

# OUTLINE PROPOSAL FORM

for Cambridge Pre-U

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Examination/Assessment Session:	June	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	November	<input type="checkbox"/>
Title of Proposal	Is Method Acting dangerous?			

Details of Proposal (see over)		
<p>In this investigation I will try to determine whether the techniques of Method Acting are to blame for the deaths, sufferings, break downs and extreme decisions of many actors. Method acting is a technique that has been refined over many years and in many different countries. In this investigation I will explore the current research on Method Acting including some pertinent historical background information. My aim in this investigation is to clarify both sides of the argument and to determine if there are certain factors within Method Acting that exacerbate the health issues problem. The pros and cons of the method within the countries where it is used are elements will also be assessed in this investigation.</p> <p>This information will be gathered mainly through websites, books and articles also by contact with specialists.</p> <p>Sources:</p> <p><a href="http://www.actingleality.com/Articles/ProsConsMethod.html">http://www.actingleality.com/Articles/ProsConsMethod.html</a> "The Pros and Cons of Method Acting."</p> <p>"Valhalla Underground?: If I Am I and You Are You Then Who Is X" - R. W. Garcia</p> <p>"Shame: Method in the madness" - Geoffrey Macnab, The Independent</p> <p>With references to other websites.</p>		
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### Is Method Acting dangerous?

Method acting uses a group of techniques "used by actors to create in themselves the thoughts and emotions of their characters, so as to develop lifelike performances."<sup>1</sup> It refers to the practices that actors undergo to achieve a sense of truth, this involves recalling on personal emotions or memories aided by particular exercises to connect the actor and the character. There are many different interpretations of Method Acting; I am going to focus on whether it is dangerous and unnecessary or whether it does enhance an actor's portrayal of a character if they have felt the same experience as the character they are supposed to be playing. By dangerous I am referring to a practice is "likely to kill or harm someone" or "likely to have a bad effect or to cause a problem"<sup>2</sup>.

The 'system', which was originally created by Constantin Stanislavski, strived to establish a sense of the 'theatrical truth'. His 'system' then influenced 'The Method' that was first established by the Group Theatre in New York City in the 30s, and it was then advanced subsequently by Lee Strasberg and others at The Actors Studio in the 40s and 50s. According to Stanislavski's 'system' the actor "analyses... the motivations and emotions of the character... to personify him or with psychological realism and emotional authenticity."<sup>1</sup> With the Method, the actor also evokes "emotions or reactions from his or her own life and uses them to identify the character being portrayed".<sup>1</sup> The question is whether connecting this much of your own life with a character is more harmful than beneficial. The danger of Method Acting can start from not wanting to be called your real name off set like Daniel Day-Lewis when he played Abraham Lincoln in *Lincoln*, to Heath Ledger staying up nights on end experimenting with voices for the character of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* to the point where he needed medication to help him sleep which resulted in the allegations that the 'dedication' to the role of the Joker actually killed him.

My first reaction to Method Acting is that it is unnecessary. I find that Method Acting is an excuse to be over-dramatic despite its aim to be finding a realistic performance. By over-dramatic I mean how an actor can indulge themselves in a character to the point where it starts to become more about the actor rather than the character. I also think that it's an excuse for an actor to appear that they do much more for their career than a 'normal' actor would do; just because you have lived in a country where your character is from, does not make an actor any more capable to achieve a realistic performance than someone who has not lived in that country and can just act. Fundamentally I believe if you are a good enough actor you do not need to live as the character, you can just act and give a just as perfectly good performance by doing so.

From doing exams where I have had to perform monologues with other students, I have witnessed first-hand how extreme people can get when they think they are using Method Acting. Ten minutes before I am about to go on stage to perform my monologue for an exam, I am met with another student backstage who refused to believe her name was anything else but Paula from *The Positive Hour*, which came across as more amusing than admirable. It was an example at how using Method Acting does not necessarily mean you will give a better performance than someone else that didn't, no other students used Method Acting yet their performances still came across as very believable and gripping.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Method\\_acting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Method_acting)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/dangerous>

