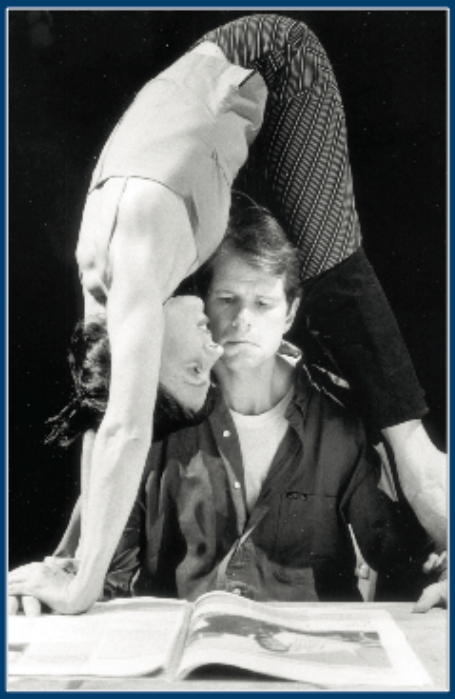
Telling Stories:

A Grand Unifying Theory of Acting Techniques



BY

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Introduction

In the Sixth Century B.C. in Greece, an event transpired which forever changed the way we view acting. The traditional dramatic form at the time consisted of ritualized choral dances illustrating popular religious and heroic tales. It was a mode of theatrical storytelling. What changed in the sixth century was a revolution of form. Thespis, whose name is now indelibly linked to the profession of acting, broke the mold of accepted practice by separating himself from the narrating chorus. His task now was not simply to relate the events of the story as part of an ensemble, but to portray the hero of that story. This was not an incidental occurrence. From the earliest tribal gatherings to the epic works of Homer, Drama had evolved from a tradition of the storyteller, in which a poet would recount epic myths and themes that defined and instructed his particular culture. The concept of an actor attempting to reveal the subjective life of a character had now been introduced to western civilization. It was a change in emphasis that would have profound implications that resound to the present day. In that moment, the predominant role of storytelling was usurped by the skills and craft of an individual actor. Later, when Aeschylus introduced a second actor and Sophocles a third, the move away from narrative storytelling and towards enactment and impersonation was made conventional. It is worth noting that in 449 B.C., the first acting competitions were held at the Dionysian festival in Athens in which individual actors were presented with awards. In a relatively short space of time, the way theatre was enacted and was perceived had changed.

What had changed? Some may argue that it was less of a revolution than an evolution, a natural shift in a developing art form. Certainly stories were still being told, only now utilizing the expression of characters' points of view. However, that shift represented a sea change in how the craft of acting would be approached for the next 2 millenniums. The ability of an actor to compel and affect an audience through the embodiment of a character would become a quantifiable commodity that would be exalted and rewarded. Some theorists, such as Bertholt Brecht, would argue that focusing on the subjective experience of the character detracts from the message and meaning of the story as a whole. Others such as Constantin Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov

emphasized the interior experience of the character as a means of deepening and enriching the story being told. The personal and psychological approach was explored and taken to a new level by practitioners such as Lee Strasberg. Sanford Meisner believed the real essence of the story lay not in personal experience but in the moment-to-moment exchanges of the characters as the story unfolds. Modern teachers such as Keith Johnstone focus on the immediacy and directness of spontaneous storytelling through improvisation.

The point of this book is not to choose sides in a debate, but rather to show how all these roads lead to the same desired impact, the sharing of a compelling story with an audience. The events of the twentieth century, from world wars to massive social and political movements and to an increasing fascination with the nature of psychology and the interior life of the individual, had profound effects on culture that in turn impacted the way we construct and tell stories to one another. A myriad of different forms and structures arose, some in response to events, some as reactions to each other. If we can look at the context in which these modes arose and understand the evolution of acting as a form, we give ourselves the opportunity to use the means and techniques that have been developed to give ourselves an incredible range of expression that reaches across separate styles and forms. In so doing, we liberate ourselves from the obligation to merely charm and please an audience and instead focus on the story itself and how it informs our work.

