

# *IS STANISLAVSKI'S "SYSTEM" STILL RELEVANT TO THE AMERICAN THEATRE?*

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## **Introduction**

“The human being who acts is the Human being who lives.”

(Strasberg 1965: 98)

I choose to start my essay with this quote because I believe it encapsulates why I want to pursue acting as a career. With this, it is important to note that theatre and acting in particular plays an extremely important role in my life and has consciously affected me in many ways. With that being said, acting and theatre in general would not be what it is today without the ideas and theories presented by “the father of modern acting,” Constantine Stanislavski. This is a commonly known fact throughout the theatre world which is why I found it interesting when I began to look more heavily into acting as a career and how to truly pursue it, that his theories were not commonly taught in modern America acting studies. This brought me to the question “Is Stanislavski’s ‘System’ still relevant to American theatre?”

In addressing this question it would appear that the “System” is not as relevant as it once was for many reasons. The actual “System” is very rarely taught today, one of the most commonly taught methods contradicts and negates many of the ideas of Stanislavski, and at the time it was presented to American theatre, it was not fully finished. However, because his introduction of the “System” to America drastically changed theatre and that between two major theories of thought the majority of his ideas are portrayed, his “System” remains very relevant to American theatre today.

To help further analyze Stanislavski and his “System” we will take a brief look at his initial introduction of the “System” to America to help establish the impact it had and has left on

American theatre. In addition, we will take a very brief look at the ideas Stanislavski presents in his “System” in order to have the ability to juxtapose them to the most common theories taught in America today. Then, I will quickly discuss my reasoning for choosing the following theorists, Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, and Stella Adler, to evaluate as the basis for modern acting techniques in America. Finally, I will take a look at various opinions on the subject to come to a conclusion on the question “Is Stanislavski’s ‘System’ still relevant to American theatre?”

To help with clarification, for the purpose of this essay, when presented with a capital S and in quotations, the “System” refers to that of Stanislavski’s ideas and theories.

### **Stanislavski’s Introduction of the “System” to America**

The first exposure America had to Stanislavski’s direction and theory of acting came after he took the Moscow Art Theatre’s (MAT) most famous actors on tour throughout Europe and the United States to aid in the financial survival of the theatre. After seeing the way of life in America and comparing it to the ones they lived back home,

Many of the Moscow Art Theatre’s talented actors traded their fame for employment in the West as actors, directors and teachers, rather than return to difficult lives in the new Soviet Union...They helped move the System beyond the bounds of Russia. (Carnicke & Hodge, 2010)

With this, the System and its ideologies was brought to America making its first initial impact on American theatre. The MAT’s tour resulted in a rise in interest of Stanislavski’s principles which thus gave way to an increase in activity among actors to study under his pupils. Stanislavski was then not only able to expand the theatre he had created but his “System” as well. As more students desired to study the “System” under his pupils, it gave way to a large spread of his ideologies throughout the US. This information comes from an article presented in the acting textbook, “Actor

Training” which is a series of essays compiled by Allison Hodge. The author of this particular article, Dr. Sharon Carnicke, holds an in-field doctorate and teaches a vast amount of her coursework on Stanislavski himself, however she has a heavily vested interest in the appeal of Stanislavski in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, seeing that she recently founded an institution based on the same theories (About Sharon, 2016).

Moreover, with the creation of the American Lab Theatre, two actors in particular who remained in America after the MAT tour had a withstandng impact on American theatre.

The links between the Lab and Stanislavski are authentic. Richard Boleslavski and Maria Ouspenskaya, the key figures in the Lab, were MAT actors intimately involved with the evolution of the system. (Willis, 1964)

Through this, we can see the direct relationship between the Lab and the “System” due to the key figures involved. As well, we see that those trained in the Lab setting, including Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, then went about to aid in the spread of Stanislavski’s influence to further the “System” in America. Much like the MAT’s performance allowing the actor to see the “System” in action for the first time, the American Lab Theatre granted (a select few) actors to study the “System” for the first time under direct pupils of Stanislavski. While this article was written prior to the twenty-first century and no information can be found on Willis himself, its focus on a past historical establishment, published in a journal with Consortium Editors from prestigious universities, provides insightful information on a theatrical community that helped develop modern acting in America. As we look at this source and information presented we are given an insight of the early stages of the actual practice of the “System” in America. With this introduction to the “System”, students had the opportunity to study Stanislavski’s principles allowing the “System” to spread and increase in relevancy and importance to the American theatre at this time.

