

Lindenwood University

Digital Commons@Lindenwood University

---

Theses

Theses & Dissertations

---

6-1998

## Mirroring the Life of Their Times: The Group Legacy in the Changing Face of Theatre

Christopher J. Stephens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/theses>



Part of the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

---

543m  
1998

MIRRORING THE LIFE OF THEIR TIMES:  
THE GROUP LEGACY  
IN THE CHANGING FACE OF THEATRE

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of Theatre Arts

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

Lindenwood University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Lindenwood University

by

Christopher J. Stephens

June, 1998

COMMITTEE  
IN CHARGE OF  
CANDIDACY

Bryan C. Reeder, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Theatre  
Chairperson of Committee / Faculty Advisor

Donnell Walsh, Associate Professor  
Committee Member

Dr. Ann Canale, Associate Professor  
Committee Member

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the following people for their contributions to this effort:

Bryan C. Reeder for his editorial assistance.

Amy H. Stephens for her feedback, patience and support.

Copyright ©1998

by

Christopher J. Stephens

---

Lindenwood University

Prospectus

AMERICAN DREAM:  
THE LEGACY OF THE GROUP THEATRE

by Christopher J. Stephens

June, 1998

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee: Bryan C. Reeder  
Department of Theatre

It is the premise of this writer and practitioner of the theatre arts that most contemporary work in the American theatre, particularly the training of actors and directors, can trace its lineage to, and is somehow aligned with, the work of the Group Theatre in the 1930s.

Chapter One describes the impetus that drove the founding members to create the Group Theatre and defines the objectives of this thesis. Chapter Two explores the historical development of the Group Theatre, explains its technique of creating theatrical productions and examines the causes of its eventual demise. Following this historical study, Chapter Three traces the development of the careers of the founders and original members of The Group Theatre and investigates the impact that those artists have had on the development of theatrical art in America.

---

Subsequently, an analysis of selected current artists reveals a connection between contemporary artistic theory and Group Theatre ideology. This evidence supports the above hypothesis regarding the origins of contemporary theatrical trends. Finally, Chapter Four concludes with forward-looking statements concerning the true legacy of the work of the Group Theatre in the 1930s and the impact that this legacy will carry into the future.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	i
PROSPECTUS.....	ii
Chapter 1.	
<i>MISE EN SCENE</i> .....	1
Chapter 2.	
THE HISTORY OF THE GROUP.....	11
Chapter 3.	
GENEALOGY AND CONTEMPORARY IDEOLOGY.....	57
Chapter 4.	
CONCLUSION.....	87
WORKS CITED.....	92
WORKS CONSULTED.....	96

## CHAPTER ONE

*Mise en Scène*EXPOSITION

Aristotle told us in 335 B.C.E. that theatrical performance developed out of man's instinctive propensity to imitate nature (28-9). Yet in the subsequent 2235 years of artistic evolution, theatrical artists somehow could not devise a means of imitating naturalistically. Then, in a veritable instant in history, in turn-of-the-century Russia, several simultaneous developments in thought, science and art resulted in the discovery by Constantin Stanislavski of a means of creating effective, realistic performance. This discovery, then modernized by the Group Theatre in 1930s America, would revolutionize the world of theatre, and continues to influence performance as we enter the next millennium. The backdrop of developments against which these discoveries occurred is tied to the Industrial Revolution and must be examined briefly in order to understand the historical context that allowed the Group Theatre to realize more effectively Aristotle's vision.

The phoenixes of mechanical development rising from the flames of the Industrial Revolution number among them Thomas A. Edison's motion picture camera. Several other intellectual forces of the same period at the end of the 19th



century interacted with the force of this development to result in the advent of a new stylistic approach to the arts of performance: Realism. Edison's feelings about the artistic potential of the motion picture are well documented by Neil Baldwin as he describes Edison's defense of the invention in a patent dispute:

Market concerns, Edison said, were of less pertinence to him than the motion picture as "art." He had. . . seen the work of Muybridge and Marey. . . he revealed the aspect of their work that bothered him. . . their pictures. . . did not produce the desired "illusion," to replicate movement with verisimilitude. . . . Edison's claim to advancement over his predecessors was based upon his immediate conviction that photography of motion such as that practiced by Muybridge and Marey was "unnatural and machine-like," designed primarily for the documentary or clinical purpose of *analyzing* motion, rather than *re-*presenting it artfully as "*commercial, living picture art*" which would be "suitable" for the delight of the common spectator. . . Edison

was the man who *created* the natural and faithful reproduction of motion, taken from a single, that is to say, humanly visual, point of view. (274-5)

Once commercially popularized, the photographically realistic properties of film became a tremendous stylistic force which interacted with previous developing forces--such as scenic verisimilitude, the advent of psychology, and the scientific method--and found their ways onto the stage, and it caused the final push of theatrical production into Realistic style. During the decade prior, the visual arts world was also experiencing a stylistic revolution: the grandiose nature of Romanticism was giving way to the photo-realistic way of looking at light's effect on objects from a humanly visual point of view that Impressionism offered. August Strindberg, an early Realistic writer, admittedly borrowed from the Impressionists (Nagler 583). Emile Zola defined the evolution of realistic representation as "Naturalism" in his landmark 1880 essay, "Naturalism on the Stage." In it, he attributes the origin of Naturalism to the first written line, and specifies truth as art's driving force: "My personal opinion is that naturalism dates from the first line ever written by man. From that day truth was laid down as the necessary foundation of all art"

(694). Here Zola parallels Aristotle's implication that truthful representation is an innate desire. Zola connects the advent of Naturalism to the development of Western thought, the development of the sciences, and to the movement away from Romanticism in the other arts (695-7). The natural sciences were established, he feels, as a result of "minute and thorough exactitude of observation" and their ability to bring "truth to light" (695). The great scenic innovators of the late nineteenth century, including such luminaries as the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen and Andre Antoine, concentrated on achieving tremendous scenic truth (Nagler 580). They retained, however, such vestiges of Romanticism as imposing crowd scenes.

We do have a few accounts of ultra realism in classical theatre. In ancient Rome, audiences as large as eighty thousand witnessed such spectacle as huge casts, including humans and animals, and the utilization of actual stage deaths (Nagler 27). In the Greece of antiquity, audiences were threatened or terrified by what they had seen on stage to the point that "children died and women suffered miscarriage" (Nagler 5). The Aristotelian model of tragedy defined a desirable audience response as one that included the arousal of pity and fear. Aeschylus certainly achieved this, and thereby must have achieved a believable moment. These examples

notwithstanding, even Shakespeare, in the prologue to Henry V, acknowledged an inability to produce truly realistic plays.

The achievement of theatrical Realism/Naturalism was not fully possible without a realistic acting style. Why, in several thousand years of theatre history, had techniques for truly realistic acting not been developed? Zola's critics felt that Naturalism was impossible on the stage (Zola 714). The problems of realistic representation were obviously not scenic, as the scenic difficulties had already been surmounted (Zola 716). These critics must then have been basing criticism on the fact that staging techniques, including acting style, had remained Romantic, presentational, histrionic.

The obvious advantage of film, which Edison pioneered around 1890, is its ability to observe human behavior with exactness and bring truth in representation to light. It is evident that this "motion picture" was a motivating force, as audiences demanded more realistic representation like that which the film could reproduce with photographic realism. Additionally, other forces were at play. The Industrial Revolution occurred during a period of simultaneous development of much modern Western thought. Sigmund Freud was doing his seminal research on human behavior as it is affected by developmental stimuli. Charles Darwin was

writing his landmark opus, The Origin of Species. Karl Marx was theorizing about dialectical materialism. The scientific method developed, by which any experiment is performed in the following order: hypothesize, test, observe, revise. It is not too great a leap to assume that Constantin Stanislavski, like Zola before him, recognizing the need for a realistic acting style, would also turn to these thinkers. Zola summed up the problem, and he revealed the influence of the scientific method, Darwinian selection and adaptation, and Freudian analysis when he said, "I am waiting for the surroundings to determine the characters, and for the characters to behave according to the logic of facts, combined with the logic of their own temperament" (711).

The combination of Edison's photographic realism, Freud's understanding of psychology as it drives human behavior, Darwin's illumination of environmental determination in selection and adaptation, and the clarification of the way in which any experimenter should theorize, observe, and revise all add elements that Stanislavski needed to develop a system of actor training. The system would instruct actors in the process of recreating human behavior realistically as observed, with the minute detail of the photograph, explainable by psychological analysis.

This system, developed by Stanislavski with the help of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, led to revolutionary turn-of-the-century performances by the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre, the company founded by these two men and built on the philosophy of actor training and playwriting they put forth. Their company toured to America in the twenties and made a tremendous impact on many developing actors in New York. It took nearly twenty years for those actors to realize that the key to effective, realistic performance lay in the combination of realistic writing with new techniques of actor training. The two key figures in this American realization were Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman, who, like Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko before them, founded a company based on a technique of playwriting and actor training.

### IMPULSE

Harold Clurman describes the impetus for founding the company in his book The Fervent Years:

A technique of the theatre had to be founded on life values. The whole bent of the theatre, I reiterated, time and again, would be to combine a study of theatre craft with a creative content which that craft was to

express. To put it another way, our interest in the life of our times must lead us to a discovery of those methods that would most truly convey this life through the theatre.

(Clurman 34)

These same words are also used to begin a television documentary on the Group Theatre, hosted by Joanne Woodward, who continues,

Well, life was exactly what Harold, Lee [Strasberg] and Cheryl [Crawford] found missing from the New York theatre of the late 1920's. Lots of plays, lots of actors. On the surface, Broadway was doing alright. But most of it was cut from the exact same cloth--drawing room comedies, light entertainments which you forgot once the final curtain fell. In short, conservative, old-fashioned, and no challenge. Then came The Group, hellbent on changing the whole face of the American Theatre. And their passionate experiment gave us the foundation from which we all work. This is their story--the story of one theatrical endeavor that left an indelible

legacy..." (Broadway's Dreamers).

That legacy in our midst as theatre artists, which remains influential nearly seventy years later, is the subject of this study--the legacy of the Group Theatre.

### OBJECTIVES

It is the premise of this writer and practitioner of the theatre arts that all work in the American Theatre, particularly the training of actors and directors, can trace its lineage in some way to the work of The Group Theatre in the 1930s. We are currently experiencing a backlash against the "methods" of realism/naturalism on the stage, yet even extreme examples of departures from realism admit the use of vocabulary and techniques developed during the experimental work of The Group. Although I participate in many lovers' quarrels with Stanislavski's System (more accurately, Stella Adler's adaptation of it), I continue to return to the virtues of my relationship with The Group's ideology. What I discovered through work with many teachers, copious reading and extensive trial-and-error; what I espouse as a philosophy of work--process-oriented, objective-based exploration within an ensemble environment--really began in America at the hands of another ensemble; or, more appropriately, another Group.



Having already described the background and presented a theory about the advent of actor training for realistic representation, I will next explore the historical development of The Group Theatre while explaining its technique of creating theatrical productions. Following this historical study, I will trace the development of the careers of its members and the impact that those artists had on the development of theatrical art in America. Finally, I will theorize about the origins of the work of current practitioners, both traditional and avant-garde, and will demonstrate the debt that their work owes to the dedication, ingenuity and perseverance of the members of America's most important ensemble-oriented theatre company, The Group Theatre.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The History of the Group

#### HUNGER

The Group Theatre formed during a period of turmoil in American life and culture. Its beginnings perhaps were a result of the turbulence of the times in America. Yet, it remains remarkable by today's standards that this company was founded during the worst of economic times in the history of this country.

