripts and characters, and encouraging actors to become independent artists.. Her emphasis on the "given circumstances" of the play (which could also be read as the "material" circumstances of the character) offer an alternative to an essentiallizing view of scripted roles–and an excessive and essentializing emphasis on the "self." And Adler's emphasis on the *difference* between actor and character also opens a huge area for feminists. For this model places emphasis on what it takes to enact a role, rather than what it takes to change an actor. Actors need not be limited, then, to playing only aspects of "themselves." They can choose, if they like, to transform themselves to play "the Other."

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Sanford Meisner's Technique is perhaps the most troublesome of these four; ironically, it is also currently the most popular. The Repetition Exercise, with its built-in structure, does seem to lead actors inevitably down one path. Yet its purpose is to get actors to *listen* to one another--a deceptively simple description for what is really an incredibly challenging task. To his credit, Meisner is the only teacher included in this study to place so much emphasis on connecting to one's partner; the Meisner Technique has the reputation of achieving this goal. Meisner wants actors to communicate with and play off of one another, to be spontaneous, to act in the moment. Being "in the moment" is a powerful acting (and real life) skill. My concern about Meisner's Technique is that it isn't nearly as open or as spontaneous as he believes. Yet it seems possible that with some experimentation in and around his technique, if one were to avoid the external observations and comments on personal appearance, and to try playing verbal "ping-pong games" of a different variety, one might possibly arrive at more open responses than the ones found in Meisner's text. Listening is a facet of the actor's work which, in combination with an ability to analyze scripts (which is to be learned from other teachers), is certainly most useful.

Finally, Uta Hagen's approach for working on a role asks that actors find commonality in human experience, learning to relate to the "Other." While her insistence on "identification" has inherent risks, particularly for female actors playing traditionally gendered roles, Hagen does offer actors achievable ways of putting themselves "in the shoes" of people unlike themselves. This could potentially include playing across race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality--and applying the technique in

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ways that would allow an actor to explore the strongest and most powerful aspects of herself, instead of the weakest. Hagen also shows the most awareness of these four teachers of the inherent "dangers" of the acting teacher's position. Through her advice to both students and teachers, Hagen offers an outstanding pedagogical model.

In seeking to expose the gender biases endemic to the traditions of American actor training, I have been very critical of many of the practices of the teachers I have studied. But I have also traced the "patriarchal structure" of Stanislavskian training, noting that it was not created by Strasberg (or the others), but inherited by them--like the society into which they were born. Strasberg, Adler, Meisner, and Hagen *were* the products of an earlier time, an era in which there was far less general awareness of gender politics than there is today. Times *have* changed in the hundred years since the inception of the System--and in the sixty odd years since these four began teaching. What *if* the best intentions of these teachers--and the most positive aspects of Stanislavskian training--were to be freed from the more sexist assumptions of their traditional implementation and put to use by feminist practitioners?

I hope that this study might help to pave the way for that to happen. If teachers are made aware of the political implications of their work, adjustments might be made to their practices. If students are made aware of the ways in which they might be manipulated in the acting classroom, they might choose their training carefully and guard against exploitation: to be forewarned is to be forearmed. And if feminist scholars continue to ask questions about a wide range of acting practices, more can be learned about the perils and possibilities in American actor training.

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Notes

1. Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 48.

2. Jill Dolan, "In Defense of the Discourse: Materialist Feminism, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism . . . and Theory," in *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre*, 8.

3. Frances Foster, interview by Holly Hill, in *Actors' Lives: On and Off the American Stage*, by Holly Hill (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 309-310.

4. Rhonda Blair, "The Method and the Computational Theory of Mind in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 203. See also: Rhonda Blair, "Not . . . but"/"Not-Not-Me": Musings on Cross-Gender Performance," in *Upstaging Big Daddy*, 291-307.

5. Blair, 204.

6. Blair, 214-215.

7. Blair, 213.

8. Foster, 310.

9. Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, ii.

10. Sharon M. Carnicke, "Stanislavsky's System: Pathways for the Actor" in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (New York: Routledge, 2000), 16.

11. See Deanna Jent, "Sex Roles in the Acting Class: Exploring the Effects of Actor Training on Nonverbal Gender Display," Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1989; and Deanna Jent, "Sex Roles in the Acting Class: Nonverbal Gender Display in Performance," *Theatre-Studies* 35 (1990): 18-27.

12. Jent, "Sex Roles in the Acting Class: Nonverbal Gender Display in Performance," 22.

13. Jent, "Sex Roles in the Acting Class: Nonverbal Gender Display in Performance," 22.

14. See Peggy Phelan, "Feminist Theory, Poststructuralism and Performance," in *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre*, 157-182.

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15. Sarah Werner, "Performing Shakespeare: Voice Training and the Feminist Actor," *New Theatre Quarterly* 12, (August 1996): 249-258.

16. Werner, 249.

17. Werner, 249.

18. Werner, 251-252.

19. "Balancing Acts: Anne Bogart and Kristin Linklater Debate the Current Trends in American Actor-Training," moderated by David Diamond, *American Theatre* 18, no. 1 (January 2001): 30-34; 104-106.

20. There is, however, some evidence of history repeating itself with new players. The "debate" between Bogart and Linklater echoes earlier debates about Stanislavsky, and the "right" or "wrong" approaches to actor training.

21. Patricia Schroeder, *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 35.

22. Schroeder, 42.

23. Elizabeth Stroppel, "Reconciling the Past and the Present" in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 114.

24. Stroppel, 115.

25. June Schlueter, ed., *Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), 11.

26. Dinitia Smith, "As Miller Meant Linda: Actress Feels Wife is Protector of Willy Loman," *New York Times*, Sunday, 23 May 1999, Arts & Entertainment, p. 21.

27. Dinitia Smith, "As Miller Meant Linda."

28. Terry Byrne, "Dennehy, Franz Shine in Powerful 'Salesman,' *Boston Globe*, Saturday, 2 December 2000, Arts & Life, p. 33.

29. Ben Brantley, "Attention Must be Paid, Again," *New York Times*, Thursday, 11 February 1999, sec. E, p. 1, col. 2.

30. Quoted in Patricia O'Haire, "Broadway's Elizabeth the Second," *Daily News* (New York), Sunday, 6 June 1999, Showtime, p. 4.

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31. Cherry Jones, "Emotion Within Stillness," an interview by Roy Harris in *Eight Women of the American Stage: Talking About Acting*, by Roy Harris (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1997), 10.

32. Jones, 9.

33. Deb Margolin, "Mining My Own Business: Paths Between Text and Self," in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 127. For a description of Margolin's teaching technique, see also Deb Margolin, "A Perfect Theater for One: Teaching 'Performance Composition,'" *TDR* 41, no. 2 (summer 1997): 68-81.

34. Margolin, 132.

35. Margolin, 133.

36. Karen Finley, "A Constant State of Becoming: An Interview by Richard Schechner," in *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre*, 260.

37. Finley, 258.

38. Quoted in Carol Martin, "Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You, An Interview by Carol Martin," in *Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre*, 196-197.

39. Adler, *The Art of Acting*, 105.

40. Anna Deavere Smith, *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines* (New York: Random House, 2000), 53.

41. One must also note that in addition to her "experimental" work, Anna Deavere Smith increasingly turns up not only in film, but on television, in shows such as *West Wing* and *The Practice*. There, she clearly draws on Stanislavskian technique which she claims to have eschewed.

42. Stanislavski, *An Actor's Handbook*, 94. Brackets are Hapgood's.

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