

His Dream of Passion: Reflections on the work of Lee Strasberg and his influence on British Actor Training

By David Shirley

ABSTRACT The first of two ‘companion’ articles examining the work of Lee Strasberg, this discussion begins with an exploration of Lee Strasberg’s interpretation and adaptation of Stanislavski’s ‘Emotion Memory’ exercise before proceeding to examine the efficacy of his version of the technique and consider the extent to which some of the persistent criticisms surrounding his approach are tenable.. Has his work been misjudged and misrepresented in recent years or are some of the concerns that have arisen justified? The discussion will then move on offer a brief outline of some of Strasberg’s other techniques and consider the degree to which his approach may have influenced actor-training environments in British schools and colleges.

Keywords: Lee Strasberg, Stanislavski, Emotion Memory, Actors Studio and Method Acting.

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Lee Strasberg's influence on the development of actor training in the 20th Century cannot be over-estimated. His interpretation of Stanislavski's work and the exercises and techniques he developed at the Actor's Studio, in New York City were to have a profound influence on many of the world's most acclaimed actors including Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Paul Newman, Anne Bancroft, Ellen Burstyn, Al Pacino, Sally Field, Robert De Niro, Harvey Keitel and many more. Notwithstanding his high profile, however, and the extraordinary impact of his work, Strasberg's approach to actor training and many of the methods he adopted have frequently been maligned and dismissed – often by some of his closest associates. Sanford Meisner, for instance, who worked alongside Strasberg at the now famous Group Theatre in the 1930s, took great exception to his 'introspective' approach:

'I told Lee when he was alive. I said to him, "You introvert the already introverted' All actors", I said, "like all artists, are introverted because they live on what's going on in their instincts, and to attempt to make that conscious is to confuse the actor". Needless to say, he didn't pay any attention to me...'

(Meisner and Longwell 1987:59)

Stella Adler, another Group Theatre colleague and highly acclaimed acting teacher, was equally as critical of Strasberg's work:

' "...we don't need your emotion; we need the text," she tells a student, with a wicked smile. "Don't bring it down to the level of the street"; "don't bring it down to your own small selves," she repeats, over and over, deploring the kind of casualness and intimacy that is often in evidence in Studio work. "The intimate tone is the tone you

use in life; it's boring, disgusting, like seeing a couple of dogs playing; you think if you're being intimate, you're democratic, which is useless for art, and boring without end. That low tone is for the mice.” ’

(Foster Hirsch 1984: 214)

Similarly, whilst David Mamet, in his book *True and False* (1997) attacks the Method *per se*, his frequent allusions to the use of Emotional Memory appear to implicate Strasberg's work in particular:

‘ “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.’

(David Mamet 1998: 12)

Or even more directly:

The addition of “emotion” to a situation which does not organically create it is a lie. First of all, it is not emotion. It is a counterfeit of emotion, and it is cheap.’

(Ibid: 78)

In recent years, Strasberg's work has also attracted criticism from scholars including John Harrop (1992), Richard Hornby (1992), Jonathan Pitches (2006) and Rosemary Malague (2012). Whilst, in each case, we are offered different perspectives on Strasberg's work, all of the abovementioned academics highlight significant flaws in

relation to some of the assumptions on which his work was based and the teaching practices he adopted.¹

Yet, despite wide-ranging criticism from a variety of parties, Strasberg's work continues to be extremely popular amongst actors – both in the UK and in the USA. The Actors' Studio, of which Strasberg was the Artistic Director between 1951 and 1982 continues to thrive – in large part due to his legacy – and the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute, founded in 1969, and credited with training Angelina Jolie, Scarlett Johansson, Matt Dillon and Alec Baldwin - is now well established both in New York and in Hollywood. In London, Sam Rumbelow's Method Acting Studio, with a specific focus on Strasberg's techniques, attracts students from all over Europe and a number of teachers working at drama schools in the UK continue to use the techniques he developed.

So that we can begin to evaluate the effectiveness of Strasberg's approach to acting and thereby begin to understand his lasting appeal, it is worth taking some time to look at the roots from which his practice developed and the key ideas that shaped his approach to Emotional Memory work.

The arrival of the Moscow Art Theatre on Broadway in 1923 was to prove a formative moment for the young Lee Strasberg. Led by the actor/director, Konstantin Stanislavski, the Company performed works by Anton Chekhov (*Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*), Maxim Gorky (*The Lower Depths*) and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (*The Brothers Karamazov*). Although, by this stage, Strasberg had

already developed an intense fascination with theatre, the impact of seeing Stanislavski and the MAT perform was to prove decisive in determining his future:

‘In the Moscow Art Theatre, we saw for the first time the possibility of that greatness being shared by talents that were not necessarily on the same level, yet were capable of the same intensity, reality, belief and truth. These experiences were a major factor in the stimulus toward further advances in American theatre and were directly responsible not only for my own development, but for the creation of the Group Theatre...In 1924, as a result to a large extent of the visit of the Moscow Art Theatre, I finally decided to become a professional actor.’

(Lee Strasberg 1988: 40-41)

When the performances on Broadway came to an end and MAT actors, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya remained in New York and established the American Laboratory Theatre, in order to train actors and promote Stanislavski’s teachings in the USA, Strasberg, together with Harold Clurman, Stella Adler and Francis Ferguson were amongst some of the earliest students to enrol.

