

Part Two

Theatrical Production

2 Acting

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One of the first images that spring forth when people think of actors is glamorous red carpet award shows filled with pampered stars whose pictures fill supermarket checkout magazines. Many assume a glamorous life of public attention, steady work, and colossal paychecks. But the reality of the average actor's life is starkly different, especially in the world of live theatre. There are extremely few overnight successes. Most actors toil for years before getting any high-profile acting jobs. Auditioning more than they work, they can face constant rejection from casting agents, directors, and producers. Most have studied for a long time to hone their skills, and even after establishing themselves, many continue to take classes or meet with coaches to keep their instincts sharp. Since lucrative acting jobs are hard to find and usually offer no permanent financial security, most actors have to support themselves through other work. This is where the cliché of the “actor/waiter” originates; it is one of the few jobs where you can alter your hours to attend auditions.

So why become an actor when most other occupations offer more stable living conditions? Most will tell you no other medium offers the same rush of emotion and immediate connection with the audience. Simply put, they would not be happy doing anything else. Even those who have enjoyed success in film and television often return to the stage to practice their first love. Braving audiences and critics in professional theatre still remains the ultimate test of an actor's ability and courage.



The 2003 production of *The Pillowman* (featuring Adam Godley and David Tennant). Intensely emotional scenes like this one must be duplicated by actors night after night. Photo © Robbie Jack/Corbis.

A Brief History of Acting Theory

Before we delve into the particulars of how an actor approaches a role, reflect on this question: is the actor a craftsman or an artist? You could consider them craftsmen in the sense that they use a set of skills to build a character onstage; they do it by interpreting the lines set forth by the playwright in a manner that will ring truthfully to an audience. Although many of us might have little to say in matters of art, we are all critics of human behavior—we all know emotional truth when presented to us.

**"The technique is the craft.
It's the individual qualities
that make the art."**



Stanley Tucci, actor

At the same time, you could call the actor an artist because he applies creativity and imagination to this interpretation, transcending the words on the page to create something highly individual. Ultimately, no two actors can play

a character exactly the same way.

No matter how you label it, acting is a paradoxical activity. Actors must explore the emotional world of the character, but at the same time they must meet a set of technical demands such as

articulating and projecting their words so they can be understood by an audience, applying a voice and physicality appropriate for their character, following proscribed movements dictated by the director, adjusting to the response of the audience, and dealing with any mishaps that might occur (missing props, actors forgetting lines, etc.). This balancing act, what one critic called a “special gift for double-consciousness,” is one of the skills that separate merely competent actors from great ones.

Schools throughout the world offer classes in acting, but there is no singular way to teach it. All acting teachers are, in some way, disciples of other teachers who have struggled with the same questions—when creating a character, what should get the most emphasis, technique or emotion? Should the actor truly feel the emotions of his character, or can they be somehow simulated by physical means? When playing the same character night after night, how personally invested must you be in your performance to give the appearance of truth?

We turn to the originators of Western theatre, the ancient Greeks, to find the first opinion on the emotion vs. technique debate. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he suggests that when writing plays, playwrights should become actors because “they are most persuasive and affecting who are under the influence of actual passion” because the audience shares “the agitation of those who appear to be truly agitated—the anger of those who appear to be truly angry.” This idea that actors must actually feel and not just feign the emotions of their character was adopted by the Romans, whose powerful empire conquered the Greeks and imported their theatre. Although the Romans enjoyed plays among their pastimes and some actors were celebrated, the social status of the actor was at an all-time low.

"I think it's a craft...I come at it from the point of view that I need a writer."



Morgan Freeman, actor

Acting was left to slaves and noncitizens, which is probably why we do not find debates on the subject during this period.

Performance *was* discussed, however, by the practitioners of public speaking. This was the last phase of education for men of ancient Rome; they needed the ability to argue and persuade to enter public life in politics, administration, or law. To speak well was the hallmark of a powerful Roman citizen. The most notable teacher of what we call **the rhetorical tradition** of performance was a teacher named Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (35–100 CE) known as Quintilian. He ran a school of oratory and produced an influential twelve-volume textbook on the subject. In it, he begins by echoing Aristotle’s opinion that the effective player must first feel the emotions present in a speech. He then introduces the idea that after feeling these emotions, they can be “impersonated” later. But how? Quintilian’s highly detailed writings offered advice such as the following:

Wonder is best expressed as follows: the hand turns slightly upwards and the fingers are brought in to the palm, one after the other, beginning with the little finger; the hand is then opened and turned round by a reversal of this motion.

This notion that physical movements such as gestures can simulate true emotion would linger for centuries as Quintilian’s work was periodically forgotten and rediscovered. Still, to put his writing in context, there was no understanding of the complexities of the circulatory system or psychology. The belief was that our bodies were giant containers of four fluids or *humors*—blood, yellow and black bile, and phlegm. It was thought that our behaviors were affected by any imbalance in the composition of these components. It was also assumed that if you simulated emotions (called “passions”) through proscribed movements but went too far in their execution, the result would be a poisoned body.

