

## Self-Reliance and Ritual Renewal: Anti-theatrical Ideology in American Method Acting

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American Method acting is not only a realistic artistic technique but also an ideological formation. Almost every account of the adaptation of the Stanislavsky system by the Group Theater generation describes the new "Method" as distinctively American, yet this nationalist aspect of the project has rarely been examined from a historical standpoint that relates it to the dominant forces of American artistic culture; either the Method's arguments for its objectivity have been accepted as scientifically progressive, or its roots are traced to progressive European models (Ashby 1). On the contrary, the Method represents perhaps the most successful merging of a theoretically conceived theatrical technique with the intellectual traditions that shape the history of American artistic culture. Most critics of the Method in America have produced explanations of the Method's dominance by taking issue either with its artistic claims for superiority or with its satisfied closure into a repressively conceived realism—both arguments that could be carried out solely on the basis of Stanislavsky's work, rather than considering that of his American epigones (Marowitz; Dolan 84-86). I view the emergence of the Method as the productive juncture of a theatrical practice and a revolutionary ideology, an imaginative intersection of innovation and energy that resulted in a remarkable body of work before its force subsided in the face of subsequent, similar cultural transformations; though American debates about the finer points of its technique still continue, the intellectual vitality of the Method revolution has been in a steady decline for about three decades (Schechner).

My assumption in this essay is that the Method participates historically in a semiotics of American cultural politics. The primary pattern of American art and culture moves "against the grain," as a consistently revolutionary legacy that stretches from Puritan ideology through the Revolutionary era and the period of frontier expansion, to Modernism and the contemporary rhetoric of difference; the standard for freedom in this ideology is not some conceptual partner, like slavery, but a theory of original, spontaneous behavior. This tradition of the new is historically hostile to the idea of "restored behavior" (i.e. it is, in Jonas Barish's terms, "anti-theatrically prejudiced"), for the theater is seen in this ideological

context as a repository of conventional behavior—of civilizing manners, as recent critics like Erika Fischer-Lichte have reminded us—rather than being seen as a context for authentic, post-colonial self-expression. Consequently, the American theater has developed as an institution curiously against itself, as paradoxical as the "nation of individuals" that it represents (Richards). Sacvan Bercovitch has described the constant American process of rejecting inherited models in search of new, authentic forms of art as an intellectual ritual, a social drama comprising "the rejection of American culture in the name of American values" (Bercovitch, 1987).

In American acting, then, the problem of supposedly free, authentic performance has resulted in a few recognizable artistic options. When characters take on the burden of authenticity, the theater audience demands the long-term closure of actors like James O'Neill and Joseph Jefferson into singular, self-defining roles—still a common problem for performers in today's serial television (Carlson). When actors become the focus of identity pressures, the result is often a celebrity status that precludes submersion into the role (Quinn). A third response to anti-theatrical sentiment is for the performing artist to attempt, however paradoxically, to create a kind of spontaneous self-expression on stage (Gillette, Beck); this last avenue often emphasizes its sympathy for original behaviour through a policy of unmasking or deliberate underplaying. Edwin Booth, for example, gave these directions to his scene partner when he played *The Merchant of Venice*: "This is a quiet scene. Shylock is speaking to his own flesh and blood here. His mask is off. Each glance of mine to you is significant. My facial expression is important here, but I wish to *do nothing*. Any emphasis in this scene is over-emphasis" (Henderson). Spontaneous underplaying, a kind of Kantian diversion, "freely serves" anti-theatricality while also creating an opening for the possibility of an actor with Romantic powers of self-creation. The artists who established the Method negotiated this contradictory ideological configuration very successfully, eventually achieving dominance in American theatrical culture precisely by means of their new brand of iconoclasm.