In addition, Stanislavski turned to writing more for personal income making yet another large impact on American theatre with his publication of his books *My Life in Art* and *An Actor Prepare*. “His decision to publish abroad undeniably helped to promote the ‘System’ throughout the world.” (Carnicke & Hodge, 2010) The format of the book also helped the student understand Stanislavski’s teaching methods as it was written as if it were a student’s point of view of a series of classes taught by the theorist himself (Stanislavski, 1989). While originally distributed for profit, Stanislavski’s books provided more people access to his theories that made up the “System”. Furthermore, the way in which it was written resonated more deeply with prospective students as they could envision themselves in the class setting giving them a greater understanding and thus spreading Stanislavski’s “System”.

Therefore, for the purpose of this essay, the information provided allows us to see and understand Stanislavski’s initial impact on the American theatre. Without this, it would be hard to justify if he is “still relevant” to the theatre if not have proven he once was very relevant.

### **The “System”**

In order to be able to properly evaluate the extent of Stanislavski’s and his “System’s” relevancy today, we must have at least a basic understanding of what the “System” entails. While the “System” is vastly more complex than what can be described below, the information provided helps give us insight on the main ideas Stanislavski presented in his “System.”

While Stanislavski’s “System” underwent a major shift throughout his career nearly creating two separate branches, for the purpose of this essay, we will take a look at a majority of the ideas present in the “System” regardless of the time it was presented. The following

information comes from the article *Naturalism and Stanislavski* published by BBC as well as the essay *Stanislavsky's System: Pathways for the Actor* by Sharon Carnicke which was published in Alison Hodge's *Actor's Training*. While the BBC article has no author to validate, the BBC itself is a highly regarded and trusted news outlet around the world. In regards to Dr. Sharon Carnicke, her legitimacy had previously been validated.

One of the first aspects of the "System" to be developed and undertaken by various theorist is the idea of "Emotional Memory." This constitutes the idea that the actor finds a past experience in their life where they have felt a similar emotion and then "borrow" the feelings to help bring the role to life (Naturalism and Stanislavski, 2017). This is most definitely one of Stanislavski's earlier ideas and he later denounced it fearing it did not allow the actor to live up to the fullest potential to being truthful however, at the time of its introduction to America, this idea was present in the "System."

Stanislavski also valued the "method of physical actions." This is a later thought of Stanislavski and correlates with the idea of relaxation in addition to being physically aware of one's body to help one release the necessary emotions (Naturalism and Stanislavski, 2017). In addition, according to Carnicke (2010),

Stanislavski posits that physical tension is creativity's greatest enemy, not only paralyzing and distorting the beauty of the body, but also interfering with the ability to concentrate and fantasize.

This shows the emphasis Stanislavski has placed on relaxation blatantly stating tension is a great enemy to the actor and their craft.

Stanislavski also placed a large emphasis on the "subtext" of a piece that is to be discovered through script analysis (Naturalism and Stanislavski, 2017). This is also seen as active analysis of the script in which "a play reveals its anatomy through the chains of events, which tells the story"

(Carnicke & Hodge, 2010). In correlation with these ideas, the actor is thus supposed to discover the objective, super-objective, and through line, through this script analysis (Naturalism and Stanislavski, 2017)

In conclusion, for the purpose of this essay, we will constitute Stanislavski's "System" to include the ideas he put forth regardless of the time presented. These include emotional memory, method of physical actions, subtext, objective, super-objective, and through line. In correlation, to help with these his ideas and methods he placed a large focus on concentration, communication, and imagination.

### **Modern American Techniques**

The decision to evaluate Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, and Stella Adler as my main theorists representing modern American theatre came about for a variety of reasons. One of which simply had to do with the overwhelming fact they when researching colleges and other schools of acting, these three names were ever present. In addition, and to give a more concrete reason to my decision, we can look at the statement in reference to the "American Method" and therefore American theatre given by David Krasner (2010),

Although there are many instructors, directors and actors who have contributed to its development, three Method acting teachers are recognized as having set the standard of its success: Lee Strasberg (1901–82), Stella Adler (1901–92), and Sanford Meisner (1905–97).

I came about this quote during my research and it solidified my choice of acting teachers and their methodology to research in relation to Stanislavski himself and the "System" he presents.

### **Argument: Is the “System” still relevant?**

To address the question “Is Stanislavski’s “System” still relevant to American theatre?”, it would appear that the “System” is not as relevant as it once was because of the lack of teaching Stanislavski’s actual “System” today, the fact that one of the most commonly taught methods contradicts and negates many of the ideas of Stanislavski, and that at the time it was presented, it was not fully completed to Stanislavski’s ideals. However, because his introduction of the System to America drastically changed American theatre and that between two major theories of thought the majority of his ideas are portrayed, it can be said that the “System” remains relevant to American theatre today.