Importantly, both Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya had worked in close collaboration with Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre, where they appeared in some of the company’s most celebrated productions. In addition, they were both early members of the First Studio of the Moscow Arts Theatre, established by Stanislavski in 1911, with the aim of training actors in the new techniques he was developing. Indeed, Richard Boleslavsky also directed the School’s debut production - Herman Heijermans 1901 play *The Good Hope*. Over a decade later, when the MAT visited New York 1923/4

to perform on Broadway, Boleslavsky – who had left Russia some years earlier – rejoined the Company to work both as an assistant director and as an actor – notably alternating with Stanislavski in the role of Satin in Maxim Gorky’s *The Lower Depths*.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that each of these practitioners was well equipped to begin the process of transmitting Stanislavskian techniques to fledging American practitioners.

Emulating the values of the MAT, the American Laboratory Theatre eschewed an emphasis on the individual in favour of an ethos that stressed collaboration and absolute dedication to the interests of the ensemble. For Boleslavsky, the notion of theatre as a collective ‘team’ effort was paramount, as is evidenced by Foster Hirsch’s citation of his entry to the 1924-25 edition of the American Laboratory Theatre Bulletin, in which Boleslavsky applauds the achievements of the first group of students on becoming:

“...an organic group, similar to the Guild of medieval times, which, in the collective practice of it’s craft, has become a living theatre – that is to say, a theatre in which each actor strives to act his part, however humble, as if it were a major part in the play but harmonized toward a perfect ensemble.”

(Foster Hirsch 1984: 60)

Broadly speaking there were three elements that made up the curriculum that Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya created for their newly formed school. The first related to what Boleslavsky has referred to as the ‘external’ aspects of an actor’s work and

included movement training (ballet, eurythmics, mime), voice, stage combat and make-up classes. The second element was designed to stimulate the ‘inner’ realms of experience and expression and included exercises aimed at fostering the imagination, concentration, relaxation, sense memory and activities aimed at promoting emotional recall. Finally, the third element of the training regime sought to enhance the intellectual, political and cultural awareness of students and develop sensitivity to the environments in which they practice their art. Like Stanislavski, Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya valued a ‘holistic’ approach to training so that different aspects of the curriculum were carefully integrated and framed by visits from guest speakers (e.g. Jacques Copeau) and regular lectures from Boleslavsky himself.²

At this point it is important to note that whilst there is no real evidence to suggest that either Boleslavsky or Ouspenskaya strayed from the principles informing Stanislavski’s core training regime, the emphasis on his early work at the MAT and Boleslavsky’s very particular interpretation of Emotion Memory – helped sow the seeds for some of the more polarized positions that fueled the often heated arguments, misunderstandings, and confusion that characterized American transmissions of Stanislavski’s work for much of the rest of the 20th Century.

Stanislavski’s most detailed discussion of Emotion Memory appears in Chapter Nine of *An Actor’s Work*³. Whilst it is very clear from the examples given and exercises cited, that he places great emphasis on the ability to draw from the emotional experiences and feelings stored in our memories, he also resists any attempt to give the impression that we can control the means by which we access such feelings:

‘They are direct, strong, vivid but they don’t occur onstage in the way you imagine, that is for long periods, or for an entire act. They burst through, here and there, but only as discrete moments...One word of warning. We aren’t masters of spur-of-the-moment experiences, they master us. And so all we can do is leave it to nature, and say to ourselves, if spontaneous feelings do arise, then let them appear when they are needed, lest they run counter to the play and the role’.

(Konstantin Stanislavski 2008: 208)

We will return to the importance of the ‘play’ and the ‘role’ in due course, but for the moment, it is worth pausing to reflect a moment on some of the content of this chapter. Clearly recognizing the extent to which sensitivity to stored memories can enrich the actor’s craft, Stanislavski stops short of actually prescribing tasks or exercises designed to control or manipulate such memories. Instead, through the persona of Kostya (the imaginary student) he narrates the experience of witnessing a tragic accident involving the death of an old beggar. Over time the memory of this event becomes more intense and varied, prompting various responses and feelings in Kostya that are usually shaped by contexts of his own actual lived experience. These range from feelings of depression immediately after witnessing the incident; to fitfulness and terror during the sleeping hours that followed it; to feelings of frustration and indignation at the futility and ‘cruelty of life’ (2008: 204) a couple of days later; to something more akin to the poetic, even ‘celebratory’ (Ibid) a week or so after the event took place. As more time elapses, the memory of the accident stimulates other seemingly separate feelings – in this case an incident involving a grieving Serb and his dying monkey (Ibid: 205)

When Kostya shares his experiences of the incident with Tortsov (the imaginary acting teacher), the latter's response is telling:

‘What happened to you...illustrates very well the process of crystallization which takes place in our Emotion Memory. Everybody, in their time sees not one but many tragic accidents. They are stored in the memory but not every detail, only the features that have made the most impact...This is a synthesis of all like feelings. It is related not to the small, individual parts of the incident but to all similar cases. This is memory on a grand scale. It is clearer, deeper, denser, richer in content and sharper than reality itself.’

(Konstantin Stanislavski 2008: 206)

The suggestion here is that Emotional Memory affords a rich, complex, but necessarily *general* landscape that can be drawn from in order to stimulate and nourish feelings and responses in the actor that are ‘similar to the role’ (Ibid: 209) represented in the play. Indeed, it can be clearly argued that Stanislavski cautions against any attempt to unpick the minutiae of stored memories:

‘...give up the idea of hunting old beads – they are beyond recall, like yesterday, like childhood joys, like first love. Try to let each day bring forth new, fresher inspiration in you, one sufficient unto the day.’

