

Lee strasberg and
stella adler's
approaches to
emotions in acting



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Theatre Arts Essay

Feel or Not Feel

In this essay, I will discuss whether the actors/performers should feel or not feel the character's emotions they are portraying in order to make them more believable. I will be basing my research on Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, my chosen practitioners. I'm going to be pointing out their different approaches to this working and training method. Despite both of them being Stanislavski's students, they have varied beliefs that will be presented further on.

The aim of this assessment is to compare and be aware of the good and, sometimes, bad moments of an artist's methods of working, because sometimes what is more practical and easier might not be the best way of achieving the results they are looking for.

Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) was a Russian theatre practitioner who co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1897 and developed his own performance method for acting, stating that acting was very different from miming and therefore relying on the actor's personal histories and experiences to express authentic emotions and feelings to create richer characters on stage and reach the spectator's heart, being everything internal and nonphysical (Biographycom., 2016) It was very clear for him that what the actor was living on stage was not real: s/he is not seeing a real sunset; s/he is not kissing the real love of her/his life - but he must respond as if it was because, for the audience, it was. So basically, the actor had to feel what the character was feeling, but before that he needed to understand

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the character's emotions so then he could relate them to his own, making it easier for him to recall his personal feelings and memories. This is why the actor needs to develop a "creative concentration", focusing himself on what is around him, which will help him build an imaginary world on the stage, believe in it and begin to live within it. To conclude, "the actor needs to create as he concentrates; create as he puts his attention somewhere". Not also is important to control the actor's attention on the literal things on stage, but he needs a concentration that controls attention and simultaneously brings alive whatever imaginative value he needs, according to the play (Theatrefuturesorguk, 2011).

Based on this method, Strasberg (1901-1982), created a system where the actor strives for a realistic performance by using their "emotional memories" (Onlocationeducationcom, Strasberg, 2018), which are evoked by the development of the actor's concentration and relaxation on different exercises throughout his career. Strasberg describes an actor as someone who "can create out of himself", and in order do to so he must "appeal to the unconscious and the subconscious" and with the relaxation exercises he hoped the performer would activate his body by removing blocks of tension held in it, becoming more open to anything he needed to do afterwards, so it was basically a way of awakening and preparing the body to act, while having control over it (Seikagrovescom, 2018, Video). He then designed a sequence, stimulating the actors' concentration through imaginary objects, not just by creating them but also by investing in them a personal history, so that there was a sense of progression and continuity to the process of training. For this, he also emphasised a series of sense-memory exercises,

awakening their 5 senses. This means that “ the ability to recall them stimulates the body rather than the mind, giving the actor greater awareness and experience”. The emphasis on emotion and credible and natural behaviour were, for Strasberg, an important and necessary process of required actor training (Hodge, p. 134). Even though Method Acting is similar to Stanislavski’s process, Strasberg decided to take this idea a step further, requiring actors to go beyond their emotional memory and use the “ Substitution” technique to become the characters they are portraying (Onlocationeducationcom, Strasberg, 2018).

The “ Substitution” technique advocates “ not only for utilization of the emotional memory but also a full immersion into the memory”. With this being said, the actor is no longer playing the character on stage, he is temporarily becoming the character for a major cause (Seikagrovescom, 2018). At this point, the actor forgets about his personal life out of the stage and lives the character’s one. He will be now living in a different era, maybe, with or without a family, with another job and having different points of view about everyday life subjects and worries. Once the show is done and he is out of the arena he was performing on, he carries on with his normal life, not being affected by anything that happened during the time he was performing.

Method Acting focuses on showing realism and attempts to duplicate reality as much as possible, differing from the traditional styles of acting, which include much bigger emotions than life. The ensemble work was emphasised, the actors were trained to evoke specific emotions and actions and developed an unassuming natural stage presence (Hodge, p. 130).
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Indicating emotions and feelings were replaced by actually felt experiences, defending that in order to achieve and prepare a role, the actors should immerse themselves into the characters life and position, so they could understand and feel better what they were about to show to an audience, so it could be more natural and realistic. It was placed under careful examination later on because some actors took this method too seriously trying to replicate their character's lives that they actually put their own's at risk. Also, it is believed that many actors refused to step out of their characters as well, even when they were not performing, playing and taking their roles to extremes (Onlocationeducationcom, Strasberg, 2018).

The good side of it is that when people can actually separate their personal lives from their roles, it results in a beautiful way of performing. Feeling their character's emotions sometimes can be the best way of transmitting it to the audience and make them also live all the drama, happiness, sadness and passion shared on stage during the presented performance. If the actors are not in the healthy and balanced psychological and emotional state of mind they should be, then they might not be capable of portraying their roles and end up influencing one another, because the actor cannot be affected by his role as the role itself cannot be affected by the actor, impairing the performance. People who are having problems in their personal or social life will certainly have their emotions and thoughts connecting negatively with all the other circumstances of life, mainly their work.