To start, it can be inferred that Stanislavski’s “System” is not relevant to American theatre anymore simply because it is not a technique commonly taught in the American classroom. According to KC Wright (2014), the most common acting methods include Stanislavski’s System, Lee Strasberg’s Method, Stella Adler, Meisner Technique, among others. While Stanislavski is mentioned among these acting methods taught, it is interesting to note that within the article, she also addresses “stars who swear by them.” Looking at this, there is only two mentioned in association with Stanislavski’s “System” in comparison to the average of seven found within the other three methods. While these are only “stars” mentioned, it gives us an idea as to the amount of people that practice the various acting techniques. While no information can be found to validate the author, this information comes from an article published on a heavily used and trusted theatre networking site that provides access to information about the study and profession of acting. Furthermore, Sharon Carnicke (2009) who is a strong proponent of Stanislavski and the inclusion of his ideas to modern American theatre, stated:

By the mid-1950s, Stanislavsky's name stood for excellence in realistic and truthful acting. By 2000, many young people who thirsted for acting careers entered my classes with either no knowledge of him or only a foggy notion that he had something to do with Method acting. As the twentieth century turned into the twenty-first, as cutting-edge theatre artists sought postmodern modes of expression, and as leading scholars began to develop the new field of performance studies, Stanislavsky began to seem less relevant.

While this is technically only one example of the lack of knowledge and integration of Stanislavski's "System" into the process of teaching acting, it helps give us a more visual and tangible idea of the lack of the "System" in American theatre today. While previously used as a source, this particular information comes from the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Dr. Carnicke's book *Stanislavski in Focus* which heavily leans toward the goal of reintroducing Stanislavski's "System" back into American theatre. Between the two examples, we can assess the lack of the "System" being taught in American theatre today. As seen, there are few, if any, who follow Stanislavski's "System" as a whole but instead chose to follow those that branch from his original ideas. As well, with the lack of knowledge possessed by students about Stanislavski and his "System" in Carnicke's classroom we can infer that Stanislavski and his "System" holds less of importance than it once did. Thus we can see that between the actual studying of his "System" and the lack of knowledge on the subject of it, Stanislavski and his "System" do not remain relevant to American theatre today.

Moreover, Sanford Meisner and his method is very commonly taught in American theatre today yet does not represent the ideas presented in Stanislavski's "System" thus making the "System" less relevant to American theatre today. While he initially learned the same ideas presented in the "System" as other theorists, he took a sharp turn when developing his own method. Meisner's theory places a large emphasis on the behavioral aspect of acting. Within it he stresses the behavior of the actor, the relationships between both the actors and the audience, and the "reality of doing". In comparison to Stanislavski's methods, Meisner seems to come to opposition

with two very prevalent aspects of the System. On the subject of Stanislavski’s “emotional memory” Meisner expressed that he preferred the approached of “controlled fantasy” in order to avoid probing into one’s life experiences (Soloviova, Adler, Meisner, & Gray; 1964). While he did not entirely reject emotional recall or substitution, he believed and required that it should be done as homework. Meisner’s opinion on the subject of Stanislavski’s emotional memory shows us the lack of the “System” that is present in his theory. While it is not the only portion of the theory, the direct negation of the principle raises the idea that Meisner did not agree with the “System.” Meisner also disagreed with placing too large of a focus on the script and its analysis. This not only conflicted with Stanislavski but fellow modern theatrical teacher Stella Adler as well (Krasner & Hodge, 2010). Instead of this analysis of the script, Meisner believed that the actor’s work should rather be based on the theory of behavioral reaction to their partner. This serves not only as another example as to the differences placed not only between Meisner and Stanislavski but his fellow teachers. With this, it can be seen that Meisner’s “theory of doing” negates a large amount of Stanislavski’s principles giving way to a vastly different theory of acting being presented. In addition to the differences found between the “System” and Meisner’s theory, his methods also negate that of fellow teachers which have developed sections of the “System.” Since his theory is commonly taught among schools of acting, and very little can be associated with the “System,” the “System’s” relevancy to the theatre today is reduced.

Finally, to further the argument that Stanislavski’s “System” is not relevant to American theatre, the “System” itself was not entirely finished when it was introduced on the MAT’s tour. According to Richard Hornby (2008), “nowhere outside Russia itself have Stanislavski’s acting theories been more popular than in the United States, and nowhere have they been more misunderstood.” This statement poses an interesting idea giving us the information that the

“System” was extremely popular and thus prevalent at the time it was introduced, yet these widespread ideas are commonly misinterpreted from Stanislavski’s original ideas. Holding an in-field doctorate and being a working professional, Hornby’s information can thus be seen as reliable however, in the document presented it focuses more on the history of the spread of the “System” rather than what made it misunderstood. To help understand how the US has misunderstood Stanislavski’s “System” we can take a look at a statement given by Sharon Carnicke (2009).

