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CONSIDERING STRASBERG'S METHOD IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A NEW PEDAGOGY

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CONSIDERING STRASBERG'S METHOD IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:
A NEW PEDAGOGY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Abstract

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Major Director: David Leong, Theatre Chair, School of the
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Student of Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, co-founder of the Group Theatre, Artistic Director of the Actors Studio, founder of the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute, and developer of The Method, Lee Strasberg is one of the most famous acting teachers of the twentieth century. In the same way a concert pianist must practice her scales daily to maintain expertise, Strasberg believed an actor must regularly practice the use of sense memory to be emotionally authentic. Using Strasberg's Method, this is achieved through a combination of

relaxation and concentration, which leads to a sense of truth in performance.

The Method, a praxis built on Stanislavski's own approach to actor training, since the death of its founder has slacked off in popularity. This is noteworthy for the gold standard status the Method once held in the United States. More easily accessible, less process oriented, more demonstrably obvious and observable techniques such as the work of Michael Chekhov have taken stronger hold in some academic circles. Empirical evidence seems to suggest that a mixture of prejudice for the Method and possible personal dislike for Strasberg the man has made this so.

Curious to discover if the Method still held value for the next generation, I committed to teaching a Method class to Virginia Commonwealth University undergraduates. Drawing on my experience at the Strasberg Institute studying under Anna Strasberg, Geoffrey Horne, my practical experiences on stage, and research available after Strasberg's death, I created my own approach to The Method. Through analysis of my students' Method acting work and my own teaching, I intended to learn the efficacy and practicality of Strasberg's Method as we begin the twenty-first century: what we can keep, what we must let go, and what we can change for the better.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

For the better part of the later half of the twentieth century, Lee Strasberg reigned supreme as America's preeminent teacher of acting. His approach to performance, called "The Method," shaped an entire generation's perspective on stage work, stressing a sense of truth through emotional reliving. Every actor and teacher of acting, of course, searches for this "sense of truth." But, Strasberg more than any other teacher before or after him stressed the importance of an actor's will being brought to bear to in order relive emotional experience and in order to avoid clichés and attain self-mastery. Mere "imitation" for Strasberg was unacceptable. He strived to inspire in his performers a "reliving" of experience. His particular perception of Konstantin Stanislavski's acting technique challenged the standards of what had been considered "truth" in acting and created a startling sense of realism in performance heretofore never seen. Never before had anyone concentrated with such intensity (sometimes to the detriment of the playwright's words) on the importance of the actor's

performance in bringing a drama to life. For Strasberg, the play was not the thing. The beating heart of the actor . . .his mind, his psychology, his soul . . .were all-important to the success of a theatrical endeavor. For Strasberg, without the revelation of inner truth by the actor, without this experience of authentic emotion, it mattered not how brilliantly a writer had written her play. The play would fall flat. The axis on which a production spun was on the honesty and veracity of the actor.

From the 1950's until his death in 1981, Strasberg's Method was the gold standard of the New York acting aesthetic. Too many actors to list here, many famous, were taught by Strasberg at the Actors' Studio and his Institute for Theatre and Film. But, at the time of this writing, Strasberg's approach to acting has largely fallen out of favor, or at the very least, it can be said to have steeply fallen from it's previous place of ascendancy. Since his death, ignorance and personal dislike of Strasberg's personality have fueled a consistent attack against the man and his Method. Even thirty years after his death, apparently no other twentieth century teacher of acting can elicit stronger emotions on or off stage than Strasberg.

Additionally, our acting aesthetic has perhaps changed as more and more of our performances are communicated electronically. The prevalence and popularity of so-called

"reality TV" and Youtube video production featuring untrained, unrehearsed actors performing for the camera has, perhaps, propagated a less refined, more emotionally muted, less intense style of performing. Which begs the question, given the changes in taste and technology when comparing Strasberg's time to our own in the twenty-first century, can The Method of America's greatest acting teacher survive? Does The Method still hold any value for the modern actor? Can Strasberg's approach to acting last long after his lifetime, or is it the nature of things that we must ever create newer, fresher approaches to dramatic presentation?

It is my intention to demonstrate that, although electronic media has become more ubiquitous and has shaped expectations and tastes, the Method, its creator and chief purveyor long dead, still has something practical and enormously helpful to offer actors. The world has not passed Strasberg by yet. Whether on stage or in front of a camera, The Method, with its stress on exercising the will of the performer, can sharpen an artist's discipline and mold that performer into a serious artist.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to evaluate what can be kept, what must we let go, and what can we change for the better. If it is to remain a valid, contemporary approach to acting, its foundational structure (Relaxation, Concentration, Sense of

Truth) ought to be built on more than just faith and personal experience, but whenever possible, a scientific perspective as well. But, in a process as personal and subjective as acting, when the "feeling" that one has about one's performance can so often differ from the objective result, that is, in the opinion of the observer, can any evidence be brought to bear that such an approach as Strasberg's can unequivocally lead to better performances?

This may be the wrong question. Can it be the case that a technique is used only specifically? Does The Method need to be a panacea? By utilizing hard-won, practical lessons learned from performance, recent scientific insight, evaluation of my students' work in my Strasberg's Method class, as well as evaluation of my own teaching, I intend to discover what still works, what fails us today, and what needs re-interpretation or to be let go entirely in Strasberg's Method.

CHAPTER TWO

Lee Strasberg: America's Acting Teacher

Co-founder of the most important ensemble America has ever produced, the Group Theatre, Artistic Director of the Actors Studio, and mentor to a generation of New York Actors who would make their way West to become the indelible face of American Acting, Strasberg's influence on theatre, film, and American Culture cannot be overstated. His unique approach to the method created by Konstantin Stanislavski, adapting it into his own Method, raising the standards of a "sense of truth" on stage and created a startling sense of realism in performance heretofore never seen.¹ Never before had anyone concentrated with such intensity on the importance of the actor's performance in bringing a drama to life. The beating heart of the actor, his mind, his psychology, his soul were all-important to the success of a theatrical endeavor. For Strasberg, without the revelation of emotional truth by the performer, without a reliving of

Note

1. I make the distinction between Stanislavski's approach to acting (method or process) and Strasberg's adaption of Stanislavski's approach (Method or The Method).

emotion, it mattered not how brilliantly a writer had written her play. For him, the play would fall flat. The axis on which a production spun was on the honesty and veracity of the actor.

Since Ancient Greece, theatre practitioners have strived to define "great acting." Acting, an interpretive craft that "is written in melting snow," has had to largely rely on the memories of individual artists or critics when trying to understand its relative quality from a historical perspective (Strasberg 13). The wellspring of an actor's creativity, his inspiration and its unreliability, has been regarded as "the actor's problem". Broadly speaking, approaches to addressing the actor's problem often fall into two distinct categories: an inside-out approach and an outside-in approach. Denis Diderot, writing in the eighteenth century, is a famous example of someone who advocated an outside-in approach for the sake of consistency in performance (35). Franoise Delsarte, famous advocate of an outside-in approach, must be the victim of the greatest misunderstanding in theatre history. Delsarte, who never wrote his theories down, believed that only through the development of a technique for acting could the stage performer find consistency and veracity in this craft (Stebbins 75). His technique was an inside-out approach made real through gesture. Unfortunately, Delsarte's theories were warped by others. These interpreters of Delsarte reversed his theories, stressing

gesture over intention. In the end, these misguided advocates created a misunderstood enemy in the persona of Delsarte for later advocates of "truth in acting" to react against. Still, here was a nineteenth century attempt to create a systematic approach to the craft of acting. Finally, by 1900, the Russian actor Stanislavski began to formulate his ideas about acting into a system that could be taught and replicated. Stanislavski and his Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) gave us "the method."

Stressing imagination, relaxation, and concentration, Stanislavski more than any other actor before, and perhaps better than any actor since, systematized what the stage player must do to create consistently authentic performances (Hirsh 38, 39). Enter a young Lee Strasberg; resident of Austria-Hungry until age eight and curious about theatre (Hull 11). An insatiable reader and child actor growing up in New York's Lower East Side, Strasberg's first contact with Stanislavsky was watching his performance in *Tsar Fyodor Ivanovitch* during MAT's sit down in New York (Strasberg 38). During 1923-1924, Strasberg saw MAT perform *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Lower Depths* in addition to *Tsar*. For Strasberg, MAT's productions were a revelation. "I doubt that the minute, detailed, moment-to-moment aliveness on the stage represented by and participated in by every member of the cast will ever be achieved again," said Strasberg in his memoir (39).

When two actors from MAT stayed behind to set up their own theatre school in 1924, Strasberg immediately enrolled. Created by Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, the American Laboratory Theatre was Strasberg's seminary. By attending Boleslavsky's lectures and Ouspenskaya's acting classes, Strasberg was introduced formally to Stanislavsky's ideas (Blair xi). But it was Ouspenskaya who, I feel, had the most meaningful impact on Strasberg's later approach and style.

Unlike Boleslavsky, whose acting philosophy was presented in *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, Ouspenskaya never wrote down her take on Stanislavsky's process. Not given to theorizing, Ouspenskaya was in the trenches teaching actors, that is when not acting herself (Blair xv). Strasberg had seen Boleslavsky (subbing for Stanislavski) with MAT and found him only a so-so actor (Strasberg 64). But, Ouspenskaya he found "brilliant" (64). "Madam," as her students called her, had a piercing look and a commanding demeanor (Frome 16). Her vehement criticism could bring students to tears, but also broke down the student to make them more emotionally available (16). In her classes, she conducted exercises involving concentration on objects for ten minutes at a time to memorize everything about the item (Strasberg 68). This sharpened the actor's will to perform more difficult tasks, such as the use of affective memory. Affective memory, a mixture of sense and emotional memory, was trained by

creating emotionally charged scenarios that the actor had to perform. Strasberg himself was scolded for not being truthful and indicating too much during some of Madam's exercises (72). Ouspenskaya also used a gibberish exercise in her classes to encourage her students to use more freedom in expressing feelings (Cohen 51). When I attended the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute in the early 1990's, the gibberish exercise was part of the curriculum as were variants on Madam's concentration exercise. In fact, one could make the case that the Sequence of Basic Sensory Exercises as developed by Strasberg and iterated by Hull owes a great deal to Strasberg's time spent in Ouspenskaya's classroom (45). Like Ouspenskaya, Strasberg was a non-native English speaker, which might have brought Strasberg into a stronger affinity with her. Also, witnessing the ultimately positive effect she had on her students during her tear-down sessions might have encouraged Strasberg to utilize his own strong will when working with actors in class or rehearsal. Given Strasberg's eventual preoccupation with concentration and affective memory, circumstantial evidence seems to point to Ouspenskaya having a profound effect on Strasberg's pedagogy and approach to directing actors.

Like the Moscow Art Theatre from which it drew inspiration, The Group Theatre was formed as a counterpoint to the "star system". Harold Clurman, the Group's gregarious, passionate

leader, had met Strasberg while both auditioned for *Garrick Gaieties of 1925*. Clurman was drawn to Strasberg's passion for "acting upon which," says Clurman, "he seemed as concentrated as a jeweler over the inner mechanism of a watch" (Clurman 10). Strasberg, the way Clurman saw it, believed the interpretive elements of a play (that is, the acting itself) contributed in a *creative* way to the overall production. By relying too heavily on a playwright's words, by keeping plays ensconced in a literary tradition, plays became boring things not worth viewing (12). Since most plays never rise to a standard of excellence, in Strasberg's view, the actor's contribution was critical. In 1931, Cheryl Crawford and Strasberg as well as twenty-seven actors, including Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Robert Lewis, and Clifford Odets were drawn to Clurman's vision of a theatre that served something larger than themselves (Hull 13). By uniting under one umbrella of training, which would be Strasberg's department, and submitting themselves to the leadership of Clurman, Strasberg, and Crawford, this group of actors in faith committed themselves to a true theatrical ensemble; something that America had never seen nor has ever see again.

Strasberg's training as a director and a teacher was during those early years with the Group Theatre. Chosen as director of the Group's first play, *The House of Connelly* by Paul Green,

Strasberg became the Group's most important presence (Smith 36). Strasberg conducted play rehearsals with acting class characteristics, leading his actors in improvisation and affective memory exercises (Clurman 37, 40). By leading his actors in improvisations analogous to scenes found in *Connelly*, Strasberg worked to free his actors of their inhibitions and inspire their creativity (Garfield 24). No longer shackled to the literal words of the play, his actors could feel free to interpret a situation in their own words, coming closer to the emotional meat of the matter. By stressing improvisation, Strasberg was encouraging a more intimate relationship to the play, and consequently, giving his actors a greater personal stake in its events. This highly personalized way of conducting rehearsal naturally led to what would become the cornerstone of Strasberg's approach to acting forever more; his work with affective memory. For Clurman, Strasberg's work in this area was nothing short of miraculous (Clurman 41).

Here at last was a key to that elusive ingredient of the stage, true emotion. And Strasberg was a fanatic on the subject of true emotion. Everything was secondary to it. He sought it with the patience of an inquisitor, he was outraged by trick substitutes. . . . Here was something new to most of the actors, something basic, something almost holy. It was

revelation in the theatre; and Strasberg was its prophet (41).

Strasberg would tell his actors, before beginning work on a scene, to "take a minute" (Frome 23). This was Strasberg's signal to the actor to summon the necessary memory appropriate for entering a scene or, perhaps, in presenting a key moment in the play. Strasberg's exploration of affective memory and improvisation would continue well beyond the life of the Group Theatre itself, becoming in essence, his acting technique. In other words, The Method.

