

STELLA ADLER

THE TECHNIQUE

OF ACTING

Foreword by Marlon Brando



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CHAPTER ONE

The Actor's Goals

The typical middle-class education is one of conformity. Rigid models of success and sobriety are placed before children from the very beginning. These set standards of behavior, or the Norm, are obstacles for the growing artist. This middle-class way of thinking (Norm) becomes a straitjacket for the imagination.

The dread of criticism, money madness, stage fright, unusual shyness, star dreaming, and character clichés are impositions made by the public. To be an artist you must overcome these obstacles. Everyday notions of good taste, beauty, and morality can mean death for *truthful behavior* and in-depth performance. People think they can act, but their thinking is often conventional. As an actor you must establish a new Norm—the actor's Norm.

One of the first jobs of the actor is to rid himself of outside opinions. Only when you respect someone more than anyone in the world can you accept and incorporate his opinions or criticisms. Otherwise, ignore people's notions of what is right for you. Nobody can tell you if you are young or old, beautiful or successful. These are ideas you must create for yourself. Most opinions on art and theatre are merely forms of gossip.

In my first session with actors, I always make a request: That each actor must carefully explain his (or her):

AIM: What is his goal and career plan?

Which comes first, **growth** (development) or **success** (money, fame, audiences)?

It is good for the young actor to verbalize his needs and fears, to make a distinction between people's (the public) idea of success (stardom) and the slow maturing of a great performer who can make more developed choices. In addition, the young

actor has to have a strong awareness of himself and must be able to quickly list his assets and faults. An example of such a list is:

ASSETS	FAULTS
Desire for growth	Insecurity
Interest in reading plays and background material	Procrastination
Health	Untrained voice
Good resonance chamber	Poor diction
	Sloppy body behavior

Only with a true awareness of your qualities and faults and with daily work can you begin to learn and break out of your middle-class defensiveness. The young actor has to be reminded that his emotional range must be extended to the maximum. One cannot hold back on anything and be an actor. All this begins with self-awareness.

The actor has only his own body as an instrument. So write down what has to be fixed. As an actor you must work continuously on:

- your body
- your speech
- your mind
- your emotions

Your new Norm is clear: the will to survive. One's core must be made of steel. An actor has the right to survive, to grow as an artist. This entails a special strength, a new discipline, and self-awareness. Know what you want and have the courage to pursue it.

It is important to say aloud: "I am myself and have my own standards."

ON MY WAY TO STANISLAVSKI

One day in 1925 I went to the New York Public Library to find some books on the theatre, on acting, on ideas. I sat very far from the other people, all of them engrossed in their work, studying and reading. I could see how large the room was, even though it was dimly lit. While sitting there, I noticed a young man sitting opposite me.

When I started to read, he unexpectedly said to me, "May I ask what you're interested . . . or what you're reading?" And I answered, "I'm interested in the theatre." A moment passed, and he said, "So am I!" Of course we both giggled, which put us at ease. As actors we immediately felt a bond between us. Whenever actors get together they feel this closeness.

As we spoke and he told me he was an actor, I said, "I thought so, and I think maybe I know you." He said, "Well, I know you!" (I had acted a lot.) I told him that I was interested in the ideas that were coming out of Europe. Because American actors were separated from Europe, they didn't have contact with European theatrical life and concepts and weren't aware of what was being done there with Realism or Post-Realism. I knew all this was going on, but getting hold of material was difficult.

I explained this to him, and he said to me, "I think there is someone in New York who is doing a play that would interest you. It's a production in a very small theatre." He gave me the name of the theatre and told me where it was.

The theatre was on the East Side in the lower twenties, in a tenement building, with small steps going up. To the left was a room—just a room—and that's where the production of *The Sea Woman's Cloak* was taking place. It was a small room, very dimly lit, with about fifteen chairs about. In the corner was a

woman, very huddled up, in dark clothes, looking through what seemed to be opera glasses.

She was very interesting. There was nobody else there. Perhaps a few more people came in just before the play began. When the curtain went up, a miracle happened.