One does not have far to look in our own era to see film and television actors being paid millions of dollars on the basis of the relationship they have established with an audience through previous characters they have portrayed. Throughout the centuries individual actors have assumed a place of prominence in popular culture as they nurtured in audiences powerful associations with the great roles they have played. This is not always a healthy thing. The point of this book however, is not to ruminate on the vicissitudes of fame and fortune. It is rather, to look at the state of the acting profession, and more specifically at the current state of training and preparation for the profession and ask ‘Is there a better way?’ Is the enthronement of the individual actor a particularly

healthy way to approach the task of conveying compelling drama, or is there an alternative?

Theatre, of all the arts, is the most collaborative of mediums. It requires the efforts of designers, writers, directors, a vast technical staff, as well as actors. In film and television, the numbers of contributors increase exponentially. Yet the focus on the actors whose efforts so determine the success or failure of the enterprise inevitably distorts the process. Not to sound overly egalitarian, but we are all working at the same job. We are storytellers. It is that simple. All of us who work in theatre or film have a task to achieve, and that is to convey in the most compelling way, the story at hand. That seems a blatantly obvious concept. But as I will show, the thorough understanding of that concept and its' application to every aspect to training and performance can have a transforming effect.

1 Telling Stories

The concept of storytelling as the underlying principle of Acting is surely not radical. All Theatre and Films, for that matter, rely essentially on the transmission of information to an audience. This is not information as in the facts and numbers of a University lecture. Instead, the information contains the situation, the context, the emotional relationships, and the challenges and choices that characters face in the story. Basically, when an audience begins to watch a play, they ask three questions; 'Who are these people?' 'What is going on?' and 'why do I care?' In order to maintain the audience's interest to the very last moment of the piece, the entire cast and artistic staff must address those needs in the audience.

Too often and actor will begin his work on a text with the question, ' How can I act this part well?' That is fundamentally the wrong question to ask. It is analogous to a plumber being called to fix a sink and asking 'How can I use this job as a means to show what a good plumber I am?' The customer would be better served if the plumber would simply ask 'What needs to be done to fix this sink?' That is the very crux of Storytelling. It is about focusing on the task at hand. If that plumber facing the broken sink had said, ' Not only can I fix the sink. I can re-lay all your underground pipes, modernize your heating system, and put filters on all your faucets', his offers would likely be viewed as at best irrelevant and at worse, annoying. So would the actor who views a play as an opportunity to show off his vocal prowess, his imaginative and complex choice making skills, or his range and virtuosity in developing a character. We would all be better off if he just concentrated on what needs to be done to tell the story to an audience.

Storytelling is an invitation to the actor to pick up his lunch pail, put on his work boots, and join the ranks of workers and craftsmen everywhere. It is also a potential boon to the actor. By embracing the principles of storytelling at the very beginning of the creative process, he avoids many possible pitfalls and much unnecessary work. The goal is efficiency. The framework of the story provides the actor with a context that organizes his or her choices so that all the efforts become cumulative and move towards the

purpose of conveying information. For acting is a constant state of telling. Every movement, every look, every breath taken onstage is a process of revelation and communication. Storytelling affords the actor the means to take control of, and the opportunity to take responsibility for that process.

2 How Did We Get Here?

The theatre in America at the end of the 19th century was a popular entertainment form. It was modeled after the continental system of the Actor/Manager. Companies were formed around a leading man or leading lady and the play served as a vehicle for best showing off his or her particular talents. Theatre competed with early Vaudeville and Minstrel Shows for the public's patronage. The tastes ran from broad comedy to Romantic and Heroic epics. Shakespeare was adapted to these tastes and the style of performance was in general bombastic and broad. Audiences were not shy about voicing their approval or displeasure. There were some notable original voices in the American Theatre as it moved into the 20th century, among them Eugene O'Neill. Still, the predominant convention remained a star-centered theatre that answered its' audiences' need for sensation and escapism. Several thousand miles away in Russia, however, changes were taking place that would transform the American Theatre and Cinema over the next century.