Opening night of Paul Greene's *The House of Connelly* on September 21, 1931 was an utter success (Garfield 27). "We had twenty-two curtain calls opening night," Crawford remembered (Hirsch 84). Critics' reactions were almost unanimously positive (Garfield 27). Brooks Atkinson, legendary critic for the New York Times said, "this new band of actors . . . have done an extraordinary thing. They have been arrogant enough to regard acting as an art." But he goes on to say,

They are self-conscious at present. They play at a tempo that is almost dull, and in order to keep their performance honestly subdued they are frequently hard to hear in a large auditorium. . . . They may force the soul too much. (Hirsch 84)

Still, Atkinson saw in the Group a great promise for "revitalizing our stage" (84). Since there was no recording made of the Group's performance of *Connelly*, audio or otherwise, these early reviews are key to understanding what a nascent Strasberg Method performance must have looked like to a Depression Era audience. It is striking that many of the very same negative criticisms would be leveled at Strasberg's *The Three Sisters* thirty years later by Young's successor, Robert Brustein (Brustein 166). In turn, Atkinson's negative comments sound similar to my own reactions to some of my less experienced fellow students' work at the Strasberg Institute in the 1990's: Startlingly natural scenes that have a sluggish pace. Finally, it is worth noting that Atkinson unknowingly conceptualized in the very first review of a production governed by Method techniques the archetypal Method actor: the self-conscious mumbler. This archetype was something I was eager to avoid when teaching others in my Strasberg class.

Although Clurman and Crawford would continue to champion Strasberg throughout their lives, Strasberg's influence in the Group would begin to weaken. Inevitably, Strasberg's imperious style began to wear on some. But, this underscores the importance of personality in the development of each individual's school of acting and how *personality*, not art, not ideology, but *personality*, can shape history. From Strasberg's

son, John, we have this reflection on the Group Theatre and its profound effect on American Stagecraft.

My Father, Stella Adler, Sandy Meisner . . . a lot of what they're teaching isn't in their methods. Because a lot of what they're teaching was their own dedication, their own obsession with their work, their own artistic visions. So the individual . . . can't be separated from the technique. (*Accidentally on Purpose*)

For the next ten years after Strasberg resigned from the Group Theatre, he made do directing sixteen plays (only mildly successful), teaching workshops, and even doing a three year stint in Hollywood directing screen tests for Twentieth Century-Fox (Garfield 78). Moving back to New York in 1947, he started coaching the actors on *Brigadoon* once a week (78). Finally, Strasberg was invited to teach at the two year old Actors Studio, founded by Lewis, Kazan, and Crawford and taught his first class on September 27, 1948 (76). Strasberg was offered the post of Artistic Director in 1951, a position that would eventually make him the most famous acting teacher in the world (83). As Kazan puts it, once he accepted, "no one could have been more committed or devoted. Or valued by everyone there. . . .respect became hero worship, and hero worship idolatry" (Kazan 303).

The list of actors taught by Strasberg during his time at Actors Studio is impressive: Edward Albee, Barbara Bain, Anne Bancroft, Roscoe Lee Brown, Ellen Burstyn, Jill Clayburgh, Bruce Dern, Robert De Niro, Robert Duvall, Sally Field, Jane Fonda, Ben Gazzara, Michael Gazzo, Lee Grant, Julie Harris, Dustin Hoffman, Celeste Holm, Kim Hunter, Lainie Kazan, Steve McQueen, Burgess Meredith, Marilyn Monroe, Michael Moriarty, Patricia Neal, Paul Newman, Al Pacino, Geraldine Page, Estelle Parsons, Jose Quintero, Kim Stanley, Maureen Stapleton, Rip Torn, and Shelley Winters (Hull 4-6). His daughter, Susan Strasberg, as well as his son John were also students at Strasberg's Actors Studio (6).

During the 1950s and 1960s, it was impossible to avoid the Studio's influence. Strasberg's actors became ambassadors for the Studio creating a new cultural force. "Audiences – not theorists or partisans – have made the success of Actors Studio veterans from Karl Malden and Robert De Niro to Rod Steiger and Geraldine Page and so many others," said Strasberg (Hull 250). American theatre students no longer needed to follow classic English training techniques exclusively. Here was an American approach to drama that was vital, exciting, and sexy: The Method. However, all of the heat that came with having an army of actors "making it" in film and television naturally created enemies. Sometimes criticism of the Method was an honest

expression of disagreement, as its psychoanalytic feel ruffled the feathers of some. But all too regularly, critiques of the Method devolved into *ad hominem* attacks against its chief purveyor.

In his book *Method Acting Reconsidered*, David Krasner culls together a number of essays in consideration of Strasberg's Method. In the first chapter titled "I Hate Strasberg," Krasner lists common criticisms against the Method (and Strasberg). The Method is attacked by feminists (Elaine Aston) and masculinists (David Mamet) alike as being hopelessly character-based (Krasner 9). Still others attack the Method for the opposite reason: that it relies on self for characterization regardless of context, of which critic/playwright Robert Brustein has been a vocal proponent (17). Some feel that Method is only useful in kitchen sink drama (unfortunately confusing technique with style) and still others feel it is a misrepresentation of Stanislavski's intention; that the Method is not the method (25, 28). I would suggest the last argument is irrelevant as Strasberg from about 1934 onward ploughed his own field. Always acknowledging his kinship to Stanislavski, but never extolling a slavish adherence to his theories, Strasberg worked the Relaxation/concentration/affective memory aspect of Stanislavski's work for most of his career. Stanislavski's other concepts (Tempo and Rhythm, Magic If) were useful to

Strasberg only in support of his primary obsessions, which I believe, requires no apology on Strasberg's part. The Method's application where The Classics are concerned is where Strasberg seems most vulnerable. Because viewers of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Johnson are presumed to be going to "hear the words" or "see the play," this necessarily sublimates the actor into the fabric of a production. Method stresses the creative contribution of performer, making Classical Theatre seem *prima facie* a bad fit. Nonetheless, I would take up the challenge of applying Strasberg's work to Shakespeare. Strasberg believed in his heart that the Method was compatible with The Classics because the Method was not about making "everything casual and ordinary," it was about filling everything "with the utmost possible significance" (Hethmon 317). Deciding to take Strasberg at his word, a portion of my Method class was devoted to performing Shakespeare monologues.

Personal Reflections

I trained at the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute in New York from 1989-1993. I was taught by former students of Strasberg including Anna, his widow. During my time there, I had the opportunity to watch many young actors perform scenes and, most fortunately, was given the task of cataloging videotapes of Strasberg lecturing at his Institute in 1980 and

1981. These tapes would eventually be transcribed and published under the title *The Lee Strasberg Notes*.

Occasionally, Method Acting could lead to sluggish performances. This was most often the case with novices; students with little practical stage experience and unaware of the importance of energy and pace when performing on stage. And yet, when these very same performers were recorded on camera, something magical happened. The languid pace seemed not to matter and all that was left was a vital, unpredictable sense of reality. I don't believe it accidental that so many Method Actors meet their real success in the film industry.

Classes at the Strasberg Institute were taught twice a week, four hours a session. My instructors always stressed the importance of keeping your secrets to yourself. Even though private moment exercises were part of the curriculum, there was no open examination of what you were specifically doing in the exercise because the whole class was working on their own assignments at the same time you were working on yours. During the last half of class, scene work and monologue work would take place with the teacher taking the center seat and lecturing the students à la Strasberg.

It is worth noting that Strasberg late in life showed us that the teacher of the Method could practice what he preached. Of course, Strasberg started his career in the Twenties as an

actor on stage. But, with roles in major motion pictures like *Going in Style* and *The Godfather: Part II*, Strasberg ably demonstrated the technique he created. He put his reputation on the line and gave model Method performances. When he was nominated for an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, he was nominated against his old student, Robert De Niro (Adams 376). When Strasberg lost to De Niro, he said, "I knew Bobby should win" (376). In *Going in Style*, Strasberg plays Willie, a senior citizen bank robber. Poor Willie dies of a heart attack on screen. This moment proved prophetic as Strasberg died on February 17, 1982 due to a heart attack (Strasberg xvii).

When I was a student at the Strasberg Institute, Geoffrey Horne, one of my instructors, was lecturing on affective memory and the importance of using your life experience in your work. "You earned it through sweat and tears. You might as well use it!" To demonstrate what he felt an actor's commitment should be when exploring the senses, he told the story of Lee Strasberg's death. When Strasberg began to feel ill and slumped down, he was asked, "What's the matter?" His answer: "I am experiencing a heart attack." Horne's point? Even at death's door, Strasberg was checking in with himself, his senses, exploring what it felt like to actually have a heart attack. Strasberg, in his last moments, was still journeying down the

road he had set for himself as an actor, a director, a teacher.
Using his Method.

CHAPTER THREE

A Method Class for the Twenty-First Century

What in the world happened to the Method, at one time the most famous acting praxis in the world? Studied by Dustin Hoffman, Steve McQueen, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Kim Stanley, and Paul Newman, Method acting is mostly closely associated with actors whose major work was filmed in the last century. Granted, a particular studio based on the teachings of one man is likely to suffer once that man dies. But, no other Western approach to the craft has suffered such an ignominious fall from grace. Why? Meisner technique, Stella Adler, Michael Chekhov, and just about every other New York School of Acting has managed to escape the vituperative attacks that have been leveled at Strasberg. Why?

I suspect this question has four answers. The first answer is surely linked to an idea discussed in Chapter One. John Strasberg makes the connection between the personality of the practitioner and his process: they cannot be easily split. Disliking the man most likely leads to dislike of his process. Strasberg's autocratic style yielded either devoted worshipers

or detractors. Stella Adler, directed often by Strasberg during their days together with the Group Theatre, was one of Strasberg's most famous and vociferous critics. This legacy of revilement is carried on today at the Studio that bears her name where dislike for Strasberg's Method has been institutionalized. Kathryn LeTrent, VCU MFA candidate, studied at the Stella Adler Studio while at New York University. She relates,

My teacher in that class referred to emotional memory as "mind fucking", meaning [it] will mess you up in your personal life. The example that was cited for this was Marilyn Monroe, that she would not have killed herself if she had not been working with emotional memory (LeTrent).

Strange that an acting school, a business that would by its very nature seem to necessitate a philosophical liberality, would preach such hatred for one man and his Method. It also seems strange that this same attitude has managed to cross-pollinate from one acting praxis to another. *From Russia to Hollywood*, a documentary about Michael Chekhov's legacy as an acting coach, attacks Strasberg head on with *ad hominem*. Comparing Chekhov and George Shdanoff to Strasberg, the narrator states, "They believed in the imagination and bringing out the best in the actor . . . as opposed to many of their contemporaries, who believed in breaking down the actor's ego and personality"

(*Russia to Hollywood*). This is spoken as a picture of Strasberg is shown on the screen. What follows are five short interviews with actors who emphatically state that they don't like Strasberg or the Method (in this montage, Jack Palance, apparently unbeknownst to the editor, focuses his ire on Adler, not Strasberg). This hate-filled propaganda taught to beginning actors is likely to go unchallenged by inexperienced, uneducated minds. Therefore, part of the drop-off in popularity of the Method might be due to integrating old grudges and personal dislikes into acting curricula that is presented as fact rather than opinion.

A second possible answer for a fall-off in the Method's popularity is it had such a precipitous height to descend from. Strasberg had the strongest resumé of his contemporaries. The Group Theatre, The Actors Studio, Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute, his A-list movie star students, and his own film career far out-shown anything Meisner, Adler, or Chekhov did in their lifetimes. As brilliant as these individuals were as teachers, Strasberg became far more famous, branding The Actors Studio forever as a place where great actors did serious work. His film performances in high profile projects like *The Godfather II*, *And Justice for All*, as well as *Going in Style* cast him alongside some of the most famous movie stars of the 1970s, many of whom were his students. This is what I call

"everybody hates the Yankees": because of the success of the Strasberg and the Method's overall popularity, there was likely to be jealousy amongst rivals. So perhaps, a combination of personal dislike for Strasberg delivered as dogma at some acting studios in combination with a famous man's death, facilitated a diminishment of stature for the Method not commensurate with its positive attributes.

A possible third answer is the belief by some that connecting emotionally to the role is unnecessary for a valid performance. This philosophy harkens back to Diderot. Being moved as the performer, for some, may seem beside the point since it is the audience's, not the actor's experience, which should be primary. I personally believe this to be the weakest of my four possible answers. I believe any artist worth their salt is in the Arts to express themselves. A performer who has decided to cut themselves off from the emotional life of their character has decided to anesthetize their creativity. Robots could act (or play the piano or paint pictures) as well as humans under such a pretense. Brilliant performers have never been accused of passionlessness.

My fourth answer is likely to be unpopular, but it must be stated. The Method is difficult. It demands more from the performer than mere imitation or gesture. It requires a high degree of relaxation, concentration, and a willingness to relive

personal memories, some of which may be unpleasant. Strasberg was serious about this point. Imitating emotions was cheap and easy. Only by re-experiencing feelings could a sense of truth be brought to the stage. Like any good pianist or dancer, the Method demands of the actor regular practice leading to an increased ability to be private in public. This level of self-involvement can be alternately exciting and boring by turns. But, no one can begin to hope to re-experience emotion on stage if they are unwilling (or unable) to harness their talent in a focused and disciplined way. Therefore, I believe the effort and time required to master this kind of work is a barrier to some, leading to denigrating the Method as a result of sour grapes.

This is the atmosphere I found myself in when considering teaching a Method class in 2013. I knew its value from personal experience. I believed it was receiving a bad rap due to ignorance and jealousy. I set for myself the humble task of confronting these misconceptions.

