

Techniques you need  
to know if you want to  
become an actor



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This literature review analyses three aspects of the technique of acting known as Realism: the actor's self-playing a role, the methodologies of Sanford Meisner and approaches to researching a character. A discussion of how much the actor's "self" should be brought to a role will be followed by an outline of Meisner's methodologies, and finally by a description of the three approaches to researching a role, namely; period, place and person.

There are many different opinions on how much of one's self an actor should bring into their role in Realism. It typically depends on how much the actor's self they see in the character they are playing. For example, if their personality and the character's personality are completely different, they may not be able to relate to the character in depth and may need to do more extensive research into their traits such as their likes, dislikes, opinions and views.

The book, *Actors on Acting* by Toby Cole, states that "this identification with the role becomes a complex problem for the actor." In an interview with Philip Seymour (actor, producer, director), in response to a question about relating to his character, he stated that "I think I relate, or partly relate, to a lot of the parts I play.

But for those two parts, I didn't have to do anything technically to myself: I didn't really change the way I dress or talk or move. I just kind of left myself alone for each of those roles." When performing in the style of Realism, the line between you and your character must be drawn. Typically, actors tend to slightly exaggerate a role by, for example, speaking at a higher volume than they would in everyday life. Actors must be aware of how much they

may be over or under acting and find a balance in order for it to seem realistic.

Konstantin Stanislavski, a widely recognized Russian theatre practitioner, employed techniques such as concentration, emotional memory, physical skills, observation, harmony, analysis, creativity and personalization.

Concentrating on emotional memory specifically, he demanded that his actors actually experience the emotions of the characters they were portraying in order to bring more of themselves into the role. He believed that an actor must take their own personality into a performance and a role.

For example, to prepare for a role who is experiencing a fearful situation, the actor must attempt to remember a point where they felt frightened, and bring that into the role. He achieved this by developing the use of emotion memory to train actors to remember and experience a range of human feelings. Moreover, Stanislavski spoke about "living a part." He said, "he (the actor) must fit his own human qualities to the life of this other person, and pour into it all of his own soul." (Actor Prepares, p13). Actors will typically attempt to distance themselves from the character roles that they are playing.

This is recognized in Brecht theatre whereby actors 'place a wedge' between reality and the role they are portraying. However, other forms of acting, such as the Stanislavski style of acting, (Zamir, 2010, p237), assume that the role should be part of their being: The Stanislavski method of acting "demands that an actor's whole nature be actively involved, that he give himself up, both mind and body, to his part.

He must feel the challenge to action can you say act? Physically as well as intellectually because the imagination, which has no substance or body, can reflexively affect our physical nature and make it act". Stanislavski's acting 'system' includes a two-part structure. This is borrowed by a technique developed by American theatre practitioner, Sanford Meisner - the Meisner's technique, which was well-known for being unorthodox and effective. The first part is based on the development of the acting instrument - the " self," which is followed by the second - working on how to apply that instrument to the role they are playing.

This technique is recognized as the 'healthiest' approach to acting. According to the book, Sanford Meisner on Acting by Meisner and Dennis Longwell, the approach emphasizes getting the actor to " live truthfully under imaginary circumstances" and focus on the partner in the scene or the activity at hand. Meisner observed that what brought energy and life to a scene was the 'space in-between'.

This is also known as the interaction between the characters in the scene. This led Meisner to develop a more 'natural' approach to acting. Bill Millionis state that " Meisner is like no other method because it retrains you to seek and develop what's alive within yourself. As children, imaginative play and make-believe are instinctive to us, but we lose this along the way to adulthood. Actors need to rediscover this in order to do their work well. Meisner Technique brings actors to a place where they can tap into this instinctive place, again and again and again." (Actors Pulse, 2015).

This technique emphasizes carrying out an action truthfully on stage and letting emotion and subtext build based on the truth of the action and on the other characters around them, rather than simply playing an action or emotion. The main focus is for the actor to "get out of their head", so that the actor is reacting impulsively to the surrounding environment.

Meisner said that his approach to training "is based on bringing the actor back to his emotional impulses and to acting that is firmly rooted in the instinctive. It is based on the fact that all good acting comes from the heart, as it were, and that there's no mentality to it." This approach is sometimes confused with 'method acting' taught by Lee Strasberg, as they were both developed from the teachings of Stanislavski.

The training itself involves a series of exercises that build upon each other. An example is his well-known repetition exercise, whereby two actors sit across from each other and respond instinctively with a repeated phrase. This exercise breaks down overly structured procedures and works on openness, flexibility and a range of other skills. Meisner's work is almost universally admired, and he has been regarded as one of the most important acting theorists of the 20th century. Before an actor takes on a character or even begins exercises such as Meisner's, they must research the role they are playing in depth.

In order to fully relate to and get into character, actors must be aware of the history of the play/movie, the current economic and political situation, and the type of music, art and food that was around. Sources to research could include the internet, films set in that time, and images of landscapes. The

three main approaches to researching a role are focusing on the period, place and person.

If the play or movie is set in an era that an actor is not familiar with, they would need to learn the social rules in order to understand the politics and current events during that time. They would need to read about that time period, look at pictures and perhaps ask family members or friends who may have been around during that particular time.

Additionally, according to the Time, as an 'Element of Drama', the research should involve whether the play is set in the past present or future, what the associations were from the period, the messages and the constraints of the period. Moreover, if a play takes place in an unknown city, state, or country, actors must carefully look at the local situations. They should never assume that their own experience translates to places they are unfamiliar with.

Places should be researched similarly to the period - through pictures and text.

Lastly, it is only by research that one can learn the fundamentals about their character. In order to fully build their character, the actor should know everything about their physical, social, psychological and moral qualities as well as how the character reacts to events in the play. Physical questions an actor may ask include; Who is my character? What is the gender and age of my character? In addition, they must research how their character behaved in each stage of life so far - toddlerhood, pre-school, middle-school, adolescents etc.

When looking at the social side of their character, the actor should research their educational background, intelligence, nationality, occupation, political attitudes, and religion. The psychological qualities to research include the types of choices their character may make, their instincts and worries.

Moreover, the actor will research moral qualities such as who their character admires, their attitudes, likes and dislikes. Lastly, the actor should study why the character is in the play, their relationships with other characters and how the time and period affect their actions.

This literature review discussed how much of an actor's life should be brought to a role, the methodologies of the Meisner approach, and three main approaches actors should take when researching a role – period, place and person. These aspects are important elements for actors using Realism in their role to consider in rehearsal and performance.