

The Art of Acting by Stella Adler

Stella Adler gilt als die bedeutendste Schauspiellehrerin in der amerikanischen Geschichte. Sie beeinflusste die Entwicklung der Schauspielkunst und des Theaters in den Vereinigten Staaten in entscheidender Weise.

"Stella Adler ist für mich mehr als eine Schauspiellehrerin. In ihrer Arbeit vermittelt sie dem Schauspieler das Nützlichste überhaupt: wie man die eigenen emotionalen Abläufe und damit auch die der anderen versteht." (Marlon Brando).

Auszüge aus dem Kapitel „First steps on stage“:

Over the next few months you will hear me say repeatedly that acting is not about *you*. But right at the start I want you to know that you do matter.

You live in a very busy world. You didn't have your coffee, or you grabbed it at the Cafeteria. Your baby is home crying, or your husband doesn't love you, or your boyfriend didn't call you. Everybody has troubles.

Then there's the scattered person who doesn't know where she is. She's late for no reason. She's just late. That's her way of life.

You must understand that while you're in this room you leave the outside world outside.

You need all of *yourself here*. You don't need your father. You don't need your mother. You don't need your husband. You don't need your child. You don't care what happens in *The New York Times*.

You need 100 percent honorable selfishness *toward you*.

You're here to learn a tradition that goes back two millenia. The theatre has roots that go back to Ancient Greece. The stream of dramatic literature runs from the Roman to the Elizabethan, to the Jacobean, to the Restoration, to the French Renaissance, to the Romantic Period, to Ibsenian Realism and Naturalism and leading to the gulf of the 20th Century. The tradition embraces all the regional and national characteristics, all the languages, all the shifting, changing styles, the different periods of time, the different levels of society, the mores and morals of passing years . . . the cut of clothing from generation to generation . . . the different furnitures, the very sound of the music in the air, the evolution that has changed the earthenware mug into a paper drinking cup.

This is the inheritance of the actor, the theatre student of today.

It's an awful lot of words to use to the actor, but somehow he must be made aware. The young actor today tends to be little. He seeks to protect his little emotion as he sits comfortably in his little chair in his little blue jeans and stares at his little world that extends from right to left.

He has confined himself to the beat of his generation only, bounded himself within the limits of his street corner and alienated himself from every object or period that doesn't contain *his* pulse.

The result of this is a disrespect for the world in general and a foreignness to anything around him that isn't immediately recognizable to his everyday habits. He has even begun to lose perspective on what his own assets and faults are, because he has nothing to measure these things against.

It is time to take the blindfold off.

You come from different parts of society, from different neighborhoods. The thing that leads you here, at this moment, is that you have talent. Take my word for it. The thing that makes you say, "I want to do something" — that is the beginning of talent.

What is important and what you must always remember is that you had the courage to find the way, the grown-up sense to call up, to fill out an application, to find your way down here to me. Now say, "I have one credit on my side." Don't give that up for anybody. It is something you have done.

In your society, where they tear down old buildings and put up new ones, many of you are going to aim at making money. Even if you started becoming a priest, somehow you're going to try to cash in on it. I've never asked a priest about this, but someday I will. These different aims are in you. It's what your mother thinks, your father thinks. Everybody tells you that you have to be successful. Success means for some of you TV, movies, working all the time. It means being applauded. It means being reassured.

I'll let you in on a big secret. No actor is a success unless he feels inside himself, as long as he lives, that he is good. If you don't feel that you're good, no money can give it to you! No applause can give it to you! No

symbol of success can give it to you! That feeling, of an artist or an actress, that confidence must come from him in spite of everything. And this is the confidence we must establish in you. And when you have it, you will not need me. You will not need anybody. You will *collaborate* with the director, but you will never say, "Help me!"

An actress must be secure. You must travel 10,000 miles to find the person who gives you a technique that makes you secure. You have to keep growing in order to feel secure. You must not have an aim that is low. You cannot have an aim that is low and keep your security. Security when you get it gives you growth. The doctor who doesn't grow in his science is a hack. The actor that doesn't grow is a hack. Write this down: "My aim is to be independent from Miss Adler or anybody else. I know this as well as you do, and in the sense that I know it as well as you do, I don't need you." And I will help you to achieve this independence.

When I began I told you you were permitted a certain kind of selfishness, a selfishness that focuses on the work. You must come here with a sense of quiet. You can't do that if you forget something — where's my book? Do I have a phone call?

I demand quiet. Get rid of everything. Get rid of the newspaper. Get rid of the pocketbook. Get rid of the lipstick. If you do you'll find a weight has been taken off you.

If you like, you can mix your dates up. You can even double-cross people on the outside. You can say you can't go to a party because . . . I don't care. **But you can't miss a class. Don't for any reason, except death, stay away from class.** Don't get a cold. Don't get a backache, and don't go to your psychoanalyst. It doesn't belong in the theatre.

You must have 100 percent health. You have to be healthy and know that you are. Actors don't sneeze on the stage. They don't catch pneumonia. They don't get chills. They don't itch, and their feet don't hurt them. They don't have lumbago. Nothing happens to them.

Health is something you owe yourself and your profession. I've been an actress all my life and I've never had a headache. You must not give in. This must be the one area in your life that is totally controlled.

Any faults you may have must be taken care of by yourself. I'm not going to go home and nurse you, and nobody else will. You have to know your faults and correct them. Mr. Stanislavsky had a bad lisp. When I worked with him in Paris, he said, "I cannot see you in the morning. I've got to work on my lisp for two hours." This was a man in his seventies, the head of the Moscow Art Theatre, two years before he died. He knew he had this problem, and he worked on it. Everybody here has work to do. It is a privilege to have this opportunity to work.

