

Stanislavski

Constantin Stanislavski, January 7 1863 – 7 August 1938 Konstantin Sergeevich Alekseyev was born the son of a wealthy Moscow manufacturer in 1863 and is regarded as the founder of realism. He first appeared on stage at the age of seven and later changed his acting name to Konstantin Stanislavski to preserve the reputation of his family, though they were not ashamed of his work. Indeed, his father often supported him and allowed his son to perform to friends and relations at their family and country home. At the age of 25, he established the *Moscow Art Theatre* (MAT) which became famous for realistic performances of plays by famous Russian playwrights Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorki. In fact, Chekhov became famous because of Stanislavski's direction of *The Seagull* in 1898. Stanislavski's interpretation of Chekhov's piece was almost unheard of at the time, but drew audiences deeply into the mythical universe created on stage. He turned simple stage directions into a barrage of subtle details, varied emotions, long pauses and gloomy stares. The Theatre of the time: At the beginning of the 19th Century, Russian theatre was heavily censored and only Moscow and St Petersburg sustained acting companies. Towards the middle of the century, social comedies began to disguise scathing attacks on society and gradually broke down censorship. Playwrights, such as Gogol and Schepkin, tried to make acting a respectable and structured practice; but by the time Stanislavski came to it, it was as chaotic as it had ever been. Stanislavski's chief worries early on as a director lay with the punctuality of the actors and their backstage drunkenness.

The acting style itself was almost anarchic. Actors would strut on stage as they saw fit and deliver the lines downstage to the audience, without any regard to addressing fellow actors. The actors or theatre store provided whatever costumes they had to hand. The theatre provided sets and props from stock, while set design placed doors for the convenience of actors rather than to create a realistic aesthetic for the crowds. In 1894, Stanislavski directed Shakespeare's *Othello* and took a trip abroad to buy props and fabrics for costume that would actually fit the play - something unheard of at the time.

Stanislavski not only disliked the costumes and props, but also the general feel of theatre - an indifferent system negligent of thespian training or a rehearsal process, relying primarily on cheap French and German farce comedies. In a bid to eradicate this problem, he developed a method, or more accurately a system, with which to train the actors he directed. This system led Stanislavski to become the father of modern theatre. **The System**

The System uses a balance between an actor's personal experience and an attempt to imagine being in their character's situation. The actors could not merely rely on observation and imitation, they had to emotionally feel the role of their characters and recognize themselves in it, not just think of the part but also live it. Stanislavski stressed importantly that no part of his three-part system take precedence over another part, as this would create an imbalance. All aspects of The System must systematically engage together.

The System falls into three sections, elaborated upon in Stanislavski's novels:

- *An Actor Prepares* (1937) - This book explains how the actor must psychologically and emotionally prepare for a created role. Once it is created, the actor must personally develop it until he feels comfortable living as somebody else. Actors must ask themselves 'What would I do if...?' based on the circumstances surrounding their character. The System describes this as a personal reality.
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- *Building A Character* (1949)² - This book deals with the external training an actor undertakes to communicate different aspects of a role. The stress here is on a physical and vocal approach to the role and how far these aspects can change to display aspects of the role while remaining in the character.
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- *Creating A Role* (1961) - This book gives detailed examples of how The System can be applied to various roles. The actor must make the role fit the script, but only after preparing the role and assuming it both physically and vocally. The actor must effectively consider and approach each line and every pause from the character's perspective. This helps the actor gain proper access to the subtext.
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The Method

By encouraging actors to become artists in their own right, Stanislavski had to lay down a method to stimulate his three-part System. Now known as 'method acting', the mechanisms used to take on a role are varied, but all focus on making an actor put their own experience, imagination and feeling into a role.

2 most influential acting teachers: Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler

Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio

Method Acting:

If one listens to either its critics or supporters Method Acting is described as a form of acting where the actor mystically ‘becomes’ the character or tries to somehow literally live the character in life. Like all clichés, both explanations are false. When Lee Strasberg defined what is popularly known as *Method Acting* he used a simple declarative sentence: “Method acting is what all actors have always done whenever they acted well.”