(Ibid: 207)

For Stanislavski, Emotion Memory represents a source of inspiration and motivation for the actor; a repository that can be used creatively to bring ‘*a logical, truthful...genuine...physically embodied*’ (Ibid: 196) approach to a dramatic character.

Aside from some experiments with lighting and sound effects, or furniture and props as a means of exploring how to foster different emotional responses in the audience as well as the performer, there are no practical exercises included in this section of the book that focus on the psychological makeup of the students. On the contrary, Tortsov suggests the opposite:

‘...the things around us influence the way we feel. And that happens not only in real life but on the stage too...In the hands of a talented director, all the production values, the theatrical effects...become a work of art. When they relate to the inner feelings of the character, they become much more meaningful than in real life. The mood they evoke, if it matches the play, focuses attention marvelously on a character’s inner life, and influences the actor’s mind and feeling. So, the externals of the setting and the mood they create is a stimulus for us.

(Ibid: 212)

In the context of the present discussion Stanislavski’s focus on ‘external’ modes of representation highlights an important consideration when evaluating the transmission of his work to the USA, as is clearly demonstrated in Richard Boleslavsky’s articulation of Emotional Memory.

Although in broad terms, Boleslavsky's interpretation of Emotion Memory is similar to that of Stanislavski's in that it emerges from the work of French psychologist, Théodule Ribot, his focus on the need to unpick the specific details of individual memories represents an important point of departure. Whereas Stanislavski cautions against 'hunting old beads' (see above), Boleslavsky advises the opposite, as the following comparison suggests:

'Don't imagine you can return to yesterday's memory, be content with today's. Learn to accept memories that have come to life afresh.'

(Konstantin Stanislavski 2008: 206)

'The point is to bring yourself back as you were then, to command your own ego, go where you want to go, and then when you are there, to stay where you went.'

(Richard Boleslavsky 2003: 33)

Whereas for Stanislavski, the 'slippery' nature of emotion memory prompts him to recommend an approach based in intuition and adaptation, Boleslavsky places much more emphasis on the ability to manage, control and manipulate such stimuli. This difference in emphasis provides the key to understanding the driving force behind Strasberg's interpretation and development of the Emotion Memory technique.

In his book *Science and the Stanislavski Tradition of Acting* (2006: 105), Jonathan Pitches sheds further light on some of the key differences between Boleslavsky's approach to the teaching of Emotion Memory and that of Stanislavski. These include the following:

- The ‘accidental’ nature of Kostya’s recounting of the street accident for Tortsov is set in contrast to the intentionality of Boleslavsky’s prompting of the Creature’s memory in his Second Lesson⁴.
- Unlike the incident Kostya describes – which has no connection to his personal history, Boleslavsky encourages the Creature to recall an incident involving a close family member.
- Whereas Kostya’s recollections are revealed in front of the class, the Creature’s are recalled privately in a context reminiscent of the processes adopted in psychoanalysis.

Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that the work on Emotion Memory was the most important feature of Boleslavsky’s work at the American Laboratory Theatre, it is perhaps not unjust to suggest that it was this feature of the training that proved the most compelling to Lee Strasberg, as is confirmed by the following observation by Foster Hirsch:

‘Strasberg’s attendance at the Lab had been irregular and confined for the most part to 1923 and 1924, when Boleslavsky’s emphasis on affective memory was more pronounced than it was to be at any later period. Along with Boleslavsky, most of his listeners at the Lab grew disenchanted with the technique – but not Strasberg, who was drawn to it because it confirmed his readings in Freud and because he felt it led to the kind of truthful acting style he was interested in...His interpretation of Stanislavski, as filtered through his partial understanding of Boleslavsky’s talks, comprised a minority of one; and in the face of often belligerent opposition, Strasberg continued to use affective memory as a cornerstone of his method.’

(Foster Hirsch 1984: 75)

That Strasberg was heavily influenced by Freud's writings is evidenced in his own book, *A Dream of Passion* (1988); in Robert H. Hethmon's *Strasberg at the Actors Studio: Tape Recorded Sessions* (1991); and in *The Lee Strasberg Notes* edited by Lola Cohen. Various examples of Strasberg's 'psychoanalytical' approach to actor training can be found in his chapter entitled "The Voyage Continues II" in *A Dream of Passion* (1988:94-122). The sequence, for instance, where Strasberg recalls the actress diagnosed with arthritis in the neck, and who as a result of his 'guidance' discovers that this discomfort was due to childhood conditioning as a result of tension caused when sharing a bed with her sister - who had threatened to 'kill her if she didn't lie still' (Ibid: 97). In a later sequence involving the use of a relaxation technique, we learn of an actress displaying tension and taking up an 'oppositional' stance when this was pointed out to her. Assuming a manner similar to that of a 'psychoanalyst', Strasberg subsequently elicits from the actress concerned that she had been physically punished as a child - something to which he attributes 'the rigidity of her neck and back muscles' (Ibid: 98). Later still, during an Emotional Memory exercise as preparation for a scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where an actress '...seemed to be in conflict or in contradiction with what she was trying to will herself to do' (Ibid: 99-100), we learn that her difficulties stemmed from her father's conviction that actresses are 'all tramps' and his insistence that she '...at least sit ladylike' (Ibid). For Strasberg it was this '...strong primary conditioning' (Ibid: 100) that was the cause of tension in her body - especially, and 'unusually', according to Strasberg in her legs and feet.