In June of 1897, Constantin Stanislavski met with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko to discuss what would be his first professional job in the Theatre. Stanislavski, whose given name was Alekseyev, had confounded his bourgeois family by acting and directing in the amateur theatres of Moscow. The Moscow Art Theatre represented a wholly new endeavor. It was with the passion and conviction of an outsider and the discipline of an accomplished practitioner that he threw himself into the discussion of the burgeoning enterprise. It was decided that Stanislavski would become the Artistic Director and form the Acting ensemble and Nemirovich-Danchenko would be the Literary Manager. Stanislavski had been profoundly influenced by recent productions by the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, the noted German Director. The Meiningen Court Theatre used large casts in his historical productions and employed a minute attention to detail. Each performer, no matter what the size of his role, had precise functions to perform in a scene. Yet the action was seamless and cohesively orchestrated. Another major influence on the young Stanislavski was the acting of the Italian tragedian Tomasso Salvini and that of his compatriot, the actress Eleanor Duse. Stanislavski was

awed by the passion and intensity of Salvini's "Othello", and by Duse's simplicity and emotional truth. He wanted to establish an ensemble capable of the precision of Meiningen's troupe with emotional honesty of Salvini and Duse.

As a performer himself, Stanislavski was acutely aware of the obstacles the actor faced; tension, self-consciousness, and inconsistent concentration among others. He was a diligent analyst of his own creative process and it was this observational propensity that led him to devise a systematic approach to combat impediments and nurture more truthful performances. Working with his hand picked ensemble gave him the opportunity to explore approaches and formulate techniques in service of that goal. So began what would become a lifelong pursuit of Stanislavski; the devising and refining of a comprehensive method of training the actor.

Stanislavski understood that plays structurally require a sense of momentum and that the momentum is fuelled by the contrasting desires of the characters. He saw the Objective of the character, his innate desire, as his propelling force. That Objective then manifests itself in the form of actions- specific expressions of the need to attain the desire. When an action is frustrated it must be adjusted or replaced by a new action in service to that desire. He called this process 'adaptation'. The individual shifts or adjustments are called beats. By locating the units in which a character strives for an objective, one can find the score for the entire role. The Objective can encompass scenes, whole acts, or the entire play. The largest of these objectives, which defines the life course of the character, he called the Superobjective. He also used the Superobjective in reference to the play as a whole. He saw it as the unifying element, the story as it were, that integrated all the characters' separate actions and objectives and brought them into a satisfying coalescence. He also advocated the using of the "What If?"(1), a process of investigation by which the actor employs his imagination to gain entry into the "Given Circumstances", the facts of the play that determine objectives.

So much of Stanislavski's terminology has entered the popular lexicon that it almost seems cliché. The quotes "One must love art, and not one's self in art" and "there

are no small parts, there are only small actors" are his. (2)'The fourth wall' is a concept originally formed by the theorist Diderot to describe an imaginary wall behind which the actors behave as in a private room, oblivious to the presence of the audience. The term was inextricably linked to Stanislavski's naturalist stagings. 'Circles of Concentration' refers to the means by which an actor anchors his concentration and focuses his attention on stage on objects and activities that absorb him. One of the most controversial aspects of the evolving method was 'the memory of emotion' or 'affective memory'.

Stanislavski found that in order to render an intense emotional moment in a play, the actor could look for an analogous feeling that he had experienced in his own life. By revisiting the sensory details of the experience in his imagination, the emotion would be recreated and therefore usable in performance. There is an ironic anecdote about these affective memory exercises. Michael Chekhov, one of the most gifted members of the first MAT Studio, was doing an exercise in which he recounted the details of his father's funeral. The class and the teacher were profoundly moved and afterwards Stanislavski embraced the young actor and consoled him. It was only later that Stanislavski learned that Chekhov's father was in fact very much alive. But this is less an indictment of Stanislavski's methodology than it is a reflection of the imaginative facility of the great actor and later teacher, Michael Chekhov.