Conceiving a unique approach to teaching the Method

Key texts have explained Strasberg's core curriculum when teaching The Method. Strasberg explains The Method and his approach to teaching it in his autobiography *A Dream of Passion*. Lorrie Hull takes this one step further. As a teacher at UCLA and The Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute in Los Angeles

during Strasberg's lifetime, she gave us an extraordinarily important text. In Hull's book, *Strasberg's Method*, the recommended course of study for actors is listed and notated along with variations of exercises and advice to teachers for how to approach specific problems. Detailing Strasberg's lectures, conversations, and speeches at faculty meetings, we are given an unfiltered glimpse of Strasberg as pedagogue. This text, I felt, would be my touchstone in the creation of my own class.

As Strasberg and Hull both explain, a typical Method class begins with relaxation. Strasberg believed stage-fright the enemy of all performers. When we are tense, we lock in our emotions. Relaxation holds the key to peak performance. As Strasberg is quoted by Hull:

The actor becomes completely responsive. His instrument gives forth a new depth of resonance. Emotion that has habitually been held back suddenly gushes forth. The actor becomes real- not merely simple or natural. . . .He unveils . . . himself but with such a degree of ease and authority that he seems literally to have taken off a mask, to have emerged from a disguise that previously had smothered his true personality. Yet all he did was relax. (31-32)

The way Strasberg approached relaxation in his classes was by sitting the student in a chair. The student would focus on tension in the body by moving major muscle groups. By moving the arms and legs in unconventional ways, by expressing the release of that tension with an "ah" sound, the actor would release tension, priming themselves for the next phase of Strasberg's Method which was concentration.

The Concentration Exercise would start with something as simple as recreating all the sense memories tied to a breakfast drink, like orange juice or coffee. Unlike Hagen, Strasberg would not want you to bring the actual object into the room; you would bring a memory of the object after having rehearsed it. Then, in class, you would relive the experience of drinking the drink, recreating the smell, temperature, taste connected to that drink. With success, the student would move on to other sense memory exercises like creating an overall sensation (rain, sunshine, wind) and more complex exercises like recreating a personal object or reliving a private moment. All these concentration exercises had a two-fold purpose: to awaken the will and open the door to affective memories.

Affective Memory for Strasberg was his true passion. Affective Memory, a term first encountered by Stanislavski when reading the work of French Psychologist Theodule Ribot, is the memory of feelings: Emotional Memory (Stanislavski 197). It was

the reliving of sensations experienced through the five senses on stage that was most vital to Strasberg. It is the use of Affective Memory for him that was the defining characteristic of good acting. According to Hull, in a lecture given in 1977, Strasberg stated:

The thing that makes the difference [in truthful acting] is the conscious or unconscious use of sense memory. . . . Acting deals not with remembering, but with experience. The greatest thing when you see an actor performing is to think, 'That's the way it is' . . . What Stanislavski emphasized was not making believe or imitating something, and not indicating, but the ability to experience. (41)

Every acting teacher, in their own way, is striving for a analog of real life on stage, but for Strasberg, the path was clear: Relaxation => Concentration => Sense of Truth.

Although Hull forensically details a course of study for The Method, many of her exercises outside the core curriculum are in a beginner category. The fact that it was published in 1985 with no Second Edition presented a problem for me. Blank scenes, circle games, and "becoming a machine" are useful exercises for building concentration and cohesiveness in a classroom, but I felt unsure about applying these to students in VCU's BFA program; it felt too rudimentary. (It is worth

noting, Strasberg at his Institute, taught his Method to all comers. The only prerequisite was an in-person interview. Philosophically, he believed beginners and experienced actors had something to learn from each other in class. This is a rare instance where I disagree with Strasberg. The beginner can learn technique from watching a better actor; the pro only learns how much better he is than the novice). I was eager to make my class as difficult as possible. "Awkwardness," as I would find out later, became a target I set for my students. If they weren't going for that which felt strange, scary, or untried, they were failing. So, if I was going to create a challenging Method class for the twenty-first century, I felt I needed to reach beyond what Strasberg's *Passion* and Hull's *Method* had to offer.

I started to look at psychology. Stanislavski looked to Ribot when developing Affective Memory work (Stanislavski 197). Later in his life, Stanislavski and his colleagues were in contact with the famous psychologist Ivan Pavlov concerning the scientific accuracy of Stanislavski's books as they were prepared for publication in America (Whyman 72). In fact in 1973, Michael Schulman wrote an article on Strasberg's Method in *Psychology Today* and its relationship to Behavioral Psychology, so it didn't seem far-fetched to start to look at what modern psychological study might have to say about Strasberg's favorite

trio of Relaxation, Concentration, and Affective Memory (52). I made what I felt was a radical decision: I decided to include a book on sports psychology as required reading for my class.

When living in New York, I was attracted to baseball because I saw an analog between the batter's concentration standing at the plate and an actor taking the stage. The batter like the actor must be relaxed, not distracted by his audience; he must exercise his will and focus on the object of his concentration in order to perform his best. W. Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis* is a masterpiece of sports psychology. Similar to Strasberg, Gallwey states that "relaxed concentration" is essential for peak performance (9). Gallwey goes a step further by distinguishing between two selves: Self 1 and Self 2. Gallwey poses the question, when we talk to our self, "who" is talking to "whom"? There must be two selves, he reasons. Self 1, the critical, thinking, ordering self pushes around Self 2 that is all natural intelligence and talent. Gallwey believes that by quieting Self 1, Self 2's natural ability can flourish. "Trying hard" is a Self 1 energy where as "effort" is Self 2 energy (12). By learning "to trust Self 2 to perform its best and learn from both successes and failures" and learning "to see what is happening rather than merely noticing how well or how badly it is happening," trying hard evaporates,

allowing for mastery of the supreme skill: "the art of relaxed concentration" (13).

I thought this the perfect, if unusual, complement to Strasberg's sometimes dry, archaic style of writing. By having something written in a less academic style as required reading, on a seemingly opposed subject, I thought any smart actor would make the connection: the key to great acting was to stop running yourself down and focus on the "now". To trust in self means suspending judgment and understanding that worrying about results sabotages effort. Concentration and Relaxation are interrelated; each leads to the other. I knew including *Tennis* was a risk and might raise eyebrows, but I was excited to try something new, so it was included side by side with Strasberg's *Passion*.

The final major aspect I wanted to include in the class were online responses on Nicenet to questions posed at the beginning to the week. I would draw inspiration for online discussion from my favorite book on acting: *Notes to an Actor* by Ron Marasco. Published in 2007, written by a practical man of the theatre, Marasco's book is filled with inspiring, but down-to-earth observations and words of advice for actors of all media and levels of experience. He seems to hover above the Adler/Meisner/Strasberg/Hagen paradigms and without dismissing them, observes their positive contributions to the theatre. At

the same time, he writes from the perspective of someone who knows there are some things you can't learn in a classroom. His view is informed by both the business and the art of acting. He is empathetic to the practical problems of the actor addressing his audience in the style of someone writing a letter to a friend. Most of the acting classes I've taken in my life were short on dealing with practical problems or were too philosophically restricted to allow for a discussion about how to be a responsible working actor. Responding to his writing, I hoped, would broaden the scope of the course beyond simply learning an acting technique to considering its application (and relevance) in the real world.

Although my class time was extremely limited, meeting just three hours a week on Fridays, I wanted to teach all three perspectives in my class: hard-core Strasberg Method, an alternative, but complementary approach to his key concepts through sports psychology, and season it all with down-to-earth advice for the working actor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Teaching the Method at VCU

Week One

Core Strasberg Assignments – Introduction of Strasberg’s Active Relaxation Exercise. Breakfast Drink.

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – “Lie to Me.” Assigning Undream Scene.

Teaching Objective – Communicate Strasberg’s core principles.

At One O’clock on Friday, January 18th, 2013, the fateful moment had arrived. I had been uneasy about the very thought of teaching a group of underclassmen Strasberg’s Method. What if they thought he was passé? What if I or the work failed to hold their attention sufficiently for the next fifteen weeks.

Relaxation/Concentration exercises can be, by turns, tedious and exciting. True, I was about this group’s age when I first went to New York to study at what was then called the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute with Hope Arthur, Geoffrey Horne, Anna Strasberg and others. But, that was before the internet. That was before streaming video and the ubiquity of “Reality TV.” Had our aesthetics changed in the intervening years? Was this

Method, embraced by an entire generation of actors, now obsolete?

As I entered Shafer rm. 302, I felt an electric thrill at the meaning of that moment. I had come all the way from South Florida with the intention of changing my life and career, and here I was less than a year and half since moving to Richmond teaching undergrads a class of my own devising. Two thirds of my class were Sophomores or Juniors with Seniors making up the final third. It was an enormous class. I had allowed overrides for at least a half-dozen underclassmen who had emailed me requesting admittance. I eagerly accepted them; four weeks before my class started, I had five students. Now, as I strode into the room, there were seventeen faces welcoming me to my first independently designed class.

I knew what I wanted that first day. I'd scheduled twenty minutes at the top of class to introduce ourselves. This moment was of high interest to me, more so than many other first day introductions: I could now hear all the unfettered bigotry I expected to be leveled at the Method as well as why they were taking the class.

I was delighted to hear that many of the students had thoughtful, open minded responses. One student, a martial artist, explained that he had difficulty connecting emotionally to characters on stage. I was so excited to hear him say that

because prescriptively, The Method is perfect for individuals such as he. Others said they had heard The Method was "dangerous" and was psychotherapy in disguise. Other seniors and juniors paid me the compliment that they'd heard I was a good teacher and wanted to take the class regardless of its content. This spirit of openness and good feeling was unexpected and gave me the confidence I needed to proceed.

I had scheduled introductions to take twenty minutes. They took forty-five. The magnitude of my class was already warping my plans. Would it be too unwieldy to teach seventeen students something as individualized a course of study as The Method? A great chunk of the work was necessarily scenes and monologues. How could I work through so many scenes with only three hours a week? My very first day, I was butting up against my newbie mistake: I'd let too many people into the class and not scheduled enough time for the work.

Putting that out of mind, I moved on to a review of the syllabus, stressing what I felt was the beating heart of Strasberg's teaching: that the theatre can survive without scenery, directors, lights, costumes, but it can't survive without actors. His intense interest in the inner life of the actor, expressed through character, was something that was felt by all his students and gave them a sense of self-worth in a profession that often demeans them. To give *my* students a sense

of their own power, to instill in them the importance of their individuality when creating their own work, I wanted it plainly stated that I felt that they, not the playwright, were the most important part of the theatre. It was something I tried to communicate by reading a passage from a recent interview with Daniel Day-Lewis about his role in *Lincoln*. Here is excerpt of what I read:

You think you're traveling a vast distance to understand another life, but it may be that you're bringing that life toward you at the same time. What allows the work to live is the common experience . . . It's utterly delusional to say you become some other person – you don't. (Winter 40)

I gave a short lecture on Strasberg the man then gave everyone a break.

When we came back, I workshopped an exercise I'd been thinking about as a complement to Strasberg's work. It was not part of his standard curriculum, but I wanted to introduce something up front in the class that would signal to them that sometimes we might go off script and try something new and fun. My exercise is "Lie to Me."

Everyone must think of two stories to tell from a first person perspective: one that is absolutely true and the other absolutely false. No hybrids; the stories must either be one

hundred percent true or not. Then, one by one, each enters the circle and tells both stories. We as a class must determine which is the true story and which is the false story. The lesson will be a.) it is easier to tell the truth than to tell a lie and b.) from the audience's point of view, it takes more work, more effort to tell the lie. Results were mixed. Whereas many people discovered that people work extra hard to fill in details when telling a lie, a couple of story-tellers when telling the lie actually enjoyed it more than telling the truth, knocking me off the scent. The result was I felt the exercise half a success; many, not all, story-tellers felt "pressure" when lying, disconnecting from self. The truth tellers, mostly, felt more at ease (relaxed) and were able to concentrate with little effort on the story, giving them the chance to re-live the experience.

Next, I demonstrated a core component of the class: Active Relaxation. Taking my place in a chair, moving the class to one side of room 302, I demonstrated how one becomes mindful of self by physically engaging those areas most tense through movement. When engaging areas of tension, whether it be the shoulders, back, hips, calves, release of tension calls for a release through sound, usually on a sustained "ah." During this process, it is normal for emotions to get stirred up. As that happens, it's important to continue to engage one's own body

through movement continuing to express with sound, not blocking the expression of emotion, but letting it come forth.

Students took seats and began to engage in the Active Relaxation. Some were skittish at first, feeling self-conscious making big sweeping movements with their arms while letting go of tension on the "ah". But, once they were able to drop into themselves, they were able to shut out the rest of the room, being private in public. This continued for fifteen minutes until I introduced the first sense memory exercise.

Ordinarily, Strasberg would ask for a week of study before having the student come in with this exercise. The student would focus their attention on every aspect of their favorite breakfast drink; the temperature of the glass, the texture of the cup, smells associated with the drink, the feel of the cup against their lips. An inventory of one's senses in connection to this drink would be explored in order to relive the experience in class. A difference between Strasberg and Hagen's approach to sense memory work is Strasberg's interest in a full recreation of the object, whereas Hagen wants the material foundation of at least a cup present on stage to awaken an actor's sense of reality. I believed that throwing my students into the exercise without preparation was justified as many of these students had been taking acting classes for years. Strasberg's students at the Institute would sometimes come in

off the street with no experience or training. So, jumping ahead, as it were, seemed entirely justified.