One of the clearest examples demonstrating the extent to which the language of Strasberg's teaching practice was closely aligned to that used in psychoanalysis can be found in Lola Cohen's edited notes taken from his classes:

'Often when you re-live an emotional memory and use it in your work, it's one that has been sublimated, in the Freudian sense. When the emotion is released, the feelings remain, but the block is eliminated. It's freed. You feel as if you've been absolved. The therapeutic value in art is the living out of emotions that made you feel guilty, for example, or have been otherwise stifled' (Lola Cohen 2010: 28)

Concepts and ideas associated with notions of 'regression', 'blockage', 'substitution', 'sublimation', 'release', 'guilt', 'fear', 'therapy' are a common feature of much of Strasberg's writings as well as the recorded transcripts of his classes. If the language used is suggestive of that used by the probing analyst, then his actual behavior helped to reinforce such an impression - as the following testimony from a former student at the Actors Studio confirms:

'He...brought in Freud in his sessions with actors in what he called 'Affective Memory'. That is, instead of lying on a couch, the actor sat in a chair (straight backed), relaxed as fully as possible, eyes closed, while a teacher (Strasberg) led him in a kind of dream-like sensory journey into an incident in the actor's past experience...to bring the actor in vital touch with something traumatic, or joyful, or ecstatic in his past and which led him in his acting to be more aware and active (responsive) to his own qualities'.

(Letter from Richard Durham to Jonathan Pitches. Cited in Pitches 2006: 116)

The view of himself as a kind of ‘medic’ tending his patients is underlined by the discovery that Strasberg frequently came into physical contact with his students. In the case involving the actress who believed she suffered from arthritis, for instance, he ‘supported her neck and encouraged her to rest it in [his] hand’; (1988: 97) for the actress who had been punished as a child he initially ‘lifted her arm’ before he ‘lightly hit’ it (Ibid: 98).

The combination of the ‘probing analyst’ and the benevolent but nonetheless ‘paternalistic medic’, appear to have transformed Strasberg’s classroom activities beyond the merely pedagogical to something more akin to a psychoanalyst’s consultancy, where patients (actors) sought freedom from the emotional blockages they had accumulated through their lives.

Reaction to this approach was often extremely hostile and we can trace the origins of such hostility back to the early days of the Group Theatre, of which Strasberg together with Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford was a co-founder. Forged from a desire to address ‘the truest preoccupations of an intelligent American audience’ (Sharon M. Carnicke: 1998:45), the Group Theatre emulated the ensemble and creative ethos of the Moscow Art Theatre. Like the American Laboratory Theatre, it sought to advance the work of Stanislavski through the presentation of often gritty, realistic dramas that were reflective of contemporary American culture and society. With the demise of the American Laboratory Theatre in 1931, and given Strasberg’s intense passion for acting, it seemed natural for him to take charge of the actor training aspects of the Group’s work. An early indication of Strasberg’s impact in this area is signaled in

Sharon Helen Chinoy's observation that Group Theatre audiences were left 'flabbergasted' by the presentation of 'truthful emotions' and that watching a performance was 'like witnessing a real accident' (Ibid:50).

Focusing mainly on improvisation and emotional memory exercises, Strasberg's methods were often treated with skepticism. Fellow company member Phoebe Brand, for instance recalls getting to the point where 'I couldn't stomach the affective memory' and that 'it makes for a moody, personal, self-indulgent acting style'. Moreover, she argues that 'Lee crippled a lot of people' (Foster Hirsch 1984: 77).

Another Group Theatre actor, Margaret Barker, recalls that 'He had me going over and over a painful experience - my roommate had been killed the year before - until I thought I was going to crack...On one of the late rehearsals, I flung my purse in Strasberg's face. He had me doing an emotional memory, and I felt I wasn't playing the play.' (Ibid)

Strasberg's emphasis on personal psychology - often at the expense of work on the 'play' and the actual 'role' itself - was a source of tension amongst many Group Theatre actors - something that was further exacerbated when Stella Adler - also a Group Theatre actor - following five weeks of intensive training with Stanislavski himself, returned from Paris in 1934. Her subsequent proclamation that, according to Stanislavski, the Group's approach to acting was incorrect in that it neglected the importance of the actual play - the given circumstances, the role, the physical environment and the text itself - resonates with Stanislavski's own writings and his caution against the temptation to be drawn by those 'spur-of-the-moment experiences'

that may 'run counter to the play and the role' (see earlier quotation). Adler's announcement was to prompt a derisory rebuttal from Strasberg when he declared 'Stanislavski doesn't know. I know.' (Ibid: 79)⁵.

As is well documented, the ensuing conflict that arose between those who subscribed to Adler's version of Stanislavski's work and those who advocated Strasberg's was to last for many decades. Without wishing to rehearse the rights or wrongs of each side of the argument here, it is worth highlighting the point that, unlike Strasberg – who at an early stage in his career appears to have arrived at a fixed methodology from which he seems never to have strayed, Stanislavski's work was constantly evolving and changing – even at the time of his death. The move from the initial focus on the inner life of the actor to an increased emphasis on external expressiveness and the physical environment in which the action is situated represents an important watershed in Stanislavski's work. His belief in the need for balance and exchange between internal and external realms of expression, which subsequent teachers appear to have embraced – notably Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner and Robert Lewis – appears to have been largely ignored by Strasberg.