The Group was created in 1931, just two years after the great stock market crash of 1929 on Wall Street, while the Great Depression was in full swing. One would think that the formation of a new theatre company would not be supported by a public more concerned with the immediacy of hunger and the need to produce income for sustenance. However, there was a drought in the American theatre as well, and perhaps the cultural thirst for plays and performances of substance created a power equal to or greater than that behind the urge toward sustenance. Or, maybe a cultural sustenance would help the hungry populace to transcend the pangs of other societal starvation.

NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION

The origin of The Group occurred during that year, as described by Woodward,

when a bunch of highly dedicated, or according to some, crazy, young people came together to form a permanent company. Their leaders were three remarkable individuals: Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg. The trio first met working for the Theatre Guild in New York...Cheryl Crawford was a casting director for the Guild, Lee Strasberg was a stage manager and sometimes acted, and Harold Clurman was a play reader. (Broadway's Dreamers)

The Guild produced good work. Clurman says: Their platform, from the first, was to do distinguished plays according to the best professional standards. Their function was to bring plays previously regarded as uncommercial to a big middle-class audience. In this function they succeeded admirably. And by organizing their audience through the subscription method they made a first-rate

contribution to American theatre practice.

People who later complained that the Guild had belied its early ideals spoke lightly. It is a fact that no American theatre organization ever brought to the boards so many worthwhile scripts. (Clurman 25)

One can see the influence on the Group's later ideology. But, something was still missing. Clurman felt, They had no blood relationship with the plays they dealt in. They set the plays out in the show window for as many customers as possible to buy. They didn't want to say anything through plays, and plays said nothing to them, except that they were amusing in a graceful way, or, if they were tragic plays, that they were "art." And art was a good thing. The board members were in favor of culture. As a result they chose plays of the most conflicting tendencies, and produced them all with the same generalized Broadway technique, though in better taste than the average. All the productions were rather pretty (with a kind of disguised

middle-class stuffiness) and they nearly always lacked passion or pointedness. (26)

In Broadway's Dreamers--The Legacy of The Group Theatre, Joanne Woodward tells us that "a few adventurous theatres lingered on from the 1920s," such as Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre. "Hallie Flannigan's dynamic Federal Theatre Project and John Houseman's and Orson Welles' flamboyant Mercury Theatre Company" were part of the changing theatre landscape of the 1930s. But Strasberg, Crawford and Clurman envisioned a totally new kind of theatre, "one that would mount original, American plays, on Broadway, using a new ensemble approach to acting. And these new plays would mirror, and even change, the life of their times" (Broadway's Dreamers).

The reasons for the formation of the company can always be traced back to these ideals, but those reasons were a result of several forces. Clurman and Strasberg found that they had very similar ideas and a very equal passion about the possibilities of performance and its purpose. So they decided to generate enthusiasm among Crawford and contemporary Broadway actors by spreading the word that they would start "their" theatre. Crawford described her reason for joining as

having been convinced that their desire for theatre was also hers (Interview).

Original Group member Eunice Stoddard claimed that the primary reason that the Group Theatre grew up, its seminal influence, was the tour to New York by the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1920s: "American actors and audiences had never seen acting like this" (Interview). The appearance was that these were real people on stage, not characters being presented by performers. Stoddard recounted that "Harold Clurman began in the winter of 1930-31 to tell other actors" in the Theatre Guild and elsewhere on Broadway "that it was possible to have a group theatre--to have actors work together, the way they did in the Moscow Art Theatre" (Interview).

In his book, Clurman communicates his fervent belief about the necessity to form a company which would train a permanent ensemble of actors:

Since we were theatre people, the proper action for us was to establish a theatre in which our philosophy of life might be translated into a philosophy of the theatre. Here the individual actor would be strengthened so that he might better serve the uses of the play in which our common

belief was to be expressed. There were to be no stars in our theatre...because all distinction...was to be embodied in the production as a whole. (35)

So “Clurman began to give lectures--talks, really, on Friday night talks, to which actors from throughout New York City were invited” (Nelson). This approach to forming the company seems incredible to me as an educator and motivator of actors. In his desire to form a new company, without the promise of any current or future financial return, Clurman invited peers to lectures during which he proselytized about his and Strasberg’s ideology. This simple fact should lead us to believe that there was artistic hunger for a new approach to theatre, in which the actor is invested in the objectives of the play and has the technique necessary to create truth in performance. Whether this desire grew out of the experience of seeing the Russian company, or was spawned solely by the circumstances of the state of 1930’s theatrical art and societal issues is not important. What matters is that the desire was there. Actors participated in these lectures, and later the company would commit themselves without money during hard times. As necessity is usually the mother of invention, a need perceived by Clurman and Strasberg led them to the

invention of a theory of performance and a company whose ideals espoused that theory.

Most of the interest among actors was based upon personal invitations by Clurman and Strasberg that sometimes verged upon insult. Bobby Lewis, an original company member, was performing on Broadway at the time that the Friday lectures were occurring. One night, Strasberg and Clurman were in attendance at the production in which he was appearing and after the performance, they visited Lewis backstage. In an interview for the documentary on the Group Theatre, Lewis recounted their encounter by describing Strasberg's first question: "What did you think you were doing out there?" (qtd. in Lewis, Interview). Lewis did not know how to respond because, as he explains in the interview, "What I wanted to do was give a damn fine performance." Strasberg followed with, "Do you think that was real emotion you had out there? That was 'indicating.'" (qtd. in Lewis, Interview). Although Lewis did not fully comprehend what Strasberg was saying, he knew that "indicating" was bad: "I didn't know what that meant, but I knew it was a dirty word because of how he said it" (Interview). Clurman and Strasberg then extended an invitation to Lewis to attend the Friday sessions in order to learn more about their proposed technique. Obviously, Lewis



was interested in improving his work and attended. Lewis must have been interested in the long term development of the professional actor, as he later co-founded The Actor's Studio with Elia Kazan and Cheryl Crawford with the express purpose of developing the skills of professional actors engaged in long Broadway runs. Lewis admittedly didn't really understand Strasberg, and even described him as a "Svengali" in this account. However, he felt that Clurman and Strasberg must have seen something in him in order to have come and spoken with him and, more importantly, to have invited him to their Friday night meetings. The "indicating" statement, Lewis sarcastically opined, must just have been Strasberg's "polite way of expressing" his criticism (Interview).

Original Group member Stella Adler, who later in life became a legendary acting teacher, was a student at the Laboratory Theatre. She stated that Clurman invited her to a meeting. After attending, she became "hooked." Although she joked that she had a natural "tendency to follow men" in her personal life, her recollections describe the theatrical experience as having been very charismatic in nature (Adler). Margaret Barker had been in a play with Franchot Tone, whom Clurman and Strasberg knew from their days at the Theatre Guild. She believed that Tone told Clurman and Strasberg

about her and caused the invitation to occur.

The primary means of generating interest was a combination of networking by actors among their respected colleagues along with the charms and charisma of Clurman and the idealism of Strasberg. Clurman said that others described the company's origins as his having "talked The Group into existence" (qtd. in Broadway's Dreamers)

However, not all actors bought into the espoused philosophy. Robert Lewis recounted a story about a meeting to which

Eunice Stoddard... brought a girlfriend of hers into one of these meetings, and she was introduced to us as Katherine Hepburn, a name which none of us knew at that time. She had never played a part...At the end of the meeting, Clurman said to her, "would you be interested in joining such a group like this that we've been talking about?" (Interview).

Hepburn, also being interviewed for the documentary, says that she responded, "'I'm leaving. I don't want to be a member of a group. I want to be a great, big star.' And I left." History tells us that she predicted her destiny. It also tells us that, from the very beginning, a primary objective of the

company was to function as an ensemble in which everyone was equal. Unlike Hollywood's approach, the means of this acting technique was to present reality--where all characters interact--rather than to serve as a vehicle to highlight an individual personality. Lewis thought at the time "that she was some kind of heretic" (Interview).

Morris Carnovsky, character actor and original member, said that "the Group was not exactly a revolution against stardom. Rather, what we recognized, and from personal experience what I recognized, was that I had no basic technique. What we discovered, led on by the passions of a man like Harold Clurman, was that there was an awful lot to learn" (Carnovsky).

Phoebe Brand felt that they were inspired by Clurman to "know each other, work with each other, and work on a common method" (Brand). In other words, they needed to develop a well-functioning ensemble that utilized a common acting technique. Lewis believed that what was needed was to look at "the good in each other, not the false, if we were ever to have an ensemble" (Interview). Obviously, a histrionic approach to acting within a star system was out of the question.

The Group needed to discover an approach to theatre

that would suit their needs and bring them closer to achieving their vision. As Clurman described it in The Fervent Years,

If man was to be the measure of all things in our theatre, if life was the starting point, and an effect on life the aim or our effort, then one had to have a point of view in relation to it, one had to define an approach that might be common to all the members of the group.

(34)

Finally, they assembled a group of twenty-eight actors who felt that this was the kind of theatre they wanted and/or needed, and headed to the country for Summer Camp.

#### SUMMER ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES

Some of us owned cars; others were borrowed. On the evening of June 8, 1931, twenty-eight actors, some wives, two children, the three directors, and a few friends left from the front of the Guild Theatre on Fifty-second Street for Brookfield Center, Connecticut. (Clurman 39)

Although of different backgrounds and tastes, they

went to Brookfield Center to live and work together on their first production.

Twenty-eight actors and three directors had become a group. This would be a summer of training by Strasberg, organized by Crawford and guided by the inspiration of Clurman.

The first year set the pattern for those to follow--summers of communal living, experimentation and hard work of a never-ending struggle to transform the theatre by transforming themselves. (Broadway's Dreamers)

The general plan was to spend working hours in technique classes (acting, voice, movement, dance, fencing, poetry, improvisation, etc.) and in rehearsal on their first play. Evening hours were spent over coffee and tea in endless discussions and arguments about the theatre.

Margaret Barker likened that first summer at Brookfield Center to the "first few months of marriage" (Interview). Tony Kraber believed that, since they were going to spend the rest of their lives together, "naturally they had better get acquainted" (Interview).

Many had visions of changing the face of theatre in

America for years to come. Most importantly, the feeling was that this was the only way to do serious theatre (Nelson; Barker). Although there was time off, the company had the luxury of twenty-four hour access to one another and essentially worked morning, noon and night. It was hard work, but was loved by all, and was quite fun for all.

“Clurman talked, Strasberg taught and started to direct, and Crawford looked for money and sometimes played the peacemaker” (Broadway’s Dreamers). The work was mainly on the play, but also focused on training the actors in the method that Lee Strasberg had devised after reading the writings of Stanislavski. Clurman chose as the first play Paul Green’s The House of Connelly, which has obvious links to Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard in its dealing with the emergence of a new class from among the poor. However, Clurman felt those parallels to be “academic, empty and useless...Concern over the play gave way to the actors’ far greater absorption in it as a vehicle for the strengthening of their craft” (40).