This is where **decorum** came into play. Modulating your performance to avoid any excess was considered a great skill, especially when you switched quickly from one emotion to another. The most famous example of this dictum comes from *Hamlet*. In William Shakespeare’s play, the title character gives thorough instructions to an actor he has hired to perform a play he has written:



A statue of Quintilian in Calahorra, La Rioja, Spain.

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief [I would prefer] the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently: for in the very torrent, tempest, and—as I may say—whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.

Not only could Hamlet's advice be considered a demand for a natural delivery of the lines, it could also be a thought of as a plea for personal safety.

By the eighteenth century, new ideas in physiology shifted to the notion that the body was a kind of natural machine. Under stress, it was thought this machine would generate emotions that could be catalogued by observation, much like a zoologist dividing animals into genus and species. Many actors would write about observing “nature” to create their

characters, suggesting that a universal code of emotions existed. If you could discover the correct set of movements, supposedly any emotion could be represented.

One theorist who took this idea to an extreme was François Delsarte (1811–1871). Until the late nineteenth century, no *systematic* means of training stage actors existed in the Western theatre tradition. An actor's early career was a process of trial and error or an apprenticeship with a veteran actor where he was often encouraged to imitate the master's style. Delsarte, a French singer and actor studying at the Paris Conservatory, experienced this bias toward imitation. After four different teachers corrected his delivery of a single line in four different ways, a frustrated



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The actor, in studying his part before a large mirror, where he can see his whole figure, in order to determine the most proper expressions for every thought, should consult nature, and endeavor to imitate her. But in this imitation, he should take care not to make too servile a copy....The theatre is intended to exhibit an imitation of nature, and not nature itself.

Acting is generally agreed to be a matter less of mimicry, exhibitionism, or imitation than of the ability to react to imaginary stimuli.



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Delsarte decided to do his own scientific study of how people moved and reacted. After observations in parks, cafés, hospital wards, churches, and even mortuaries, the result of Delsarte's research was what he called his "Science of Applied Aesthetics." The positioning and movement of every part of the body and head was broken down into an extensive list, with a description of the corresponding emotion accompanying each item. For example, various combinations of eye and eyebrow movement could indicate disdain, moroseness, firmness, or indifference. Different movements of the head could suggest abandon, pride, or sensuality, and certain arm and hand positions could indicate acceptance, horror, or desire. Delsarte wanted an emotional connection to the words to accompany his physical system. However, the bastardized popular version taught by enthusiasts made his system a victim of its own success. In Europe and the United States, "Delsarte clubs" sprang up where simply posing and freezing was presented as artistic entertainment.

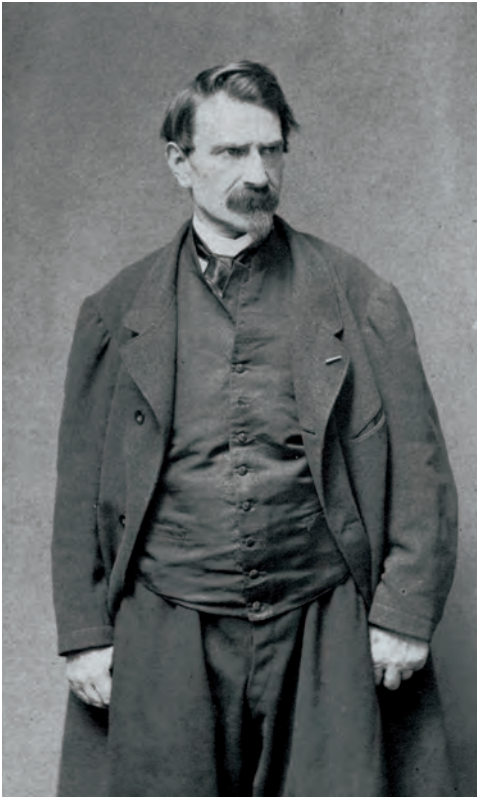
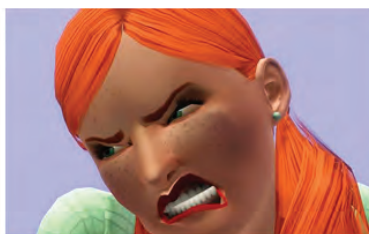


Photo of François Delsarte taken by Étienne Carjat in 1864. Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



In video games such as *The Sims*, the Delsartian idea is still alive—all characters have the same animation to represent emotions such as sadness and anger. However, the idea that physical poses can represent a finite number of emotional states is now out of favor in theatrical circles. Some anthropologists even disagree as to whether emotions are biologically universal. They hold that many emotional definitions such as happiness, sadness, and fear are shaped by the culture in which people live. A notable exception is clinical psychologist Dr. Paul Ekman, who claims that everybody's facial muscles are involuntarily activated in exactly the same way when feeling certain emotions. According to Ekman, these "microexpressions" last for a fraction of a second and can be useful in detecting deception, an idea that formed the basis for the 2009 television crime drama *Lie to Me*.

