

DIGITAL THEATRE+

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE

Lee Strasberg

Lola Cohen

Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute

INTRODUCTION

Lee Strasberg (1901-1982) was born in Budaniv in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire (now Ukraine) and emigrated to the US in 1908. He is considered the “Father of Method Acting” in America and was a prominent master teacher, director, producer and actor. He was Co-founder of The Group Theater, Artistic Director of The Actors Studio, Co-founder with Anna Strasberg of The Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute in New York City and Los Angeles and Keynote Speaker at the Stanislavsky Centennial Celebration, Moscow, USSR. Strasberg's lectures were published in *Lee Strasberg at the Actor's Studio* (1980) and he authored *Dream of Passion: Development of The Method* (published in 1988 after his death). He was an honorary doctorate degree recipient and was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Strasberg received an Academy Award nomination for best supporting actor in *The Godfather Part II* (1974).

Strasberg was the key exponent of ‘method acting’, in which actors are encouraged to use their own emotional experience and memory in preparing to ‘live’ a role. Strasberg’s personal papers are archived at the Library of Congress in the US. His ideas and method acting continue to be an important creative force in [actor training](#) worldwide.



HISTORY

Lee Strasberg was a dominant influence on American acting in all three mediums: theatre, film and television. He translated his ideas into a concrete discipline to develop an actor's full potential as a performer. Actors use Strasberg's training to be equipped to 'live truthfully' on the stage under the imaginary circumstances of the play, by activating their senses and imagination. The training provides the tools to stimulate the actor's creativity when crafting a role, creativity that can be reliably repeated at will.

The sequence of sense and emotional exercises which comprise Strasberg's work has at its foundation the ideas of **Konstantin Stanislavsky** (1863-1938) and addresses what both practitioners identified as the central problem of the actor, which is to simultaneously experience real feelings and be in control of what needs to be done emotionally and physically while acting a part.

Strasberg's life in the theatre began in 1922 when he joined a group of amateur actors at Students of Art and Drama at the Chrystie Street Settlement House in New York City. He acted in plays and began to direct, experimenting with different styles and genres. Strasberg then enrolled at the Clare Tree Major School of Theater studying acting, ballet, voice and Shakespeare. Dissatisfied with the school's conventionality, he learned and interpreted the Stanislavsky System from Richard Boleslavski (1889-1937) and Maria Ouspenskaya (1876-1949), both esteemed Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) actors who emigrated to New York City and formed the American Laboratory Theater where Strasberg enrolled in 1924.

Stanislavsky's System revolutionised **actor training** and led the way to what is viewed as a more truthful and reliable inner experience for the actor. This was the foundation of the MAT formed in 1898 by **Stanislavsky** and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943). During the MAT's 1923/24 season in New York City, Strasberg saw their productions and observed an ensemble of extraordinary actors playing both leading and supporting roles while performing the plays of **Anton Chekhov** (1860-1904), Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793), Knut Hamsun (1859-1952), **Henrik Ibsen** (1828-1906) and Alexander Ostrovsky (1823-1886). Strasberg was profoundly moved by





their power and simplicity. He recognised **Stanislavsky's** genius and felt a responsibility to carry on his work. That same season Strasberg saw the renowned Italian tragedian Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) perform in **Ibsen's** *Lady from the Sea*. He saw John Barrymore (1882-1942) in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the Russian Opera singer Fyodor Chaliapin (1873-1938) in *Boris Godunov*. Strasberg began to dream of an artistic life in the theatre while at the same time devouring and collecting books and listening to classical music and opera – passions that lasted throughout his lifetime.

Strasberg was influenced by the ideas of **Stanislavsky's** prized pupil Yevgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922), the Russian actor and visionary director known for 'Magic Realism' and after whom the Vakhtangov State Theatre is named, and also **Vsevolod Meyerhold** (1874-1940), Russian actor, renowned director and creator of his own performance system 'Biomechanics'. Both **Meyerhold** and Vakhtangov were members of the MAT.