Clurman chose Strasberg as director, even though Crawford had closer ties to the play. Clurman made this choice because he

was concerned with the formulation of a

technique of acting and production, a specific training that might be shared by the entire company. For this, Strasberg, with his experience and his peculiar gifts as a teacher, was best adapted. It was from no pedagogic dogmatism, however, that I insisted on the establishment of a single unified method for the company. It was a question of artistic necessity. You couldn't actually say what we wished to say in the theatre by simply having a troupe of actors give "good performances." Talent, contrary to the accepted doctrine of Broadway, is not enough. Talent is accident; craft, in the use of talent, is a matter of some consciousness, of training. Talent might be sufficient for the individual actor; it didn't lead to the solution of the problem of a whole production, which is the relating of a number of talents to a single meaning. "For the elements of a theatrical production to be shaped into a true artistic organism," I had written, "it is not sufficient for them merely to be 'good.' They must be homogeneous,

they must belong together, they must form an organic body." That day in June 1931 Strasberg began to make of the twenty-eight actors an "artistic organism" with its own special character and aims. (41)

Interestingly enough, this was later legitimized by the post-Stanislavski Soviet theorists. Quoted in The Fervent Years, Vachtangov, the student of Stanislavski, said "A theatre is an ideologically cemented collective" (93).

The specific technique adapted from Stanislavski by Strasberg had "as its purpose a truthful playing of a situation, rather than 'indicating,' as he called it" (Lewis). Indicating is presentational, showing and telling--acting like one is experiencing the feeling of the moment. Truthful performance is representational, it is feeling the truthful emotion, in the moment. Strasberg's approach, as documented by Hull, was based on improvisation, relaxation, emotional recall and affective (or, sense) memory. The original members that worked with Strasberg explained the approach roughly as follows. If an actor could recall in great detail a personal event during which an emotion was experienced, the actor could reexperience the feeling of the emotion. If this experience and accompanying feeling could be recreated several times, the



actor could develop a channel to the feeling of that emotion. The development of this ability on demand would allow the actor to use emotion as a tool of expression. An actor could use this same personal moment within a play to achieve the portrayal of a character's emotion (Lewis; Barker; Brand; Nelson).

This technique seems a bit contrary to the goals of The Group, however. They wanted and needed to get to know each other. Emotional memory exercises would certainly bring them to a more vulnerable state among the others. This aspect of the work could allow them a better understanding of one another's backgrounds and personalities. The exercises, faster than any other means of getting to know someone, could therefore deepen their relationships on a personal level. In fact, Strasberg himself said that he was "making a group, not hiring a company, and that a certain closeness to the very pulse of the individuals composing the group was essential to real leadership in it" (qtd. in Clurman 42). Further, Clurman states that this approach "did not consist in an immodest prying into succulent privacies, but was an attempt to get to the fundamental realities that affected him" (42).

However, their desire to utilize an ensemble approach to acting requires that the actor live in the moment. Based on

a character's motivations, the actor must respond to other characters in a give and take manner. The work within the world of the play must be exactly that--within the world of the play. Logic dictates that an actor who is personally reliving a past event internally is not living in the world of the play. The focus on the internal would seem to conflict with the external in this case. Also, how could an actor arrive at "truth" in portraying a character if the actor's mind is somewhere outside the world of the play? Strasberg seems to have been talking about emotional truth, which brings the focus back to the individual--contrary to Clurman's original desire for distinction in terms of the entire production (23, 33, 35, 43). Strasberg returns the emphasis to strong individual performances.

Strasberg's method was not totally new and unpracticed at the time of the founding of the Group, as he "had experimented with his ideas in other productions off-Broadway" and in classroom settings (Lewis). He had achieved a foundation for a method based on Stanislavski. Now he also had a receptive company of "good actors who shared his vision" of creating a different kind of theatre (Crawford). Bobby Lewis said that, within the company, Strasberg was perceived as infallible: "he was like the pope; he could do no wrong" (Interview). Clurman felt that too much discussion was made

early on of the system as a method of training, and that it should never have been the subject of press discussion or audience concern. His feeling was that

the aim of the system is to enable the actor to use himself more consciously as an instrument for the attainment of truth on the stage. If we had been satisfied that such truth was achieved in most productions, there would have been little purpose in troubling ourselves over the system, for it was not something taught novices, but rather a method employed in all our productions with experienced actors. We were not satisfied with most of even the best previous productions, which seemed to us to show more competent stagecraft than humanity or authenticity of feeling. With few exceptions, what we saw in most shows was "performance," fabrication, artifice. Theatrical experience was, for the greater part, the antithesis of human experience; it bespoke a familiarity with the clichés of stage deportment rather than experience with

direct roots in life. It seemed to us that without such true experience plays in the theatre were lacking in all creative justification. In short, the system was not an end in itself, but a means employed for the true interpretation of plays. (43)

The two parts of the system that were most important to the Group's work were improvisation and what Strasberg called "exercises," short for an "exercise in affective memory," which may be defined as "memory of emotion" (qtd. in Clurman 44). Clurman explains that the improvisations were used in two ways: In one type of improvisation, the actors were asked to improvise scenes that were not from the text of the play, but were emotionally analogous to scenes from the play. The other type asked the actors to improvise actual scenes from the play in their own ad lib dialogue (43-44). These two improvisational techniques are obviously used to get the actors to connect to the material on a personal level. Strasberg derived the "exercises" from the discovery Stanislavski made that led him to develop his entire system (Clurman 44). Clurman elaborates on these techniques, roughly described above as emotional recall exercises, in The Fervent

Years:

In this "exercise" the actor was asked to recall the details of an event from his own past. The recollection of these details would stir the actors with some of the feeling involved in the original experience, thus producing "mood." These "exercises" were used to set the mechanism of the actor's emotion rolling, so to speak. When the actor was in the grip of this mood--although that is not what we called it, nor was it the purpose of the exercise to capture it directly--the actor was better prepared to do the scene calling for the particular mood that the exercise had evoked.

(44)

Clurman admits to there being problems with the "exercises," but says

whatever its validity or error, the fact is that this procedure was used by us for the first four years of our work, and it unquestionably produced results--of all kinds. The first effect on the actors was that of a miracle. The

system represented for most of them the open-sesame of the actor's art. Here at last was a key to that elusive ingredient of the stage, true emotion. And Strasberg was a fanatic on the subject of true emotion. Everything was secondary to it. He sought it with the patience of an inquisitor, he was outraged by trick substitutes, and when he had succeeded in stimulating it, he husbanded it, fed it, and protected it. Here was something new to most of the actors, something basic, something almost holy. It was revelation in the theatre; and Strasberg was its prophet. (45)

The rehearsal process was unconventional, even by today's standards. The play was presented to the company by reading it to them. Usually, Cheryl Crawford read the play aloud and then discussed it with the company. The company then read it aloud twice. The directors then determined parts and assigned them to the company members.

After the parts were assigned, the company read the play one more time. They then placed the script aside and

improvisation commenced, without the use of the script. Eventually, the script was used little by little until, finally, that actors were using the words of the playwright. This wouldn't occur until a few weeks into rehearsal. By then, the actors had internalized the roles and made them their own. This technique allowed them to approach the truth in characterization which they sought.

The very fact that the company was the static feature rather than the play remains unconventional. Rather than choosing a script and then finding a company to fill it, the Group became a company, developed as a company, and then chose plays that said what they wanted to say and provided the vehicle in which they could develop as actors and as a company. To utilize the same group of actors has been done before: "The Provincetown people liked to to keep the same company with them for all their productions" (Clurman 9), and will be done again; but seldom are actors trained by the company in a unified approach to the art of acting, and even more rarely are these two approaches used as a vehicle to propel the company's desire to put forth a message. Clurman says

We wanted to work on a play for which we had no formal production plans, but the work

would be instructive to the actors, and a new theatre might be born of our modest efforts...Young actors, Strasberg and I declared, had no opportunity at the Theatre Guild, or elsewhere, to be trained while they were rehearsing. It was taken for granted by the Guild, as well as by commercial managers, that every actor was ready to perform as required, but the actor's individual problem as a growing craftsman was neglected. There were two reasons for this neglect: theatre organizations, like other business firms, were concerned solely with marketing their product; furthermore, the problem itself was neither realized nor understood by most managers or directors. In our group we would pay careful attention to the actor's development. Rehearsals themselves would constitute a schooling. Moreover--and this in a way was to be our real innovation--since our technique was, at least officially, taught not only at the Laboratory Theatre but occasionally at the Neighborhood Playhouse,



we expected to bring the actor much closer to the content of the play, to link the actor as an individual with the creative purpose of the playwright. In most theatres the actor is hired to do a part: he was expected to make it live on the stage, but as an individual he stood outside the play or the playwright's vision. His art and the playwright's were presumed to be connected only technically. In our belief, unless the actor in some way shared the playwright's impulse, the result on the stage always remained somewhat mechanical. (23)

## RESULTS

In an interview later in his life, Strasberg claimed that "the company was totally unprepared" for the audience's response to the opening night performance of The House of Connelly, by Paul Green, at the Martin Beck Theatre on West Forty-Fifth Street, New York City on September 23, 1931 (qtd. in Broadway's Dreamers). Clurman recalls that, although he initiated the audience's shouts of "Bravo," being so proud of the accomplishment of the young company, the audience's

continued applause demanded twenty curtain calls (qtd. in Broadway's Dreamers). The reviews were equally as laudatory. In his September 29 New York Times review entitled "A Rare Play, Rarely Acted, Theater Again!," Brooks Atkinson raved,

They play like a band of musicians...Their group performance is too beautifully imagined and modulated to concentrate on personal achievements. There is not a gaudy, brittle or facile stroke in their acting. For once, a group performance is tremulous and pellucid, the expression of an ideal. Between Mr. Green's prose poem and the Group Theatre's performance, it is not too much to hope that something fine and true had been started in the American theatre.

The next day, September 30, the company was greeted with Gilbert Gabriel's review in The American, in which he made comparisons undoubtedly enjoyed by the members of The Group: "They must have convinced the fascinated audience that their way is the only way to prepare a play for all the play is worth. . . . I cannot remember a more completely consecrated piece of ensemble work since the Moscow Art masters went

home" (qtd. in Clurman 59). Clurman recounts a telling review which proves that critics and audience alike felt a hunger for a finer and more effective form of performance:

another reviewer, after describing "the rafter-rocking cheers which are all but unknown at first nights nowadays," pointed out that "the truest reason for these cheers was not Mr. Green's play. Instead it was the simple fact that in this Group Theatre jaded Broadway seems finally to have found the young blood and new ideas for which many of us have been praying" (59-60).

Clurman felt that the

value and importance of the Group's first production was...that its technique and intention were aimed toward the creation of something different in kind from the usual expert production...The Group people had succeeded in fusing the technical elements of their craft with the stuff of their own spiritual and emotional selves. They succeeded in doing this because, aside from their native character or habit, they were

prepared by the education of their work together before and during rehearsals (60).

Of course, times were not always perfect for The Group. After a smashing success with The House of Connelly, they followed up with a play called 1931. An important lesson was learned after the terrible reviews and the poor audience response. The Group wanted to mirror the life of their times and also change that life. One reason for this was their desire for social change in a depressed 1930s America.