The Citizens Commission on Human Rights produced an article called *A Madness in the Method*. It is an article based on facts and evidence about how Method Acting can be extremely harmful. The article does state at the beginning that Method Acting was supposed to reduce the likelihood of an actor producing a very stale, mechanical performance each and every night; Method Acting was supposed to practice with a "diversity of behavioural-styled, psychological techniques".<sup>3</sup> The article tries to provide a two-sided argument whilst retaining a solid 'dangerous' undertone. The article contains a running counter argument of what they really conclude to; they say that "it sounds harmless."<sup>3</sup> They have so much historical evidence to prove that Method Acting is a beneficial method and has good outcomes using quotes from psychologists and practitioners, for example, Harold Clurman, author of *The Fervent Years* wrote that the recollection of details of their own past "would stir the actors with some feeling involved in the original experience"<sup>2</sup> giving the impression that The Citizens Commission on Human Rights can understand how it is a good idea. The quotes from the psychologists and practitioners however, do seem like they have been picked out to be interpreted that Method Acting has sides of danger and essentially more harmful than beneficial. Their conclusion, that method acting made the actor dive "headfirst into some traumatic incident in their life"<sup>2</sup>, looks more like a point of view rather than a fully backed up conclusion. They state that some actors did not just remember the past but they re-lived certain experiences they may not want to feel but they had no evidence to back up their point. You can also tell that they believe method acting is dangerous by their conclusion because of the emotive language they use in the last paragraph, comparing Method Acting as "Russian Roulette"<sup>2</sup> in some cases, an activity that can end up killing a person which could be seen as very over the top. Specifically using Marilyn Monroe as an example, it is a very extreme case of how Method Acting can affect the actor themselves not just their performance. One of the main restrictions of this article is that it does not state who wrote it. Although The Citizens Commission on Human Rights produced many articles on the website, the author is not obvious and therefore we do not know how reliable they are or whether they have any expertise in the field of Method Acting or whether this is just their point of view. The Citizens Commission on Human Rights is an "advocacy group"<sup>4</sup> that "supports views against psychiatry"<sup>4</sup> and therefore may seem to know a lot about mental illness and believe that psychiatric medication is a destructive and deceitful practice which could suggest that any "manipulative psychoanalysis"<sup>2</sup>, like Marilyn Monroe had, is dangerous and unnecessary. Their conclusion is that method acting is dangerous but the lack of knowledge of the author could mean that they are entirely biased and their conclusion is just their own belief.

D.L. White tries to suggest that there are pros and cons of method acting in his article "*The Pros and Cons of Method Acting*", however, he states that his conclusion is that he "[finds] it too dangerous and limiting to achieve a safe and more importantly, sane acting career".<sup>5</sup> He believes that, although a realistic performance can be achieved, there is "potential mental and physical harm from engaging in dangerous behaviour and unreliable performances."<sup>5</sup> White states that he believes that there are safer methods to achieving great acting results. White used more current examples of actors who use or do not use the system of Method Acting. For example, Dustin Hoffman played an avid runner who found himself involved in a serious, mysterious conspiracy in *Marathon Man* and started "running all around Manhattan during filming to force himself into a state of exhaustion".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.mental-health-abuse.org/harmingArtists8.html>

<sup>4</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens\\_Commission\\_on\\_Human\\_Rights#Controversy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens_Commission_on_Human_Rights#Controversy)

<sup>5</sup><http://www.actingreality.com/Articles/ProsConsMethod.html>

which could seem either ridiculous to those who believe Method Acting is unnecessary or inspirational for those who believe that an actor should live the character before it goes to camera. White even uses a counter argument to enforce the point he could be wanting to make, that Method Acting just seems superfluous, by stating that Sir Laurence Olivier had said, on seeing Dustin Hoffman do this, "Good Lord man, just act."<sup>3</sup> His argument then led to his own opinion being that the "best asset"<sup>3</sup> for an actor is imagination, which reiterates his view that there are different and safer methods to achieve "wonderful results"<sup>3</sup>. He uses a lot of personal, emotive language; "eventually realized" which sounds as if it is his voice and opinion; He has an undertone personal distaste towards the system which makes him automatically bias. In this article White uses the straw man fallacy. White distorts the system of Method Acting and uses extreme examples such as River Phoenix, whose experimental drug use lead to death. This misrepresents the system Of Method Acting and assumes that the system can only be extreme and strenuous. Although it is perverting the argument, this can add more scope to knock the argument down with; he also fails to introduce any counter arguments to say that Method Acting has its benefits except saying that it can help an actor attain a genuine performance. The title is "*The Pros and Cons of Method Acting*"; however, White's opinion was evident throughout. White does give a counter- arguments that the pros can mean that realistic performances can be achieved that have been based on real experiences, but the pros of the argument he puts forward are scarce and the feel of the underlying opinion of distaste for the system is evident. This was also confirmed by the email conversation I had with the D.L.White who stated that method acting 'is dangerous if taken to the extremes' and 'a largely counter-productive exercise that gives better result better facilitated by the use of the imagination.' Through our conversation via email, I was able to find White's CV<sup>6</sup> and have seen that he does have a lot of experience in acting and the arts, for example, he has been a director and writer for films such as *Ice* and *This Is You*, he is also directed music videos and has written books on acting and how to give a good performance. This level of experience gives him a certain degree of expertise and an ability to see, but could also give him a bias as he might have his own way of approaching a project and therefore may not have complete neutrality.