After completing this exercise, with time still left in class, I asked if anyone had any monologues they wished to present, with me coaching them through an affective memory exercise. Several hands went up. I chose one student. Performing a monologue from *Little Dog Laughed*, he went through it once. We talked about where the character was, what he wanted, and whom he was talking to. I then, without prying, suggested he find an analog for the "other" in the scene from his own life. I asked him to close his eyes as I guided him through discovering all the sense memories tied to his substitute. Inviting him to consider the texture of this person's hair, the shirt they were wearing, and how they smelled. I continued like this for some minutes until I felt he'd realized this person in his mind. He opened his eyes and spoke the monologue again, but this time with so much more authenticity. There was a gentle, open quality to his performance that wasn't there before. He was relaxed and concentrated on the "other." The performance was free of imitative, indicative forced emotion, giving the reading an unpredictable quality. After it was over, I asked him how he felt. Quietly, he said three or four times, "Wow." It was a huge success for him and for the rest of the class. They could

see him relive speaking to his friend *through* the monologue. The student could feel the difference between the first time and second time doing the monologue. All in all, a magnificent first day of class.

My final instruction to my students all was for all of them to choose their "Undream scene." This should be a two person scene that either they or the world could never see themselves doing. The challenge of doing the scene, therefore, was built into it from the start. The learning outcome I hoped for was that nothing was ultimately beyond their reach. That as Day-Lewis says, all they had to do was bring that other "life" toward them (Winter 40). I lined them up in two rows: Alpha row and Beta row. The Alpha's would do their "Undream scene" first, then the Beta's. In a class with eleven women and six men, I was concerned that going forward, I would be forever struggling to make good pairings. I was right.

Learning Outcome – "Lie to Me" needs refining although it was well received. Active Relaxation was hesitantly embraced by all. The mechanics have been learned. Through repetition, its function will be manifest.

Week Two

Core Strasberg Assignments – Active Relaxation, Mirror Exercise
Supplementary Non-core Assignments – Nicenet response to Dweck concepts. Undream Scenes.

Teaching Objective – Recreate (and confront) the image of self in Concentration Exercise. Confrontation of self through Undream scene.

Monday I was contacted by students saying that my required reading material was slow in arriving by mail, asking for an extension. I had assigned the first half of both *A Dream of Passion* and *The Inner Game of Tennis* with reading responses due the Thursday before class; a huge chunk of reading. I notified the class that the assignment would not be due until the following week. Instead, they were to respond to a question with an essay. I stated that there are two theories concerning ability: that it's Incremental or Fixed. Believing in Fixed Talent (or Mindset) means you think it is innate and believing in Incremental Talent means that you think it is developed over time by facing challenges (Dweck 6-7). There are consequences to believing either theory and introducing this idea was another attempt on my part to incorporate modern theory into my Method class, to help them see their Method work in a contemporary frame, and encourage them to embrace an Incremental Mindset. Responses were encouraging. Although many students believed talent innate, they thought "hard work" (studying, practicing, discipline) could eventually win the day.

Class started as it would start for the rest of the semester: students sitting in chairs beginning the Active

Relaxation work. Again, there was some hesitation as if to say, "Are we really doing this?" But, once a few released on the "ah," others folded into the anonymity of the class and began to relax. After twenty minutes, I led students through Strasberg's Mirror exercise. Students during the past week were tasked with "practicing" their morning routine: putting on make-up, washing face, brushing teeth. The object is to pay particular attention to the way one looks in the mirror as well as the experience of doing these actions. Merely repeating the motions associated with, say, shaving is not acceptable: one must effort to recreate the image of self as well as the sensory feel of every object used in the exercise. I asked leading questions to help focus their attention: "What do you like about your face?" "Do you look tired?" "Do you have wrinkles when you smile?" and so on. This began to trigger emotional reactions in some students as they considered more keenly their own appearance. This is an early indicator that these students are connected to self and open to expression. But, it can be disorienting to the student; shocking to some to have such a strong reaction to simply looking at themselves in a recreated mirror. The learning outcome for the Mirror should be an awareness of self and determining if one is reliving sensation or merely imitating it.

With seventeen students in class, I felt overwhelmed with my task; evaluating the outcome of such a personal exercise for

so many students. As a way of helping to lock into their needs, I began a ritual which stayed in place for the first half of the semester: asking for how they experienced the exercise and comparing that with what I saw. I was not thrilled with this approach. But, limited time demanded my efficiency.

Some students clearly evoked all their senses in the exercise. They were passed on to the next step; Sunshine. For those who had trouble either seeing themselves or avoiding imitation, they were asked to re-create either three different kinds of fabric or the experience of taking off and putting on underclothes. Strasberg reasoned that this was an extension of working with physical objects but was also a doubling down on sensation (Strasberg 135). Soft material running across intimate areas of the body as in the case of underclothes, experienced so regularly, should be an easy window into sensation.

After our Relaxation/Concentration debrief, we gathered for a first run at some of our Undream Scenes. Scenes from *Bachelorette*, *A Doll's House*, *Killer Joe*, and *Spike Heels* were presented. Each time, I would ask the actors "what were you working on?" Often, I'd get shrugs or stammers as they tried to answer the question. I explained that I would ask this question after every scene. I also explained that this was an easy answer: it is the reason you chose the scene. With time, this

essential question received more specific answers, but I believe the style of the question threw them off. As I explained about mid-way through presentation of these scenes, my class was going to be about the process of acting, not the product. It was going to be about experiencing on stage, not imitation. This required their fullest commitment, nothing less. But, it also would require some getting used to.

Learning Outcome – Relaxation and Concentration go hand in hand. I will hold them to account when applying what they learn in class to their scenes.

Week Three

Core Strasberg Assignments – Relaxation, Mirror exercise, Three fabrics, Dressing and Undressing

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Reading and response to on Nicenet to *A Dream of Passion* and *The Inner Game of Tennis*. Undream scene.

Teaching Objective – Understand Strasberg's history and how he developed the Method. Develop a supplementary lexicon for engaging Strasberg's work. Engage sense memory.

My most serious challenge came just before the beginning of the third week. It was brought to me attention that five of the seniors in my class would be absent for three of my classes; the equivalent of missing three weeks. This was due to their participation in Capstone; a program which allowed graduating

seniors to travel to Los Angeles, New York, and Tennessee to showcase their work, take workshops, and meet casting director and agents. (An immeasurably important experience and one I wish I had had as an undergrad.) But, it meant a third of my class would miss a fifth of the course. I was already feeling pressed for time given my three hour, once a week window. My syllabus states plainly that missing more than one class would mean dropping a full letter grade for the class. Every senior under these conditions would get a "C" and no higher if they did "A" quality work for the rest of the semester. I tried to remedy this by working it out on paper, but to no avail. To lose five students every five weeks meant I would need to teach a two-tiered class: ten students doing one lesson, five doing another. That on its face seemed unmanageable, so I set about contacting seniors letting them know what their status was to be in the class. Four dropped out, leaving one senior in the class who felt it impossible to leave given her scholarship situation. So our class, after losing two our first day, and now losing another four, was down to eleven. Although I was sorry to see most of the seniors leave, thus depriving the class of their maturity and experience, I was pleased that suddenly my class had become much more manageable. But, this left me with a new problem in regards to scene work: I now had two men and nine women in class. I had set the precedent that all actors could

choose their own Undream Scenes. Unless most of them chose scenes for two female actors, my male actors would be called upon to do double or triple duty; a less than fair circumstance.

With everyone's texts arrived, the first reading assignment and response was due to be posted before our third class for the first two halves of *The Inner Game of Tennis* and *A Dream of Passion*. The *Tennis* reading left some baffled. Said one student, "At first reading this book I thought it would mention acting at least once. But no, it's really a book about tennis." Still another said, ". . . I was surprised when I realized, yes, we really are reading a book about tennis for an acting class." But, they got it! More from the first student: ". . . I began to understand it was a metaphor for all performance aspects . . ." The second student said, "The Inner Critic, or Self 1, is rampant regardless of your craft. I found his views on Relaxed Concentration to be very refreshing." I was overjoyed to read comments like these. It reflected a struggle with the legitimate use of a "sports" book in an acting class, but a depth of maturity to juxtapose Gallwey's approach to sport and Strasberg's approach to acting. Ironically, *A Dream of Passion* was in many ways more challenging than *Tennis* for this group of acting students. Strasberg's recount of his early life in New York, watching great but now forgotten actors of the stage left most students cold. "Overwhelming" and "very difficult" are a

sampling of reactions to Strasberg's autobiography. For one lonely student, however, the history of theatre told through Strasberg's eyes was inspirational. "Strasberg's description of his early theatre experiences – both watching and learning from Stan the Man – made me long to be alive during the Golden Age of Broadway." I felt I had achieved a two-fold purpose with this reading response assignment: by drawing from readings on other disciplines that require "solitude in public," my actors were introduced to the universal applicability of The Method's core principles. Additionally, I had exposed my students to a first hand account of theatre history through Strasberg's writings they had never known before; theatre before sound movies. This eclectic mixture of information, I planned and hoped, would add up to a cohesive whole when all was said and done.

In class, we started with our Relaxation exercise moving on to everyone's Sense Memory work. One student was doing the three fabrics exercise and doing it very imaginatively, exploring all the ways the fabric could come in contact with his body. One actor was redoing the mirror exercise due to a lack of concentration during the first go around. By asking my exploratory questions again, I was able to not only hear, but also see, this go around was much more successful for the student. Others engaged in undressing and dressing as their sense memory activity. After our post exercise conversation in

which the student and I discuss the results of the exercise, comparing what I saw with what they felt, we decide whether to revisit the exercise next week or move forward. I particularly like this approach because it is demanding the actor take responsibility for development of their skills. All students this time felt their exercises were a success. I prescribe Overall Sensations for next week. Some were asked to recreate Sunshine, others a Shower, and still others were asked to recreate a childhood place. My prescription was predicated on each student's response to strength of each individual sense in previous exercises as well as emotional response to the exercise. The less strong the sense memory, the unlikelihood of Affective Memory being accessed. For those having difficulty locking into their senses, the Overall Sensation exercises were prescribed. For those having emotional reactions already to the Mirror Exercise, I moved them on to a Childhood Place; this is an exercise not part of Strasberg's curriculum but rather my own inclusion. However, it is appropriate as it asks for multiple sense memory engagements and, because of its appeal to nostalgia, should encourage affective memory.

We discussed the reading before moving on to scene work, with some changes in casting due to the sudden reduction in class size. Scenes from were *Marisol*, *Killer Joe* with a new cast member replacing a senior, and *Orange Flower Water*. Before

each scene, the actors were encouraged to "take a minute" just as Strasberg would suggest to his actors, to find the Affective Memory that would create the necessary moment before to launch the scene. At the end of each scene, I asked my "What were you working on?" question: the standard question asked by Strasberg at the Actors Studio as well as his teachers at the Strasberg Institute. I continued to press home the idea that our focus in my class was not the scene ready for performance. My emphasis is the process, the application of our Sense Memory work to the scene. It is a reverse engineering of most acting/scene study classes. The stress is what is and is not working for the actor; the actor is all. We discussed the challenges for each performer; why they chose to challenge themselves with their particular scene, and discuss its relative success. All scenes in the first phase have at least two passes before letting the scene go, although some scenes, due to a failure to engage one's will sufficiently to engage Sense and Affective Memory, would need to go more than twice.

Learning Outcome – Process is the product in Strasberg's Method. Trust in self allows Natural Intelligence to do its job.

Week Four

Core Strasberg Assignments – Relaxation. Overall Sensation. Childhood Place.

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Reading and responding on Nicenet to *A Dream of Passion* and *The Inner Game of Tennis*.
Undream Scene.

Teaching Objective – Prelude to Affective Memory through Concentration Exercises. Immersion in Strasberg's Method through reading and class work. Comfort with self through repetitive Relaxation and Concentration Exercises.

Earlier bouts with self-consciousness, "the endless ah's" as one student called it, seemed to have evaporated with time and repetition. This process of quickly relaxing and concentrating is the result of repetition. The unusual mad house like atmosphere of people swinging arms and legs while releasing pent up emotion with sound is becoming banal to my students, a result of their determined focus on the exercise. Concentration exercises for some involve creating Overall Sensations like Sunshine, a Shower, or my own contribution, recreation of a Childhood Place. However one student working on a Shower keeps dropping out of the exercise, falling back on the relaxation work to reassert his will. I asked him what he was struggling with. "I can't feel it. I see it. I can't feel it." I drew his attention to his hands and hands alone, asking him to see the water hitting them, rolling off. I asked him to describe what he felt on his hands, building sensation upon sensation until the actor began to relive the experience.

Encouraging the performer past their initial point of comfort is important in building discipline and resolve. This will eventually lead the actor to consciously create desired emotion that can be summoned at will.

Most, not all, students working on a childhood place were successfully recreating an environment both variable and stimulative. Conceptually, for this exercise more than any other previously prescribed, I wanted my students to understand that by focusing concentration on a single element in an environment, the mind would pop into existence other elements and sensations connected to that environment. The mind writes the scene if, to use Gallwey's language, Self 1 allows Self 2's natural intelligence to guide the exercise. Trusting Self 2, being gentle with Self 2, relinquishing Self 1 control gives up on the concept of ourselves as an "obedient computer" and trusts our "intuitive knowing" (Gallwey 53).

My feedback was given; I told students what I saw. Based on student's feedback, I prescribed moving on to another exercise or giving this week's another try. The young man having trouble connecting to The Shower must bring it back. For another young woman having trouble with Childhood Place, I take her back to an Overall Sensation for next week: Rain. Inversely, a young woman working on a Shower reports (and demonstrates) success. She is moved on to a Childhood Place for

next week. One potent example of the success of the Childhood Place was with an actress who felt her body getting hot outside at a friend's pool, making her laugh. Those who report success with Childhood Place are moved on to bringing in a Personal Object for next week. The Personal Object exercise is one in which the student sensorily recreates an object that has special significance; nostalgic or otherwise. Other exercises may as a consequence, create an emotional response; the Personal Object exercise is the first exercise in Strasberg's curriculum to go after an emotional response directly (Hull 65).