In 1925, Strasberg made his professional acting debut in The Theater Guild's production of *Processional* at the Garrick Theater in New York City. There he met Harold Clurman (1901-1980) and Cheryl Crawford (1902-1986), with whom he founded The Group Theater in 1931, a uniquely American theatre modelled on the MAT. The Group Theater was a collective ensemble staging contemporary plays that expressed progressive values and mirrored the social and political turmoil of the depression era in the 1930s. The Group had a profound cultural impact at that time.

The **Stanislavsky** System, as interpreted and taught by Strasberg, was at the foundation of the Group Theater's approach to performing plays. The Group introduced new playwrights like Clifford Odets and William Saroyan and actors including Luther Adler, Stella Adler, Morris Carnovsky, Lee J. Cobb, Frances Farmer, John Garfield, Elia Kazan, Sanford Meisner, Burgess Meredith, Paula Miller (Strasberg's second wife), Robert Lewis and Franchot Tone. Strasberg left The Group Theater in 1937 and continued to direct plays on Broadway and conduct private classes at New York City's Carnegie Hall and The New School for Social Research.

In 1948, Strasberg joined the Actors Studio and in 1950 became its Artistic Director, a position he held until his death in 1982. The Actors Studio is a





not-for-profit membership organisation for professional actors to work on their craft in private with colleagues and session moderators. Strasberg served as session moderator, director and co-producer of the Actors Studio's award-winning plays and founded a Director's Unit to provide a training ground for directors.

In 1969, the Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute was formed to continue his work, teaching The Method to actors from all over the world. The acceptance and use of The Method grew with the success of its artists: an extraordinary range of well-known US performers, directors and writers including, amongst others, James Baldwin, Anne Bancroft, Ellen Burstyn, James Dean, Robert DeNiro, Sally Field, Jane Fonda, Dustin Hoffman, Dennis Hopper, Elia Kazan, Martin Landau, Steve McQueen, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, Mike Nichols, Al Pacino, Geraldine Page, Sidney Poitier, Kim Stanley, Barbara Streisand, Christopher Walken, Eli Wallach, **Tennessee Williams** and Shelley Winters – whose work collectively has been honoured with a large number of Oscar, Tony and Emmy awards and nominations.





AIMS

Although Strasberg was a director and an actor, his primary objective was to teach acting and nurture talent. He devoted his life to solving the obstacles that actors face in their work: inspiration, truthfulness, spontaneity, anticipation and repetition. Strasberg had a critical eye for analysing and pinpointing the actor's problems and offering solutions to overcome them. He is known to have frequently said in his classes that, "I don't give you talent; I demand it from you." Strasberg was adamant that actors familiarise themselves with the other arts. Painting, music, literature, theatre history and biography, science and psychology should inform the actor's work. He suggested that actors should practice yoga or tai chi for strength and focus.

Strasberg devised procedures and exercises that train actors to be immersed in a role with genuine feelings and psychologically in-depth behaviour in order to successfully move an **audience**. He said actors must understand and control the nature of their own 'instrument', a word he used to describe the mind and body. He believed that disciplined daily practice of physical and emotional exercises would lead to a more truthful depiction of reality. Here, the actor lives and acts in the present moment internalising and identifying with the part to achieve the desired results:

"Other approaches to acting are immediately concerned with the scenes and their interpretation. Our preparation is contrary. Just because you know what to do in a scene, doesn't mean you're able to do it. To truthfully convey the ideas that the scene demands, we need the ability to relax at will and to apply inner concentration and awareness."

(Strasberg, cited in Cohen, 2010, p.5).

Strasberg's training procedures are intended to improve relaxation and concentration, both of which he considered to be essential to good acting: "We relax to have control over our bodies and we concentrate to have control over our minds". He believed that the Relaxation Exercise must be done in class and as a preparation for rehearsals, auditions and





performances to achieve what **Stanislavsky** and, subsequently, Strasberg referred to as the ‘creative mood’.

One of Strasberg’s aims was to help actors identify and eliminate their own physical and emotional habits which may not be the habits of the character. These individual mannerisms will confine expression, lead to imitation and overacting or bowing to a phony reading of a line. Strasberg taught that, by developing the senses, an actor would gain the skills to create and inhabit a character by embodying its ‘spine’ or essence. Truthful behaviour then emerges to fit the circumstances of the play and illuminate the playwrights’ words and intentions, which Strasberg believed to be sacrosanct.