There can be no quibbling about the Russian origins of the Method, but the way these foreign origins were received and transformed in America makes some difference. The intellectual context of reception included such forces as the emergence of an American pragmatism that was profoundly interested in the theory of action, a widespread curiosity about the political potential of communal economy, as well as the native taste for under-playing that Booth's career represents. Early visitors to the Moscow Art Theater like Oliver Saylor and Norris Houghton had aroused artistic interest in Stanislavsky's techniques; the crucial moment of contact between cultures came with the visit of Stanislavsky and his company to New York in 1923. Such visits are designed to create

intercultural bonds, like those Marcel Mauss finds in gifts. If not for a couple of crucial differences, Stanislavsky's visit might have had no more effect than Jacques Copeau's similar cultural mission during the war. Firstly, the Moscow company was received in such absurdly nationalistic terms that the spirit of the gift was violated. In John Conklin's reviews, for example, readers were treated to observations like these:

The ensemble work is an accident of the Russian character. . . . The Russian is accustomed to an atmosphere where complete and indeed servile obedience is required from one class to another. He is willing to yield himself utterly to the director's orders. The American actor has too much independence, to high a degree of individuality, to make this possible (Hirsch 54).

Rather than convincing America's ambitious artists of the Moscow company's foreign character, such arguments suggested a fresh context for the novel effects that produce successful art in the American tradition. If Stanislavsky dominated his company, he was also obviously an "actor's director," someone who was curious about the creative genesis of action and expressed that interest in what Uta Hagen would later call a "respect for acting." His company was not any more mired in servility than the actors who struggled in America to establish their union and break the monopoly of theatrical syndication. Moreover, American artists who could create an ensemble art in an individualist culture would be doing something really new.

The other critical result of Stanislavsky's visit was the decision of two members of the Moscow company, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, to stay behind and begin a producing conservatory. Rather than constructing itself as a Russian institution on American soil, the new Theater Arts Institute (which would orient such later Method luminaries as Stella Adler and, to a lesser extent, Lee Strasberg) declared itself a good immigrant organization, dedicated to the project of assimilation. Its stated intentions were consciously political, designed to fulfill a legitimating, sustaining cultural course:

1. This theater must grow here by itself and must get its roots into American soil.
2. It must begin slowly, training young Americans for the stage in all its departments.
3. It must be recognized and organized as a living social force, recreating itself each generation from the thoughts and materials of its own times (Hirsch 60).

Though the school failed to survive the collapse of patronage in 1929, its goal of establishing Stanislavsky's approach to acting in America was eventually fulfilled by other means.

There are two principal, ritualized gestures of dissent in American intellectual life that animate the revolutionary progress of the culture. The first, most negative trope, creating an atmosphere of crisis, is from the rhetoric of the pulpit, the jeremiad. In its basic form the jeremiad declares a moral condemnation of the contemporary scene; it may also offer a new plan for virtuous life that calls for a return to essential values. Artistic manifestoes are the perfect vehicles for such arguments, though in the case of the Method revolution the tradition of visionary dissent was largely an oral one, with the problem of access to the preacher later proving to be the basis for a cult formation of historical initiates. Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg seem to have been the most adept with this rhetoric, though the former was more comfortable with large public groups. In *The Fervent Years* Clurman takes the opportunity to reproduce a sample of his sermons, which were delivered late at night, at the top of his voice, while he stomped about knocking over chairs:

At the time I might have put it this way: In the books I read, in the painting I see, in the music I hear, in all conversations, I am aware of the presence of the world itself, I detect a feeling for large issues of human concern. In the theatre these are either absent or diluted, frequently cheapened. The composers and the painters are searching for new words, so to speak, new forms, shapes, meanings. Aaron Copland tells me he wants to express the present day, he wants to find the musical equivalent for our contemporary tempo and activity. Where is the parallel to all this in the theatre? There are little avant-garde performances here and there; Copeau speaks seriously about the theatre. Of course, the greatest poets of the past wrote for the theatre. Yet, despite all this, what I actually see on the boards lacks the feel of either significant contemporaneity that I get from even the lesser concerts of new music—not to mention the novels of Gide, Proust, D.H. Lawrence—or the sense of a permanent contribution to my inner experience that I get from some things at the Louvre, from the finale of Beethoven's Ninth, or even from the simple reading of certain classic dramatists. Where is the best thought of our time in the theatre, the feeling of some true personal significance in any of its works? Either there is something inferior in the theatre per se or there is something wrong about the practical theatre of today that escapes me. I can't live without the theatre, but I can't live with it.