An article in *The Independent* takes a completely different stance of Method Acting and Geoffrey Macnab, the author, feels strongly that the aftermath when actors use method acting their performance is outstandingly believable and gives them a "chameleon-like ability to switch their personalities as they switch roles"<sup>7</sup>. He uses examples such as Michael Fassbender who can play a sullen Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre* to fascinated and analytical Carl Jung in *A Dangerous Method*. Geoffrey Macnab appears to believe that the more work that an actor puts into their character behind the scenes, the more they will get out of their performance., he believes it is "extreme dedication"<sup>7</sup> and that an actor's instinct, who uses the technique of method acting is to "immerse themselves utterly in their roles"<sup>7</sup>. He uses a listing technique of listing many up and coming British actors who, because they have used the system, "have brought a brooding, introspective intensity to their performances."<sup>7</sup> His argument is rich in examples of actors who have developed some great films through method acting for example, Marlon Brando, Robert DeNiro, Dustin Hoffman

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.imdb.com/name/nm3219515/resume>

<sup>7</sup><http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/shame-method-in-the-madness-2354161.html>

and Christian Bale who "famously denied food and sleep in preparation for *The Machinist*"<sup>7</sup>, where he played an insomniac machinist who slowly loses his mind. Here Macnab claimed that Christian Bale believed his methods helped him inhabit the character more than any CGI would. Also, Thomas Hardy who went to comparable extremes when portraying Charles Bronson, putting on weight after losing sheds of weight a year before from playing a homeless drug addict in *Stuart: A Life Backwards*. He uses very emotive language to suggest that he favours method acting over any other technique, referring it to their "craft"<sup>7</sup> and claiming that more contemporary British actors are not suffering from their "predecessors' snobberies or insecurities about movies."<sup>7</sup> The bias is blatant throughout the article and when referring to snobberies that those actors may feel and there is an underlying tone of his own opinion resonating through. Macnab attempts to use a counter-argument to see the other side by saying that people such as RADA trained students found the system uncivilized and inappropriate to use but he dismisses the counter argument by saying, yes it is an anecdote even if it is "droll", but he believes those sorts of attitudes made British acting nervous in comparison to some of the great American method actors. Geoffrey Macnab writes a lot on film and show business, it is easy to see that he is passionate about the subject, although it may give him experience in the topic area, it does however affect his neutrality and his opinion is underlying throughout the article. We do not know by reading this article if he has any expertise in the topic of Method Acting, we just know that he is experienced in the topic of writing about theatre and film, which makes him relatively unreliable.

Mark Westbrook, a professional acting coach, has written a blog "*Ten Reasons I Hate Method Acting*". He believes that "Method Acting isn't bad or wrong; instead it's simply unnecessary"<sup>8</sup>. He suggests many reasons as to why Method Acting is unnecessary. He believes that a lot of Method Acting and the research that goes into it are just self-indulgence and fake work and to be a good actor you do not need to experience the life of the character but you should be able to act it: "Acting is action"<sup>8</sup>. And he also suggests that the Method's "ill-educated and misguided approach to tinkering around in the mind of the actor is frightening."<sup>8</sup> Westbrook believes that not only is it not brave but stupid, he believes that the mind of the actor is not "the playground of an acting teacher"<sup>8</sup> and that no one knows what problems of the past they could be digging up. Westbrook believes that not only is Method Acting anti-practical, but it confuses students for them thinking that the 'truth' they are finding in this research will help bring truth to the characters but he believes that it really is just very good pretence. He also believes that it is self-indulgent, not just for the actor but also for the teacher. He believes that the actor is given an opportunity to go and 'research' something exciting that they would not usually do to get them to a state that he believes does not really help an actor at all. Westbrook also thinks that the teacher should be teaching the topic and not pushing their own influences to the student which he believes some teachers do. The article is filled with many good reasons yet no evidence to back them up. Most of his points are valid and can be applied to Method Acting but with no evidence it diminishes his argument to just a list of opinions. Westbrook has studied at multiple institutions, taught, performed and directed. This gives him a level of expertise as he seems to have been in a lot of different areas of the Arts. The broad expertise he has, gives Westbrook an ability to see, being involved in Drama and Theatre he would have had to have studied practitioners such as Stanislavsky and Method Acting at some stage. However, we can see from even the title of his blog that he has a strong bias against Method Acting and therefore has no neutrality and can lessen his reliability.