I tried an experiment: I extended the ordinary times for Relaxation and Concentration Exercises beyond their ordinary time frame. Relaxation lasted twenty minutes instead of fifteen, Concentration Exercises lasted forty minutes. The result was pleasing. My notes from that day: "Finally, everyone is fully committed. Losing themselves in the work. Becoming abandoned and less inhibited. Excellent!" My initial concerns about young people in the twenty-first century not connecting to the exercises or being put off by the time demands of the work have proven to be unfounded. But, time has been stolen from the Undream Scenes to accommodate this sterling example of the efficacy of Strasberg's Method. We have only time to work two scenes from *Marisol* and *Watbanaland*. The female actor in *Marisol*, after receiving my notes last week, conjured an

Affective Memory involving her sister to make Marisol's reaction to The Angel more authentic; she must be gentle with him although she fears for her life. It is a success because she takes her time with scene. Rather than rushing through it, trying to produce something "stage worthy", the actress embraces my earlier stated philosophy: in my class we are not shooting for the audience-proof scene. We are striving for reliving experience. We want to control our inspiration through concentration. Actors, in acting class and when rehearsing a play, can be treated as machines that must get the show up and done as fast as possible. I wanted to, like Strasberg, create an aesthetic of trial and error, process over product, experience over imitation.

The students doing *Watbanaland* have a stronger obstacle; one young woman was playing a man while the other must be affectionate to "him" in the scene. Both were on book, not allowing for strong acting choices let alone the possibility of Affective Memory to take hold. This was the downside of encouraging a process-based class environment; everyone slows down. "Actors love moments, but audiences love momentum," as Marasco says (84). To give my actors half-a-chance at experiencing something authentic on stage, I felt the sacrifice of getting things done fast was acceptable. If my actors at the end of my class felt like they'd experienced acting in a more

meaningful and spiritual way than before, I would count all the concessions made to allowing more time a success.

Learning Outcome – Patience with self, concentrating on experience rather than product, makes for good work.

Week Five

Core Strasberg Assignments – Relaxation. Overall Sensation.

Personal Object.

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Nicenet response regarding “Vulnerability.” Undream Scene.

Teaching Objective – Trust in self. Trust your audience. Be vulnerable.

Breakthrough day for two of my students! Perhaps I had set them up for success by introducing the topic of “Vulnerability” for discussion on Nicenet. Leading with a quotation by C. S. Lewis on the subject, I asked, “What is it to be vulnerable on stage and in life? Can I be vulnerable on stage but not in life? . . .How does this relate to the work we are doing in class?” Again, everything I was doing in addition to Relaxation/Concentration was with an eye toward opening them up emotionally and encouraging a trust in self.

Students not working an Overall Sensation like Rain or Shower worked on creating a Personal Object. During our debriefing, comparing my observations with their experience, some students complained that they couldn’t create the

environment which the object was in. I explained that this wasn't the point. Similar to Stanislavski's concentration exercises passed down to Strasberg through Ouspenskaya, the point of the exercise is to recall even the smallest detail of an object (Strasberg 68). Strasberg modified it for maximum emotional impact to elicit Affective Memory making the Object Exercise a *Personal Object* exercise. Unlike Hagen who prefers work with physical props, the Method actor recreates it through the senses. Many actors working on the personal object exercise were able to draw forth subtle and fluid emotion. Through my coaching them with the object, inviting them to engage the object sensorially in a way they'd never experienced it before, according to many of my students, surprisingly strong sensation and emotion was evoked.

Scenes presented in class are from *Orange Flower Water*, a representation of *Bachelorette*, *Spike Heels*, and a representation of *Watbanaland*. Three of these four plays represent serious challenges for the actresses who chose them. *Bachelorette* is the least successful of the four scenes; this is probably due in part to the loss of one of the senior actresses midway through their rehearsal. *Orange Flower Water* was chosen as the Undream Scene by a delightful, talented comedienne because the scene takes place during love making; an uncomfortable circumstance for this actress to consider for

herself. More than some, she has made a consciously brave choice in her material. The scene takes place in a motel room during a clandestine coupling of two of the four main characters. Each character is married to another. Both characters are making love as they speak their lines. Our actors, being young and shy, have chosen to stage the scene at a completely flat angle, both sitting on chairs next to each other. The scene, as staged, starts with a chaste kiss and progresses with hand holding and little else. For their second presentation of the scene, I invite them to reconsider memories of hiding something that's pleasurable from the judging eyes of others. Additionally, I tell them they have to have a proper "bed" on stage.

The greatest challenge in teaching The Method to my students is that their limited life experience narrows the scope from which they can draw memory for use in their work. As mentioned earlier, at The Strasberg Institute novices and experts were thrown into the same classes together. This was hugely beneficial to the less experienced actors, as they had modeled for them good Method performances by more experienced performers. They could witness the technique at its best. My students don't have this benefit. I must draw out and encourage their "vulnerability" to help them succeed in the class.

Another brave actress with body issues chose a scene from *Spike Heels* in which she confesses to her friend that she loves him. This is their second pass at the scene. The actress has chosen this scene because she has been in love and it is difficult for her to imagine being anyone's object of desire. She has set up a challenge for herself, but is fearful of tackling it. I point this out to her. I ask, "Don't you love him?" She answers, "Yes." I tell her I have no sense of that at the beginning of the scene and that she needs to "go after him." "The lines suggest you kiss him when you come in." "I know, but I'm afraid to," she says smiling through her fear. Frustrated with her but understanding she needs a kick in the pants to get her over the wall, I am more severe than I have been thus far in class. I look her in the eye. "Do it!" I walk away, sit back in my chair, feeling an electricity in the air. All eyes were on what would happen next. The actress ran on stage, kissed her scene partner with abandon. There was a gasp from the class. The actress had changed from self-doubting, emotionally flat, to an integrated self-motivated confident individual. The rest of her performance was, to the delight of myself and her classmates, the most concentrated and authentic performance she'd ever given. She had let herself be "vulnerable." She had focused her concentration on the object of her desire, and with deliberate courage, created for herself

the necessary sense memory to evoke her passion in the scene. Was the event entirely self-motivated as the Method is ideally suited to be? No. Would I have dealt with this issue the same way with any other performer? No. But, without that kick in the pants, there would have been no success in the scene. She would not have had a memory of that success from which to learn.

Another breakthrough that day occurred, but less triumphantly. Performing a scene from *Watbanaland*, two actresses were performing Act II, scene three. One actress, because of our dearth of male actors, was playing a man (Dash) who was loved by the female character (Marilyn). This gender-bending, as I found out, was causing discomfort in the actress tasked with being in love with "him". The scene demanded a desperation and despair from "Marilyn," but there was resistance to playing it. "I don't like it," the actress said. "Why?" "It doesn't feel good to be sad." I was nonplussed at this. What kind of student of acting doesn't want to engage their emotions? It never occurred to me that anyone signing up for Method Acting would not want to engage affective memory. I was reaching my limit with excuses for not doing the work. "I've had a bad day." "I don't care," I said rather brusquely. This refusal on my part to give her an out realigned her priorities immediately. She started the scene again, tearing up, crying when talking about her disappointment to her boyfriend. She was

plainly miserable, but it was necessary for the scene to be more than a string of actor clichés; the actor “pretending” to be sad. It was another success for another actress resistant initially to committing fully to the work. The Method cannot be done without this commitment. It is not imitative, it is reliving. Strasberg’s daughter, Susan, once asked him why he was yelling at an actor during exercises. Strasberg said he wasn’t angry. “I was trying to awaken his will. Without it, he will never be an actor” (Hull xv).

Learning Outcome – By rushing toward the thing you fear, you might just accomplish what you’ve never done before. Acting obstacles are internal, not external. Awaken the will and achieve great things.

Week Six

Core Strasberg Assignments – Relaxation. Personal Object.

Private Moment.

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Nicenet response to “Awkwardness.”

Teaching Objective –

Leading this week’s class was my Nicenet posting on the subject of Awkwardness. From *Notes to an Actor*:

Understanding this connection between awkwardness and emotion can be a big help to an actor. Where there . . . awkwardness, be assured that just beneath it in your

subconscious is a wealth of strong emotion. For an actor, this awkwardness is like an "X" marked on a treasure map: . . . And Great Actors aren't afraid to get out the shovel. (Marasco 103)

I thought this was an excellent supplement to the breakthroughs of last class, letting the students articulate their reactions to what they say in the context of this new assignment.

During Relaxation/Concentration exercises, half the class is doing or redoing Personal Object while the other half is working on Private Moment. For the Private Moment exercise, the student is to create an activity that is done privately, that would be ceased if someone came into the room, within the bounds of good taste. This exercise strives for something beyond Stanislavski's "public solitude" (99). It is an exercise in shedding inhibitions about that which seems most precious to us while surrounded by other students engaged in their own exercises. It is attacking our fearful modesty head on, overcoming it, building a trust in Self 2 and eliminating tension stemming from sharing something personal in public. I encouraged my students to speak in gibberish or fall back on the "ah" if something needed to be expressed during the exercise. During our debrief, I stressed I did not want to know particulars of their private moment unless they wished to share them. The exercise was deemed a success only if both of us

agreed that the student committed to the exercise and was able to complete whatever task they had set for themselves.

Affective memory would naturally arise during this exercise, sometime causing concern in the student that they were doing it "wrong." As always, I encouraged them to engage all experiences without judgment, accepting whatever emotions that arose as "good." For it is the experience of real emotion under imaginary circumstances, for Strasberg, that is at the heart of all good acting (Hull 41).

Marisol was shown for the final time. Excellent moment before and playing of the given circumstances by both actors. The male actor previously challenged by emotional scenes is moving more fluidly from beat to beat, with real commitment. *Orange Flower Water* is shown for final time, building on the notes I had given. Female actor smashed down personal inhibitions to allow herself to love and be loved. Private Moment exercise for her has turned out to be the perfect warm up for her for this scene! *Women of Manhattan* was performed with scripts in hand. There was little feedback I could give these actors beyond the note to get off book. *Killer Joe* is shown and will continue to be worked on. Originally the actress' Undream Scene, I am letting the male actor adopt it for his own Undream Scene as well. One of two males in a class with nine females, he has done double duty during scene study. Additionally, he

will be the lead in the main stage show. I decided to cut him some slack.

Learning Outcome – Stanislavski's rules always apply.

Awkwardness and vulnerability are targets in our work.

Week Seven

Core Strasberg Assignments – Affective Memory. Private Moment.

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Undream Scene.

Teaching Objective – Culminate previous experience with Sense Memory exercises to engage a personal, meaningful Affective Memory.

The assignment for this week is Affective Memory. All the exercises have been leading to this one. As Strasberg describes it:

... (T)he actor is asked to recreate an experience from the past that affected him strongly. The experience should have happened at least seven years prior to the time that the exercise is attempted. I ask the student to pick the strongest thing that ever happened to him, whether it aroused anger, fear or excitement. (Strasberg 149)

I have instructed my students the previous week that the "prior to seven years ago" rule was sometimes amended to four years in my acting classes. Anna Strasberg herself told me to work with memories four years or older. Since my class is so young, I

invite them to use the four year rule. Three students are doing Private Moment, everyone else is doing Affective Memory work. I felt stretched thin this day: too many students doing work that necessitates a more personal style of teaching. As best I could, I guided each student individually with questions to which the student must answer, to make certain they are committing to the exercise. "What do you feel against your body?" "What do you hear?" "What time of day is it?" "What temperature?" All is asked with the intention of keeping the actor from anticipating emotion and keeping her mindful of the events she is reliving.

Three of my students did exercises with earphones. This is something that Strasberg never had to address in his classes. Like a student using a computer in Uta Hagen's Object Exercises, it practically changes the rules of the game. If a student can just blank out the audience by putting on headphones or watch videos on their computer, it armors the actor against the audience in a way Hagen and Strasberg never could have predicted. I wrote in my notes "NO MORE COMPUTERS OR HEADPHONES!"

Another pedagogically informative moment occurred with I asked a student to redo her Private Moment. She was not engaged in the exercise and admitted it. She asked me to reconsider my decision based on her discomfort with anyone knowing what it was

she was truly doing. Strasberg would have told her "tough luck" and had her redo the exercise, since the exercise's *raison d'être* was the erosion of tension-inspiring inhibition. But, I didn't have it in me to tell her "no." Given her youth and relative inexperience, I felt if the exercise was a burden, it would negate any positive values it might have. I instead moved her on to Affective Memory, which was by no means giving her an easy out: it was moving her forward to the heavy lifting of the Method.

Scene study featured scenes from *Mr. Marmalade*, *The Odd Couple*, and *The Matchmakers*. One of my students, an actress I directed in my all-female version of *Don Juan in Hell* last semester, has a history of breaking character when something strikes her funny. Doing her scene from *The Matchmakers*, her bad habit reemerges. I reminded her of her character's miserable, inescapable circumstances: falling in love with a boy who is the son of her future step-father; a situation not remotely funny to contemplate. To focus her will, I insisted she continue to do the scene over and over again until she got through it without breaking! Recommitting herself to the given circumstances, mindful of possible endless retakes for her and her partner, narrowed her concentration so efficiently that she finished the scene without a break in character. In fact, the scene became electric! Because the actress as well as the

character were now in sync; both found themselves in a potentially humiliating situation and were fighting like hell to avoid it. It was a magnetic performance. Assessing the learning outcome with my student, she confirmed that once she felt at risk, her character felt at risk. Her fellow students remarked it a turning point in her growth as an actor.