The theater gives itself lofty graces, claims a noble lineage, but has no more dimension than a bordello! (6)

This fire and brimstone may come from a Jewish critic, but the criteria for excellence that he seeks in art—contemporary and personal significance—are figured in terms of an "individualist" problem that is widely shared. The affective force of Clurman's rhetoric, and its resultant power to initiate a new institution, made these speeches the founding gesture of the Group Theater; Wendy Smith's *Real Life Drama* makes it clear that Strasberg, too, was thinking in broad terms about American culture, both in public and in his passionate, characteristically private conversations (83).

The second gesture of American intellectual reform, more positive and constitutive of resolution, is the spiritual retreat in which the new righteous community is formed. Though this myth is very broadly Christian, it has been persuasively presented by American Studies scholars like Perry Miller as a defining ritual of New England's Puritanism, as in Cotton Mather's "Errand into the Wilderness" and its goal of a new American Jerusalem. Copeau, with his somewhat Rousseauist French example, had already forged one such model theatrical excursion, and Stanislavsky's troupe, too, sometimes abandoned the city for rehearsals. As Clurman again reports, on the Group's decision to begin its project in a rural compound in Brookfield Center, Connecticut, "From an experiment in theater we were in some way impelled to an experiment in living" (42). It was at this juncture that Strasberg emerged as the voice in the wilderness who would teach the members of the company their new Method, a kind of theatrical version of Emersonian "self-reliance."

Sacvan Bercovitch also argues that the self in American culture takes on a representative tropological significance; it is the country in microcosm, both a landscape for development and a figure for spiritual fulfillment. The constitutive theatrical power of this idea of the self is already implicit in New England transcendentalism, particularly in Myra Jehlen's reading of Emersonian nature in *American Incarnation*: "Emerson's great idea was that the power to act—not just to think, but to act—lay not in the individualist's hands but in his mind and soul, so that he would look out most effectively precisely by looking in" (78). Strasberg's primary principle of acting was "emotional truth," and his technique for achieving it was Stanislavsky's nostalgic "affective memory," which proceeds through just such Emersonian introspection. Strasberg thus taught the Group a version of affective memory in which the proper emotions are somehow always already there, in every soulful person, regardless of personal history; all the actor needs is a way to get to his or her emotions, to fight through repressive social conventions and psychological defenses to a supposed natural state of

spontaneous feeling. Some of Strasberg's critics argue that he stuck to his doctrine of affective memory out of dogmatic stubbornness, yet Strasberg seems to have understood that the intense individualism of the technique was particularly suited to American needs. If, in Strasberg's view, "the essential thing for the actor is to use himself," and if, as he says, "acting exists in every human being," then affective memory as a technique of freely emotional communication underpins the event of theatrical "communion" in much the same way that "inalienable rights" like freedom of speech in American political discourse underpin democratic institutions. The contradictions of the technique align themselves, and take advantage of, the contradictions of a political system in which people are supposedly born equal, have equal rights, and yet are nevertheless obliged to pursue happiness in their own way.

From this ideological standpoint the Method founders seem both remarkably adept as manipulators of the cultural system, and yet remarkably unaware of the American politics of their own rhetoric. Strasberg's summary of the Group Theater's mission is an exemplary case:

The Group Theater was not founded out of any ideological interest or out of a desire for social drama. It came out of the firm idea that no true theatre can emerge from a group of actors who work together for a few weeks because they have been hired for a production. What we foresaw was that a theater as a unit can have the same kind of artistic development that an individual has. We proclaimed at that time that a theater demands the kind of coherence and unity and selflessness in which all the selves become a larger self, but a larger self in which each individual finds his own true expression within the unity of this intention (Hethmon 395).

