

To Be, or Not to Be? The Setbacks of Method Acting

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“To be, or not to be— that is the question:” Arguably one of William Shakespeare’s most prolific and quoted pieces of text (Shakespeare, 1603). In the context of *Hamlet*, the play in which this quote hails, the protagonist asks the question regarding the choice of life or death. This suicidal soliloquy is not unprompted as Hamlet has just endured what many have trouble even imagining: his father has been murdered, his mother has remarried his uncle, and the ghost of his father is visiting him asking for vengeance, revealing that his own brother, Hamlet’s uncle, was the one who took his life. These traumas alone make Hamlet a hard character to portray. As an actor, one must reexperience these horrors night after night, in a way that is believable, truthful, and not damaging to the actor’s psyche. We as actors are then called to ask the same question that Hamlet has asked: to be, or not to be? Do we choose to truly live in Hamlet’s mind, allowing our emotions to become synonymous with his—to be? Or do we use other methods to discover a sense of emotional truth, without allowing our emotions to meld with that of the characters—not to be? These are the very same questions that acting theorists asked more than a hundred years ago, and out of these questions sprung two major methodologies of the craft: System Acting from Stanislavski, and Method Acting from Strasberg. In this essay, we will dive deep into the roots of Method Acting, how it ultimately differs from the techniques of Stanislavski, and why I believe that the methodology should be utilized carefully and should not be an end all be all.

Method Acting sprouted from the roots of Konstantin Stanislavski whose technique was one of the first to emerge in the pedagogy of acting. Stanislavski, a Russian man born in 1863, studied the craft of acting by observing the great actors of his time in the theatres of Moscow (Stilson et al., 2023). His teachings and methodology only became popular in America in 1923

when the Moscow Art Theatre toured across the states (Stilson et al., 2023). This is where Lee Strasberg was first introduced to the work of Stanislavski, and at this time, emotion memory was one of Stanislavski's principal teachings. Emotion memory is the concept of calling on one's own emotional memories as a way to reach a heightened emotional state that a role may require. Say a person plays a character where they must experience the loss of a beloved family member; To reach the emotional state needed, the actor might recall their own instances of grief when losing a loved one (Stilson et al., 2023). Strasberg, who trained under those a part of the Moscow Art Theatre, took a liking to this element of Stanislavski's teachings and from this, he created his own technique of the craft which he called "my method of acting," a phrase that was later shortened to Method Acting. He developed this methodology over the time he spent being a part of the Group Theatre of which he was a founding member. The Group Theatre was an iconic and formative ensemble of actors whose knowledge would take over the pedagogy of acting throughout the rest of the 20th and later 21st centuries, and featured renowned actors such as Stella Adler, Cheryl Crawford, and Sanford Meisner. At the Group Theatre, Strasberg, along with other acting teachers and coaches, further developed this methodology, and over the years the process has expanded and become what we know today as Method Acting.

What makes Method Acting distinctive from System Acting is the need for an actor to fully immerse themselves in the character's emotional reality (E., 2023). System Acting promotes the idea of sense memory versus full immersion in emotional reality. Sense memory is a concept where an actor recalls an emotional event, of which they aren't too attached, and uses the elements of their five senses to elicit an emotional response (Stilson et al., 2023). For instance, say you are playing Hamlet and you must perform the iconic soliloquy mentioned at the beginning of this essay. You want to have an emotional response while saying these lines, so you

recall the death of a family member as a base for these emotions. However, instead of imagining the pain, the grief, and the trauma that instance put you through, you think of specific sense memories instead: the funeral home had a scent of mothballs, the jacket you wore that day was itchy against your skin, the sound of your mother sobbing in grief, your aunt saw you crying and gave you a butterscotch candy to cheer you up and you can still taste the sweetness on your tongue. Though these memories would look different for each actor, imagining a specific sense instead of the traumatic event itself can help induce an emotional response without retraumatizing the actor. Method Acting, however, encourages real emotional responses, asking actors to put themselves into the mind of their characters and their trauma, recalling painful personal events if necessary to reach these responses. This is one of the reasons why Method Acting can potentially harm an actor's mental wellbeing.