It's important to remember: Strasberg was not discarding Stanislavski's work, he felt he was building on it. "Given circumstances", "tempo", "circles of attention" were all a part of Strasberg's approach as much as Stanislavski's and vital to the psychologically logical performances Strasberg strove to draw from his actors. Strasberg would use whatever strategy he felt necessary during rehearsal or scene work to awaken the actor's will. Finding the appropriate Affective Memory was not always the solution to every actor problem. But, finding the key to experiencing and sharing an authentic event with your audience, for Strasberg, was all-important.

Learning Outcome – Stanislavski always applies. We don't discard that which we've already learned; we build on it. The actor's struggle can be the character's struggle.

Week Eight

Core Strasberg Assignments – Relaxation. Affective Memory.

Private Moment.

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Undream scene.

Teaching Objective – Similar to last week, we are exploring useful, repeatable Affective Memories.

Two students are working on Private Moment exercise while the rest have brought in an Affective Memory. The Affective Memory exercise is ordinarily an intensely personal and one-on-one exercise. With no one else on stage, the instructor guides the student to recall all sensory aspects of a strong emotional event from their experience. The teacher asks specific questions about what the student is experiencing through the senses, helping the student to concentrate. It takes time and individual attention in its traditional application, time and attention that I cannot afford. So, I am with faith in the talent and commitment of my young actors, asking them to commit to the Affective Memory exercise all at the same time. One actress is stretching, flushed in the face. I ask her where she is. "Side of the road," comes the answer, filled with exhaustion. Another actor is speaking in agitated gibberish. This is Strasberg's idea, a way of encouraging expression, but permitting the actor his privacy. "I don't want to know your secrets," is something I often say during our Relaxation/Concentration exercises. One actress doing a Private Moment is so engaged in the exercise, she's singing out loud while driving. The sound is full expressed and uninhibited.

One actor, the one who is the lead in a main stage show, is crying and laughing. He is my best student and slips into the exercises with remarkable ease. I decide to release him from the exercise early and invite him to watch everyone else engaged in their work.

We've reached the half-way point for the course. Most of my students as of this class will have experienced Strasberg's most important exercises for teaching his Method. I feel it is appropriate to start to bring students out of the exercises early, allowing them my view of the room; actors in chairs, standing up, laying on the ground, but all intensely focused on reliving past experience. I hope it will inspire them and encourage them knowing how powerfully the work reads to the viewer. I will continue to take this approach for the rest of the course; selecting a few at a time to see how others approach the work.

My students are given their homework assignments for the next couple of weeks. Those who did not engage an Affective Memory this week must bring one in next week, so everyone in the room will be doing Affective Memory. Everyone is told they will be assigned a Shakespeare monologue from a play they must read. Next, they must decide if their character was an animal, what would that animal be. Study that animal and prepare to bring it in for the future. Additionally, everyone should be finding a

monologue from a film to be done during our final weeks of class with an eye toward performing it for the camera.

Mr. Marmalade and *Killer Joe* are brought back. *As Bees in Honey Drown* and *Women of Manhattan* have their first go. The young actors playing Lucy and Mr. Marmalade have taken my note from last time, but they are still not emotionally invested in one another. I use a favorite technique of Strasberg's; I have them improvise a scene not in the play. I have them improvise the very first meeting, the "summoning" of Mr. Marmalade. Mr. Marmalade and Lucy are much more dear to one another in this improvised scene; there is real affection between them. I quickly have them restart their scripted scene and, as I had hoped, the shared experience of that past event for both actors has translated into a more nuanced, less predictable playing of the scene. Line readings feel original, not imitative of stereotyped emotional responses. The actors report a connectedness to each other that didn't exist before the improvisation.

All actors in *As Bees in Honey Drown* and *Women of Manhattan* are barely off book. There is little I can do with either one of these scenes until they have memorized their lines. I am near the end of my patience in regards to a lack of preparation by some and I tell them so. My main stage, over-worked male actor is doing double duty again on the *Bees* scene and *Killer*

Joe so it's difficult to come down too hard on them. The young lady in *Killer Joe* is finally able to surrender to the helplessness of her character's situation and release all the pain in this penultimate, harrowing scene when Joe abuses her. It is as close as we have come for this actress to actually experiencing her character's humiliation. I declare the *Killer Joe* scene a success and retired.

Learning Outcomes – For some, the cumulative effect of considering vulnerability, awkwardness, and Affective Memory has led to a trust of self leading to more authentic moments on stage.

Week Nine

Core Strasberg Assignments – Relaxation. Animal work. Affective Memory.

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Shakespeare monologue assignment. Undream scene.

Teaching Objective – Engaging character through animal work. Prelude to engaging heightened text.

Laying the foundation for the Shakespeare monologue work, those actors who were not engaged in Affective Memory exercises had been tasked with bringing in an animal influenced by their Shakespearean character. Earlier in the week, I had assigned each actor the following tasks: memorize the Shakespeare monologue assigned, read the play it was from, and choose the

animal that character would be if it were one. Through this exercise, I endeavored to introduce characterization as often approached by Strasberg. Influenced by Ouspenskaya's animal work in her own acting classes, Strasberg believed animal work a brilliant way to develop the actor's concentration and imagination when approaching character.

For those actors doing Affective Memory work rather than animal work during out concentration exercises, the success is palpable. One young actress seemed to be stroking an animal, filled with grief. Another is scratching herself, extremely agitated. I would learn later this actor had created the Affective Memory of when she was in the hospital about to give birth. The anesthesia was giving her an allergic reaction. Additionally, the nurse attending was flirting with her husband! Still, another actor is experiencing waves of laughter and joyful tears at the sight of military families reuniting after months apart (as I would learn during our debriefing). I felt proud of my students. They are taking control of their own work during these exercises. Conferencing with them afterward to confirm my observations, with less guidance from myself, my students are charting their own course through their work.

The Odd Couple, As Bees in Honey Drown, Women of Manhattan, and *The Matchmakers* all come back for another pass. *The Odd Couple* is still not off book and I am given excuses for why. I

halt the class and make a speech emphasizing the primacy of learning your lines, making choices, and the inability to perform with anything like competence when you don't know what you are saying. I dismiss the scene and move on to better prepared work.

The woman in *As Bees in Honey Drown* is still playing at being seductive, going for results rather than experiencing the circumstances of the character. Curiously, she never physically engages her prey, a result of the actor not feeling fully comfortable in the scene. Well, it is her Undream Scene, after all. I invite both actors to sit across from one another, holding hands, and make positive observations about the other's face. This exercise has been borrowed from David S. Leong as a way of slowly building intimacy between actors for scenes that require it. I ask them to say to one another, "I'm going to take care of you." I have them replay the scene. My actress is now much more comfortable with using physical contact as a tactic to persuade her acting partner to give her what she wants. She is experiencing the character on a more authentic level. Her male partner, also as a result of the exercise, has softened, being less angry, more moved by her advances allowing the scene to ebb and flow with a rhythm that seems more life-like.

Women of Manhattan suffers from much the same problems as *Bees*: the actors are talking at each other, playing at attitudes, rather than working to experience the circumstances of the play. I fall back on my Leong "face off" exercise; both actors holding hands looking at each other. I give one actor the adjustment that she has the soul of Mother Theresa; nothing this other woman says can hurt her at all. Suddenly, they were two friends, rather than two competitive women, having a meaningful conversation about relationship troubles. Because the *characters* were more relaxed, the *actors* became more relaxed. A virtuous cycle was put in place allowing an organic truthfulness to come out of this simple conversation over glasses of wine. I point this out to my actors reminding them that our Relaxation exercises are not a separate, meaningless activity; it is the core of our work. Without it, we as actors, are stiff and uninspired, thus uninspiring.

The Matchmakers is performed vigorously with high stakes and without inhibition. Because both actresses fully commit to the importance of the moment, it is a very funny scene. Without exception, all agree it was both actresses fullest commitment to their characters' circumstances.

Learning Outcome – Improvisation opens the imagination.

Intimacy between actors is intimacy between characters.

Week Ten

I am sick this week and unable to teach my class. My students are encouraged to study their Shakespeare monologue and bring in their Shakespeare inspired animal for next week.

Week Eleven

Core Strasberg Assignments – Animal work for Concentration

Exercise

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Application of animal work to a Shakespeare monologue.

Teaching Objective – Exploring a key to characterization. To assist in losing self-consciousness through observation/concentration involved in creating the animal. Strengthening the idea that emotional connection is inextricably linked to physical connection.

Quickly following upon the heels of our weekly Relaxation Exercise, we moved into this week's Concentration Exercise which was centered on Animal Work. Each actor explored the physicality of the animal they had chosen for their Shakespeare Monologue. I instructed them to keep their animal in a cage, letting their animal explore the chair they did their Relaxation work in. Then I told them to raise the I.Q. of their animal, letting them explore more deftly a way out of their prison until finally, they evolved their animal to a place of walking and talking. After mingling with each other, finding affinity

with similar characters, they sat and we went through the monologues.

We debriefed after each presentation, doing the monologue a second time with notes.

Learning Outcome – Some lost the connection to their animal, focusing instead on the words of their monologue; not a sin especially when it comes to Shakespeare. Shakespeare's characters often have to think about the words they are saying, coining poetry because prose won't do. Others discovered what I was hoping they'd find: inspiration and a lens through which to focus their concentration in the animal.

Week Twelve

Core Strasberg Assignments – Animal work for Concentration

Exercise

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Application of animal work to a Shakespeare monologue.

Teaching Objective – Very similar to last week's objectives with a chance to deepen their understanding of Shakespeare's text, giving polish to their monologues. Exploring a key to characterization. To assist in losing self-consciousness through observation/concentration involved in creating the animal. Strengthening the idea that emotional connection is inextricably linked to physical connection.

After ten minutes of Relaxation work, an abbreviated session consciously designed to give more time to our Animal/Shakespeare construct, all began to embody their chosen animal. As was the case last week, I asked them over time to increase the intelligence of their animal and to evolve the animal to the point where it could walk on hind legs (or grow hind legs). I created a scenario of a wedding party in which they were the guests. By mingling with each other, they sat themselves down at the table with the characters they felt most kinship with. After reciting their monologue to everyone at the table, we gathered for our second presentation.

I was heartened to see so many of my actors express the changes in thought that Shakespeare demands of them through his words. Marrying word to thought, letting the thought change the landscape of their face, experiencing the piece rather than reciting it. A few of my actors were less successful, glossing the speeches with a mood rather than deeply understanding the train of comprehension Shakespeare leads his characters through. I was, on the one hand, pleasantly surprised that there was what John Barton calls in his book *Playing Shakespeare* "the borderline between passion and coolness" in much of what I saw (147). Still, I had a secret desire to see someone boil over with emotion to give visceral proof that affective memory was undeniably in use during these performances: proof positive that

The Method was at play. However, animal work applied to articulately performed Shakespeare as well as asking for demonstrable affective memory work is probably not only asking too much, but asking for the wrong result. In the exercise I had constructed for my students, I was asking them to enter character through the animal inspired by Shakespeare's writing. I was layering the cake. By placing this exercise at the end of my syllabus, I was hoping for the most robust, multi-layered performance thus far. It would have been artificial to ask for everything I was asking for to be demonstrated all the time, and most likely impossible. More often than not, I was presented with a balanced performance which honored both "passion and coolness" (147).

Learning Outcome- Connection gained to their primary focus, the animal, enhanced concentration on words of their monologue according to some, more so than last time. Several admitted to being intimidated by the language initially, being their first foray performing Classical text. This is no longer the case. Two passes last week and two more this week in front of class with notes has given them foundational poise when approaching Shakespeare.

Week Thirteen

Core Strasberg Assignments – Relaxation.

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Application of The Method to a filmed monologue.

Teaching Objective – When exposed to the camera, that great “lie detector,” The Method shines brightly.

For the past three weeks, I had been inviting my students to send me monologues from film and TV that they wanted to present for camera. Most took up my challenge to do the hardest scene they could find. I was startled to find that many of these young actors had polished, basic film skills in place: strong focus with the eyes, avoiding blinking, as well as relaxing the face even during the most emotional monologues. With my Canon EOS Rebel T2i sitting on a tripod, hooked up via an HDMI cable to a Vizio TV, my actors were able to watch live on screen their peers as I recorded them.

We started off well. My young male actor who at the start of the semester had confessed not being emotionally connected to his work, for this his final acting assignment for my class, had chosen an wrenching sad and angry monologue from the film *Magnolia*. He was open, vulnerable, crying, and honest. There was nothing imitative or predictable about his performance. Being able to step back behind the camera and witness his own performance solidified for him the terrain he had crossed during the course of my Method class; he had let himself contact his vulnerability and shared that with his audience. This student,

braver and more committed than any other in my class, rushed toward material he feared and brought his will to bear in all his assignments. Watching himself on camera, he acknowledged his trepidation at performing such raw material, but like myself, found in it success.

No other exercise produced such clear delineation between when my student actors were bringing their will to bear and when they were not. Viewing one's own work with one's peers made the success or failure of the performance most clear; more clear than any unfilmed scene or monologue performance delivered in our class. This exercise, coming at the very end of the class, was the capstone of our work together. For three months, my actors had been initiated in the Strasberg approach to Relaxation, applying that work for up to 30 minutes a week in class as well as one of the codified Method Concentration exercises. This process oriented approach to the work – preferring experience over outcome – emphasizing the reliving of memory over imitative action – is, I feel, the genius of Strasberg's Method. By refusing to mandate an end product from the actor at the outset, Strasberg's Method gets the best end product possible from the actor in the end.

Debriefing with my students after everyone had had two passes at their monologue, and after allowing everyone to see their own work on screen, consensus was easily reached regarding

who had succeeded in using the Method, and who had not. To a person, the actor's opinion of their own work was in concert with other's opinion of their work; an extraordinarily rare occurrence.