Unfortunately, the audience didn't always want to be reminded of their less-than-happy lives during the depression. The play, by Claire and Paul Sifton, was a dark reminder indeed and closed after less than two weeks of performances. Although the company's desire was to help to change the social situation, Cheryl Crawford felt that the circumstances of the depression were such that no one wanted to see it on stage (Interview).

Artistic success was common, however. During the run of Success Story, Joanne Woodward states, "fellow actors from around the city slipped in nightly to see Stella Adler in the final scene and Noel Coward saw it seven times" (Broadway's Dreamers). A great turning point arrived when the Shuberts offered the script of Men in White, a hospital drama which had won the author, Sidney Kingsley, a Pulitzer

Prize. In the Williamstown Theatre Festival "Tribute to The Group Theatre," Kingsley recalled Strasberg's decision to produce the play. "Strasberg said to the group of actors, 'Why are we here? What is the magic glue that holds us together?' And he said, 'Idealism. And this is a play about idealism. And we are going to do it.'" For this production, designer Mordecai Gorelik took an ultra-realistic approach to the scenic design reminiscent of the approach of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen in the previous century. Gorelik's designs were nevertheless unusual for American theatre. Even more revolutionary was the directorial approach that Strasberg implemented. He had the company visit a hospital to observe a real operating room in action so that they might stage those scenes with exacting verisimilitude. Strasberg paid tremendous attention to detail and choreographed the scenes with great care. It was a tremendous triumph financially as well as artistically and was the type of vehicle in which Strasberg and this company excelled.

#### AN IDEOLOGICAL CROSSROADS

As described above, the development of the means of training actors and the technique of acting which Strasberg devised was based largely on emotional recall. Although many

of the actors felt that it was valuable in allowing them to arrive at a better understanding of self, the “exercises” began to take an emotional toll on them, and some began to protest.

A curious circumstantial occurrence followed during a 1934 trip to Paris by Clurman and Stella Adler. Clurman identifies his trip as “memorable” as a result of his “meeting with Stanislavsky” (138). He narrates the meeting in The Fervent Years and what happened thereafter follows.

Stanislavski happened to be recuperating in Paris from an illness. The famous director Jacques Copeau informed Clurman and Adler of the master’s presence, and a meeting was arranged. “Stella Adler had been worried for three years over certain aspects of the Stanislavsky system or method. She no longer found any joy in acting, she avowed; perhaps this was due to that cursed method” (138). Adler explained to him that they had used his “System” and asked him to help with problems that they encountered. His first reply was “If the system does not help you, forget it. But perhaps you do not use it properly” (qtd. in Clurman 138). He then asked her to describe how they used it and said that he would try to help her (Broadway’s Dreamers). When Adler explained the “exercises,” Stanislavski informed her that he had abandoned that years ago. Although he had experimented with affective

memory and written about it early on, he discovered that its use was limited (Broadway's Dreamers). Obviously, the problem was that the group had not been exposed to his later writings due to the inaccessibility of scholarly materials from the Soviet Union. Strasberg had relied on the early writings until he later received publications in Russian about post-Stanislavski developments in the Soviet theatre and had a friend who spoke Russian translate them (Clurman 91).

Stella Adler was relieved, and reported this news back to the company. Clurman declared that,

To put it bluntly, she had discovered that our use of the Stanislavsky system had been incorrect. An undue emphasis on the “exercises” of affective memory had warped our work with the actor. Strasberg’s first reaction to this declaration was the charge that Stanislavsky had gone back on himself.  
(139)

Other versions aren’t so kind to Strasberg. In Broadway’s Dreamers, Brand, Nelson and Barker describe a feeling of shock and surprise in the company when Adler reported that “Stanislavski was wrong” in his early writings. It sounded like heresy to them, since “Stanislavski was the

master.” Adler explained that the master had abandoned exercises in affective memory. His later work seems to emphasize the actor’s work in the moment, based more on the character’s impulsive desires.

Actually, Clurman proves that even Strasberg later saw validity in these developments, as “he decided to take advantage of the suggestions furnished by Stella’s report, and to use what he could of the ‘innovations’ in Stanislavsky’s method” (139). Clurman illustrates that Strasberg’s later work, influenced by innovations in Stanislavski’s later approach, “displayed a greater concern with movement and the expressive value of physical materials” (139).

His personal use of the later innovations notwithstanding, Strasberg’s stubborn ego then took over. As Lewis told the story in his Broadway’s Dreamers interview, Strasberg exclaimed that Stanislavski was currently wrong. Elaborating, Lewis reveals that “Strasberg was livid. He lit into Stella and into Stanislavski. He said, ‘I don’t teach the Stanislavski System. I teach the Strasberg Method.’” As a result of this description, his work became known as “Method Acting.” Later in life, Strasberg said,

I believe the Method is the only basic means for solving the actor’s problem. Any kind of



approach in any artistic area can never be rules. It can be principles. And principles, you must learn how to make use of them. You must learn how to apply. In the same way, I tried all the work, and rightly or wrongly, whether it was Stanislavski or not, it works. (Interview)

So he stuck by them. Unfortunately a great rift developed among the actors who then, as Elia Kazan felt, “began to view him not as someone who was always right which is the way it started, but as someone who was not always right.” More appropriately, he was someone who disagreed with Stanislavski. “He really made that group of actors. And then, gradually...they began to doubt his mastery and his preeminence” (Kazan). Crawford said,

Frankly I don't know who was right and who was wrong. I think whatever works is right, and whatever doesn't is wrong. But they never did solve their disagreements. And some people tended to take Stella's experience as the right one, what Stanislavski told her. And some stuck to Lee's point of view. (Interview)

In fact, it got so bad at one point that, after Strasberg berated Margaret Barker during a rehearsal for losing concentration when someone fainted, Ruth Nelson admittedly threatened to kill him (Interview). A separate account of this incident was also given by Bobby Lewis, in which he describes Strasberg's reaction. "She went for him," Lewis recalled, "and said, 'now I'm going to kill him.' That was the first time those words had been used. And that was so terrifying to him that he ran out of the theatre and didn't finish the play. Harold Clurman took over the last few rehearsals."

After her visit with Stanislavski and her subsequent report to the Group, "Stella herself began to give classes that summer" (Clurman 139). Adler's work from that point on was focused on the later developments and discoveries of Stanislavski and on her experimentation with his ideas. The approach she developed was still designed to get the actor to use the self but was based more on the concept of living in and responding according to the given circumstances, or the situation set up by the playwright. She focused on a psychologically realistic approach to acting, in which the actor interprets a character's "action." "Stella's vocabulary is precise. When she says 'action,' she means the character's emotional objective" (Stella Adler: Awake & Dream). The actor then

plays every scene by utilizing a series of choices based on the character's strategies used to attempt to achieve these objectives. Describing the actor's (and her own) larger motivations, Adler says, "There is a dream. I want something. There is an inner desire to express something that you can't in daily life. And actors know that there are parts of themselves that they haven't used" (Stella Adler). In the search for a character's actions/objectives, an actor is led by her inner desire and begins to discover and use the previously undiscovered territories of herself. Until the end of her life in the early 1990s, Stella Adler trained many famous American actors using this approach at the Stella Adler Conservatory of Acting.

### STRIKE!

As it is not within the scope of this work to cover all of the developments in The Group during their history but rather to give an overview of its historical genesis and theoretical underpinnings, we jump now to perhaps the pinnacle of the Group's success.

The Group's desire was to reflect and change the life of their times. They sought plays by Americans about America. It was through the medium of such plays and their truthful

performance that they could affect change. In the summer of 1933, the actors also, as Clurman described,

tried to gather fresh information. While a year before, in the depths of the depression, the actors were making vain attempts to continue their acting classes, now, shortly after President Roosevelt's experiments had begun, they sought social knowledge. If, as I had always insisted, the artist is intimately related to the society in which he functions, the actors were going to investigate more specifically the anatomy of their own society. . . . What precisely was learned from all this is of little import here; the fact is that our actors began to question themselves, their work, their theatre. They seemed to hanker after barricade dramatics, a sense of being in the fight rather than on the side-lines...Another striking aspect of our summer was the desire for social action that seized some of our people...Our neophyte radicals wanted to fix everything. There was a veritable itch to unearth monstrous injustices they could be

indignant about, to find causes they could espouse, to seek battles they could join. (132, 140)

However, the plays they had been performing thus far were largely by writers without some direct connection to them. It follows that a writer with intimate knowledge of their inner workings could devise plays whose messages could be communicated more fully, more effectively, and could be more completely felt by the audience. Their voice was being stifled in that they were simply presenting the idea of another, realized through the interpretation of the director.

At this time in their development, the company members and directors were lacking a play to complete the 1935 season. What was needed was a play for them, about them, by them. Enter Clifford Odets, aspiring actor and musician, and original member of the Group, who had written a play called Awake and Sing! When the company was completing the flop of a production called Gold Eagle Guy, the actors were truly concerned about what to do the next day and several began asking to hear Odets' play (Carnovsky, Lewis). Strasberg refused, saying that he didn't like it. Lewis disclosed that the company had lost a good degree of faith in Strasberg,

and said that they didn't care what he thought and demanded to hear Odets' play. In fact, Lewis reveals, they found out that Clurman had liked the play and had begun dramaturgical work on it. Once the company had heard it, they insisted on producing it, and insisted that Clurman be the director (Interview). Their affinity to it was justified, given the fact that the characters were written with them in mind. Odets knew them intimately, having worked with them for several years, and wrote them into the play. In Broadway's Dreamers, the production is described as a huge success, fulfilling the company's lifelong dream of creating a theatre that spoke to and for its audience. This was the company members as themselves on stage. Their work in acting technique which gave them a better knowledge of self while getting them to live the life of the characters, and a play that was written with them in mind, combined to allow them to "realize their cherished vision of a new theatre. And they had reached that vision on Broadway. Woodward tells us that,

in Walter Winchell's phrase, they had become "somebodies." Responding artistically to the climate of the times, Clifford Odets became the voice of The Group Theatre. His plays mirrored the essence of what the Group

wanted to be and do. They commented on the social climate of America, the politics, the hopes and fears, and the struggle to survive.

(Broadway's Dreamers)

All of the Group's qualities--optimism, perseverance, stubbornness, camaraderie, etc.--are seen in Odets' work. Most importantly, Harold Clurman defines his work as the embodiment of the Group's principle "desire to get at the truthful expression of human feelings" (qtd. in Broadway's Dreamers). It is logical that the "flowering of the Group coincided with the discovery of Odets' true gift. Clifford himself said that he would never have become a playwright were it not for the Group" (Broadway's Dreamers). And in the Group, his arrival as a playwright found a home.

The New York City taxi cab drivers' strike of 1934 provided Odets and The Group with a tremendously coincidental, yet precipitous occurrence. Echoing the Group's desire to mirror and change the life of their times, Clifford Odets was inspired by contemporary societal issues. However, rather than being squashed by a society weary of its struggles and succumbing to its woes, which is what occurred with 1931 a few years before, Odets seems to have been propelled forward. At one point in 1935, four of his plays ran

concurrently. He had much to say. In fact, as Woodward conveys, one of his most famous plays was written in only three days and made it to the stage before Awake and Sing! (Broadway's Dreamers). Crawford reports that Odets disappeared for a week, and then appeared backstage with a handful of written pages. Worried about him, she asked where he had been. He stated that he had been writing a play and handed the pages to Crawford for review. That play was Waiting for Lefty (Broadway's Dreamers).