Later on in his career, during his time at the Actors' Studio, Strasberg's work was also a subject of heated debate. Although many of the techniques he developed – especially those involving relaxation, sense memory, the private moment, song and dance, and exercises for movement and voice often produced startling results, the Emotional Memory Exercise continued to form the cornerstone on which his version of the Method was established. It was also an ongoing source of controversy.

Aside from the concern that this exercise involved an uncomfortable degree of intrusion into formative events in the actual past life of the actor, the technique also fostered an approach to acting that encouraged patterns of behavior and expression that were reflective of the actual personality traits of the ‘performer’ rather than the imagined behavior of a dramatic character. Indeed, the very essence of the exercise - at least as taught by Strasberg - resisted the aesthetics of ‘physical or vocal transformation’ in favour of an appearance that seemed, by comparison, to be much more spontaneous, unpredictable and lifelike. For many who studied at The Actors’ Studio, there is no doubt that this approach proved highly effective (for example, in performances by Jon Voight, Dustin Hoffman and Sally Field), but one of the consequences of this approach was to narrow the frame of artistic and imaginative expression so that it was often unclear as to which persona was being presented – that of the actor or the character. Foster Hirsch expresses the point eloquently:

‘I was sometimes bothered that the distance between the actor and the character – the inevitable gap between simply being and giving a performance – was not clarified, as if to be yourself in a believable way was enough.’

(Foster Hirsch 1984:221)

Revealingly, given that one of the core principles of the Group Theatre was to establish an ensemble-based, collaborative ethos, it seems ironic that one of its co-founders went on to develop and promote an introspective and highly idiosyncratic style of performance – often at the expense of the play and the other actors working in it:

‘Under Strasberg, Method acting became more confessional than communal. Such an emphasis on the actor in isolation undermined the ensemble-oriented aspects of Stanislavsky’s system, producing actors like James Dean, whose on-screen aura of alienation from those around him was enhanced by a solipsistic acting technique that could lead him to step on the speeches of his fellow performers with line readings of his own that were often inaudible.’⁶

(Virginia Wright-Wexman in Pamela Robertson Wojcik (ed) 2004:131)

The accusation of ‘solipsism’ in part, at least, can be attributed to the work with Emotional Memory, but it would be inaccurate to claim that all those who encountered the exercise had negative experiences. For many actors who trained with Strasberg, the results proved highly enabling. Academy award-winning actress Estelle Parsons, who studied with Strasberg in the 1950s and 60s feels that his ‘...gift was to inspire people to function at their highest level’ (Hirsch: 167) and that his teaching taught her ‘more and more to be self-aware...to be as aware of yourself and your behaviour as you can possibly be’⁷. Of the Emotion Memory Exercise, Parson’s observes that ‘Every human being has a rich inner life, and the inner technique teaches you to train the emotional life, making it accessible’ (Hirsch: 211)

Salem Ludwig, also a regular at the Actors’ Studio and who played Ferapont in Strasberg’s 1963 production of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, needed no persuasion as to the value of the emotion memory technique asserting that ‘Actors who don’t use this technique are faking it... Teachers who reject it are afraid of it...’ (Ibid).

Strasberg himself, aware of the controversy surrounding this aspect of his work, defined it as follows:

‘Affective memory is not mere memory. It is memory that involves the actor personally, so that deeply rooted emotional experiences begin to respond. His instrument awakens and he becomes capable of the kind of living on the stage which is essentially reliving. The original emotional experience can be happy or frightening or fearsome. It can be concerned with jealousy or hate or love. It can be illness or accident. It can be anything that your mind immediately goes to when you ask yourself “Has anything strange, unusual, or exciting happened to me?”’

(Robert H. Hethmon 1965:109)

Interestingly, the above statement makes no mention of the dramatic character or of the processes by which an emotional memory can translate from the *actual* personal life of the performer to the imagined persona of a *fictional* character. Instead there is a clear emphasis on the actor ‘reliving’ ‘deeply rooted emotional experiences’. Although later on in *Tape-Recorded Sessions*, Strasberg goes on to say that an actor ‘...must fuse his personal emotion with the character and event he is portraying.’ (Ibid: 111) the requirement ‘that he listens and answers naturally’, when responding to another actor’s text, whilst simultaneously concentrating ‘on the objects of his own event and thus to fuse his material with the author’s.’ (Ibid) goes some way toward justifying Wright-Wexman’s observations about the Strasbergian actor’s tendency towards ‘solipsism’.

Although – as we have seen - it may well be the case that, for many actors, Strasberg’s use of Emotion Memory techniques have proved instructive and empowering, the concerns that have repeatedly plagued his application of the exercise have served to generate suspicion and skepticism not just about the exercise itself, but about Strasberg’s work more generally. Some of the most compelling concerns – which Strasberg failed to adequately address – include criticisms related to a) a tendency to allow the exercise to detract from the textual demands of the play itself; b) a propensity towards overly indulgent and introspective performances; c) the preference for the ‘relived’ emotional experiences of the performer in place of an ‘imaginary’ creation of the fictional experiences of the character; d) echoing anxieties expressed by Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, a conviction that the technique ignores Stanislavski’s call for a balance between the inner and outer realms of experience.