Learning Outcome- For me and my students, camera work demonstrates failure and success using the Method so clearly, in future classes, I would want to use the camera more often and in unconventional ways; scene work for example. For the students, they learned that weak acting cannot be masked; it is plain for all to see especially when filmed.

Week Fourteen

Core Strasberg Assignments – None.

Supplementary Non-core Assignment – Nicenet response to "Thinking and Not Thinking about Words."

Teaching Objective – Lecture on Strasberg's Legacy. Guest Lecturer and Actors Studio observer Michael Hegarty. Contextualizing Strasberg's influence on film performance, acting philosophy, and celebrating the work we've done.

Wrapping up the work we've experienced in class, I lectured on my experience at Strasberg's Institute from a personal perspective. Michael Hegarty lectured on his experience as an observer at the Actors Studio. Stressing the point that the Method is a technique and not a style, our class watched scenes from famous films featuring the performances of Strasberg

trained actors including Al Pacino, Kim Stanley, Robert De Niro, as well as Lee Strasberg's own acting in *The Godfather II* and *Going in Style*. Time was dedicated at the end to airing personal feelings about time spent in class.

Learning Outcome – There is a freshness to The Method that makes performance even in older films seem contemporary. Performances through The Method seem to be aging well.

CHAPTER FIVE

Results: Success and Failure

In the Introduction, I set forth three questions which needed answering through teaching Strasberg's Method in 2013: What about The Method still works today, what fails us, and what needs re-interpretation? Answers to these questions have been furnished, but the experience of teaching the class – trying to honor the spirit of Strasberg's intent by teaching his curriculum – has produced unexpected additional questions in regards to not only teaching The Method, but teaching acting overall. Before answering my three primary questions, a brief explanation of these new queries is in order to give context to what will follow.

Acting praxes, particularly those rooted in the twentieth century American tradition, are curious creations when compared across the other performing arts in two ways. First, their progenitors are not chiefly recognized as great actors themselves. Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Michael Chekhov, Uta Hagen, and even Lee Strasberg made their bones as *teachers* of acting, not as actors themselves. It is their *praxes* which are

regarded as their life's work. Is it not curious that the Great Teachers of American Acting should have famous acting techniques, but be not themselves famous for their own artistry? Second, only in actor training do we endeavor to emulate with such vigor another teacher's approach to artistic creation. There is no Picasso School of Painting teaching students how to paint like Picasso that I am aware of. Neither is there a Michelangelo School of Sculpture teaching sculptors to sculpt like Michelangelo. Although The Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute as well as The Stella Adler Studio of Acting each offer an array of classes in performing skills like singing, dance, stage combat and the like, the center piece of each school is its progenitor's acting technique. Is it not strange that American's have a heritage that pedigrees our actors based on whose approach to acting they practice? These questions have risen up through teaching Strasberg's Method. I do not have answers for them. But, asking the questions are vitally important because I suspect the answers will presage where we are headed in terms of our philosophical approach to actor training in the future.

What in Strasberg's Method still works? The praxis is process oriented. By treating the experience of the actor and his communication of that experience to the audience as dominant the desired result is achieved by not trying to achieve it

directly. Sometimes referred in theatre circles as "end-gaining," by focusing on the experience of process rather than the finality of product, the goal is achieved by going the long way around.

Strasberg's Relaxation, sometimes referred as Active Relaxation, is given a frame (sitting in a chair, moving the limbs unconventionally, releasing tension on "ah) which is rigid enough to demand discipline of the artist and free enough to allow the actor to focus on the areas of the body that feel most rife with tension for her. Strasberg's approach is actor-guided with support and observation in the classroom supplied by the instructor, but designed to be self-directed under real world circumstances. Execution of Strasberg's prescription for relaxation can be problematic. To the uninitiated, behaving in such a fashion to relax the mind and body can be inhibiting; the exact opposite of relaxation. However, through repetition, inhibition is obliterated, the will is exercised on self rather than on everything that is not self; things one cannot control. This leaves the actor's consciousness at the doorstep of Concentration and relaxation is attained.

Relaxation via Strasberg is more easily achieved in the classroom when done alongside one's peers. But, what about when one is standing in the hallway of a casting director's office or backstage before a performance? Can one practically apply this

technique in one's dressing room before a performance? Does this not foil Strasberg's approach?

In part, yes. Active Relaxation out of the context of a classroom or rehearsal hall calls attention to itself. Nonetheless, through continued practice of the Relaxation technique devised by Strasberg, the actor's will becomes more supple, ready to obey the wishes of the actor on command. Practice improves self-confidence creating a virtuous circle which can be relied on even if ideal circumstances do not exist everywhere an actor might do work. In fact, it is the goal of relaxation work to create a portable sense of well-being that can be called upon when necessary. Strasberg's Relaxation work practiced regularly, even if occasionally not done "by the book," builds confidence in one's ability to relax at will, denies Self 1 its critical power, fostering concentration on the task at hand, leading to a sense of truth. Strasberg's Relaxation exercise remains useful as demonstrated by my students, confirmed through observation of their work and their feedback.

Concentration exercises as devised by Strasberg, as demonstrated by the dozen or so weeks we worked on them, remain an important gateway to accessing Affective Memory, the jewel of Strasberg's Method. The Super Structure of Strasberg's Method – Relaxation/Concentration/Sense of Truth – holds very well. My

students demonstrated little of the impatience with these exercises I was expecting given that several of them had done what they called "recall" in other classes. Strasberg's stepping stone approach to Affective Memory work, I feared, would be too plodding, lose my students' interest, and sabotage my effort to honor Strasberg's emphasis on progressive Sense Memory/Concentration exercises. I was proven wrong every day of my class. My students, as recounted in Chapter Four, alternately succeeded and failed specific sense memory exercises, but never failed to engage the exercise on its own terms. When I and a student both agreed the exercise was a success, we moved the student on to the next exercise. When they failed, they repeated the exercise the following week. No student ever gave up, nor did any student have back-to-back failures in my class. When they met a challenge, as a whole, my students redoubled their efforts, exercising their concentration on the object of their will.

So, the Strasberg's Relaxation and Concentration (Sense Memory) components seem to be ageing well, at least as witnessed through my eleven young actors. What about Affective Memory? Is that hoary old term indicative of an aged out idea? Is it really necessary for the actor to feel *everything* the character feels? This question, as introduced in my first chapter, is as old as acting itself. It is probably best answered on a case by

case basis through the commonsense of the actor and director as guided by the story the playwright wishes to tell. But to better answer what we should keep of Strasberg's Method, perhaps its best to state that it is *sometimes* necessary for the actor to experience authentic emotion for the sake of her audience. And the physically closer an audience gets to the actor – the smaller the theatre, the closer the camera – the harder it becomes “to lie like truth.” Better and easier to just *tell* the truth. My students, most especially in our on-camera class, observed what I believe is the most compelling special effect of the Method Actor: the changing face as emotion sweeps across it. Affective Memory, in tandem with Relaxation and Concentration, remain essential components of not only Strasberg's Method, but of any Master Actor.

So, Strasberg's super structure of Relaxation, Concentration, and Affective Memory (sense of truth) seem to be “keepers.” But, what can we afford to lose? What has lost its luster or grown ineffective? Have tastes changed past the point where certain aspects of the Method as taught no longer hold water?

One thing we can afford to let go of is our misconceptions and bigotry surrounding Strasberg's belief regarding theatre as a whole. As alluded to earlier, sometimes emotional realism isn't called for. And there is no sense in pretending that a

"sense of truth" cannot be arrived at through other means. An abstract production with clowning and acrobatics can be just as moving as a psychologically realistic performance of O'Neil or Williams or Albee. Strasberg honored many artists whose varied approaches to theatre could be considered antithetical to his own philosophy including Shakespeare, Artaud, Grotowski, Brecht, and Olivier (Strasberg 175-177). Although Strasberg strenuously defended his Method's applicability to many different styles of theatre, it is important to understand he was not an absolutist. We can, going forward, let go of the idea that he was.

What also fails us is The Method's incompleteness. There is a rudimentary movement component to The Method if one includes Strasberg's animal work as well as the psycho-physical exploration in Relaxation work. But, there is no vocal component to Strasberg's Method. This could be considered an unfair criticism, as the point of Strasberg's Method is not movement or vocal training. It is not structured to be exploratory in those ways. Perhaps, no one actor training method can cover all these aspects of performance, and as mentioned earlier, his Institute conducts many classes in various disciplines. But, The Method if approached as a panacea for all actor problems will fail to produce even a good actor.

Which leads me to my most strident critique of the Method. Because it has no vocal component, because the Method is so

process oriented, the beginning actor, the inexperienced actor, can follow the Method's directives to a T and become a bad actor. I was very fortunate to have in my class intuitive, savvy young actors. The Method, as far as they were concerned, was something to add to their actor's toolbox. I never sensed from any of them that The Method had become their "religion" as a result of taking my class. I made certain this could not be the case by declaring during the first day of class that The Method is a method. It is not the *only* method. The Method is designed to be taught to all-comers. It is from the ground up structured as a technique for learning how to act. Without the individual teacher's on-stage experience brought to bear in the classroom, stressing all the important technical aspects of theatre acting (projection, articulation, opening up, blocking, acting with your partner), the beginning actor using The Method could learn to be bad. Ultimately, a product, a play, a work of art, must be communicated to an audience. Ultimately, in a Strasberg's Method class, we must let go of process and the centrality of actor experience. We must accept that, in the end, we must present a polished product to an audience.

What, if anything, can we reinterpret in Strasberg's Method to bring it closer to us in the twenty-first century? In retrospect, my introduction of other texts and concepts into my classroom, such as *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Dweck's theories,

and Marasco's observations, as well as posing questions inspired by these on Nicenet served a dual purpose. They helped bring Strasberg's ideas out of a mid-twentieth century perspective, viewing them through the lens of ideas formed closer in time to my student's own generation. Additionally, these fresh ideas inclusion in my class, I hoped, would inculcate Strasberg's teaching through multiple perspectives, reinforcing his validity. This, I believe, was my biggest risk and I feel more often than not, these succeeded in their intension. By broadening our common language to terms such as Self 1 and Self 2, Natural Intelligence, Awkwardness, Innate vs. Fixed Talent Theory, my students and I were able to approach the challenge from multiple fronts.

Including my own idea for a sense memory exercise, the Childhood Place, I felt was a fitting supplement to Strasberg's curriculum. Some of Strasberg's Concentration Exercises hold the potential for darkness or discomfort, such as Private Moment, or strong Overall Sensations like a Cold Shower or Sharp Pain. In fact, I deliberately avoided some of these extreme Overall Sensations because they are generally unpleasant, and frankly in my opinion, not fun. Childhood Place offered the hope of reacquainting oneself with pleasant sensations and experiencing happy surprises. Overall, I was deeply prejudiced against requiring during the Concentration Exercise indisputable

unpleasant sensation. So, I would offer to future instructors of the Method the suggestion that although suffering is often the path as an artist, it need not be our decision when left with choices. Integrity of Strasberg's Method is not sacrificed by including some strong, predictably pleasant Concentration Exercises during a future course of study.

Was the course a success? In the broadest possible sense, yes. Certainly, I made mistakes. I went off syllabus early due in part to circumstances beyond my control. I should have scheduled a longer class or one that met twice a week. Nonetheless, I set for myself the task of illuminating my students about the strengths of Strasberg's Method and dispelling misinformation, which unfortunately, still surrounds them. I wanted to deepen their connection to self, thereby increasing their self-confidence and challenge them to go for the "awkward," revealing a part of themselves they never thought they could. A few made great strides in the overall depth of their performances. A few others made one or two personal breakthroughs during out time together that, I hope, will be remembered for the rest of their lives. My greatest discovery in teaching Strasberg's Method was that, in the future, as a teacher of acting, I would do best to emulate Strasberg's approach to developing his own Method. Strasberg, influenced by Stanislavski through Ouspenskaya and Boleslavsky, developed his

Method over years of discovery in the rehearsal hall and classroom. As director, teacher, and actor, he found his way of teaching students how to access what he thought was most rare and valuable in an actor; reliving emotion; a Sense of Truth. Here's the most important lesson I learned teaching Strasberg's Method: Every great teacher teaches themselves. Through teaching my class, I discovered that John Strasberg was right when he said personality was the key to every approach to teaching acting. I will, in the future, continue to use Strasberg's Method and let it influence me, just as Stanislavski influenced Strasberg. But, I will also develop methods and approaches of my own design. Ones that inspire the best work from my students. Ones that best help me along my path to finding my own method.

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APPENDIX A

SYLLABUS

“Proficiency and the results of proficiency come only to those who have learned the paradoxical art of doing and not doing, of combining relaxation with activity, of letting go as a person in order that the immanent and transcendent Unknown Quantity may take hold.” – Aldous Huxley

“Acting is the ability to react to imaginary stimuli – to create real thoughts and feelings under imaginary circumstances.” – Lee Strasberg

**“Can the theatre exist without a scene designer? –Yes-
Without music –Yes-
Without an author –Yes-
Without an actor –Never-“ – Richard Boleslavsky**

STRASBERG’S METHOD

Fridays 1-4pm

Instructor: Mr. Terry Hardcastle, AEA

Email: hardcastlet@vcu.edu

OFFICE: SHAFER PLAYHOUSE 207

Mailbox: Performing Arts Center, 2nd floor

Office Hours: By Appointment

Course Description

The student will be exposed to and exercise Lee Strasberg’s Method; an approach to acting

Required Texts

A Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method by Lee Strasberg

The Inner Game of Tennis: The Classic Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance by W. Timothy Gallwey

Suggested Reading

Strasberg's Method as Taught by Lorrie Hull by S. Loraine Hull

Notes to an Actor: Practical Advice Shaped to the Way Actors Work by Ron Marasco

Course Objectives

- To master Strasberg's Active Relaxation, managing stage fright and tension through disciplined, regular practice.
- To build an inventory of Sense and Affective Memories and apply them to Performance.
- In performance, to "relive" rather than just "remember"; to experience, rather than imitate
- To develop a trust of "Self 2" . . ."the child self" . . ."the true self" . . .and believe in its natural intelligence.
- To develop a basic understanding of the history of Strasberg and the work of his students.