The first sign that Method Acting was a potentially dangerous methodology was actually when Strasberg first began teaching at the Group Theatre. His ensemble, which included Stella Adler, found the use of emotion memory as the basis of their training extremely problematic as it was "driving them crazy" (Stilson et al., 2023). Adler disapproved of this methodology so much that in 1938, she traveled to Paris to study under Stanislavski himself. There, Stanislavski revealed that he was no longer an advocate for emotion memory as a basis for discovering emotional truth for stage work (Stilson et al., 2023). While training actors at the Moscow Art Theatre, he observed that many were brought to a state of panic when using the technique in practice, so much so that it affected their nervous systems. After learning this, Adler returned to the Group Theatre where she shared her findings. However, not all members were receptive to this news as Strasberg believed that his budding methodology had great potential. This resulted

in the disbanding of the Group Theatre who could not agree on one methodology as the basis for their work.

Modern interpretations of method acting differ widely across different groups. Some teachers believe that it is an inauthentic style of performance, or that it is dangerous to an actor's mental health. Some teachers think it is one of the most honest, powerful approaches to the craft of acting and encourage their students to participate. Writer and researcher Yuchen Guo in their paper "Onstage Emotion as Imagination," discusses the actor's paradox of experiencing emotions onstage. They argue that actors should be able to use their imaginations as a way to induce an emotional response, opposing Strasberg's idea that emotion should be recalled (GUO, 2022). This whole idea of emotional recall versus imagination brings up an incredibly weighted question: Can emotional recall be considered acting? Some would say "of course," as the ability to induce an emotional response from a memory in and of itself is a difficult task. However, in the words of Sanford Meisner, acting is behaving truthfully under *imaginary* circumstances (Meisner & Longwell, 1987). To say that those who rely on emotion memory are not acting is inherently discrediting the hard work that these talented individuals put in to create truthful and convincing performance. To imply that they are not actors just because of this may not be a fair assumption. But on the other hand, to say that these performers are equal to those who use sense memory and given circumstances to invoke a truthful response would be discrediting these actors' abilities to take their imagination and create something convincing and raw. I do not ever want to discredit an individual's ability or performance based on technique, but I do agree with Guo. In their paper, they state that educational acting environments should encourage the development of imagination as opposed to emotional recall. This is a fair point as not every actor is fit to handle the weight of emotion memory techniques, and not every actor will have an

arsenal of strong emotional moments that they can look back to. In many circumstances, using one's imagination may provide more benefit than emotional recall. For example, say an individual is playing a mother that loses their child, however, the actor does not have children and has not lost an important figure in their life. If they were to use emotion memory as one of their main practices, they may fail to find the emotional depth that is needed for an accurate portrayal of this character. However, if they have strongly developed their imagination so that no matter what, they can react truthfully within the given circumstances, they will likely be able to induce a strong emotional response that is fitting with this character's circumstances.

Besides the unreliability of emotional recall, the technique of Method Acting has additional setbacks. Some practitioners of Method Acting blur the line between character and actor, adopting the characteristics and personality traits of the character they are portraying. Writer, Martin Puchner, describes it as “an attempt to turn one human being into another, combining an odd set of psychological and philosophical underpinnings” (PUCHNER, 2016). This technique is widely popular especially among film and television as the intimacy that is required for this medium lends itself more to this technique. According to writer and researcher Molly Schneider, Method Acting emerged out of the need to define a specifically American reality, and thus was one of the first American acting techniques (Molly A. Schneider, 2016). At the time where Method Acting was garnering popularity, “slice-of-life” television was also on the rise, and thus, the two became interconnected. Many stars that emerged out of this time period were heavy proponents of Method technique. Performances that emerged as a result of this influential time period included James Dean as Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause*, Marlon Brando's Vito Corleone in *The Godfather*, and Al Pacino as Tony Montana in *Scarface*. These performances are famous examples of this idea of actor-character-coalescence, and there is no

denying that these specific acting performances are highly impressive, realistic, and truthful. However, these characters experience immense and incessant trauma throughout the course of these films. Tony Montana in *Scarface* experiences a descent into cocaine addiction, murder his best friend in a fit of rage, watches his sister and close friends be brutally killed right in front of him, and ultimately is murdered at gunpoint by an opposing drug lord's hitman. Very few actors could so closely align themselves with this level of trauma without seriously damaging their mental psyche. Not every actor will portray a character with this level of intense trauma, however, to encourage the teaching of method acting, specifically actor-character-coalescence could seriously impact the mental health of young actors who cannot differentiate the trauma their character experiences and their own.