The critics recognized the evolving style that resulted from these experiments. Still, none of the early productions of the MAT was a great commercial or popular success. However, when the company first assayed the work of Anton Chekhov in their groundbreaking production of "The Seagull", they found a success and a style that would define them for years to come. Critics and audiences hailed the naturalness and detailed behavior that seemed to emerge directly from each character's subconscious. The MAT found continued success in the rest of Chekhov's canon as well as in the work of Gorky and Turgenev. As the Company came to be regarded as the premier Theatre in Russia, Stanislavski sought to evolve his methods to produce truthful and compelling acting even in more poetic and symbolic plays such as Maeterlink's "The Blue Bird" and stylized productions such as "The Marriage of Figaro". While Stanislavski himself had only

measured results in these new forms, under his aegis many of his protégés such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Michael Chekhov, and Yevgeny Vakhtangov successfully pushed his methods into evermore heightened and abstract theatre.

Yet for many, Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre would always be associated with naturalism. This was due in part to the manner in which the West was exposed to the work and teachings of Stanislavski. The system that Stanislavski was devising was a revolution in the training of actors. But for those in America, the dissemination of that system was an incredibly slow and inefficient evolution. In 1930 Stanislavski began compiling his notes for a comprehensive book on the system which was to be called "The Actor's Work on the Self". When the book was finished, because of its' length, the decision was made to divide it into 2 parts. One would deal with the psychological preparation for the role. The second would concentrate on the technical and physical aspects. Volume One was published in English in 1936 under the title "An Actor Prepares". The second volume, "Building a Character", did not appear until 14 years later. This led to the misapprehension that Stanislavski's methodology focused exclusively on the Psychological at the expense of the Physical demands of acting.

Americans gained first hand knowledge of the work of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1923 when members of the Company, including Stanislavski, toured the United States. The plays they brought over included Gorky's "The Lower Depths" and Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" and "The Three Sisters", examples of the MAT's mastery of naturalism and ensemble playing. For the company consisted of the crème de la crème of Russian Theatre and many of its' members, having not been convinced of the benefits the ensemble, would have been considered stars in their own rights. The tour created a sensation in the American acting community and led to a hunger for training in this new style of performance. Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya were members of the first MAT lab who had earlier immigrated to New York during the violent days of the Russian Revolution. They established an acting lab modeled after the MAT and taught a method based on Stansislavski's early work. To their students, the example of the MAT's performances and the teaching of Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya were a revelation. Lee

Strasberg was one of those students. Inspired by the MAT's new approach, he and fellow student Harold Clurman along with their friend and associate Cheryl Crawford sought to create an American Theatre based on the MAT model. Thus the Group Theatre was born.

In 1931 they formed an acting ensemble culled from fellow students and some of the brightest young actors of the Yiddish and Off Broadway Theatre and moved into a farmhouse in Connecticut to prepare. Clurman became the Artistic Director, Cheryl Crawford would produce, and Lee Strasberg would direct and was placed in charge of training. He based his methods on the principles he had learned from Ouspenskaya and Boleslavsky and on his readings of essays about the system. He emphasized Relaxation, Concentration, and the use of Affective Memory. The Group's early productions were appreciated for their truthful intensity and ensemble playing but their commercial appeal was erratic. It was through the works of the Company's resident playwright, Clifford Odets, that the Group found true popular success. With the acclaim of "Waiting for Lefty" and "Awake and Sing", the Group Theatre became a major force in American Theatre. The Group almost single handedly defined a new genre of American Social Realism by shifting the focus from bourgeois comedy and escapist drama to the sufferings and strivings of the working class.

Yet just as the Group Theatre enjoyed success and an increasing prominence in the American Theatre, there were fractures forming behind the scenes. Members of the acting company were expressing frustration over the training methods of Strasberg, specifically, his use of Affective Memory to achieve truthful emotion on stage. The actors felt that far from creating moment-to-moment life, the technique caused actors to drop out of a scene and create emotion through a kind of self-hypnosis. At this point of crisis, Clurman and his wife Stella Adler, one of the company's leading actresses, made a sojourn to Paris where they managed to meet with the man who had started it all, Constantin Stanislavski.