Attendance Policy

You are permitted one (1) unexplained absences. *However, starting with the second absence your class grade will be automatically reduced one full letter grade.* Two tardies (arriving after attendance has been taken) qualify as one absence. If you arrive more than fifteen minutes late to class, you are absent. If you leave class early without being excused, you are absent. If you are sick, I'd rather you stayed out of my class and got better. But, absence from class does not excuse you from doing required work.

Disabilities

If you have any visual, auditory, ambulatory, or cognitive disability, it is your responsibility to inform me **ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS** so I can accommodate your needs. See [The VCU Resource Guide](#) for details.

Religious Observances

In accordance with University policy, if you wish to observe a religious holiday you must provide advance written notification by the end of the second day of class so that I can accommodate your needs.

VCU Honor Policy

Please visit the VCU website or to see the VCU Handbook to review the official university honor policy. One university ruling you need to be especially aware of: **The University requires that cell phones and beepers must be turned off while you are in the classroom.**

VCU Alert and Campus Security

- Sign up to receive VCU text messaging alerts [<http://www.vcu.edu/alert/notify>].
- Know the safe evacuation route from each of your classrooms. Emergency evacuation routes are posted in on-campus classrooms.
- Listen for and follow instructions from VCU or other designated authorities.
- Know where to go for additional emergency information [<http://www.vcu.edu/alert>].
- Know the emergency phone # for the VCU Police: 804-828-1234. Report suspicious activities and objects.

Classroom Policies

- **Cell Phones:** Before class begins, your cell phone must be turned OFF. Not on “silent,” not on “vibrate,” but OFF. We will assign two students to leave phones on for text alerts.
- **NO FOOD:** If you’re that hungry, skip class, or bring enough for everyone. Otherwise, let this be a snack-free zone. Students, however, are permitted (and encouraged!) to bring water to class in a closed container.
- **Late Work:** *I will not accept late work.* I will not accept assignments emailed to me. I do, however, accept work early.
- **Gum:** Don’t use it in class. Using it during a speech will drop you a letter grade for that speech.
- **Academic Honor:** Students will only represent their own original creations as their own work. Plagiarism, intentional or otherwise, is not only academically dishonest, it is illegal and can result in failure or expulsion. Avoid plagiarism at all costs!

DRESS CODE -VCU PERFORMANCE CLASSES

- **Students must wear sweat pants, dance pants, exercise pants or tights; Unitards are permitted**
- **Pants and Tights must extend to the ankle. NO SHORTS**
- **Pants and Tights must be worn at the waist, NOT on the HIPS**
- **Pants and Tights must be form fitting and NOT Baggy**
- **From the waist up students must wear a t-shirt with sleeves. NO TANK TOPS. NO LOW CUT T-SHIRTS.**
- **T-shirts must be long enough so that when hands are raised above the head NO SKIN is showing at the midriff.**

- T-shirts must be form fitting, NOT BAGGY.
- All students must wear supportive underwear
- All jewelry, including BODY jewelry (rings, watches, necklaces, earrings, studs, barbells, gauges etc...) must be removed BEFORE entering class.
- Long hair must be tied back unless asked to wear it down.
- All clothing, including shoes and socks, MUST be solid BLACK without EMBLEMS or LOGOS
- Shoes need to be cross trainers, indoor soccer shoes, jazz shoes, gymnastic shoes or any shoe that is form fitting with a relatively thin sole. FLIP- FLOPS ARE NOT SHOES.
- STUDENTS MUST BE DRESSED BEFORE CLASS BEGINS.
- If a student does not wear appropriate clothing to class they will be asked to go get the proper clothing. The student will be counted LATE if they return within a reasonable time. Otherwise, it will be counted as an absence.

Assignments and Grading

Active Relaxation/Concentration Exercise. . . .25%
Scene work/camera work.....25%
Weekly written responses.....25%
Final Assignment.....25%

VCU Grading Scale

A	100-90%
B	89-80%
C	79-70%
D	69-60
F	59 and Below

Date	IN CLASS	ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT CLASS
Jan. 18	Course Overview: Introductions, Strasberg Lecture, Relaxation-Concentration (R-C): Breakfast Drink	Read <i>Tennis</i> pp. 1-81 <i>Strasberg</i> pp. 1-93: Reading Response by 1/24
Jan. 25	R-C: Mirror or as assigned. Scene assignments	Read <i>Tennis</i> pp. 82-134 <i>Strasberg</i> pp. 94-201 Reading Response by 1/31
Feb. 1	R-C: Close to the skin or as assigned. Scene work-through	Essay/Response due by Feb. 7

Feb. 8	R-C: : Close to the skin or as assigned or as assigned Scene work-through as needed.	Essay/Response due by Feb. 14
Feb. 15	R-C: Where am I? or as assigned: Scene presentation	Essay/Response due by Feb. 14
Feb. 22	R-C: Overall sensation or as assigned. The cold read and Strasberg	Essay/Response due by Feb. 21
March 1	R-C: Personal Object or as assigned. Your audition.	Essay/Response due by Feb. 28
March 8	SPRING BREAK	Drop in with yourself!
March 15	R-C: Animal exercise or as assigned. Scene Two	
March 22	R-C: Animal upright or as assigned. Scene Two	Essay/Response due by March 21
March 29	R-C: Animal with human characteristics or as assigned. Scene Two presentation	Essay/Response due by March 28
April 5	R-C: Human with animal characteristics or as assigned. Shakespeare and Co.	Essay/Response due by April 4
April 12	R-C: as assigned. Shakespeare and Co.	Essay/Response due by April 11
April 19	R-C as assigned. Shakespeare and Co.	Essay/Response due by April 18
April 26	R-C: On Camera	
May 3	FINAL	

Notes on Criticism

Always accept criticism even if you don't agree with it.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding specific criticism received in class, please let me know.

From one actor to another. Remember . . .

"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls

who knew neither victory nor defeat."

Theodore Roosevelt "Citizenship in a Republic," Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910

APPENDIX B

NICENET DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

[\[Edit\]](#) [\[Delete\]](#)

FROM: Terry Hardcastle (01/21/13 4:56 PM PST) [[Send a personal message to Terry Hardcastle](#)]

SUBJECT: Fixed or Incremental Talent

[\[Reply\]](#)

As I mentioned at the end of our first class, there are two differing theories in regards to "talent." Fixed Theory and Incremental Theory. In the "fixed theory" of talent, one perceives an ability as innate. If I believe in the fixedness of my own talent, I approach challenges as occasions on which I am called upon to demonstrate my innate abilities. In "incremental theory," one assumes that ability evolves through challenge and hard work. Challenge and the experience of failure feels like evidence that one is stretching oneself to their current limit. Psychologists seem to believe incremental theory is a better theory to live with. That is, it is a happier way to see your own talent and to live your life.

But, does that make it true?

Great musicians from Mozart to the Beatles all showed their talent at a very early age. It's hard to imagine Mozart had faced many "challenges and hard work" when at age five he started composing little pieces of music. Picasso was painting so well in his early teens (so the story goes) that his father, also a painter, vowed to stop painting. Even though we refine our skills through experience, this does not negate an innateness, does it?

How much does luck and good fortune figure into the development of talent or for that matter, the understanding of it? Are some people's talent fixed and other's incremental? Is it a false distinction? Which is really better to believe in? Which do you believe in?

Please share your thoughts.

[\[Edit\]](#) [\[Delete\]](#)

FROM: Terry Hardcastle (02/12/13 5:31 PM PST) [[Send a personal message to Terry Hardcastle](#)]

SUBJECT: Vulnerability

[\[Reply\]](#)

On Vulnerability –

CS LEWIS writes . . .

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung, and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. . . . It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

What is it to be vulnerable on stage and in life? Can I be vulnerable on stage but not in life? Or vice versa? Do you feel "more you" when you are vulnerable? Is vulnerability the same as lacking confidence?

Does vulnerable mean "weak?" Can I be a better artist by feeling secure, by protecting myself? Can I be vulnerable and happy at the same time?

How does this relate to the work we are doing in class?

Please respond with a thoughtful paragraph or two. I look forward to reading your responses.

[\[Edit\]](#) [\[Delete\]](#)

FROM: Terry Hardcastle (02/19/13 9:17 PM PST) [\[Send a personal message to Terry Hardcastle\]](#)

SUBJECT: Awkwardness

[\[Reply\]](#)

From Ron Marasco's "Notes to the Actor" –

"The best way for an actor to find more emotion is to go for the awkward.

Because the human brain's job is mainly to keep us functioning as a biological mechanism, it steers us away from feelings that might overwhelm us. Awkwardness and its awful "nails-on-a-chalkboard" sensation are an alarm the brain sends out to keep us from going into potentially flammable feelings . . .

Understanding this connection between awkwardness and emotion can be a big help to an actor. Where there is a conscious feeling of awkwardness, be assured that just beneath it in your subconscious is a wealth of strong emotion. For an actor, this awkwardness is like an "X" marked on a treasure map: it marks the spot where you should start digging for strong emotion. And Great Actors aren't afraid to get out the shovel."

All of you have chosen scenes that make you feel awkward. When I ask in class, "What were you working on?" I'm really asking, "What are the awkward moments of this scene for you and how are you using Strasberg's Method to 'dig into it?'" Remember, everyone of you should be applying sense memory work to your scenes. If you can't answer how you are doing that, then you are not using "the shovel." And Strasberg's Method is the most powerful shovel there is for digging up gold!

Talk about your "awkward" moments in all your scenes, in both scene A and B, even if you haven't performed them yet, and how you are using (or wish to use) Method work when tackling these scenes.

Speak in generalities (I don't want to know your secrets), but I do want to know you are applying the work to your scene and to your partner's scene.

[\[Edit\]](#) [\[Delete\]](#)

FROM: Terry Hardcastle (04/09/13 6:50 PM PST) [\[Send a personal message to Terry Hardcastle\]](#)

SUBJECT: Shattered Persona

[\[Reply\]](#)

So much of what we say and do is built on our persona: our view of the way we wish the world to see us. When we break from these personas . . .when we act "out of character" . . .our friends and family can go ape shit crazy.

Think of all the famous scandals from the tabloids: all of them have been about a disconnect between a person's projected persona and the reality we are left with.

Drama is about what happens when a character is forced to stop pretending. When they are forced to stop "acting." The character must experience this shattering of persona. Great actors do this as THROUGH the character.

Is there something that you've lived through which shattered your persona? How did you survive it (and congratulations, you did!)? Does your Shakespearean character have a moment in which their persona is shattered? What about the character in your movie monologue? Does this character unravel, letting all the pretense fall away? How can you use your own experience with shattered persona in your future work?

[\[Edit\]](#) [\[Delete\]](#)

FROM: Terry Hardcastle (04/21/13 8:15 PM PST) [\[Send a personal message to Terry Hardcastle\]](#)

SUBJECT: Thinking and Not Thinking with Words

[\[Reply\]](#)

For two weeks, we worked on our Shakespeare piece, blending animal work with Shakespeare's words, working two seemingly dissimilar approaches simultaneously: one physical, the other intellectual. Did your animal work unleash any unexpected emotional responses inside you? Did Shakespeare's words work their magic more powerfully than the animal work?

In film work, more often than not, we think without words. On stage, we often deal with the struggle between two actors/characters. In film, the moments we remember are the struggles within actors/characters. Certainly, films involve struggles between characters as they do in plays, but it is character struggling with self and the moment of change that crosses the face that is most memorable in film. What were your "change" moments from last Friday for yourself or something you saw in someone else's film performance?

Vita

Terry Hardcastle was born on January 10, 1968 in Columbus, Ohio and is an American citizen. He graduated from GlenOak High School, North Canton, Ohio in 1986. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts from Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana in 1990. Moving to New York City, he studied at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute from 1990 until 1993, where he worked as an administrative assistant in exchange for classes. There he studied with Anna Strasberg, Kirk Taylor, Hope Arthur, and Geoffrey Horne. Performing in Off-off-Broadway theatre as well as theatre for young audiences, in 1993 he accepted an internship with the Burt Reynolds Institute for Theatre Training where he studied with Mr. Reynolds, Charles Nelson Reilly, and Jose Quintero. Settling in South Florida, Terry became one of South Florida's most prolific and respected Equity performers. Performances in stage dramas, comedies, and musicals garnered him three Carbonell Awards as well as nine nominations. Additionally, he's received a Curtain-up Award as well as several media citations including Best Supporting Actor (Miami New Times, *Doubt*, Caldwell Theatre, 2008) and Best

Supporting Actor in a Musical (Miami New Times, *Sisters of Swing*, Florida Stage, 2006). With over 50 Equity shows to his credit, some performances include Billy Flynn in *Chicago*, 1995 at BRITT directed by Marion J. Caffey; Jacob in *The Rothschilds*, 1995, at Royal Poinciana Playhouse directed by Lonny Price as well as Man 6 in *The Good War*, 2005, at the Maltz-Jupiter Theatre dir. David H. Bell and Craig Carnelia. In 2003, his play *Behold* received a staged reading at the Caldwell Theatre Company. He received his Master in Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia in 2013. At VCU, he taught Beginning Acting, Effective Speech, Speech for Business and the Professions, and Strasberg's Method.