The play concerned the cab drivers' strike and took place during a meeting of the cab drivers while they waited for Lefty, who of course never comes. According to Crawford, it was written in street language, shocking at the time, but organized in such a way as to be poetic (Interview). In doing so, a new voice was created. This voice was exactly the one that the Group yearned for, and it was in their midst. It was a voice of their concerns that echoed their struggles and knew their frustrations. These were also the concerns, struggles and frustrations of their audience.

Waiting for Lefty deals with commonplace concerns of the common man. Not only is there the connection in title to Samuel Beckett's later defining piece, but there also seems to be a connection in theme--the desperation of the common



man's struggle to exist in a world which increasingly seems to squeeze him out.

Opening night of Waiting for Lefty at Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre on Fourteenth Street was a night, as Ruth Nelson declared, "to remember all the days of your life. The audience was so with this play that night that it was the essence of why the Group Theatre was formed. It all came into flower" (Interview). As Clurman notes,

Sunday night, January 5, 1935...an event took place to be noted in the annals of the American theatre...The first scene of *Lefty* had not played two minutes when a shock of delighted recognition struck the audience like a tidal wave...a kind of joyous fervor seemed to sweep the audience toward the stage. The actors no longer performed; they were being carried along as if by an exultancy of communication such as I had never witnessed in the theatre before. Audience and actors had become one. Line after line brought applause, whistles, bravos, and heartfelt shouts of kinship...There were very few taxi-drivers in that first audience, I am sure; very

few indeed who had ever been directly connected with such an event as the union meeting that provided the play its pivotal situation. When the audience at the end of the play responded to the militant question from the stage: "Well, what's the answer?" with a spontaneous roar of "Strike! Strike!" it was something more than a tribute to the play's effectiveness, more even than a testimony of the audience's hunger for constructive social action. It was the birth cry of the thirties. Our youth had found its voice. It was a call to join the good fight for a greater measure of life in a world free of economic fear, falsehood, and craven servitude to stupidity and greed. The audience, I say, was delirious. It stormed the stage, which I persuaded the stunned author to mount. People went from the theatre dazed and happy: a new awareness and confidence had entered their lives. (148)

Elia Kazan played a taxi-driver in that performance.

Lewis described Kazan's performance as "sensational"

(Interview). Fully understanding his part and the play, and “freed of all inhibitions,” Kazan approached the audience and screamed, “Strike!” and the audience erupted in applause, stomping and shouts of “Strike!” (Lewis). Some believe that the union movement was in part spurred on by the Group (Winters). The spirit of revolt coursed through Odets’ plays, and many members became more socially and politically active. This ended up having a deleterious effect during the McCarthy/HUAC hearings, as many Group members who had expressed interest in the Communist party during this era were investigated and blacklisted. Their interest in Russian art and in working as a collective didn’t help their cause. Nor did the fact that they lived in the equivalent of a commune that they called “Groupstoi.” Regardless, this period saw the members of the company become more empowered to effect the societal change which they called for on stage. Odets, the directors and the Group forged forward and continued to try to “change the world by changing the theatre which mirrored it” (Broadway’s Dreamers). This period represented the high point of the work of the Group Theatre.

The Group Theatre experiment began with an idea and the idealistic talking of Clurman and Strasberg. Although the ideas weren’t new, the implementation was. Changing the face

of a Broadway that was only interested in the audience to the degree that they would pay for tickets, the Group wished to use the training of the actor within an ensemble as a means of connecting with an audience. Clurman states that he

was well aware of the fact that there had been other permanent companies in the recent theatre (the Neighborhood Playhouse and the Civic Repertory had them). As for training actors, at least two other organizations proposed to do this. In fact, every one of the reforms our theatre might bring had been announced, at least, by a previous organization. My approach emphasized the theatre's reason for being. New technical methods, no matter how intriguing in themselves, had a very minor value unless they were related to a content that was humanly valuable. First, to the theatre artists themselves--to actors, since they were the theatre's crucial factor; actors were citizens of a community before they took on their dubious connection with "art." Second, theatre ideas were to be important to

an audience, of which the actors were a focus, for it is the audience (seen as a "community") that has given birth to its artists. The criterion of judgment for what is good or bad in the theatre--be it in plays, acting, or staging--does not derive from some abstract standard of artistic or literary excellence, but from a judgment of what is fitting--that is, humanly desirable--for a particular audience. (32-33)

Unfortunately, ideas and idealism ultimately gave way to the same pressures that historically drove Broadway. What was humanly desirable for their audience wasn't always a standard of excellence. Rather, the audience often desired a named star, and the artistic ideals which the company lived by ultimately caused a rift.

#### THE PARTING OF WAYS

There are many theories as to the cause of the company's ultimate demise. Undoubtedly it came as a result of many forces, described in Broadway's Dreamers, which split the membership: continued financial struggles, the constant search for new plays, the attempt to subsidize the company by

farming out talent to Hollywood, importing “stars” from Hollywood in order to bolster the box office (a practice which was contrary to the original ideal), politics, and fights over which “method” of training and technique was correct. Ultimately, the need to raise funds took over and the bickering continued until a demoralized Cheryl Crawford had had enough and resigned (Broadway’s Dreamers). This was followed by the resignation of Strasberg. “Clurman then posted a sign on his office door that stated that the only members of The Group Theatre were the current cast of Golden Boy,” which included some imported Hollywood names such as Frances Farmer and Mladen Sikulovich, aka Karl Malden (Lewis). This certainly outraged many of the original company who were not in the cast (Nelson). They were then contracted on a by-play basis. Although Golden Boy was the biggest financial success the Group had ever known and allowed them to stay afloat for another two years, the means by which it was cast and directed were in complete contradiction to the principles on which the Group was founded. For purely economic reasons, it utilized a star system rather than an ensemble approach and excluded many dedicated Group stalwarts. It was the beginning of the end of the most novel and productive experiment in American theatre history.

The final chapter of the Group's ten year run arrived without any of the éclat that accompanied their storied, epic entry into the annals of American theatre history. Although Clurman claimed never to have "officially called it quits or formally ended the Group" (281), he closed the book on the company with his May 18, 1941 article entitled "Group Theatre's Future" in the New York Times. Always keeping the audience in mind as an essential part of the Group's genesis, ontogeny and phylogeny, Clurman seems to have written this article for them. In the article, which he quotes in The Fervent Years, he accurately articulated the cause of the disbanding of the Group as follows:

The basic defect in our activity then was that, while we tried to maintain a true theatre policy artistically, we proceeded economically on a show business basis. Our means and our ends were in fundamental contradiction (281).

## CHAPTER THREE

## Genealogy and Contemporary Ideology

A CAREER LAUNCHING PAD

The Group's workings generally focused on the training of actors within an ensemble and the production of new American plays which spoke to and for their audience. The experience provided a seminal influence for the careers of its members. The members of this company became the most influential actors, directors, designers, playwrights and, more importantly, teachers that this country has yet known. Their most significant contribution to the world of theatre was in the sharing of the knowledge that they gained in their experience with the Group, as many became the prophets of acting technique in this country. Legions of today's professional actors studied in conservatories founded by, or utilizing techniques developed by, the Group members in their later teaching careers.

Elia Kazan, who later became one of this century's most celebrated film directors, co-founded with Bobby Lewis and Cheryl Crawford The Actors' Studio, a training ground for established and new acting talent. The New York Times press



release of Sept. 12, 1947 comments:

the formation of The Studio, a novel drama school designed especially for Broadway actors to study and improve themselves at no cost, was announced today. It will be conducted by Elia Kazan, Robert Lewis and Martin Ritt, well-known directors, and Cheryl Crawford, sponsor of Brigadoon, who will be in charge of the administration. Mr. Lewis will teach those who have had considerable Broadway background, while Messrs. Kazan and Ritt will look after those with little or no Broadway experience. (qtd. in Hirsch 26)

Members of Robert Lewis' first class at the Studio included Herbert Berghof, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Cliff, Mildred Dunnock, Tom Ewell, John Forsythe, Anne Jackson, Sidney Lumet, Kevin McCarthy, Karl Malden, E.G. Marshall, Patricia Neal, William Redfield, Jerome Robbins, Maureen Stapleton, Beatrice Straight, Eli Wallach and David Wayne. Included as members of Elia Kazan's first class at the Studio in the fall of 1947 were Jocelyn Brando (Marlon's sister), Joan Copeland (Arthur Miller's sister), Betsy Drake, Lou Gilbert, Julie Harris, Steven Hill, Cloris Leachman, Nehemiah Persoff and

James Whitmore. Martin Balsam, Kim Hunter and Vivian Nathan joined the class in early 1948 (Hirsch 26-29).

Were it not for Kazan, the career of Karl Malden would never have happened. Kazan knew of Malden's work in the days of the Group and cast him in some of his greatest roles, most notably in A Streetcar Named Desire and in On the Waterfront. Malden, a former steel worker, made a career of using his life's experience in his work. He is a true "method" actor and seeks a gritty realism and psychological truth in his work. He is most often cast in parts he knows well--roles about and for the common man. He speaks the common man's language and, like the members of the Group, had the common man's preoccupations and struggles.

Bobby Lewis, for the rest of his life until he died in the fall of 1997, taught professional actors acting technique so that they might continue to sharpen their skills. Lee Strasberg also taught at the Actors Studio and eventually opened his own studio. Sanford Meisner opened an acting school at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Stella Adler founded the Stella Adler Conservatory. This group of teachers had a profound impact on future generations of actors, as they trained the actors in techniques developed during the years of experimentation in the Group Theatre.