Now to the casual observer, that may sound as though he were implying that only actors who studied and used Strasberg’s particular method of work were good actors; but such an interpretation is contrary to Strasberg’s intent. He meant that what is called “Method Acting” is nothing new, but rather as old as Western Civilization itself. In fact, the Greeks were the first to identify and practice this kind of acting (despite it being credited to Constantin Stanislavsky). For centuries, cultures used different words and phrases to describe this kind of “good” acting: Romantic Acting, Emotional Acting, Divine Inspiration, The Muses, Feeling the Role. These terms merely described an organic process of creativity that talented actors used, often times unconsciously, to accomplish what audiences experienced as a moving performance; And this ‘moving’ was in fact the (re)experiencing of life by the actor within the fiction of the story as if it were true and happening now. Aristotle said that the secret to moving the passions in others is to be moved oneself, and that moving oneself is made possible by bringing to the fore “visions” of experiences from life that are no longer present. In essence, Aristotle was stating the core principle of The Method—the creative play of the affective memory in the actor’s imagination as the foundation for (re)experiencing on stage.

This idea was first called the ‘System’ by Konstantin Stanislavsky, and later, as further developed by Lee Strasberg (at the Group Theatre, the Actors Studio and then at the Institute), ‘The Method’. The Method trains actors to use their imagination, senses and emotions to conceive of characters with unique and original behavior, creating performances grounded in the human truth of the moment.

As the only school in the world that teaches Lee Strasberg’s work in its consummate form, The Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute is the home for all actors seeking to delve into Method Acting and its tradition of training some of the worlds most brilliant and truthful actors.

"The real secret to method acting— which is as old as the theater itself—is creating reality."

– Lee Strasberg

Early Life and Career

Born on November 17, 1901, in Budzanów, Poland, Austria-Hungary (now Budanov, Ukraine), Lee Strasberg went on to become one of the top acting teachers of the 20th century. [Al Pacino](#), [Sidney Poitier](#), [Paul Newman](#), [Maureen Stapleton](#) and [Marlon Brando](#) were among his many students at the Actors Studio in New York City. Strasberg moved to New York with his family in 1909. He first became involved in the theater at the Chrystie Street Settlement House, acting in productions staged there.

Strasberg had a life-changing experience in 1923, when he attended a performance directed by [Constantin Stanislavski](#). The production was part of the Moscow Art Theatre's American tour, and Stanislavski's work influenced Strasberg's entire career path. Around this time, Strasberg began working with the Theatre Guild. He started out as an assistant stage manager and then moved into acting.

After retiring from the stage in 1929, Strasberg soon created his own dramatic organization. He formed the Group Theatre in 1931 with Cheryl Crawford and Harold Clurman. While with the Group Theatre, Strasberg directed numerous plays, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Men in White* by Sidney Kingsley. The organization also produced several works by [Clifford Odets](#).

The Actors Studio

In 1948, Strasberg joined the Actors Studio as a teacher. The studio had been founded the previous year by [Elia Kazan](#), Cheryl Crawford and Robert Lewis. Its aim was to provide theatrical professionals—actors, directors and playwrights—with the opportunity for creative exploration and growth. Strasberg became famous for his approach to acting, which drew from Stanislavski's techniques.

Strasberg asked his students to engage in what is known as "method" acting—actors call upon their own emotions and experiences and incorporate them into their performances. "The real secret to method acting—which is as old as the theater itself—is creating reality," Strasberg once said, according to the *Boston Globe*. "That is tremendously difficult. Some actors think behaving casually is the same thing."

In the early 1950s, Strasberg became the artistic director of the Actors Studio. He spent more than 30 years leading this creative enterprise, working with such great talents as [James Dean](#), [Julie Harris](#), [Jane Fonda](#) and [Joanne Woodward](#). In 1969, Strasberg established the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute.

Later Years

Strasberg returned to acting in the 1970s. In 1974, he played a Jewish crime figure in [Francis Ford Coppola's](#) *The Godfather: Part II*, and received an Academy Award nomination for his supporting role in the film.

Two years later, he appeared with [Sophia Loren](#), [Richard Harris](#) and [Martin Sheen](#) in the thriller *The Cassandra Crossing*.

In 1979, Strasberg had one of his few leading film roles. He co-starred with [George Burns](#) and [Art Carney](#) in the crime caper comedy *Going with Style*. Even with these forays into film work, Strasberg remained committed to the Actors Studio. He served as the group's artistic director until his death in 1982. Strasberg died of an apparent attack on February 17 of that year. Thrice married, he was survived by his third wife Anna and his four children, Susan, John, Adam and David.