The Stanislavsky Revolution

One person who was determined to overturn mechanical and unrealistic performance styles was the Russian actor and director **Konstantine Stanislavsky**. His ongoing "system" of techniques would go on to revolutionize twentieth-century acting. Today, most Western training is based, wholly or in part, on his innovations.

Born in 1863, Konstantine Sergeyevich Alekseyev was the second of nine children. His father was a wealthy textile manufacturer who liked theatre, opera, circus, and ballet. In order to entertain guests with his children's performances, he converted a room in their country house into a theatre and eventually, a family theatre troupe was born. However, instead of embracing the amateur nature of their efforts, a fourteen-year-old Konstantine kept notebooks filled with serious questions about the

acting process. He would spend hours in front of a mirror practicing his role and agonizing over his costumes. In his twenties, he became determined to pursue a theatrical career but was concerned about his family's reputation. Therefore, he adopted the stage name Stanislavsky and appeared in risqué amateur shows in Moscow until his parents showed up at one of his performances. His father demanded that if he was to be an actor, he should work with professionals and apply himself to reputable material.

In 1888, Stanislavsky formed and financed a group called the Society of Art and Literature. Rejecting the “star system,” where prominent actors received much attention when preparing a production while actors with small parts received almost no direction, the society strove for a sense of ensemble. Stanislavsky was a strong believer in the adage “There are no small parts, only small actors,” and every actor on stage was expected to have an inner life. For Stanislavsky the director, his highly detailed productions received positive attention, but as an actor, he continued to struggle to find truth in his own performances. In 1897, he came under the notice of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a critic and playwright, who requested a meeting. After an eighteen-hour conversation, the two men decided to create a new professional troupe that would overturn the artificiality of Russian theatre. It came to be known as the **Moscow Art Theatre** (MAT).



Postcard of Stanislavsky performing the role of Gayev in *The Cherry Orchard*, 1922. He also directed the production.



The entrance to the Moscow Art Theatre, where visitors are greeted by a photo of playwright Anton Chekhov. Photo by Pablo Sanchez.

The first great success of this new theatre was *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov. A doctor and short story writer, Chekhov pioneered a new kind of play that had none of the heroes and villains found in the melodramas of the time. Instead, his characters are flawed human beings struggling for personal happiness. Despite his complaints that Stanislavsky's direction of *The Seagull* was too serious and theatrical, Chekhov allowed him to produce his subsequent plays, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. Engaging with this new style of writing led Stanislavsky to consider a new approach—creating a role from the inside out rather than the false external physical means he had always relied upon.

Eventually, Stanislavsky's concerns about his own acting reached a crisis point. At the time, it was common for theatres to present plays in repertory, that is, showing the same plays in rotation for a number of years. Over time, it was easy for a part to feel lifeless. Stanislavsky believed his work was still full of bad theatrical habits and tricks and was desperate to save his roles from what he called "spiritual petrification." What made his situation worse was that the other actors felt his situation

too common to be a concern. Reflecting on the performances of his past, Stanislavsky realized that when he played the same role for a period of time, his most inspired performances came when he entered something he called “the creative mood” or “creative state of mind.” He wondered if there were systematic, technical means by which to make it appear and began to develop a series of exercises.

Years later, while directing nonrealistic drama, he began to put new ideas about this creative mood into practice during rehearsals and studio acting classes held at the MAT. Although the actors resisted at first, his approach soon became adopted as the theatre’s primary training method. From 1909 until his death in 1938, he continued to develop his system, often with the help of other members of the MAT. Hundreds of exercises were tried, rejected, or refined. Stanislavsky never stopped experimenting and scolded his pupils who published details about his early methods. Nevertheless, successful international MAT tours elevated Stanislavsky’s notoriety, and many actors became intensely curious about these new techniques. Soon, Russian actors who emigrated began teaching early versions of the system, creating a false impression of a fixed set of rules instead of the provisional nature he wished to convey.

The culmination of his views on actor-training, *An Actor’s Work on Himself*, did not appear in print until 1938. In the American edition, the material was divided into three books, translated as *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Building a Character* (1948), and *Creating a Role* (1961), which was created from his notes. All took the form of the fictitious diary of an actor reporting his experiences of being taught by a teacher much like Stanislavsky.