<sup>8</sup>[http://www.actingleachscotland.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=76](http://www.actingleachscotland.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=76)

David Krasner, a teacher in acting, performance and many other branches of the arts, also an actor and director, has written a book called "*Method acting reconsidered: theory, practice, future.*" His main argument is that an actor cannot "perform what [they] do not imagine"<sup>9</sup>. Krasner's argument is complete with counter arguments and seeing the other side of the dispute. He acknowledges how critics can see Method Acting as dangerous and might think that the actors themselves will "burst forth out of the play at any moment and infest them with life, with tragedy, with sex."<sup>9</sup> He also recognises that Method Acting has been known to be criticised for the actors being too "self centered...for emphasising the actor over the character or the character over the actor."<sup>9</sup> Krasner also touches on the "[misunderstanding]"<sup>9</sup> of the process of the actors doing what the characters they are portraying do. Practitioners intend for this element of Method Acting to help the actors have a personal catharsis but Krasner realises that the intention is to make the actor connect with the character they are portraying not to focus on "an emotion, a conclusion, or an obvious action that lacks strong conviction."<sup>9</sup> Where his argument looks at the danger that Method Acting is the mention of the use of affective, or, emotional memory. He states that it can be dangerous because the student might not be "psychologically ready to deal with some of the stimuli touched upon."<sup>9</sup> This is especially the case if the teacher knows personal information about the student's past. Krasner's credentials give him some sort of expertise in the field of Method Acting. He has won many awards for Theatre and Drama research and has been in the running for many awards for the books he has written. Having first-hand experience of teaching acting Krasner must have some experience in teaching Method Acting and studying the original practitioners, so therefore knows the system well and has an ability to see the different pros and cons of acting methods.

The debate as to whether Method Acting is dangerous or it is not seems like it could go on forever. There are many reasons as to why people agree with it or do not agree and most of the examples are very extreme. Those who agree with the system believe that it is the best way to achieve a truthful and believable performance. Living as the character they are portraying before they play the character can, some believe, make the actor feel the way the character would be feeling in those situations. Even using simple techniques such as emotional, or affective, memory or the Magic If can help an actor get closer to feeling the same emotions the character would be feeling and convey a true sense of emotion when acting. People who agree with the system of Method Acting seem to believe that why stop at just acting when living as the character can deliver a truly meaningful performance when you have experienced first-hand what the characters have. Like I have stated in my investigation, many people believe that Method Acting is becoming a world-wide system to help give a gripping performance and most of the greatest actors have been those of Method Acting.

Most arguments that believe that Method Acting is dangerous believe also that it is highly unnecessary. Some people believe that to portray and give a true performance they don't need to live as the character they are portraying but all they need to do is act. If they are good enough actors then they will be able to deliver just a true performance as a method actor. Many examples from those who believe that Method Acting is dangerous are very extreme. People refer to Heath Ledger, Christian Bale and Marilyn Monroe when they think of Method Acting being dangerous and they are

<sup>9</sup>[http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=9tvUvp\\_f74QC&pg=PA132&dq=is+method+acting+dangerous?&hl=en#onepage&q=is%20method%20acting%20dangerous%3F&f=false](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=9tvUvp_f74QC&pg=PA132&dq=is+method+acting+dangerous?&hl=en#onepage&q=is%20method%20acting%20dangerous%3F&f=false)

too the extreme. But many say that if living as a character can cause death than any kind of Method Acting is bad. As shown in my investigation, there are more reasons than it just being dangerous that people disagree with Method Acting, people believe that it is more self-indulgent rather than anything and that more focus should be on the text and interpretation that real life, first-hand experience.

I do not think there is any way forward in the debate or any solution. Method Acting can produce very different results for different actors and different characters. It can result in a gripping and exciting performance or it can result in stress, psychological problems and maybe even death. I do think though, that there should be a limit to how far actors should push themselves, and in that case I think it involves directors and screen writers to take more concern about their actors and make sure that their health is more important at the end of the day.