No clearer case could be made for the way the American individual can be used as a micro-unit for the conception of political—and more broadly cultural—institutions.

The Method, then, first found its power in its capacity to convert Clurman's rhetoric of dissent into a constitutive technique for acting that dovetailed with basic American convictions about the nature of the self. The American reception of the Method is one of the most carefully studied processes of cultural transfer in American theater history, particularly as regards issues of translation and understanding (Carnicke). Yet all of the American contacts with the Moscow Art Theater from the first half of the century tend to conform to a larger, unexamined pattern, which an anthropologist like Victor Turner might describe as a vision quest (Turner 1974, 182). Americans leave their culture as explorers or pilgrims,

only to return to it with new knowledge, often with some spiritual insight from an external authority. In the history of the Method the early travellers to Moscow had started this process, and the success of the Russian visit validated the authority of Stanislavsky's original vision. Subsequent teachers, like Strasberg, borrowed this authority for their own missions. Stella Adlers's later quest, resulting in a long personal session with Stanislavsky in 1934, revealed an unexpected problem to the Group generation, for Stanislavsky had changed his mind about affective memory (Coger 1967). In the context of Stanislavsky's strange ambivalence as a gospel authority, Strasberg was revealed as a false prophet who had overlooked the true doctrines of "given circumstances" and the "score of physical actions"; this breakdown of authority began the continuing relativization of Method techniques, as different members of the Group generation and their students have interpreted this historical contradiction differently, or used the lack of a consensus as an opportunity to theorize the Method on their own.

Adler's late textbook, *The Technique of Acting*, retains much of Strasberg's strange Jungian psychology of the "collective memory of Man," since this psychology endows to everyone the emotional resources that are required by affective memory technique. But in the terms of Bercovitch's representative self, Adler seems to exchange the primacy of one aspect of the self—the spiritual figure—for the primacy of another—of the body's "geographical" significance as an American corpus. Emotional memory is diverted into a physical, memory of selected, scored actions. The mind is replaced, in exercises on "pain" and "death," with a body that is conceived as a specifically influenced object. The truth of pain in this revised Method is not emotional but a matter of the site of the wound, and a good death is staged by careful observation of where the bullet enters the body. From this physical standpoint the primary rhetorical gesture of Method acting technique is to undercut any predictable physical action that might seem to be a theatrical cliché. If an actor needs to emphasize a key line, the technical vocal choice suggested by the Method is not the usual shout, but an intense whisper. If some large, convulsive gesture is the conventional theatrical expression of death, the Method actor is advised that "falling asleep comes closest to dying—the relinquishment of consciousness" (Adler 45). From this sense the Method is a semiotic technique, a cancellation of coded behavior for the stage that incorporates understatement as a novel, consistently authentic device; Method acting lays bare the historical system of expression, while hiding its own gesture of representation by refusing to show the process of signification.

This contrary style of anti-theatrical performance analysis produces the chestnuts of American acting: "You don't try to act 'dying,' you act 'trying to live,'" or "Don't 'be drunk,' but act 'trying to be sober.'" In Charles McGaw's signature example from Chekhov, the Method actor doesn't act "my foot's

asleep," but rather "I'm trying to walk despite my numb leg." The method of physical actions, in its rhetorical structure, is still "against the grain"; the problems of the body constitute both the technical challenges to the actor and the obstacles to spiritual fulfillment for the character. In the hands of theorists like Sonia Moore (who were more systematic than the Group actors, and who read the later books of Stanislavsky with great care) this arrangement began to take on the character of a more comprehensive, unified set of works. The Group generation may have concentrated on the self-oriented exercises of *An Actor Prepares*, but this emphasis may be considered less as a mistake than as a historical reason for the early success of the Method. In any case, the effective principles of the Method remain remarkably simple, reducible in the context of their theatrical background to a basic physical formula for plausibility that depends for its innovative force upon the generation of aesthetic surprises through performances that involve the "un-doing" of conventional gestures. Underplaying as a technique of authenticity is harder to see than a more clearly layered technique like satirical quotation, but it is still technical, still a semiotic "style" that can be deconstructed to reveal the mimetic principles of its formation. The extent to which the Method engages in a historical un-doing of coded acting signs, and substitutes for them a coded practice of underplaying that it assumes to derive from a natural, representative body, is the extent to which it converts its Puritan anti-theatricality into a performance technique that is also "anti-theatrical."