On another hand, we have an American actress and director, Stella Adler (1901-1992), that was one of the few people that actually got to work and learn from Stanislavski himself, discovering that he too had changed his <https://assignbuster.com/lee-strasberg-and-stella-adlers-approaches-to-emotions-in-acting/>

mind about his own early concepts. Later on her career, she “ joined the Group Theatre which, founded by Lee Strasberg, Cheryl Crawford and Harold Clurman, was America’s home base for Strasberg’s method acting, based primarily on Stanislavski’s”. She ended up cultivating her own technique and it completely differed from Strasberg’s and was more aligned with Stanislavski’s writings and philosophies (Talent Showcase, 2007). Even though her method has similarities to these two, she separates from them by adding the power of imagination to the concept of emotional recall, because she believed their interpretations and systems were a “ psychologically unhealthy way to approach acting” (Talent Showcase, 2007). Alongside with this, she defended that “ the actors must rely on their imaginations rather than digging up traumatizing memories and moments from their own personal life”. In addition, she said “ Drowning on the emotions I experienced – for example, when my mother died – to create a role is sick and schizophrenic. If that is acting, I do not want to do it” (Onlocationeducationcom, Adler, 2018). She agrees and understands the importance of drowning oneself in a role, but the source of inspiration is not only psychology or past experiences (as in Strasberg) but the actor’s imagination as they relate to the events and circumstances of the play.

Adler believed that the actors’ imagination was the most powerful and important tool they had and claims that it can be touched as a source for the actor’s craft. She taught her students that the use of imagination was more effective, and for that, they needed to make personal and imaginative choices when interpreting a script. Those choices had to be made upon instincts to fully understand the writer’s intentions (Onlocationeducationcom,

Adler, 2018). Her students were also trained in comprehensive script interpretation and analysis methods, in which scripts are separated into lines of text that are associated with actions. As well as imagination, Adler emphasized the use of action in acting, mostly what one character is doing in relation to the other. This kind of approach tests the actors to be focused and engaged specifically on their partners, rather than on themselves and the emotional states used (Talent Showcase, 2007). Besides this, for Adler, “if the actions, words or events of the play seem lifeless to the actor, then he must create another set of circumstances that correspond to the play, but create excitement and passion internally” and so the actor needs to choose or create images that evoke an inner feeling (Hodge, p. 140).

Adler suggests that the actor's inspiration should come from the world of the play itself but at the same time did not stop believing in the actor's performance. She adds “the whole aim of modern theatre is not to act, but to find the truth of the play within yourself and communicate that. If you play simply for the lines, you are dead” (Hodge, 2010). Finding the correct and best physical actions also helps the actor discovering the role he is responsible for. He must find actions beneath words by developing the “physicalisation of actions”, which basically consists on building his own vocabulary of actions, personalizing the material and adapting the play's script to his interpretation and making its words belong to him, as well as playing the actions convincingly and seeking justification and elaboration of the author's perspective.

Although Adler and Strasberg differed in emphasis and techniques, they both strongly believed in truthful behaviour, self-exploration, either psychological <https://assignbuster.com/lee-strasberg-and-stella-adlers-approaches-to-emotions-in-acting/>

or sociological, and respect acting as an art. Strasberg defended the psychological way of acting, leaning in the actor's memory, and Adler supported the sociological way of it, saying the actors needed to draw from the play's given circumstances. Besides this, Ellen Burstyn, a student from both Strasberg and Adler, further explained " Stella stresses imagination and Lee stresses reality. You use Stella's imagination to get to Lee's reality. They are finally talking about the same thing" (Hodge, 2010, p. 155).

In this research it was mostly gathered, in conclusion, that every practitioner has his own method and technique that, even though it might have been based on someone else's, its is always going to differ from it in a certain way.

Some believe that the actors should use their own personal experiences with the goal of reaching the character's emotions they are portraying, making them more believable for themselves but mainly for the audience.

Others believe in the power of imagination to get to the necessary emotions and feelings for the actors' role on stage, not having to recall their own memories in order to achieve what they needed and not having to go back to their, sometimes, traumatizing past whenever they had to perform. Plus, deep studying the script and its characters can also help the actor understand the motivations behind all the story, replacing whatever that could be harming anyone in general.

Although the first aims for a more natural and authentic way of acting and representing feelings, it may have some issues to when it comes to the actor's state of mind, because depending on how the actor takes the <https://assignbuster.com/lee-strasberg-and-stella-adlers-approaches-to-emotions-in-acting/>

techniques and uses them, it can cause him or her great psychological damage that could lead to some critical and tragic ends.

And regardless of the second one apparently being healthier in both psychological and sociological terms, it might cause more trouble to the actor who decides to use it, since it may be more complex and difficult to understand or reach.

Overall, none of these methods can be considered the “ best”, because what can be better for one person does not mean that will be so for another. What can be found as a constant similarity between all the existent methods is the intense study of the script, the characters and its background, the interrelationships between one another and how a play can replicate and help discover a part of the actor’s inner self that he maybe did not know existed.

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