By way of the evolution of actor training, there were differences in each of these teachers' approaches. Apart from the basic philosophical differences between Adler's and Strasberg's work, Bobby Lewis was also "very precise about his differences with" Strasberg's method: "From Lewis's perspective, when an actor searched within his own experience for the psychological truth of a character, he often ended up emphasizing 'his emotional reaction to a situation rather than the character's'" (Gussow 27). The current leader of the Actors Studio, director Arthur Penn, describes himself as more "ecumenical" in approach. He feels that this is exactly what the Studio, now in its 50th season, needs:

Penn has worked with actors--among them Marlon Brando, Dustin Hoffman, Paul Newman, Gene Hackman, Estelle Parsons, Kim Stanley, Maureen Stapleton and Anne Bancroft--whose work epitomizes the intense, illuminated naturalism popularly associated with the Studio. . . . By leading the Studio into middle age with a pragmatic, comparatively open-door policy which would have been alien to Strasberg, Penn has succeeded, consciously or not, in remodeling the Studio

much in his own image. . . . “I am not an undivided devotee to Strasberg,” Penn says with characteristic directness, and indeed his willingness to distance himself from America’s most renowned acting teacher has been the pivotal strategy of his regime. “Lee had the fervor of the evangelical, which suggested he had the only truth, and I don’t find that acceptable. I am not an acolyte, and my temperament is not that of a monk--my approach is more ecumenical. . . . Lee was a very gifted teacher for some--no teacher can reach every student--and there were many he taught who clearly showed the benefit of his instruction...But he spent too much time defending himself from people of equal stature--Stella, Bobby, Sandy--all of whom were wonderful teachers, brilliant practitioners and explorers.” (Hirsch 24-25)

Having found a variety of means to achieving truth in acting, Penn states, “I don’t believe there is such an exquisite or encapsulated thing as ‘the Method’ that only we have the secret of. At the Studio, we don’t call it ‘the Method’ but

simply 'doing the work.' Isn't the so-called 'Method,' in some variation, what all good actors do?" (Hirsch 25). As a director who has worked with several generations of actors, he seems here to be acknowledging the influence of the discoveries of the Group, whether it be Strasberg's use of imagination, improvisation and affective memory, or Lewis' and Adler's emphasis on the here-and-now of the given circumstances of the characters within the play. Rather than continue a closed-door policy with a singular approach to training, Penn decided to revamp the system, looking at it from "the perspective of several generations of actors who had been trained in this so-called Method but had gone elsewhere to teach and to develop their own exercises" (Hirsch 26). So the approach to the training of future generations has come full circle. Rather than continue to teach the same original Method, the Studio has incorporated the continued evolution of technique. The students are now teaching the teachers and their new experiments with the old approach are being developed for the future. The influence of the Group is still there, but it is being adapted for contemporary times. Perhaps this fact is more closely aligned than Strasberg himself continued to be with the original ideals of the Group while he ran the Studio. The

Studio's current training utilizes an approach that reflects contemporary discoveries. Also, the Studio has begun for the first time in its history to present a performance season. Therefore, like the Group of six decades ago, the Studio is utilizing a new technique (influenced by the original one) to train a company of actors and create performances that reflect a changing society.

Doing this must logically affect style and ultimately incorporate alternative performance styles. Penn believes the "work," as he calls it, is a perfect training medium for realism and for film acting, which depends on a "sense of inner life" (qtd. in Hirsch 28). However, he wants the approach to training for the stage to be unlimited by style. If it is limited,

it is being used incorrectly. Properly employed, it is an opportunity for invention and discovery. Historically, there was some misuse of the work, and people claimed they were doing it when they were not. The work was never intended to be against the play or the playwright, or the unified field of theatre. The American acting tradition does have a strong realist bent, but someday in the distance we hope to have actors trained to do

the most poetic of plays. (qtd. in Hirsch 28)

Penn also states, "I am a director rather than a teacher or an actor...and I approach the work from a directorial viewpoint...As a director I make use of whatever is there in the actors, and that can vary" (qtd. in Hirsch 25). Perhaps this is the true difference between Penn and Strasberg, as Strasberg was primarily a teacher who directed early in his career. Penn and Kazan were both directors primarily who applied their experience in the classroom.

The legendary Uta Hagen demonstrates a large degree of influence in her work as an actress and teacher, crediting Clurman specifically. Her studio also clearly resembles the Group in form and in its goals. In her classic treatise, Respect for Acting, she says,

I had lost the faith in the character, and the world the character lived in. In 1947, I worked in a play under the direction of Harold Clurman. He opened a new world in the professional theater for me. He took away my "tricks." He imposed no line readings, no gestures, no positions on the actors. At first I floundered badly because for many years I had become accustomed to

using specific outer directions as the material from which to construct the mask for my character, the mask behind which I would hide throughout the performance. Mr. Clurman refused to accept a mask. He demanded *me* in the role. My love of acting was slowly reawakened as I began to deal with a strange new technique of evolving in the character. I was not allowed to begin with, or concern myself at any time with, a preconceived form. I was assured that a form would *result* from the work we were doing. During the performance of the play, I discovered a new relationship to the audience which was so close, so intimate, that I thanked Harold Clurman for breaking down the wall which had so often separated me from the audience. . . . I believe in my work and in what we are doing at the HB Studio. I pray that with patience and foresight a first-rate acting company will develop out of the Studio, a company guided by first-rate young directors, and, hopefully, young playwrights.



When this happens, it will be a company of people who have grown together, who are united by common aims and by a way of work which has a common language and results in a homogeneous form of expression. The four walls to house such a group will follow, and then perhaps we will be able to make a real contribution to the American theater (6-8).

In her jacket introduction to the book, Hagen instructs the reader as follows:

I have attempted to break down all the areas in which you can work and search for realities in yourself which serve the character and the play. . . . Put your instincts and sense of truth, your understanding of human realities to use while probing and grappling with the content and the roots of the material. Be specific and real in your actions, and they will communicate your artistic statement. Bring your universal understanding of the present to the present. . . as a real artist.

This book elaborates on Hagen's struggles with the techniques

of acting and puts forth her teachings. It deals with techniques that emphasize action and deepen the actor's knowledge of himself and of the art of acting. Like Strasberg, she describes "object exercises." She defines the concepts of "given circumstances," "objective" and "action." Finally, she teaches the definition of the play and identification with the character the actor will undertake. Like her mentor, Harold Clurman, and the Group before her, Hagen seems most concerned with "truth" in the creative process.

Whole companies have been founded on the same principles espoused by The Group. Actor W.H. Macy and playwright, essayist and screenwriter/director David Mamet, both products of the current Chicago theatre scene, founded The Atlantic Theatre Company. Mamet's essays discuss the Group and quote Stanislavski heavily (Writing viii,15, 22, 27-30, 126-134; Some Freaks ix-x, 69-77, ). Obviously, he is influenced by both sources. What is most interesting is the operating structure of his company and the book which they have produced. The company operates in Chicago during the theatre season. In the summers, they go to Vermont for a six week training session during which company members and prospective company members are trained. The method of training has been document by Melissa Bruder and fellow

company members in a book entitled A Practical Handbook for the Actor. The system described demonstrates obvious lineage that can be traced to Adler. It utilizes the concept of “action” being the driving force of a character. The word “action” here is used in precisely the same way that the word “objective” is used in earlier pedagogical treatises. Mamet also looks to Stanislavski, and quotes him often in his essays. Mamet says, the actor must “bring to the stage the life of the human soul” (qtd. in Some Freaks 77). In order to portray a character, the actor must “stick to the channel” (Writing 15). The channel is described as the objective. It is also described as the “idea” of the play (Writing 15, 130-134). He owes a lot to the Group here. Like the Group, he also concerned with the notion of “truth” (Writing 131), and he believes, in Stanislavski’s words, that you “can play well or play badly, but play *truly*” (qtd. in Writing 29).

Mamet is always a controversial writer, and recently has contradicted some of this earlier writing. In his latest book, a collection of essays entitled True and False, he bluntly announces that “The Stanislavski ‘Method,’ and the technique of the schools derived from it, is nonsense. It is not a technique out of the practice of which one develops a skill--it is a cult” (6). This is an interesting change from a seeming

disciple of the founder of the “System.” However, a deeper reading into this new collection reveals that he is really denouncing Stanislavski *a la* Strasberg. In the essay “Some Thoughts,” he refers to the technique as the “Stanislavsky ‘method’” (6), and in later essays entitled “The Rehearsal Process” and “Acting ‘As If,’” he stands by the concept of the “action” (72, 120). In “Ancestor Worship,” even though he uses a blanket condemnation of Stanislavski, he appears to specifically argue on the grounds of the limitations of early Stanislavski (i.e. Strasberg):

“Emotional memory,” “sense memory,” and the tenets of the Method back to and including Stanislavsky’s trilogy are a lot of hogwash. This “method” does not work; it cannot be practiced; it is, in theory, design, and supposed execution supererogatory--it is as useless as teaching pilots to flap their arms while in the cockpit in order to increase the lift of the plane. (12)

In “The Rehearsal Process,” his defense of the actor’s use of “actions” further reveals his alignment with Adler’s approach:

What should happen in the rehearsal process?

Two things. . . 1. The play should be blocked.  
2. the actors should become acquainted with  
the actions they are going to perform. What  
is an action? An action is an attempt to  
achieve a goal. . . the attempt to accomplish  
something. (72)

Not only is Mamet aligned with Adler in terms of this approach to technique, he also mimics her work with the Group in his discovery of the flaws of early Stanislavski. He, too, has revisited his earlier views and is evolving his approach to technique.

Mamet's plays, like Clifford Odets', are known for their street language. They reflect the life of the times, not always pleasantly. They often explore the darker impulses of human beings engaged in a struggle for survival in a world that more often than not tries to squash them. Even more interesting is the fact that he always writes with specific actor colleagues in mind. His characters speak the voice of his generation. He is a contemporary artist, without any direct links to the Group, who has espoused much of their philosophy of training, writing, company operation and theatrical production.

Robert Cohen, acting teacher and writer, owes much to the Group in his use of a Stanislavski-derived approach, surely

influenced by Strasberg and Adler, built around the concept of the objective. In his books Acting Power and Creative Play Direction, one can see the evolution of modern acting theory in his work. He covers improvisational games, imagination, period style, theatricality, Stanislavski-based tactics, emotional work, and much more (Acting Power 24-46, 81-131, 148-188). This would lead one to believe that Cohen is taking an interdisciplinary approach to the work, utilizing that which works, regardless of evangelical ideology. William Penn would be proud. It is evident that Cohen, like Penn, sees the need for creative directors who understand the theatrical acting process, and credits the growth of repertory theatres and professional actor training programs (Creative viii). This need, therefore, is tied to the Group, as all repertory companies and training programs somehow follow in the footsteps of the Group as they create an ensemble and develop training programs that support their performance goals.

#### STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Examples of influence may also be seen in places that are not so obvious. Peter Brook, the director who founded the International Center for Theatre Research, has been considered a major figure in the avant garde from the sixties to the

present. He is not interested in acting technique. He is, however, deeply interested in performance theory. He also believes in the interdisciplinary use of the principles of those who have gone before and, although he doesn't believe in a singular approach, he does see the need for an overriding theoretical ideal. In his preface to The Shifting Point, Brook says,

I have never believed in a single truth. Neither my own, nor those of others. I believe in all schools, all theories can be useful in some place, at some time. But I have discovered that one can only live by a passionate, and absolute, identification with a point of view. However, as time goes by, as we change, as the world changes, targets alter and the viewpoint shifts. Looking back over many years of essays written, ideas spoken in many places on so many varied occasions, one thing strikes me as being consistent. For a point of view to be of any use at all, one must commit oneself totally to it, one must defend it to the very death. Yet, at the same time, there is an inner voice that murmurs: "Don't

take it too seriously. Hold on tightly, let go lightly.” (xii)

The majority of Brook's work has been in directing classical theatre and in creating cross-cultural drama. One would not expect to find influence here. However, the simple fact that he formed a company of actors who share a common vision for a new theatre and combines the training and experimentation with new technique within his production process is built on the structural foundation laid by the Group. Further, there are two overriding principles that govern Brook's work which seem to be intimately connected to the Group spirit. We see in Gerald Feil's documentary footage of Brook at work that the director is interested in finding a language of performance that “makes the invisible visible” and that creates a collective experience between actor and audience that helps to convey a cultural meaning of the performance. Also, his performance concepts are all built first and foremost around the interaction of the ensemble. The content builds out of that. The communication of a deeply cultural message to the audience and the use of an ensemble approach were inherently part of the work of the Group from its inception.