It was a brilliant production; brilliant, stimulating, interesting, aesthetically a joy—it was a poem! What was astonishing was that there were American actors acting with a grace, a knowledge, a style, and a security that I hadn't seen. I soon found out that this play was directed by Richard Boleslavski, a Russian director of fame, a director in the Moscow Art Theatre, which, for years, had been under the supervision of Konstantin Stanislavski. I knew this; I understood this; I knew almost immediately that this approach was what I was looking for. I found out that Boleslavski and the lady in the corner, Madame Maria Ouspenskaya, had come to America and started a theatre, or a laboratory. It was called the Laboratory Theatre, and it was for students who were interested in the Russian style of acting.

Within a day or two I had joined the Laboratory Theatre. Although I was acting at other theatres all the time, I stayed at the Laboratory Theatre for two years, where I attended lectures by Boleslavski, movement classes with Mordkin, and voice classes and some technique classes with Madame Ouspenskaya. It was a small conservatory, and Boleslavski was doing rehearsals and productions. I watched his rehearsals, and took part in some of the plays.

My life went on. I acted, helped enormously by the ideas that were introduced there about the theatre, about acting, about the actor in the theatre, and the importance of the actor. All this came through with great, great honesty, and I was profoundly influenced by what Boleslavski gave to his audiences.

Time passed and I continued acting in the theatre. I had the habit of going to Europe when I had the time, the freedom, and the money. At one point I was in Paris, and Harold Clurman was there at the same time.

Harold had initiated the Group Theatre, of which I was a part. To me he was a savior; he had made a theatre to which I wanted to belong. He had seen me act and asked me to join, so I did. Harold was the man who did the most to open up my talent and my mind, who helped me educate myself about plays. He had significance in my life, in my theatrical life.

In Paris, Harold said to me, "You know, Stella, Stanislavski is here." By this time, I had heard a great deal about Stanislavski. I had known people who were participating in the Stanislavski technique. I myself was part of the Group Theatre, where the technique was supposedly being used. But as an actress who had had a great deal of experience elsewhere, I resented acting with some of the principles that were used at the Group Theatre. Because of this, I became a stranger. I excluded myself from the way in which they rehearsed, and the way the plays were directed. All this was known to everyone. They knew that I was against what was happening at the Group Theatre.

Harold also knew my feelings about the Group Theatre. He thought it was a good idea for me to meet Mr. Stanislavski.

But I was hesitant. The idea frightened me, because I said to Harold, "If I meet him, I will have in me a sense that he was represented at the Group Theatre in a way I didn't want."

In the end I went with Harold Clurman to Mr. Stanislavski's home. It was a small French apartment with a small French elevator. When Harold opened the door, there were a few people in the room. It was a small room, and in the far corner was Stanislavski. The moment of meeting him was such a shock to me that I stood and didn't move. Harold went over and greeted him. With Stanislavski were his doctor, a friend, and Madame Chekhova. Madame Chekhova stood near the door with me and said, "You must go over and shake Mr. Stanislavski's hand." I looked at her and said, "No." She said, "You must." I said, "No, I mustn't," and I didn't. I stood, completely unable to move, forward or backward. I was paralyzed by the whole moment.

Within a short time Mr. Stanislavski and the others suggested that we all go to the Champs-Élysées. When we got there, Mr. Stanislavski sat on a bench against a tree, and we sat around him. There was great laughter and gaiety—the intimacy and wittiness that actors have. I remember distinctly Stanislavski chiding Madame Chekhova and calling her a ham, and of course she laughed. He pretended to bully her, and she pretended to be stronger than he was. There was humor, and an absolute moment of ensemble, and the joy of being there.

Mr. Stanislavski spoke to everyone, and he perceived that I was reticent. Naturally, he would notice that, because he had the "eye" and nothing got past him. He finally turned to me and said, "Young lady, everybody has spoken to me but you." That was

the moment that I looked at him, eye to eye, we were together. I heard myself saying, "Mr. Stanislavski, I loved the theatre until you came along, and now I hate it!" He looked at me a little longer, and then he said, "Well, then you must come to see me tomorrow."

That was probably the moment that I remember best. We said good-bye, and I went to see Mr. Stanislavski the next day.

