What is Method Acting?

- Most critics or supporters say that Method Acting is described as a form of acting where “the actor mystically ‘becomes’ the character or tries to somehow literally live the character in life”. According to Lee Strasberg (the father of Method Acting) this is false. When Lee Strasberg defined what is popularly known as Method Acting he used a simple declarative sentence: “Method acting is what all actors have always done whenever they acted well.”

- ‘The Method’ is derived from ‘The System’ by Konstantin Stanislavsky, and further developed by Lee Strasberg (at the Group Theatre, the Actors Studio and then at the Institute). The Method “trains actors to use their imagination, senses and emotions to conceive of characters with unique and original behaviour, creating performances grounded in the human truth of the moment”.

Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford (Sandy) Meisner

All three of these acting teachers use The System as a foundation for their acting technique so they have many similarities. We are going to focus on the differences between them.

Let’s start with…
Lee Strasberg

- Born in 1901
- He was an actor, director and of course an acting teacher
- He dropped out of high school, worked in a shop that made hairpieces, drifted into the theater via a settlement house company and ... had his life-shaping revelation when Stanislavki brought his Moscow Art theatre to the United States in 1923
- Strasberg had seen good acting before, of course, but never an ensemble like this with actors completely surrendering their egos to the work.... “[H]e observed, first of all, that all the actors, whether they were playing leads or small parts, worked with the same commitment and intensity. No actors idled about posing and preening (or thinking about where they might dine after the performance). More important, every actor seemed to project some sort of unspoken, yet palpable, inner life for his or her character. This was acting of a sort that one rarely saw on the American stage ... [w]here there was little stress on the psychology of the characters or their interactions.... Strasberg was galvanized. He knew that his own future as an actor – he was a slight and unhandsome man – was limited. But he soon perceived that as a theoretician and teacher of this new 'system' it might become a major force in American theater”
- Strasberg began to study with students of Stanislavski at the American Laboratory Theater
- His focus was on AFFECTIVE MEMORY- the idea that an actor could live the emotions of a character by tapping into their own memories and channeling a similar emotion
In 1931 Strasberg, along with Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford, cofounded the **Group Theatre** (Stella Adler and Sandford Meisner joined Group Theatre)

In 1951 Strasberg became the director of the non-profit **Actor’s Studio** in NY - considered the “nations most prestigious acting school”

In 1969 he founded **The Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute** in NY

Strasberg trained some very well known actors like: Dustin Hoffman, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro and Elia Kazan

**Stella Adler**

Born in 1901

Actress and acting teacher

She was also inspired by Stanislavski’s in 1923 when Stanislavski’s MAT came to America

She also joined the American Laboratory Theatre

In 1931 she joined Strasberg’s Group Theatre

**In 1934 Adler went to Paris with her husband Harold Clurman and studied with Stan the Man himself for 5 weeks**

During her studies with him and with her influence Stan actually greatly revised his theories, especially those surrounding Affective Memory which Strasberg stressed and valued the most

Her theory, then, was that “actors should rely upon imagination and the use of actions to produce a realistic, truthful response, and not their own personal memories”
Both Stan and Adler believed that extensive research was required by the actor to **understand characters experiences of different values and different cultures**. For example, if a character is a boxer then the actor has to research boxing.

When Adler returned from her training, Strasberg and her disagreed on how to develop the Method so she left and started her own teaching based on her time with Stan.

- Founded the **Stella Adler Studio of Acting** in 1949.
- Some of her famous students: Marlon Brando, Martin Sheen, Robert De Niro, Mark Ruffalo, Salma Hayek, Benicio del Toro, Michael Imperioli and many more.

**Sanford (Sandy) Meisner**

- Born in 1905.
- Member of the Group Theatre like Strasberg and Adler.
- Like Adler, he also rejected emotional memory work in favour of his own acting method.
- 1940 head of acting program in NY at **Neighborhood Playhouse**.

- **Emphasis being placed on an actor's response to other people and circumstances**, resulting in a specific behaviour to produce an emotional, truthful performance without 'faking it'.
- **One acting exercise fundamental to the Meisner Technique** is a **repetition exercise** involving two actors facing each other, repeating a phrase over and over until it takes on new meaning, tone and intention. This teaches the importance of **listening to each other and responding naturally**.
Some famous students of his: Sandra Bullock, James Caan, Stevne McQueen, Robert Duvall, Gregory Peck, Diane Keaton, Jon Voigt, Jeff Goldblum, Grace Kelly, Christoph Waltz, Tina Fey, Tom Cruise, Ty Burrell, Stephen Colbert

Key Ideas

Strasberg- Affective memory

Adler- Imagination and Given Circumstances, Internal and External Characterization is balanced

Meisner- Improvisation, Instinct, “in the moment”, “live truthfully”, “an ounce of behaviour is worth a pound of words”, “pinch and the ouch”