The features of his early system centered on ways to inspire relaxation, concentration, naïveté, and imagination. Relaxation was meant to address muscular tension, which Stanislavsky believed blocked emotional truth and physical expression. Exercises in concentration developed an actor’s ability to focus on objects and sensations, allowing the actor to direct the focus away from the audience. Naïveté and imagination improvisations were meant to produce a childlike state that would allow actors to believe in the imaginary circumstances of the play.

What would later become the most controversial technique was called **affective memory**. It was designed to produce emotional states appropriate to a scene; actors were asked to recall details about a strong emotional

moment in their lives such as fear, sadness, anger, love, or joy. Emotions were not meant to be accessed directly. Instead, actors would recall sensory details about the people and places involved. Although this method was at the heart of Stanislavsky's program for some time, he later would consider it only as a last resort.

What eventually displaced affective memory in his system was an approach he called the **method of physical actions**. Stanislavsky believed that the link between the mind and body is inseparable. Therefore, if an actor pursued an action, the emotional life connected to that action would follow. Based on the given circumstances of the play, the actor would decide what his character wanted in the play overall (the super-objective) and then what he wanted in each scene (objective). All actions onstage would be in the service of these objectives. Acting would now be action-based rather than driven by emotion. Instead of trying to stir emotional states or copying the observed emotions of others, Stanislavsky would ask actors to practice what he called "the magic if." Actors would ask themselves: "What would I do if I were this character? What actions would I take to reach my objectives?" Unfortunately, these later developments were not as widely disseminated. As used today, the label "method acting" applies to American teachers such as Lee Strasberg who emphasized affective memory techniques.

Generations of teachers continue to build upon or refine Stanislavsky's work with their own exercises and imagery to produce desired results. Some even define themselves in opposition to his approach, proof of its continued importance. Today, you can find a host of training techniques for body and voice that have been created for actors or adapted from other disciplines to help performers broaden their skills as well as prepare and sustain a role. Examples include two Stanislavsky protégés, Michael Chekhov and Vsevolod Meyerhold, who developed their own unique actor training techniques.

"Acting is not about being someone different. It's finding the similarity in what is apparently different, then finding myself in there."



Meryl Streep, actor

In the field of movement and body awareness, Rudolf Laban, Frederick Matthias Alexander, and Moshé Feldenkrais have had a great influence. For vocal training, important

innovators include Kristin Linklater, Arthur Lessac, Catherine Fitzmaurice, and Cicely Berry. Today, actors are usually exposed to a variety of different methods, eager to find the best tools to realize human truth on the stage and elsewhere.

Reading Plays Like an Actor

Although most of us will not become professional actors, there is still a great value in reading a play like one. Seeing a play through an actor's eyes helps to build a greater, more nuanced understanding of a dramatic text. Actors treat each character they play like a riddle to be solved based on clues provided by the playwright. Here are some places to start:

Name: Begin with the character's name by looking up its etymology. Is it accurate or ironic? Take the character of Blanche DuBois from Tennessee Williams's play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Derived from the French word *blanc*, meaning white, the name eventually came to mean fair or pure. In the play, Blanche, a former schoolteacher, has come to New Orleans to visit her sister Stella (derived from the Latin meaning "star") because she is trying to leave behind her troubled past. Later, it is revealed that she was fired for having an affair with a student and was ejected from a hotel for numerous encounters with men. But her name is not entirely ironic. The related word "blanch" also means to lose color, and as the play progresses, she is revealed as someone who has lost her former wealth, beauty, and energy.

Past: Before the move toward realism, characters in melodramas were either good or bad, heroes or villains. However, with the influence of thinkers such as Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, the idea that we are shaped by our environment as well as our past took hold. Now it is not unusual for actors to construct a backstory for their characters based on the text. In doing so, they can gain insight into why specific choices are made throughout the play.

Language: Language is a quick way to divine a character's nature. Is profanity used in every sentence, only in extreme circumstances, or not at all? Do they use short blunt sentences or poetic language

with an extensive vocabulary? Word choice and use or misuse of grammar can tell us volumes about their background and how they relate to the world.

Stage directions: Pay special attention to the stage directions associated with a character, separate from his or her words. Car dealers have a saying, "Buyers are liars," meaning customers often misrepresent their true feelings when trying to get a good deal. The same could be said for most characters in a play. As in real life, we want what we want, but we often do not openly say what we want. For example, a man could state his unconditional love to a woman, but if he slowly inches toward the exit during a scene, we could have reason to doubt his sincerity. Frequently, we find out what a character truly wants toward the end of a scene. This is because they must become more direct since they have used up all of their other tactics.

References: What does the character say about herself? At the same time, what do other characters say about her? Sometimes there is a great disparity between our conception of ourselves and true reality.

Objective: Ultimately, all of the factors above may influence the answer to the most important puzzle—what does the character want in each scene? Choosing a character's objective profoundly changes a performance and colors the reading of every line.