Stanislavski was in Paris convalescing from a recent illness. When she met him, Adler told him, "Mr. Stanislavski, I loved the theatre until you came along, and now I

hate it!" To which he replied, "Well, then you must come to see me tomorrow."(3) In their sessions together, he explained that his training methods were in a constant process of evolution and his thoughts on the use and production of emotion on stage had changed considerably. He described to her his Method of Psycho-physical Actions. Stanislavski explained how he found emotions to be elusive and unresponsive to direct manipulation. He found that by committing to a truly expressive physical action suggested by the play's given circumstances, emotion could be evoked indirectly. Adler worked for the next month with Stanislavski and was re-inspired by the techniques. When she and Clurman returned to the Group, she addressed the company with a detailed chart explaining the specifics of the current system as Stanislavski himself had described it. This conflicted sharply with Strasberg, whose methodology was based on the teaching of Boleslavsky as well as on published essays by Stanislavki's colleagues, Vakhtangov and Sudakov describing the system. His approach de-emphasized the play's given circumstances in favor of the personal experiences of the actors. Strasberg argued that they needn't adhere slavishly to Stanislavski's system and that, in fact, his own adaptation of the techniques were more appropriate for American actors. This began one of many fissures that would divide the American acting community over the next half century.

The actors saw the new methods as a revelation. Strasberg became increasingly marginalized within the Group as Adler's discoveries became more accepted. However, in spite of the Group's continuing prominence within the theatrical establishment, they never seemed able to use the techniques to expand to a broader repertory outside of the plays of psychological realism in which they had scored their first triumphs. They were also undermined by their own success. Three prominent members; Clurman, Elia Kazan, and Robert Lewis, found their directing services much in demand in the competing commercial theatre. Members of the acting company such as Francis Farmer, John Garfield, and Franchot Tone heeded the call to Hollywood. Still others discovered a new calling. Stella Adler retired from the stage to teach, eventually opening her own studio and becoming one of the most prominent acting teachers in America. Sanford Meisner, another noted actor in the company, used his experience to devise a wholly different technique of acting. He focused on the moment-to-moment give and take of actors in a

scene. Through the use of seemingly banal mutual observations and phrase repetitions, he taught actors to discover the essential impulses that allow truthful behavior on stage. He advised his students, “don’t do anything until something makes you do it”.(4) His classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse became yet another competing vision for unleashing the actor’s potential.

In the coming years Lee Strasberg would also rise to an unthought of level of primacy in the world of acting. Kazan had hired him on to teach Theatre History at his new Actors Studio. But Strasberg gradually asserted himself as an acting teacher and his Method became the identifying ideal of the Studio. These evolving techniques served not only the theatre of the day, which more and more was investigating the subterranean psychology of ordinary people, but also the evolving American Cinema. Kazan had scored striking success in both theatre and film with landmark productions such as “A Streetcar Named Desire” and “Death of a Salesman”, and his work had a profound influence on how acting was perceived. American acting aspired to a new level of intimacy that could reveal the deepest emotional truth projected in extreme close up on a 35-millimeter screen. Faced with this daunting prospect, many emerging actors turned to Strasberg’s increasingly controversial methods. But there were contrasting choices for young actors seeking to learn the craft.

Michael Chekhov had split with Stanislavski and toured with his own company. He believed Stanislavski’s techniques led too readily to a naturalistic style. He emigrated and set up his own Studio, teaching a much more physical and imaginative based system of training. He advocated the establishing of scenes’ atmospheres in order to create the tones of the play, from which the actor could then draw personal inspiration. He also established the use of the “Psychological Gesture”.(5) In this technique, the actor physicalizes a character’s need or internal dynamic in the form of an external gesture. He then mutes the outward gesture and incorporates it internally, allowing the physical memory to inform the performance on an unconscious level. Much of what Chekhov explored was the question of how to access the unconscious creative self through indirect non-analytical means. He also taught a range of movement dynamics such as molding,

floating, flying, and radiating which actors could use to find a physical core of a character. His techniques, though seemingly external, were meant to lead the actor to a rich internal life. In spite of his brilliance as an actor and his first hand experience in the development of the Moscow Art Theatre's groundbreaking work, Chekhov as a teacher was overshadowed by his American counterparts and their evolving interpretations of Stanislavski's methods. As if these competing approaches weren't confusing enough, in the early fifties another major influence emerged that brought the entire orthodoxy of actor training into question.