How does the Method differ from other such anti-theatrical techniques? One of the new theorists who displaced Stanislavsky in America, Jerzy Grotowski, also espoused a physical "via negativa," an undoing of habitual behavior, and he achieved his goals through a more conscious use of rituals like those I have described in the Method's American history. Yet in Grotowski's theatrical vow of poverty, one of the things that seems to be forsaken is the character that the actor would play; for Grotowski's actor, the significant other is not the fictional character but another person, an audience member or theatrical collaborator, whom he would meet in a "total acceptance of one human being by another" (Grotowski 25). As Ludwig Flazsen argues in a typically anti-theatrical evaluation of *Apocalypsis cum figuris*,

Was this a cultural event or something more? Did we find genuine human understanding here, real human contact beyond differences in culture, traditions, experiences? Are we really leaving something behind? Have they given us something of themselves? You had a chance to see what happened at the performances of *Apocalypsis*. You saw people who did not leave the auditorium until late into the night, how they sat quietly in deep reflection, and how they spoke to each

other in whispers. They received the performance as a living experience and not as mastery of an art. In this kind of silence there is wonder—at the world, at oneself, at one's own life (Osinski 146-47).

As Ryszard Cieslak puts it more succinctly in his last interview, "we act so much in our daily lives that to make theater what we need to do is stop acting" (Cieslak 261). Theater does not represent a culture in this case, but becomes its own alternative, "active culture," and rather than inhabiting the stage in some political context the actors inhabit an imaginary space conceived in the context of an intercultural community of performance anthropologists; they concentrate less on a role or a technique and upon an idea of human being. The political effects of such a conceptual interculturalism were clear to Tadashi Suzuki, who concluded that "I think Grotowski's future is to be an eternal wanderer without a homeland. Or he will bury himself somewhere in Poland, will go crazy, and as a madman, in a conceptual and emotional sense, he will be isolated from those around him" (Osinski 141). Not coincidentally, Grotowski's anti-theatrical explorations included a long stay at an American university, where his unusual program received equally unusual official support, until he tired of it (Kott 64-67).

Grotowski's sacrifice of fictional character, dramatized in Cieslak's signature performance of the martyred "constant prince," is interesting because it opens to the actor the conceptual space of an anthropologically conceived characterization. But such a sacrifice was not necessary, or even acceptable, to the more culturally specific tastes of Lee Strasberg, who saw the Polish Laboratory Theater in 1969:

I was immediately impressed with the dedication and the training of the actors, but unfortunately I was disappointed by the results. I had expected to see a mythic and transcendental experience and expression. Instead, it seemed to me that the gestures and movements were not expressive of a deep personal commitment, reaching toward a fresh, spontaneous individual image or language; they were theatrically conventional. I was surprised and somewhat startled to discover that I could anticipate which actor was going to move and how. In our work we call this "general emotion," as distinct from real emotion; that is, there is an indication of emotion created by an exertion of physical effort of the voice and body (Strasberg 181).

Strasberg, looking for the "spontaneous individual" and "personal commitment," applies American political criteria to the performance which are precisely those that the generalizing, inter-cultural Grotowski strove to defeat; the only thing they

seem to share is a dislike for inauthentic performance. Yet Strasberg's Method is politically "at home" in his culture, while Grotowski's homeland is restricted to the scattered community of performance theorists. It bears asking why two such similar theories of undoing have such different political effects.