In my opinion, components of actor-character-coalescence can be used as practice to help one see into their character's mind, however, one should never fully immerse themselves in the mind of their character throughout the duration of filming or performing, especially if the character becomes immensely traumatized. For example, as an exercise, one could perform tasks within their daily lives while living in the mind of their character, incorporating physical attributes and internal monologues to imagine what this character may be thinking about or doing during their day to day. This is a great way to experience one's character outside of the bounds of a script which can be incredibly helpful when developing a well-rounded persona, bringing a sense of "human-ness" to whom one is portraying. Note that the base of this practice is imagination which, once again, emphasizes how important this element is to the craft. The incorporation of imagination is what allows non-method actors the ability to convince the audience that what they are feeling is truthful, raw, and genuinely felt.

Though some Method actors have created characters with incredible emotional depth and have moved audiences with their portrayals, there are so many actors that do not utilize this method that have produced results of equal depth and authenticity. Shonni Enelow, author of the book *Method Acting and Its Discontents: On American Psycho-Drama*, discusses in an article how the American view of acting is shifting, introducing a new age and perception of the craft. The article highlights famed actors of today including Jennifer Lawrence, Oscar Isaac, Michael B. Jordan, and Kristen Stewart, and their new approach to the craft featuring more subdued, introspective ways of exhibiting emotion (ENELOW, 2016). The increased use of technology, the entrance of the digital age, and with that, a rise in surveillance is shifting many aspects of our daily lives, and the craft of acting is no different. Method acting sprung out of the post war era where audiences needed actors' emotions to be available to them. Now, audiences want real, raw responses, and Enelow highlights how a decrease of expression has created an increase in authenticity that is more appealing (ENELOW, 2016). Modernity calls for new approaches to what was once a set in stone artform, and as technology becomes more entangled in the lives of the average person, it requires digital media to enhance in new ways. With this, many of these contemporary actors and actresses are leaving Method acting to their predecessors in favor of a more authentic performance, allowing their own personalities to shine through in their work instead of adopting a new persona entirely. Not only are these performances raw, authentic, and full of emotional depth, but they are a better fit for audiences of today. With new expectations making way, traditional Method acting may become a thing of the past.

Throughout my near decade of acting training thus far, most teachers that I have gotten the privilege to work with are not advocates of Method technique, and most lean towards the performances Enelow highlights. At Missouri State University, I am currently studying the

Stanislavski system, voice and speech techniques of Patsy Rodenburg, the movement qualities of Rudolf Laban, and techniques of Sanford Meisner as well as Michael Chekhov. All of these influential individuals have their own way of approaching the craft, and many elements of their teachings can be utilized simultaneously. In my future career as an acting professional, I intend to use the techniques of these individuals rather than of the Method ideology as I personally believe that losing myself in the character is not a necessary component of honest acting. I believe the future of this craft follows this same logic and encourages individuality and authenticity.

In the end, the question that opened this discussion remains just as relevant today as it was for Shakespeare's Hamlet: "to be, or not to be?" In the context of acting, this question is not about life and death, but about artistic approach and personal well-being. Must an actor *be* their character in totality, risking their personal integrity, as Method Acting encourages, or is it more sustainable *not to be*, allowing imagination to fuel the emotions that drive one's performance. Though Method acting has produced convincing and wildly impressive performances, it carries significant psychological and practical risks that should be taken into consideration. Ultimately, the most effective acting does not require an artist to sacrifice their sense of self. Use of sense memory, strong given circumstances, and explorative imagination are all ways in which actors can reach levels of emotional depth without exerting themselves in harmful ways. As contemporary acting continues to evolve, so will the techniques used, and the understandings of mental health within an acting context. This evolution, propelled by expectations of newer audiences and the rise of technology, has made one thing clear: authenticity and genuine performance should not come at the cost of one's mental health and is not dependent on one's suffering.

Hamlet's timeless words still persist, echoing the constant paradox of an actor's emotions. However, the answer does not require choosing one extreme over the other, but in recognizing that to *be* and *not to be* are not mutually exclusive. The strongest performers are those who can step into a character's world with conviction while still maintaining a firm grasp on their own reality. In doing so, they honor both the truth of the character and the integrity of themselves

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