Inevitably, one of the consequences of focusing on a single aspect of Strasberg’s work is the danger that it can lead to a skewed understanding of his methodology. Whilst it may well be the case that the some of the controversy surrounding the Emotion Memory Exercise is justified, it is also important to at least acknowledge other aspects of his work – especially given that many of the exercises he developed continue to be used consciously and often unconsciously by acting teachers today. Before considering his impact on British actor training, therefore, it is important to offer a brief overview of some of the other important techniques Strasberg developed in his work.

Relaxation

As a pre-cursor to entering an emotional memory exercise, Strasberg strongly emphasised the need for relaxation. 'Remembered emotion', which has continuity and logic, he argued '...is the only emotion that can be the basis of art'. Citing William Wordsworth's famous phrase 'emotion remembered in tranquility'⁸, Strasberg advocated sitting in a chair as a device for achieving the appropriate kind of relaxation needed for concentration. The control of energy rather than comfort is the primary aim of this work. Once seated areas of tension in the face, neck, throat shoulders, body are eradicated. 'Emotions' he advises, can be lodged in your body like bones. Psychologists and psychiatrists tell us that an emotional trauma can get tied up in the muscles, and until you release those muscles, you cannot release the emotion'. (Cohen 2010: 10). For Strasberg relaxation techniques were an essential part of his training practice.

Sense Memory

As an accompaniment to the Emotion Memory exercises, Strasberg also used a range of Sense Memory techniques designed to test concentration and responsiveness and develop the imagination. Starting at home with real objects – breakfast drinks, mirrors, hairbrushes etc. that are then replaced in the classroom with imaginary equivalents, the exercises gradually become more complex involving tastes and smells, extremes of cold or heat, surrounding environments, personal objects and old acquaintances.

Animal Work

Having begun to develop the actor's capacity for concentration and control, Strasberg moved onto Animal Exercises designed to stimulate powers of observation and imitation. These exercises demand not just external imitation and muscle work to capture 'physical' characteristics, but also an exploration of the chosen animal's emotional life. Through careful observation, exploration and experimentation, the animal's characteristics assume the human form of the character and provide a basis for transformational work.

Private Moment

Designed to respond to Stanislavski's articulation of the problems associated with self-consciousness in front of an audience – this exercise is Strasberg's version of a 'private in public' exercise. The exercise should be taken from the reality of our daily lives and involve selecting '*something that you would never do in front of anyone*'. (Cohen 2010: 25). Importantly, it isn't the deed itself that is private, but rather it's significance to the individual.

Song and Dance Exercises

The aim of these exercises is to stimulate both external and internal responses in the actor. Assuming a neutral position in front of the tutor and establishing eye contact with the rest of the class, the exercise begins with singing aloud on a single breath from the lungs, a single syllable of a well-known song until the breath is fully expired. This is followed by an inhalation of more breath before moving to the next syllable. Whilst, externally, attention is focused on breathing, voice control and physical relaxation, the inner energy tunes into the actors' impulses, feelings and responses to

the situation – which can involve laughter, crying, anger, embarrassment etc. The important thing is for the actor to begin to become aware of these impulses and make contact with them. As the exercise develops, repetitive movement is added and the vocal pattern is changed. By working in this way Strasberg believed that actors became more aware of their own natural rhythms and patterns of expression and in so doing can begin to understand how the fusion between inner and outer realms of expression can be shaped and adapted when working on a character. For Strasberg there ‘...was a definite correlation between what the actor was asked to accomplish in the song-and-dance exercise, and the results it led to in dealing with the problem of expression.’ (Strasberg 1988:158).

There are, of course, many other exercises that Strasberg deployed, but the techniques listed above represent the foundations on which much of his practice both as a teacher and as a director were established. A fuller discussion of these and other aspects of Strasberg’s work will appear in a companion article to be published in a future edition of this journal.

As we have discovered, Strasberg’s work is often marked by the controversy that surrounds it, but this has not prevented it from enjoying universal appeal in drama schools and universities. Perhaps not surprisingly, his work continues to thrive in the USA – not just at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute, but also in many university departments and performing arts colleges. But what about Strasberg’s influence in the UK? Interestingly, like other teachers of the Method, Strasberg wasn’t especially impressed with the ‘English’ (for which read British) acting tradition:

‘The attitude of resting on one’s laurels is a chain around the neck of the English Theatre’

‘...the English theatre represents an outdated style. There is an English tradition in acting, but the English theatre now only holds onto the externals of that tradition. What is now created on the English stage is not humanity, not people, not reality, not even conviction. It is acting. It offers the best that acting has and therefore also the worst.’

(Robert H. Hethmon 1965:378-9)

Harsh criticism indeed, but to what degree has actor training in the UK absorbed the values reflected in Strasberg’s approach to training?

One of the first schools to adopt his approach was Drama Centre, – now part of the University of the Arts London. In 1983, Reuven Adiv – who trained with Strasberg at the Actors Studio in the 1950s – was invited by the then Principal, Christopher Fettes, to assume the role of Head of Acting at the School. Clearly an admirer of Strasberg’s approach, Adiv appears to have readily adopted most of the Strasbergian techniques he encountered at the Actors’ Studio:

‘I teach what I learned from Lee with the difference that I always keep the students focused on why we do exercises. Lee did not stress this in detail...Method exercises sharpen our awareness and help us to reevaluate ourselves as individuals so we can come to know the things that affect us.’