In the Method perspective, the actor is the central subject, and the Other is the character—not the audience, the acting partner, or the director. This Other is also the object of an emotional identification; if all persons have the same background of emotional life, then the job of characterization involves a projection into the emotional life of the other. This is not so different from the perspective of the psychoanalyst, who in most accounts—for example Kristeva's—must approach the perspective of a delirious patient by adopting the perspective of delirium herself, a gesture of love that yields therapeutically valuable understanding (Kristeva). In the Method, as explained by a major American exponent like Sanford Meisner, Stanislavsky's "magic If" is a simple heuristic device that encourages imaginative empathy with the Other. Yet the point of Meisner's stance is obviously not, in psychoanalytic terms, to cure either the actor or the character; the problem addressed in his class is teaching actors to project themselves into an Other that is already there, written in terms which are fixed into a fiction. A sample of his classroom explanations, based on the difficulties of performing one of the supposed lesbians in *The Children's Hour*, can reveal both the valuable and the annoying aspects of the Method actor's approach to characterization:

Suppose it was *as if* you told her that your boyfriend thinks you both take heroin. It's a deadly secret, isn't it? Or it's *as if* he suspects you both have prison records or jointly murdered an illegitimate child or were practicing witchcraft. You see, this is an area of acting which makes its demands entirely on your imagination. Suppose that Ralph and John were cast as players on the same football team, and suppose that in the play, Ralph, you're hurt on the field and are brought into the locker room and are lying there unconscious while your team is waiting for the ambulance to come. And suppose that I, as the director, said to you, John, "Stand there and watch him *as if* he were your wife who is dying." Now, God knows that has little to do with two football players, but we, the audience, will never know where you got your emotion, John, although we will be responsive to it. And if anybody says to you "Where did you get that moment? It's very touching," your answer is "Buzz off!" (Meisner 139).

From one standpoint this example seems politically damning, since the real problems of lesbians in a conformist society are displaced into the technical problem of acting a moment between two men with some emotional depth while avoiding suspicion of homosexuality; it sounds like a way *not* to act the scene. But in the context of Method characterization the example reads completely differently; the point for Meisner is to find a way for people who are rather ordinary to invest their emotions in characters whose situations are extraordinary—rather than reinforcing exclusive or oppressive ideological norms, he aims to cross their boundaries and to recover difference in the American Method's terms by pointing out the common emotional matrices in actors and their characters. From an interpretive standpoint this process requires using what Hans-Georg Gadamer would call the "fore-structure of understanding," or prejudice in the sense of "pre-judgment," since the only resource the actor has in encountering the Other is what he or she already knows (Gadamer 236-38). The Method's interpretation of the Other is ultimately charitable, assuming the coherent intelligence of different human subjects and offering the actor's effort of understanding to the people in the text. Of course, if the texts themselves are politically backward, such an approach is no help, but if the texts are similarly inclined (and as Vineberg notes, most "Method texts" are), then the "inter-subjective" effort of understanding and performing character tends to build a community of empathetic individuals in classic American style. For a Method class of American lesbians, the confession scene in *The Children's Hour* would be less of an interpretive challenge, and the effort of imagination would address the strangeness of heterosexuals; in either case the subjectivity of the actor in performing the Other tends to be protected by the idea of fiction, an idea which Grotowski eventually dropped in favor of a more absolute, transcultural "fusion of horizons."

If the Method's politics are so interesting, what made it *passé* in the intensely political atmosphere of the 1960s? The primary problem for the Method, in the ideological context that I outlined at the beginning of this study, is the way its success converted it into an orthodoxy. Once the Method emerged, through the acclaim of the Group Theater, the professional dominance of its training programs, and the widespread publication of its approach in forms like the lectures of Bobby Lewis, it began to accommodate the kind of majority politics that converts the problems of lesbians into the supposedly more familiar (but actually only more communicatively acceptable) problems of football players, of actors with expiring wives. Strasberg's classes at The Actor's Studio became less a focus of dissent than a conventional rite of passage for major actors on their way to Hollywood. And once the techniques of the Method became more familiar, people inside and outside the Group circle began to notice them; Lewis