After researching the debate I still believe that Method Acting is quite unnecessary. I agree with Mark Westbrook, the author of "*Ten Reasons I Hate Method Acting*". I reciprocate his belief that Method Acting is completely self-indulgent and shouldn't be necessary if someone can just act. I think his main point of self-indulgence for an actor and even the teacher is a very important one, people may talk about how the experience they had when using Method Acting reflected the work shown on screen or stage, but what people really talk about is what the actor did before and their dedication. So their 'dedication' to the cause is really what gets talked about rather than what the actor has done in the performance, so Method Acting looks to praise the actor more rather than the film or show that should be judged. I also think that D.L. White makes a very significant point in article "*The Pros and Cons of Method Acting*", in that there are safer results of achieving a realistic performance rather than putting yourself through physical and mental pain. When I think of acting I don't necessarily think of living as the character for a long period of time or actually living as a character to make my performance believable and truthful to whom I am portraying, but I think of being creative with a character and experimenting with different interpretations. I best developed this frame of mind through D.L. White's point that imagination is the best asset of an actor and that you do not have to put yourself through any harm to use imagination and creativity. Also reading what The Citizens Commission on Human Rights had to say and the examples from psychologists they used, it made me think how psychological and mentally testing Method Acting can be. Using personal experience can appear to benefit a performance but can also bring up memories that an actor may not want to relive. I was still unsure about how I felt about using personal experience and memories until I researched David Krasner's point in "*Method acting reconsidered: theory, practice, future*." Although he is obviously in favour of Method Acting, he does touch upon how some people may not be ready to deal with some of the psychological practices Method Acting entails. This reminded me of a point that Mark Westbrook made, once again about how Method Acting can be more about the teacher teaching it than the actor, and being forced into the systematics of Method Acting could result into more dangerous results. Geoffrey Macnab did use many examples of actors who have used the system of Method Acting very constructively. Using modern actors such as Michael Fassbender, Tom Hardy and Christian Bale with a mixture of Marlon Brando and Dustin Hoffman, gave him a strong list of reliable and valid examples and evidence to prove his point; that it may be Method Acting that make these actors the greatest actors of each of their time. Nonetheless, I still had at the back of mind while I was reading his article actors such as Heath Ledger, Marilyn Monroe and even Daniel Day Lewis who did and do put themselves under immense pressure and sometimes pain to achieve what they think is good acting through Method Acting. In addition, I still

can't help but have the frame of mind where I believe that maybe these actors could have been just as good if they had not done the background activities and just acted. I believe that living on the streets or running marathons around a country can be good character building for the person themselves but I feel like it is too big a risk and too dangerous to apply to all different types of characters. I also feel that if an actor needs to live as that character for a certain period of time to create a similar experience on screen or on stage, then they leave no room for interpretation or creativity. Because they have learnt the 'real thing', it would be natural for an actor to feel like they have to do what they have seen or experienced rather than what they felt in the moment.

I chose to research Method Acting and whether it is dangerous or not and all the connotations that come with it because I am passionate about the topic and after researching it I was not disappointed with what I found or how enthusiastic I further came to be. It was a door way to look into a topic I knew little bits about and I was opened to many other points of views and examples I had never heard before, for example, before starting this report I had no idea that Robert DeNiro and Marlon Brando were Method Actors and I have now proceeded to buy many of their films to see if I notice anything different. At the beginning of this report I had a very strong, adamant point of view and strong standing of what I believed Method Acting to be and I knew it would be difficult for anyone or anything to change my mind. However, as I read more and more about actors who use the system of Method Acting I found myself open my mind somewhat. I was starting to see that there are some actors who do not need to cause themselves pain to act how they want to act with including Method Acting. I also started to think that maybe Method Acting is sometimes necessary and an easier option to develop a character, for example Tom Hardy when he played Charles Bronson, a real life criminal, it may have been easier to do the research he did, meet the real Charles Bronson, put on the real weight rather than fake everything which would not be true to the performance or the film. However, my main belief will still stand when I say that an actor good enough will use creativity to help them make a performance believable and actually good. Many actors do not have the privilege to jet set around to exotic places to experience the circumstances that their characters may be in and yet the manage to give a brilliant performance nonetheless. So therefore I believe that if you do not have to do it, then don't. Method Acting could be fun and exciting to explore different surroundings and circumstances than just a rehearsal studio or a film set, but the dangers that could come with Method Acting could be consuming, isolating and completely dangerous resulting in pain or even fatality eventually. So, paraphrasing from D.L.White, imagination is the more important asset an actor can have.

## Is Method Acting Dangerous?

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