Other modern directors, playwrights and performers acknowledge ties, sometimes direct, to the Group and its



graduates. Performer Beatrice Roth states, "Whether one works in the formal context of 'Method' or not, its basic principles prevail: real thoughts in performance; use of objects, including ideas and people as objects; discovery of physical idiosyncrasies; and surprise element in character" (qtd. in Hirsch 26).

John Gronbeck-Tedesco, a teacher and writer, bases his book, Acting Through Exercises, as the title reveals, on the concept of exercises for the actor. It blends the traditional approaches of the System and the Method (citing Stanislavski, Boleslavsky, Strasberg, Adler, Hagen, Lewis, Moore, Hull, and Meisner) with

new voices and ideas [which] have gradually expanded the traditional training regimen. Grotowski, Schechner, Chaikin, Barba, Morowitz, Brook, Feldenkrais, and Alexander; bioenergetics, gestalt psychology, the human potential movement, object relations theory, neurolinguistic processing, yoga and the martial arts: All have contributed, directly and indirectly, to contemporary performance pedagogy. This is not to say that the old masters have been displaced. On the

contrary, [they] have become important in new ways. First, their approaches still provide some of the language and categories (and sometimes prejudices) used to organize training. Second, many of their basic exercises continue to be taught alongside those from more recent sources. The upshot is that American acting is becoming a jubilantly eclectic affair in which new and old protocols are juxtaposed and mixed—but often unconsciously and with uneven results. This book comes largely out of a desire to integrate new and old. Its main purpose is to provide a practical synthesis of some of those divergent practices that are increasingly a part of mainstream actor education (xxvii).

Here Gronbeck-Tedesco acknowledges the Group, among others. As in the early days of the Group, he utilizes an expanded breadth of curriculum in “non-acting” disciplines. Also, his claim that the old “masters” created a language and an organizing structure for training is seen throughout the theatre world.

The theme that seems to echo throughout modern

approaches to training is that of interdisciplinary pedagogical techniques. Bruce Miller, in his 1995 article "Stanislavski's Shadow," describes the confusion over acting technique even after nearly a century of evolution. He distills the problem down to one idea: whether the actor should approach the work "from the inside out or the outside in" (18). Ultimately, he decides that the actor must blend whatever approaches are necessary to achieve the desired result on stage (25).

Jeremy Whelan has developed a new technique of actor training and rehearsal which seems at face value to be a diversion from the course set by Stanislavski and Strasberg. Yet, continuing the interdisciplinary theme, he is an essayist who has drawn heavily from both sources in his advice to actors. Also, although he claims that his approach is exactly the opposite of traditional, Stanislavski-based systems (i.e. like the Group) which are structured to analyze first and create stage characterizations later (5), Whelan's claims closely recreate what the Group was doing in their rehearsal process. In his book Instant Acting, Whelan emphasizes staying "in the moment" (8) and living in the "given circumstances" (30). He argues against a Stanislavski-based approach on the grounds that, "the character you *read* may be very different from the character you *meet*" (8). His logic is flawed in that this is

always true, regardless of the acting technique used. He states that “The goal is to build your character’s memories into your instrument” (30). This is exactly what Strasberg was attempting with his emotional recall/sense memory exercises-- finding a physical and mental connection between character and actor. Whelan cites “three types of memories...physical, intellectual and emotional” (24) and says that “when doing the Tape Technique, the emotions are leading” (27). Strasberg was also most concerned with the flow of emotions. Whelan also claims that the purpose is to prompt actors to follow their impulses (49), in contrast to the Stanislavski way, which risks the actor getting overly intellectual (8) and prevents the actor from the spontaneity and creativity of emotional and physical impulses (9). Yes, the Group did extensive analysis, but they spent most of their early time away from the script, improvising and exploring, in order to make the characters their own, following their own impulses. In some ways, Whelan’s approach agrees more with tradition than it disagrees.

Other contemporary artists, especially those of the avant garde, have also responded to the Method. Those who champion a new technique of directing called Viewpoints Theory do not try to be the opposite of Stanislavski or

Strasberg. Rather, this theory endorses those approaches as effective and attempts to expand on the potential of stage language. Viewpoints Theory is growing as an alternative dramatic theory that has developed as an answer to the problems with Method Acting. Steven Drukman states,

It's an interesting juggling trick; students need to know both this century's governing ideas, and the problems with them. . . . But theatre training has lagged behind. In almost every instance, tyro actors and directors still sign up for the American version of Stanislavsky's Method, or some distillation of it. Whether inflected [sic] by Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg or Sanford Meisner, the lessons young theatre students usually learn are fundamentally the same as those their teachers and their teachers' teachers learned. Even those theorists and instructors who claim to be anti-Method are often using the same vocabulary-- 'motivation,' 'action,' 'objective'--and challenge students with questions rooted in psychological realism. (31)

Drukman's premise is not that the American version

(“method”) of Stanislavski’s system doesn’t work--rather it is that this approach, rooted in psychological realism, has been passed on because it does work. . . . However, like anything that codifies and systematizes, it often works because it erases complexities--so it may be best suited for certain types of drama where plot (what people do) and behavior (how and why people do it) are the aspects that need to be both underlined and explicated. (31)

“Perhaps,” Drukman surmises, the bread and butter of what-do-I-want-and-how-do-I-get-it has nourished young student actors and directors just because there’s little else on the menu. . . . Viewpoints theory. . . formally codified in the early 80’s at NYU/Tisch School of the Arts, is really a synthesis of disparate performance techniques. (Drukman 31)

Teachers come to Viewpoints Theory from dance and theatre backgrounds. It can be used as an alternative method that works for many forms of performance, ranging from Naturalism to Ritualistic Dance/Theatre. Wendell Beavers, an

early innovator of Viewpoints, claims that, since it is not limiting like Strasberg's approach, students may utilize elements of both theatre and dance: "Because of this cultivated lack of bias about the proprietary limits of dance and theatre, our students have access to the tools of both worlds" (qtd. in Drukman 33). This reflects Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg, both of whom saw their later work evolve toward the late experimentation of Stanislavski and his students (Meyerhold and Vakhtangov), who were exploring movement as a tool for the actor and director. Clurman recalls that "Strasberg had been most impressed in Moscow with the Meyerhold productions, as they had always held a theoretical fascination for him. In his production of Gold Eagle Guy he displayed a greater concern with movement and the expressive value of physical materials than he had ever had before" (139).

Drukman points out that, although the approach utilizes tenets that can be traced to Merce Cunningham and Jerzy Grotowski, it is not anti-Method, as it even utilizes exercises developed by Sandy Meisner (33).

It is a truly post-Modern approach to acting and directing: in its blending of divergent techniques, in its refusal to privilege one aspect of its system over another, in its

respect for the contingencies of various performance spaces and contexts, and in its “use what you will, discard the rest” spirit. Like the method, different artists and teachers use the Viewpoints in various ways, and according to Beavers, “it can be used as either an improvisational exercise or compositional tool for a finished play.” Viewpoints, then, can serve as a common vocabulary for actor and director during the rehearsal process. (Drukman 33)

Michael Malone, instructor of Viewpoint Theory at Syracuse University, says,

In my opinion, the Viewpoints are synonymous with *theatre*. They are an exploration and examination of the complex relationships that occur between the actor and the audience, the actor and physical space, and among the actors themselves. Viewpoint Theory simply gives these relationships a structural vocabulary. It also illuminates any text it’s applied to, from the most mundane kitchen-sink drama to the



most shapeless, abstract score. (qtd. in  
Drukman 33)

This connection between actor and audience is found in the Group's original desire, as described by Clurman. Strasberg said that he wanted to "stimulate." In other words, he wanted audience action. This idea is seen throughout 20th century art. It is, for example, a major aspect of Peter Brook's experimentation (Feil). Influential 20th century artist Marcel Duchamp felt that the presentation of a work of art was like an electrical circuit, which was incomplete if there was not a response from the audience ("Marcel Duchamp").

The structure of Viewpoints, as described by Wendell Beavers, includes the performer's focus and the audience's perception:

Originally, the perceptual landscape of the audience and the inner field of focus of the performer were divided and labeled as Space, Time, Shape, Movement, Story and Emotion (qtd. in Drukman 33).

These six components replaced "sense memory" and "emotional recall" that are crucial to Method training, but do not eliminate psychological realism altogether.

Viewpoints Theory distills each act, scene,

dance to these six elements. The trick to approaching a text comes in finding different valences for those six elements in performance. Having an actor concentrate on Stanley playing at a different “Time” from Stella, or teaching a director to score the “Shape” between Mitch and Blanche can yield new insights into a 50 year old, Method-based, psychologically realistic play (Drukman 33).

Anne Bogart, a major proponent, increases the six viewpoints to nine: “Four Viewpoints of Time (Tempo, Duration, Kinesthetic Response, Repetition) and Five Viewpoints of Space (Shape, Gesture, Architecture, Relationship and Topography)” (Drukman 34). Like the Group before her, Bogart trains her cast in her theory before rehearsing. Scott Zigler, director of actor training at American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Mass, finds it “useful for all styles...even though I usually direct realistic, traditional narrative” (qtd. in Drukman 34). He says that it has also had a positive effect on his ability to compose in space, and “all actors should know it, because young American actors are not good at using their bodies...so the viewpoints expand their physical vocabulary. They

become more apt to react physically, rather than intellectually. The intellectual process *never* leads to good acting” (qtd. in Drukman 34). Again we have an artist implying, like Jeremy Whelan, that the Method is negatively intellectual. Not coincidentally, Zigler is a co-author of A Practical Handbook for the Actor, which documents the technique developed by David Mamet, and he has a working relationship with Mamet. He directed Mamet’s most recent play, The Old Neighborhood, currently running on Broadway.

Although Zigler feels that the Method is negatively intellectual, his premise of actors reacting physically is very much a Group quality. To react physically requires an actor to live in the moment and to play/react from the given circumstances of the character. Zigler doesn’t see this, but he does acknowledge a connection between Viewpoints and the later developments of Stanislavski. As described by Drukman: “Zigler...points out that this postmodern form is both a reaction to the American Method as well as a continuation of its basic precepts. ‘In Russia, they are developing what Stanislavski was doing at the *end* of his career--which is far more structured, formal and physical work, like the Viewpoints’” (34).