A few days after his death, Strasberg was remembered at a service at New York's Shubert Theater. Countless stars from the film and theatrical worlds filled the audience to say goodbye to the acting instructor who inspired and challenged them. [Paul Newman](#), [Dustin Hoffman](#), [Anthony Quinn](#), [Shelley Winters](#) and [Ben Gazzara](#) were among the mourners.

Stella Adler

The school that lives on in Stella Adler's name is described as a "family-owned" business. This traditional acting school, very different and unrelated to the agenda of a school such as ours, apparently attempts to adhere to the teachings of Ms. Adler and her contemporaries.

One of the titans of 20th Century actor training was Stella Adler. She was born in 1905 and died at the age of 87. She was the only American to ever study Constantin Stanislavsky. She was raised in the theater, her mother and father were famed Yiddish theater stars, Sara and Jacob Adler.

Stella Adler first stepped foot on the stage at the age of four in a show called "Broken Hearts," in a production associated with her father. Her earliest study of the craft of acting was through the time-honored tradition of watching and learning from veterans of the stage. At our own school, *The Jason Bennett Actors Studio*, we honor this tradition by having beginners experience the work of seasoned professionals through appropriate collaborations that keep it interesting for both the beginners and the professionals.

Ms. Adler traveled to London at the age of 18 to appear at The Pavillion Theater as Naomi in "Elisa Ben Avia." Her production received rave reviews for the specificity and brilliance of her performance. She stayed in the role for approximately a year, before returning to the United States. She then toured many continents appearing in all kinds of plays, speaking in numerous languages.

In 1924, Stella Adler met Harold Clurman, the famed theater director, who would go on to become her second husband. In 1928, Ms. Adler first appeared on Broadway and joined what was called the "American Laboratory," created by former members of The Moscow Art Theater, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya. The Moscow Art Theater, dedicated to the innovations of Master teachers like Konstantin Stanislavski, believed acting should arise and express far more humanity and "reality" than what had been achieved in the past. One focus was to expand performance beyond mere technical gesture, posing and articulation, such that acting was a deeper and more profound exploration of humanity.

Stella Adler was one of the founding members of The Group Theater in 1931. This historic theater group, co-founded by Lee Strasberg, Cheryl Crawford and Harold Clurman, was responsible for many controversial and important plays (often written by the great playwright, Clifford Odets). The Group Theater toured the United States for about 5 years, before being essentially disbanded because of artistic disagreements among company members. Stella Adler would eventually break apart from the group in 1937 and relocate to Los Angeles.

During the course of her substantial and well-respected performing career, Stella Adler appeared as Sarah Glassman in Adah Menken in "Gold Eagle Guy," "Success Story," Bessie Berger in Odet's "Awake and Sing," and Clara in "Paradise Lost."

After relocating to Los Angeles, Stella Adler spent about six years as an associate producer at MGM. She appeared in movies such as "Love on Toast" and "The Shadow of the Thin Man." She frequently returned to Broadway and London. And her performing and directing resumé was substantial. You can find it throughout the internet.

In around 1934, Stella Adler decided to take a trip to Russia to explore the acting methods and training processes there. On her way, she visited Paris. Legend has it that she coincidentally met Konstantin Stanislavski, who had become an almost mythic "father of acting training" in the Western world. She worked with him for approximately five weeks. Lee Strasberg, it has been reported, never worked with Stanislavski.

Her work with Stanislavski, who was late in his career, led her to conclude the teachings of Lee Strasberg were invalid. Later in life, Stanislavski's work focused on actors developing methods of "physical action" to tell stories.* Upon returning to Los Angeles, she began teaching classes in opposition to Strasberg's work, working with many of the Master teachers and directors of the 20th Century like Elia Kazan, Robert ("Bobby") Lewis and Sanford Meisner.

Lee Strasberg's work focused on the actor fully immersing themselves in each role, using their imaginations and also the totality of their own life experiences -- their memories, emotional life, etc. He developed "sense memory" or "emotional recall," one of the early focuses of Stanislavski's work. When Adler returned from working with Stanislavski, she denounced Strasberg's teaching as being not at all what Stanislavski taught.