If your body is not in good shape or your voice is not in good shape, your acting cannot be in good shape. Do you understand? It is held in as if you were locked up and couldn't move. It's not that you can't act. It's that nine-tenths of you is locked up in this prison.

In a time of great disorder, order is the one thing that will save your life. Students of acting could not have chosen a profession that is more orderly, for the curtain must go up at eight, and you have to be there precisely on time.

Casualness is not helpful to the actor in his work. I have seen acting students in Russia stand up when the teacher enters the room. As artists, they preserve a formality about themselves dictated by a sense of tradition. If you are introduced to a young Student in Russia, he bows over your hand. When the visitor is singled out and made to feel special, the special nature of the theatre is once again affirmed. If you insist on being casual all day long you will finally become uncaring. In *Heartbreak House*, Shaw created a daughter who placated herself so much that she ended by having no heart. Rather than adopting the casual attitude, you do better to lose yourself in giving and risk the mistake. By making an effort you will find your mind, heart and soul, and you will gain in confidence.

What I am after is your best. You have to understand your best. Your best isn't Barrymore's best or Olivier's best or my best, but your own. Every person has his norm. And in that norm every person is a star. Olivier could stand on his head and still not be you. Only you can be you.

What a privilege! Nobody can reach what you can if you do it. So do it. We need your best, your voice, your body. We don't need for you to imitate anybody, because that would be *second* best. And second best is no better than your worst.

If you were here to study dance, the class would be about your legs. If you were here to study piano, it would be about the instrument. The actor uses his legs. He uses his voice, his eyes, his hands. He uses every part of his body. His body is his instrument.

The actor is totally exposed. He stands on the stage. He stands in the spotlight. His every movement is scrutinized. There's no place to hide. If you feel like hiding, you've come to the wrong place. Everything the actor does has consequence.

There are no "throwaway" lines. Every line is laid down like track of the Orient Express.

The actor has to develop his body. The actor has to work on his voice. But the most important thing the actor has to work on is his mind.

Nowadays a lot of what passes for acting is nothing more than finding yourself in some character. That doesn't interest me. Of course you have to bring your own experience to bear on the characters you play, but you have to realize right from the outset that Hamlet was not "a guy like you."

The theatre I grew up in was a place where actors did not want just to play themselves, as so many actors want to do today. They didn't want just to play characters different from themselves either. They wanted to play characters bigger than themselves.

In our theatre the actors often don't raise themselves to the level of the characters. They bring the great characters down to their level. I'm afraid we live in a world that celebrates smallness. Am I exaggerating? Yes. Are there exceptions? Of course. Many exceptions? No.

There was a time when to play Oedipus you had to be an important actor. Until thirty or forty years ago to *play any* major role, whether it was Hamlet or Willy Loman, you had to have size. Write this down: You have to develop size. That is what we are here to work on.

When you approach a big writer you must live up to what is big in him. You must take the measure of the writer's size, and find that stature and dimension in yourself. I come back to the word size. Acting has to do with size. It's the name of the game.

There is one rule to be learned. Life is not you. Life is outside you. If it is outside, you must go toward it. You must go toward a person, and if he or she backs off it's their fault. The essential thing to know is that life is in front of you. Go toward it.

You may have been corrupted into thinking that you are important. If so you are a lost creature waiting for the world to come to you. An actress's whole life can be ruined if she expects life to come to her. Tell yourself that the world is outside, that it's not to be hidden from you, that you are going to thrust yourself forward and be relaxed in the world. You have chosen a field where you're going to be hurt to the blood. But to retreat from the pain is death.

I want you to start making a habit of looking at things and writing down what you liked, what you disliked. I want you to do this every day. We can start right here. I like the color of the dress Miss Adler is wearing. I don't like her earrings — they're a little vulgar. I like that beautiful leather briefcase the boy in the first row has.

After a few weeks I want you to start adding why you liked what you liked. You'll find that you may like broken pavements, maybe because you think they're charming. Or you'll find you don't like broken pavements because you like things to have their own definable shape. You'll begin to discover things about your perceptions and your tastes.

There's one thing that exceeds all others: the eyes of the actor. If he sees, he sees specifically. He doesn't generalize. He must be careful. He must learn to see the difference between different reds — the red of a racing car, the red of a hibiscus, and the red of blood. They're three different reds. They mean three different things.

The ability to see specifically has to do with the ability to react differently. You don't respond to one red the way you do to another. You can respond passively to a red fire hydrant whose paint has faded and is streaked with off-white. You don't respond passively to the gleaming red of a fire engine whizzing by.

Critical seeing, self-awareness, discipline and self-control — these are the demands we'll be working on. But none of these, once mastered, will matter at all without the energy. You must develop the energy necessary for the stage. You have to work for it. God doesn't just give it to you.

The world is in front of you. You have to take it in. You have to see things you never saw before. Then you have to give it back to the world.

Everything you do as an actor is important. You have to feel that what you can give as an actor is important. You have to feel a great sense of responsibility about what you do. On a practical level what this means is that you have to promise not to miss work, not to miss class.

We have made a commitment to each other. You have to feel that there is a moral quality to that commitment. You have to understand that there was a time when a Handshake reflected a moral commitment, that men would rather die than break a promise or betray what was implied in a Handshake.

The actor has the ability to convey moral force, to help people understand that even a Handshake has a moral significance. There is no limit to what an actor can make an audience feel and understand.

Writers are important. So are scenic artists and directors. But you have let them take over. We actors have to reclaim first place. That's what this class is really about.