Ironically, that is exactly what Adler turned to after her visit to Paris with Harold Clurman and her serendipitous

visit with the Moscow master. This highlights the constant misinterpretation of all traditional American actor training as “Method” acting, that is, the approach devised by Strasberg. Drukman ends with exactly this point in quoting Jon Jory’s forward to the book Viewpoints: Anne Bogart: “So, even as Jon Jory warns... ‘Just like Konstantin’s acolytes, many will misunderstand it, do it badly and give it a bad name,’ Viewpoint theory continues to flourish *because* of all these points of view” (34). Too bad Jory doesn’t recognize that the real misunderstanding is not the misunderstanding of Stanislavski. Strasberg was the primary culprit there. The real misunderstanding is the belief that all traditional American actor training is a result of The Method (i.e. Strasberg’s “Method”). Even Sonia Moore, respected guru of the Stanislavski system, who has written several books documenting the approach, has been confused. Her classic handbook entitled The Stanislavski System--The Professional Training of an Actor was originally published under the title The Stanislavski Method. Her title change demonstrates her confusion of word “method,” actually attributed to Strasberg, with Stanislavski’s “system.” However, as has been documented above, the members of the Group developed, through time, a variety of approaches that also continue to

flourish and influence current and future generations of actors, even through the conduit of the teachers who seem to eschew those same techniques.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

A work of art must be pondered by the audience and their perception of its subject must be altered in some meaningful way. The effective artist demands this of the audience. It is the logical result of the artist having thought about the subject matter--an object or concept--in an artistic manner. This was the desire of the Group theatre. Their work required them to think about the life of their times, in all of its manifestations and outcomes, in an artistic manner. Their objective was to have the artistic product pondered by the audience, and most importantly, to cause change in their thinking and actions--thereby changing the life of their times. After their successful opening production, Harold Clurman felt,

Like the reviewers themselves, we were unprepared for the very thing we helped call to life. In the program for our second production I had published a short statement under the title: "What the Group Theatre Wants." The last sentences in this statement read: "In the end, however, the development of playwrights, actors, repertory and the rest

are important only as they lead to the creation of a tradition of common values, as an active consciousness of a common way of looking at and dealing with life. A theatre in our country today should aim to create an Audience. When an audience feels that it is really at one with a theatre; when audience and theatre-people can feel that they are both the answer to one another, and that both may act as leaders to one another, there we have the Theatre in its truest form. To create such a Theatre is our real purpose.” (72)

Their vision to transform Broadway and the American theatre world involved a type of play, an ensemble, a technique and an audience. This vision continues today throughout the theatre world.

Julie Taymor, eclectic avant garde director, is transforming Broadway today with her interdisciplinary, multicultural approach to directing and design. About her work on The Lion King, she says, “I’m inspired by technique. Just like every artist, you can use a technique which you filter through yourself and make it your own. It is for us these two events that are going on, the one backstage and the one

watching it is a community event. You are part of an experience, a momentary experience, and that is life-giving” (Taymor).

Clurman comments on the first performance of The House of Connelly: “Our first program read: ‘The Group Theatre (under the auspices of the Theatre Guild) presents--’ The official announcement that preceded the opening merely said: ‘This theatre is an organization of actors and directors formed with the ultimate aim of creating a permanent acting company to maintain regular New York seasons’” (58).

“Permanent” is relative in history. Obviously the company was not permanent; it no longer produces plays. However, more important is the permanence of the most significant gift that the Group gave to the world of theatre in America.

This gift was not in the productions that they staged. It was not even in the techniques that they developed. Their impact reached infinitely beyond those productions. The real gift was in the sharing of their discoveries as many of the company members became teachers who trained future generations of actors. What is perhaps most telling is the roster of actors trained by members of the Group. The actors with whom the general public is familiar continues to grow. And the approaches to training today, even at the Actors



Studio--which has the clearest connection to the original Group--continue to evolve as the teachers experiment, and continue to incorporate new ideas from their students and others who have redeveloped ideas which they learned from the original teachers.

Although the Group became split as a result of disagreements over pedagogy, and the "Method" has been questioned and has been a point of controversy through the years, the most important ideals of the Group remain intact. Present successful theatres and schools build their philosophy on an ensemble approach which incorporates an evolving means of training that allows actors to arrive at a "truth" in performance that reflects the life of their times.

This is their legacy. The teachers, directors, designers, playwrights, producers and actors whose careers developed in The Group truly did change American Theatre. Their students were part of the Golden Age of Hollywood and the Golden Age of Broadway, many of whom became the teachers of the current generation of actors.

William Penn says,

As an idea, the Studio is as viable as it ever was. The complaint we hear from our constituency is that directors who come out

of film schools know nothing of the acting process. . . . There is no longer the tradition of directors coming out of the theatre, and so there is more need than ever for a place like the Studio. (qtd. in Hirsch 29)

This process of generational teaching and reteaching will surely continue. We must remember that the Group's ultimate desire was to edify and thereby effect change. Efficacy would require edification of both actor and audience. Although many contemporary artists continue to misinterpret such origins, the Group's lasting legacy is in the influence of this current generation of artists, regardless of their choice of form or style, and through all of them, their audiences.

## WORKS CITED

- Adler, Stella. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.
- Aristotle. On the Art of Poetry. Trans. Ingram Bywater. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Atkinson, Brooks. "A Rare Play, Rarely Acted, Theater Again!" The New York Times. September 29, 1931.
- Baldwin, Neil. Edison: Inventing the Century. New York: Hyperion, 1995.
- Brand, Phoebe. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.
- Barker, Margaret. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.
- Broadway's Dreamers: The Legacy of The Group Theatre. Producers. Joan Kramer, David Heeley, Joanne Woodward. Director. David Heeley. Writer. Steve Lawson. Host. Joanne Woodward. Consultant. Helen Krich Chinoy. PBS, WNET New York, Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 1988.
- Brook, Peter. The Shifting Point: Theatre, Film, Opera 1946-1987. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987.
- Carnovsky, Morris. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.
- Clurman, Harold. The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre & the 30's. 3rd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.
- Cohen, Robert. Acting Power: An Introduction to Acting. Palo Alto, California: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1978.

Cohen, Robert, and John Harrop. Creative Play Direction. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984.

Crawford, Cheryl. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.

Drukman, Steven. "Entering the Postmodern Studio: Viewpoint Theory." American Theatre. Jan. 1998: 30-34.

Feil, Gerald. Peter Brook: The Empty Space. New York: Mystic Fire Video, Inc., 1994.

Gronbeck-Tedesco, John L. Acting Through Exercises: A Synthesis of Classical and Contemporary Approaches. Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1992.

Gussow, Mel. "First Things First--An Interview with Robert Lewis." American Theatre. Jan. 1998: 27.

Hagen, Uta with Haskel Frankel. Respect for Acting. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973.

Hepburn, Katherine. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.

Hirsch, Foster. "Arthur Penn's Open Door." American Theatre. Jan. 1998: 24-29.

Hull, S. Loraine. Strasberg's Method as Taught by Lorrie Hull: A Practical Guide for Actors, Teachers and Directors. Woodbridge, Connecticut: Ox Bow Publishing, Inc., 1985.

Kazan, Elia. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.

Kingsley, Sidney. Speech. "Williamstown Theatre Festival Tribute to the Group Theatre."

Kraber, Tony. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.

Lewis, Robert. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.

Mamet, David. Some Freaks. New York: Penguin Group Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1989.

---. True and False. New York: Pantheon Books, a division of Random-House, Inc., 1997.

---. Writing in Restaurants. New York: Penguin Group Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1986.

"Marcel Duchamp." CBS Sunday Morning. prod. Charles Osgood. CBS Television. New York. 12 April, 1998.

Miller, Bruce. "Stanislavski's Shadow." Dramatics. Oct. 1995: 18-25.

Nagler, A. M. A Source Book in Theatrical History (Sources of Theatrical History). Second Edition. New York: Dover Publications, 1952.

Nelson, Ruth. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.

Strasberg, Lee. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.

Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!. Videocassette. Director. Merrill Brockway. Producer. Catherine Tatge. Writer. Glenn Berenbeim. American Masters Series. New York: A Public Media Incorporated Release. A Co-Production of WNET/NEW YORK & the Center for Documentary Media, Inc., 1989.

Stoddard, Eunice. Interview. Broadway's Dreamers.

---. Speech. "Williamstown Theatre Festival Tribute to the Group Theatre."

Taymor, Julie. Interview. CBS Sunday Morning. prod. Charles Osgood. int. Euginia Zuckerman. CBS Television. New York. 6 June, 1998.

Whelan, Jeremy. Instant Acting: A Revolutionary Acting, Rehearsal and Audition Method for Beginners to Professionals. Cincinnati, Ohio: Betterway Books, 1994.

“Williamstown Theatre Festival Tribute to the Group Theatre.” Performance. Artistic Director. Nikos Psacharopoulos. Williamstown Theatre Festival, 1988.

Winters, Shelley. Speech. “Williamstown Theatre Festival Tribute to the Group Theatre.”

Zola, Emile. “Naturalism on the Stage.” Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski. Ed. Bernard F. Dukore. Orlando, Florida: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974: 692-719.

## WORKS CONSULTED

Although the following works were not cited in this thesis, each is an important treatise on the development of the contemporary theatre. Students of the theatre are referred to the works cited as well as the following bibliography as core reading in the evolution of contemporary actor training and technique.

- Ball, William. A Sense of Direction: Some Observations on the Art of Directing. New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1984.
- Barton, Robert. Acting, Onstage and Off. Orlando, Florida: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1989.
- Boleslavski, Richard. Acting: The First Six Lessons. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1933.
- Brockett, Oscar. The Theatre. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964.
- Brook, Peter. The Empty Space. New York: Atheneum (Macmillan Publishing Company), 1968.
- . The Open Door: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre. New York: Pantheon Books, a division of Random-House, Inc., 1993.
- Bruder, Melissa, Lee Michael Cohn, Madeleine Olneck, Nathaniel Pollack, Robert Previto and Scott Zigler. A Practical Handbook for the Actor. New York: Random House, Inc., 1986.
- Clurman, Harold. On Directing. New York: Macmillan

Publishing Co., 1972.

Cole, Toby, and Helen Krich Chinoy. Actors on Acting: The Theories, Techniques and Practices of the Great Actors of All Times Told in Their Own Words. New Revised Edition. New York: Crown Publishing, 1970.

---. Directors on Directing: A Sourcebook of the Modern Theater. Second Ed. First edition published under the title Directing the Play. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., a subsidiary of Howard W. Sams and Co., Inc., 1963.

Hethmon, Robert H. Ed. Strasberg at the Actors' Studio. Tape Recorded Sessions. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1965

Hirsch, Foster. A Method to Their Madness: A History of the Actors Studio. New York: Da Capo Press, 1997.

Hobgood, Burnet M., Editor. Master Teachers of the Theatre: Observations on Teaching Theatre by Nine American Masters. Southern Illinois University: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

King, Nancy R. A Movement Approach to Acting. First Edition. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1981.

Lewis, Robert. Advice to the Players: Robert Lewis on Acting. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1980.

Manderino, Ned. All About Method Acting. Los Angeles: Manderino Books, 1985.

Meisner, Sanford and Longwell, Dennis. Sanford Meisner: On Acting. New York: Random House (A Vintage Book), 1987.



- Mitter, Shomit. Systems of Rehearsal: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Grotowski and Brook. New York: Routledge, Inc., 1992.
- Moore, Sonia. Stanislavski Revealed: The Actor's Guide to Spontaneity on Stage. New York: Applause Theatre Books, 1991.
- . The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor. (First published as The Stanislavski Method. Viking Press. 1960) New Revised Edition. Penguin Books, 1976.
- O'Neill, R. H., and N. M. Boretz. The Director as Artist: Play Direction Today. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1987.
- Rockwood, Jerome. The Craftsmen of Dionysus: An Approach to Acting. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.
- Shurtleff, Michael. Audition. Bantam Edition. New York: Walker and Company, 1978.
- Stanislavski, Constantin. An Actor Prepares. Translator: Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Arts Books: Robert M. MacGregor, 1955.
- Whelan, Jeremy. The ABC's of Acting. Ed. Tom Wiecks. West Linn, Oregon: Grey Heron Books, 1990.