He developed a rehearsal process removed from ‘rehearsal around the table’ as is customary. Following preliminary research and investigation, scenes and dialogue are improvised. This process leads to a deeper understanding of the actor’s relationship to the text and its subtext. Strasberg created the Affective or Emotional Memory Exercise based on the work of **Stanislavsky** and French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot who coined the term, “affective memory”. It is designed for the actor to recapture and re-live a singular “once in a lifetime” type of event from the past, and to use those truthful feelings to rise to an explosive moment, at will. The actor articulates and describes the event through the five senses without telling the actual story, using only sensory descriptions to make contact with the reality. The chosen event may lose its power, therefore it’s important to work with several memories for the purpose of having a wide variety of repeatable emotions to truthfully fulfil the given circumstances of the play.

Strasberg felt a great responsibility to teach the Method to directors and established a Director’s Unit at both the Actors Studio and The Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute. He directed or co-directed over 20 plays in different styles and genres. He also believed that self-evaluation was essential to perfecting one’s craft and that much can be learned from one’s failures.

He observed that unlike **actor training**, there was little instructional material available for directors. Books on the subject were written by directors each addressing their own approach but did not provide a





template or system to learn how to direct and use their own style and artistry. Strasberg's aim was that The Method would help directors form their vision, supply the heart of the event and conceive the spine of the play and each character. He believed it also informed casting, staging, set, music, and lighting choices to create a vivid reality for the audience. To him, the director serves as the bridge between the text and the actors, illuminating the possibilities inherent in a scene or play.





PRACTICE

Strasberg designed his own exercises and procedures to give actors a unique language to explore life's complexities through the senses and apply this to their acting. Classes were usually four hours long. The first two hours were devoted to the actors' work on themselves and consisted of the Relaxation and Sense Memory Exercises which he assigned to each individual student. The second two hours of class were devoted to working on character and performing scenes and monologues.

Exercises from The Method deliberately train actors to develop and strengthen their senses in order to recreate and imagine objects, places, people and events, exploring what they can see, smell, hear, touch and taste. The five senses must be awakened and ready to be used at will. Strasberg taught the exercises in a precise sequence which builds in complexity. Examples include: Relaxation and Sense Memory Exercises such as Breakfast Drink, Mirror / Makeup / Shaving, Sharp Taste and Smell, Three Pieces of Material, Overall Sensations (i.e. Shower or Bath, Extreme Heat or Cold). Other Sense Memory Exercises elicit emotional responses such as: Personal Object, Private Moment Exercise, Place Exercise, Emotional Memory Exercise, Substitution and Combinations of Exercises.

The actor might imagine what can be experienced through each sense while having a breakfast drink, for example, or exploring a childhood room, a cherished possession, the intense cold, or a good or unpleasant smell. Experiencing all the sensations that arise can be reused and recalled in their acting when those particular feelings are needed. Emotional exercises connect with powerful memories in order to create a character's psychological inner life. Other exercises include Song and Dance which was designed to help actors identify and break their habits, and Painting and Animal Exercises. Actors choose which exercises to use for a role after researching their characters' life and times within the given circumstances of the play. Strasberg emphasised that the actor should identify how the character is both similar to and different from them and try to merge their own personal experiences with the characters'. He often said that if you're cast because you're just like the character, then you don't have to use the Method:





“The art of acting is, first, the creation of a character, not the reading of the line or the playing of the scene...There are many questions you must ask yourself about the character you’re creating. To search for the reality, ask yourself what the character would do in each situation – not what you would do... Look for the opposite within the character. If you play a good man, find out where he’s bad. If you play a bad man, find out where he’s good when you play a thief, also look for the hero.”

(Strasberg, cited in Cohen, 2010, pp.43-44).

The Method relies on the process of improvisation to discover expressive behaviour and envision the character’s life outside of the play, imagining what the character might have been doing before and after the scene to preserve continuity. Strasberg challenged his students to be relentless in their search for the truth, becoming resilient and exuding the confidence gained from conscious preparation.

When Lee Strasberg was asked what method acting is, he said that “Method acting is what all actors have always done whenever they acted well.”





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