(Eva Mekler 1989: 80)

Although in the interview with Eva Mekler, Adiv makes it clear that he used Emotion Memory exercises (he adopts the phrase ‘Affective Memory’), when subsequently asked directly by Mekler if he uses Strasberg’s Emotional Exercises, he adds something of a caveat:

‘We do not talk about emotion at all. Emotions are a by-product of, or response to, something that you want from the other characters in the play. Very often a student falls into the trap of working to express anger or frustration, rather than focusing on why, as the character, he has come into a specific situation, what problem he has to solve there, and what means his character will use to get what he wants and stick to his choices.’

(Ibid: 84)

What makes this observation interesting is that whereas Strasberg’s use of Emotion Memory work often led him away from the demands of the text (see earlier commentary by Margaret Barker), Adiv’s application of it maintained a strong focus on the needs of the character and the dramatic situation. As a consequence, the tendency towards introspection and self-indulgence was greatly reduced. Vladimir Mirodan, who was Principal of the School between 2001 and 2011, recalls that Adiv was an ‘excellent teacher’⁹, whose work, at that time, was at the very core of the training. Indeed in 2002, when the NCDT¹⁰ (now Drama UK), undertook a re-accreditation visit to the School, Mirodan recalls that some initial concerns as a result of witnessing a student becoming highly emotional in Adiv’s acting class, were

quickly allayed when an hour later the same student was seen in another class completely calm and in control.

Although, as a result Adiv's influence, Strasberg's work represented an important component of the training at Drama Centre for over twenty years, more recently such influence has subsided so that currently Strasberg's techniques are no longer as significant a component of the training curriculum as they once were. This said, Annie Tyson, a teacher at the School and former Head of the Acting course, continues to teach what she too refers to as the Affective Memory Exercise. Having developed and refined it, she restricts the use of the technique to third year actors. 'This is important', she asserts, 'because by this time in the training they have developed a strong sense of the ensemble and work with high levels of trust and sensitivity'. Ensuring that the work is undertaken in a 'non-sensational atmosphere', Tyson makes it clear that each exercise is carefully managed and rigorously de-briefed so that all students learn from the exercise. Far from adopting an 'introspective' approach to the exercise, Tyson ensures that it is fully expressed to all of the observers that are present in the classroom. 'This is a simple technique', she argues, 'one of many, to be used in the service of the requirements of the dramatic text'. In Tyson's view, when used with care, sensitivity, and absolute professionalism, this exercise represents an important tool for exploring and learning from the 'inner landscape of the human being'¹¹

In common with many other key practitioners, it may occasionally be the case that acting teachers deploy Strasberg's methods without consciously identifying them or labeling them as such. Thomasina Unsworth, for example, who teaches acting at

Rose Bruford College, uses a range of sensory exercises involving taste, smell, touch, sound etc. as a means of stimulating the imaginations of her students and increasing their sensitivity. Acutely aware of some of the ‘myths’ surrounding his work, she feels that these sometimes obscure the obvious benefits of the techniques he developed. Through the adaptation of some of Strasberg’s exercises related to daydreaming, visualization and free associations she ‘fine tunes’ the work of classes and rehearsals so that actors understand the importance of specificity and detail.

Another Rose Bruford College tutor, Julian Jones, who teaches both Acting and Contextual Studies at the School, believes that Strasberg’s work is self-evidently reflective of an actor’s actual work. He suggests that, “Many students arrive at the School with negative impressions of Strasberg and have a view that Method Acting is bad for you’. Speculating that such impressions tend to arise as a result of poor provision on ‘A’ level and/or BTEC courses, he feels it is important in the context of his classes to foster a more balanced view of Strasberg’s work.

As far as Emotion Memory work is concerned, neither Unsworth nor Jones offered strong opinions either way. Indeed, both practitioners acknowledge the immense importance of emotion in an actor’s work which, Jones argues, is ‘central to human experience and anything that can be done to aid the actor in reaching his goal – including recalling previous experiences – is to be valued¹².

Although teaching staff at Rose Bruford College may not actually identify the exercises they use as Strasbergian, there is no doubt that his legacy serves to influence and shape the training experiences offered at the College.

One of the most enthusiastic and committed teachers of Strasberg's techniques currently working in a British drama school is Peter McAllister, who has been teaching acting at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama for over fifteen years.

During the 1970s and 80s, McAllister attended classes at both the Actors' Studio and the Lee Strasberg Institute, where he observed Strasberg at work and studied with a number of Strasberg teachers including Lola Cohen and David Gideon. Firmly convinced that 'Strasberg's legacy has...been overshadowed by the negative and inaccurate comments made by his detractors...' McAllister believes that there has been too much emphasis placed on the emotional memory exercise. In his view, this work was 'not taught as part of the basic training sequence, but as a technical tool for solving a specific problem of extreme emotion'. In this respect, McAllister's views echo those expressed by Annie Tyson at Drama Centre.

Totally convinced of the efficacy of Strasberg's techniques, McAllister incorporates the full sequence of inner and outer sensation exercises, the song and dance exercise and improvisation into the training regime he has developed for his students at *RCSSD*. Certainly not wary of undertaking Emotion Memory work, he makes it clear that he never expects students to re-visit traumatic experiences preferring instead that they select something that they can work with.

Resisting what he refers to as ‘the old shibboleths’ relating to accusations about excessive introspection and internalisation in Strasberg’s work, McAllister urges a different approach:

‘I believe there is a genuine value in this work as part of an actor’s training as it liberates the sensory imagination and enables a fullness of physical, vocal and emotional expression. I personally view the work as *physiological*¹³ rather than psychological as it manifests itself in the actor’s body rather than in the actor’s mind.’¹⁴

Interestingly, acting tutor, David Jackson, who also shares an interest in Strasberg’s work, has invited McAllister to run master classes in Sense Memory for his undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Birmingham School of Acting. Like McAllister, Jackson feels that Strasberg’s work has been misrepresented in the past and is keen to rehabilitate his reputation.