was among the first to comment on the practical difficulties that "method fetishes" produce in theatrical productions, in which underplaying, self-involvement and throwaway techniques can all be seen as habits of the style rather than parts of every play (Lewis 67-84). Configured as a liberating technique for a theater of dissent, the Method faced an "Adam Smith problem," with *The Theater Moral Sentiments* inevitably yielding to concerns about *The Wealth of Nations* (Agnew 176). In the depression-era context of the Group Theater, which had dramatized its dissent from commercial theater practices through plays like *Waiting for Lefty* where Marxist economics play a crucial role, the challenge of the marketplace represented a real crisis, which would ultimately play itself out in the political theater of Joseph McCarthy's House Committee hearings a decade later. Meanwhile the theater of the 1960s renewed the project of American dissent through the rhetoric of presence, as practiced by experimental theater groups, in Happenings, and in the immediacy of political protest; as with Grotowski, the theater of fiction tended to disappear.

Perhaps more significantly from the perspective of acting technique, the move to Hollywood challenged the Method to adjust to a change of medium. The motion picture screen offered a wonderful opportunity to the Method actor, since the magnitude of the large screen, combined with the detailed views of close-up camera techniques, made the small physical choices that the Method encouraged into a convincing, effective style of realistic film performance. Here, too, Strasberg's approach to the Method made some sense, for without an audience to engage directly, the film actor is thrown back into an attitude of self-reliance. Bazin, Kracauer, Balasz, and the other early film theorists described film realism as an artistic, social and psychological goal, and the technical rhetoric of the method dovetailed marvelously with the technical development of the realistic Hollywood film. Though, as Steve Vineberg notes, John Garfield was the only Group member to become a motion picture star, the Method studios would produce virtually all of the revolutionary screen performers of the post-war era: Marlon Brando, James Dean, Sandy Dennis, Geraldine Page, Jason Robards, James Earl Jones—even Marilyn Monroe. And the current actors who dominate the Hollywood scene, like Dustin Hoffman, Robert DeNiro, Jack Nicholson, and Meryl Streep, do so largely by virtue of the extent to which they imitate Method technical standards. As the rhetoric of natural closure that supports the realistic film aesthetic has become gradually unmasked by contemporary semiotic film studies, the rhetoric of "natural" Method acting remains strangely impervious to ideological film criticism, which focuses on naturalized ideological types rather than the acting technique that produces them for the camera's "gaze" (Kaplan). Method films, such as those by Tennessee Williams, would bring the dramatization of reflective confession and primal physical conflict to the level of

a new code, until the authenticating effects of Method performance begin to come undone by dint of their own predictability. The moments in realistic American drama in which characters propose to tell the truth, either about themselves or about others, are typically the moments in American drama in which the Method's rhetoric of emotional authenticity have been most strongly engaged. Yet in some cases, like the *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* film, the confession continues even though its homophobic object has been censored out of the screenplay, while in others, like the screenplay for *Rebel Without a Cause*, the pattern of dissent itself becomes the subject of the story, and we can see the place of the Method within it—perhaps even ponder its pathology, since James Dean, like so many Method performers who achieved celebrity, moved beyond self-reliance to self-destruction (Schickel).

Americans, mostly immigrants who sought a fresh start in life, tend to pride themselves on the extent to which they are "self-made." Yet to maintain this pride it is necessary to avoid a theatricality of the self in which the authenticity of this new self-construction might be questioned. The Method offers a technique by which the "real" construction of the self in American culture finds a theatrical analogue, and actors are given a way of constructing their professional products that makes them the equals of other citizens. Their characters, made out of themselves, by themselves, and in some notorious cases, for themselves, provide a remarkable reflection of the rhetoric of American political life. Even though in many cases the Method has been displaced in the university by Brecht and other alternatives, Method acting still provides the foundation for most professional acting in American culture, and there can be little question of its contribution to the artistic life of the country. If the strong intellectual tradition of popular revolt against such orthodoxies ensures us that the hold of one technique upon the body of American acting will eventually lose its grasp, we can only hope for new techniques that work so well.

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