I thought it was important for me to bring somebody in case I did not understand him. The friend that I brought was a great help. Sitting with Mr. Stanislavski, I found out that we could speak quite easily in French. He asked me many questions. I told him that I was very unhappy about a play that I was in at that time called *The Gentle Woman* by Don Powell. I told him that I failed in certain moments of the play when I could neither continue the character nor understand how to continue the character. He was terribly intrigued, and we worked on the concept of the character. Within a minute or two I realized he was very interested in me as an actress. He wanted me to resolve my problem. Here was the one man in the world who could help! And so I opened up my whole heart to him.

I told him that I was a practiced actress. He knew of my family: He knew because my father, Jacob P. Adler, had produced *The Living Corpse* by Leo Tolstoi before he, Stanislavski, had played it. Adler was the first one in the world to play it, and this, of course, was known by everyone. Stanislavski understood that I was the daughter of Jacob P. Adler and Sara Adler, a theatrical family.

Stanislavski and I were in the greatest closeness of director and actress, and very soon it was just actor and actress! We worked together every day for many, many weeks. In those periods, there were certain things that he asked me to do. Particularly, he made very clear to me that an actor must have an enormous imagination that is free and not inhibited by self-consciousness. I understood that he was very much an actor who was fed by the imagination. He explained to me how important it was to use the imagination on the stage. He then explained in detail how important it was to use the circumstances. He said that *where* you are is what you are, and how you are, and what you can be. You are in a place that will feed you, that will give you strength, that will give you the ability to do whatever you want.

He asked me to use the circumstances. He said, "Just do a few things and put a plot around it." I was fluent (maybe too fluent!) I said, "Yes." I went to the window and I was devastated, because imaginatively I saw something in which I was emotionally, immediately involved. Then I walked over to the desk and wrote my name at the bottom of the letter. Again, I was dramatically, deeply involved with the plot, and I knew there was only one more thing to do; that was to get my hat and coat and leave the place.

These exercises can be done on any level. I took the dramatic level. It was closer to me, as I was a dramatic actress.

Mr. Stanislavski also told me—very much actor to actress—how he had suffered when he played *An Enemy of the People*. He said that he was a complete disaster. He didn't know the part; he didn't know where to touch it. He said it was difficult for him; that Ibsen was difficult for him. He told me that it took him ten years to find the part. While he was gathering the elements for a technique that would make acting easier, he found the answer to the problem that he had essentially experienced as an actor throughout his life, especially while working on *An Enemy of the People*. In this particular play, Stanislavski said that he had talked to the people and asked them to do something. That was wrong. He said, "I had to speak to the *soul* of the people. If I could reach their souls, I could get somewhere." Ten years after Stanislavski had originally played the role, the play was revived; the part was his and he was then able to play it.

We worked intimately on scenes and on improvisations, and I was able to be completely at ease, completely at home. I felt as if I had worked with him for a lifetime. He was gentle and "absolutely theatre"; nothing but theatre came through. Kindness and interest—a master with a student.

He couldn't see me in the mornings, because he said he had speech difficulties—that he was inclined to lisp. So he would practice every morning for two hours. I laughed at him, and he laughed at himself.

After many weeks, he told me that he had come to Paris to see his family, but that I hadn't let him do that, and would I give him some time to be with them? Of course I said yes, and I thanked him, said good-bye, and left.

But the next morning I called him and said, "Mr. Stanislavski, we did not cover some element of the technique," explaining that

there was something he had not made clear. He said, "Come right over!" (By this time my notes were voluminous!)

When I did walk away from Stanislavski's apartment, I wandered the streets of Paris. I knew Paris; I knew it as any fervent actress would, who looks at the roofs, at every doorknob, at every little shop. I was infatuated with Paris. I had worked with the master teacher of the world, the man whose words were going to flood the world with truth. That sense he had, of how truthful you had to be; this was his heritage, this is what he gave away. I could never thank him enough. I remember walking down the street and saying, "Mr. Stanislavski, I can't thank you personally, but all my life I will dedicate myself to other people, to give them what you have given me."