Alongside a presence in full time training within Drama UK accredited drama schools, Strasberg’s work is also taught in privately run schools and colleges. One of the most notable of these is Sam Rumbelow’s Method School, based in Whitechapel in Central London. Aimed largely at part-time students or those seeking intensive four-week training experience, the courses here incorporate all of the basic Strasbergian techniques including exercises in *sense memory*, *private moment*, *song and dance* and *emotion memory*. Trained in the Method by former Strasberg student Tony Greco, and fully aware of some of the controversies that have arisen in relation to Strasberg’s approach, Rumbelow, like Peter McAllister, is of the view that

Strasberg's detractors often misunderstand the 'internal dynamics' of the process. In his view the work offers an excellent 'simple and repetitive mechanism through which actors can enable the work of the sub-conscious to inform the interpretation of a dramatic character and of the text itself.'¹⁵

Notwithstanding some of the concerns that we have examined in relation to Strasberg's methodology – especially with regard to his interpretation of the Emotion Memory exercise – it appears that there is good evidence to suggest that the influence of his work and the techniques he developed continue in a very positive way to shape the training experiences of a new generation of British actors – both within the accredited training sector as well as privately funded part-time institutions.

Somewhat revealingly, it appears that there is also something of a gap between the views of recent academics and theorists who have written about Strasberg's training techniques and those in the training sector who work with and apply such techniques practically. In one respect, this isn't perhaps surprising. Our understanding of the complexity of human emotion is constantly shifting and evolving and actor trainers, who are accustomed to working with the 'liveness' of expressed emotion, are more likely to experience first-hand what Sam Rumbelow refers to as the *internal dynamics* of Strasberg's methods and how actors respond to them. This isn't to suggest that the views of theorists should be resisted – indeed the reverse is true if we are to fully understand the various levels on which new techniques operate – but rather to highlight the possibility that the live interaction and exchange between the teacher and the actor within a training environment is an important factor that needs to be taken into full consideration. It is noteworthy, that despite some of the concerns

previously highlighted in this discussion in relation to Emotion Memory work, British actor trainers working in high profile institutions continue to use the technique, albeit in a slightly modified and controlled way.

The willingness to take risks, to experiment, and to appear vulnerable in an actor training environment is often contingent on the extent to which we place trust in and feel inspired by the tutors we encounter. Whatever conclusions we may ultimately draw about the personality of Lee Strasberg or about his work, it is very evident that he inspired and enabled the work of a whole generation of actors – many of whom went on to enjoy illustrious careers. The controversies surrounding the work are, of course, worthy of in-depth scrutiny and reflection, but such processes should not overlook the insights and enduring enthusiasm for his work from those who continue to feel inspired as a result of teaching and practicing the techniques he developed.

In Part Two of this discussion, we will take a much closer look at various other techniques that Strasberg developed and assess the degree to which the ‘internal dynamics’ of his methodology represent a coherent system that remains of value and benefit to actors working in a 21st Century context.

¹ See Harrop, John (1992) *Acting* pp.39-4; Hornby, Richard (1992) *The End of Acting* pp.173-186; Counsell, Colin (1996) *Signs of Performance* pp. 56-59; Pitches (2006) *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting* pp. 109-125; Malague, Rosemary (2012) *An Actress Prepares* pp. 30-71

² A number of the lectures Boleslavsky's gave at the American Laboratory Theatre are included in Rhonda Blair's excellent edition of Richard Boleslavsky's *Acting: The First Six Lessons* (2010: 123-179)

³ For the purposes of this discussion, all references to Stanislavski's texts are drawn from Jean Benedetti's translation of *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*. The chapter on Emotion Memory appears on pages 195-228

⁴ See Boleslavsky, Richard 1949 *Acting: The First Six Lessons* pp. 21-43

⁵ Foster Hirsch in his book *A Method To Their Madness* (1984:67-95) offers various examples of how Strasberg's approach to rehearsal differed to other Method practitioners. Strasberg's emphasis on improvisations, animal exercises and emotion memory work distinguished his approach from more text/character based approaches.

⁶ Wright-Wexman, Virginia 2004 *Masculinity in Crisis: Method Acting in Hollywood* reprinted in Robertson Wojcik, Pamela (ed) *Movie Acting: The Film Reader* pp-127-144

⁷ Quoted from *In Conversation: Estelle Parsons Influences Recorded on 24th June 2010* and available at <http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/videos/?id=A71865>

⁸ A phrase originating from Wordsworth definition of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility' Published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1805) by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

⁹ Observations and commentary on Reuven Adiv's work by Vladimir Mirodan taken from personal correspondence with the author 2nd August 2015

¹⁰ The National Council of Drama Training (now known as Drama UK) is an organisation that provides formal accreditation to schools whose training meets the standards identified in a rigorous programme of quality assurance.

¹¹ From personal communication between Annie Tyson and the author 16th August 2015

¹² From personal communication between Thomasina Unsworth, Julian Jones and the author 23rd July 2015

¹³ My emphasis

¹⁴ From personal communication between Peter McAllister and the author 2nd July 2015

¹⁵ From personal communication between Sam Rumbelow and the author 12th August 2015

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