Erwin Piscator was a young director in Germany with a radically different view. He believed theatre needed to forgo the illusionistic tendencies of naturalism and form a direct dialogue with the audience. He believed in a proletarian theatre that spoke to the concerns of the average working man. Abolishing the notion of the fourth wall, he ushered in a theatre that exposed the means of presentation, using the burgeoning technology of the scientific age to explore themes directly relevant to society. His collaboration with the young playwright Bertholt Brecht laid the basis for a movement in opposition to the Stanislavski-based theatre.

With the rise of Nazis in the 1930's, Brecht and Piscator were forced to emigrate. Piscator came to New York where he taught his influential theories at the New School for Social Research, forming an important bridge from the Group Theatre to the evolving Acting Studios. The Marxist Brecht moved from Austria to the Netherlands to Russia and finally to Hollywood. His most fruitful period came upon the end of World War II, when he returned to Germany and led the prestigious Berliner Ensemble. In his plays, he focused on the choices of individuals in the context of larger political and social forces. His characters range from the sympathetic to the grotesque, but all have a recognizable if extremely fallible humanity.

Brecht is largely thought of as presentational because he sought to rid theatre of what he saw as its' reliance on empathy and reinforcement of the audience's own moral predisposition. He sought to show the story in a stark unsentimental way. He employed

song and broad comedy as a means to distance the audience from emotional identification with the characters. He was a prolific theorist and much has been made of his advocacy of the "Verfrumdungseffect", or 'alienation effect'(6). In this concept, a role needs to be performed with an objectivity toward the character. The actor works with a consciousness of both the social imperatives operating in the story and an awareness of its' impact on the audience as it is told. This may seem to advocate a certain coldness or absence of psychology in the acting. However, Brecht believed in empathy as part of the process of character development. But the character then needs to be contextualized within the story and seen from the standpoint of society.

There seemed a great void between the Theatre of Brecht and that of Stanislavski, which was reinforced by Brecht's own diatribes against bourgeois naturalism. But Brecht had little first hand exposure to the many diverse productions of the MAT and its' studios. The critic Eric Bentley best sums up the divergence as such; "Brecht was a playwright, Stanislavski an actor. For Brecht, actors were the means toward the full realization of his plays…In short, Brecht, who regarded his scripts as forever unfinished, forever transformable, and his dramaturgy as young and developing, tended to regard the actor's craft as given and as already there in finished form…For Stanislavski, on the other hand, it was the play that was a fait accompli. We do not read of his reworking scripts in the manner of Brecht or of the Broadway directors. He was busy reworking the actors. I suppose every director looks for clay to mold. For Stanislavski the clay consisted of actors; for Brecht, of his own collected writings."(7)

So, there we have it. In the course of less than half a century a veritable explosion of acting theories, each one fighting for primacy as the means to achieve theatrical truth. It is analogous to the Schism of the Christian church that arose in the Middle Ages where separate sects and orthodoxies arose vying to be the one true religion and all of them mutually exclusive of each other. How on earth could any actor know which path to choose? Indeed, the choice became even more difficult in the sixties and seventies when movements emerged in response to established methods and practices. Directors such as Jerzy Growtowski in Poland and groups such as the Living Theatre of Julian Beck and

Judith Malina and Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre in America explored a communal, improvisatory process in order to create an immediate theatre that alternately confronted the audience's preconceptions and invited a more direct level of participation.

If someone was right, was everyone else wrong? If an actor committed to a particular approach, was he then closing the door on a world of possibility? Surely, faced with this Tower of Babel of varying acting theories in the late 20th century, some rationale would have to arrive. And it did…