Thus, the transmission of Stanislavsky’s ideas to the US, their linguistic and cultural translation, and their transformation by the Method created a pervasive veil of assumptions through which we in the West commonly view Stanislavsky. While this filter has illuminated some of the System’s premises (most notably those that involve psychological realism), it has also obscured others (such as those drawn from Symbolism, Formalism, and Yoga).

Carnicke presents specific examples of the views Stanislavski presented that are often left out of modern-day American acting techniques. In return, this not only altered America’s view on Stanislavski himself, but his “System” as well. While Stanislavski did attempt to explain these views in the publication of his book as stated by Carnicke (2009),

Although inspirational, it merely outlines the System. He published the first practical explication of his ideas, generally known in English as *An Actor Prepares*, in 1936, five years after the Group had already adopted what they could learn of his techniques.

By the time Stanislavski attempted to present his full ideas in his book *An Actor Prepares*, the general public and those who taught his theories already had a preconceived idea of the “System” itself. This information proves that even in early integration of the “System” in American theatre, there was a great absence of specific aspects of the “System” the Stanislavski himself felt to be important. While a large part of the “System” may have been taken and used in this time, the absence of some of his ideas makes for an incomplete “System” and thus proves it to be less relevant to American theatre than perhaps its Russian counterpart.

However, to take a look at how Stanislavski is still relevant today, two of the three most commonly taught acting techniques, Lee Strasberg's Method and Stella Adler, both include a multitude of the “System’s” ideas. To begin, Lee Strasberg and his theory are commonly associated with the term “Method Acting” and his heavy attention to the psychological aspect of acting is what gained him common recognition. His theory places a large focus on truth and emotion as well as concentration, relaxation, and effective memory. Strasberg’s development of effective memory was heavily influenced by Stanislavski’s work on Pavlovian training. Strasberg also places a large focus on effective memory even “following Stanislavski in the pursuit of an emotional ‘trigger’, or ‘inducement’, what Stanislavski called ‘decoys’” (Krasner & Hodge, 2010). Both of these examples shows how heavy of an influence Stanislavski had on Strasberg’s theory in particular. With the majority of his work being focused on the actor’s ability to recall emotion which correlates to early ideas of the “System,” it helps us see the impact Stanislavski has left on this theory. While emotional memory was important for both schools of thought, Strasberg did not find much importance and therefore did not push the ideas of voice, physicality, or script analysis (Krasner & Hodge, 2010). With this in mind, we see that not all portions of the “System” were utilized in Strasberg’s method as it left out aspects that were important to Stanislavski’s “System.” Seeing that these are also very important aspects of the “System,” this example helps us see that not all of Stanislavski’s ideas were put into practice in Strasberg’s method. Yet, as a personal example of the relation between Stanislavski and Strasberg, Carnicke (2009) states:

Even Strasberg’s obituary in The New York Times attributes the Method to Stanislavsky, and then asserts that “Mr. Strasberg adapted it to the American theatre, imposing his refinements, but always crediting Stanislavsky as his source” (18 February 1982). Ironically, this linkage robs Strasberg of the originality in his thinking, while simultaneously obscuring Stanislavsky’s ideas.

This example specifically identifies the fact that Strasberg took ideas from the “System” itself and gives a first-hand example of him accrediting Stanislavski as the source for his Method. While he does not incorporate all of the “System,” we see that portions of the “System” were utilized by Strasberg in the development of his own theory. The majority of the ideas he used come from Stanislavski’s earlier ideas for the “System” which he later denounced but nevertheless represent an aspect important to the “System” overall. Therefore, since Strasberg is a technique commonly taught and it incorporates ideas related to the “System,” we can see that Stanislavski “System” is still relevant to American theatre.

In addition to Lee Strasberg’s Method, Stella Adler follows much of the later ideas presented in the “System” and took a very sociological view of the “System” in order to develop her own theories. She placed a large stress on imagination, given circumstances, physical actions. When commenting upon the portion of Stanislavski’s system emotional recall, Adler made clear that she opposed the process of reaching for any emotion. She believed the process to be unhealthy and untrue to the actor (Soloviova, Adler, Meisner, & Gray; 1964). Instead, perhaps the action Adler calls upon most is that of imagination. Yet, in further agreeance with Stanislavski, Adler believed that the actor must pull from the script itself to find and develop the physical actions for a scene. This method of physical action was drawn directly from Stanislavski’s later work (Krasner & Hodge, 2010). With this example of a portion of Alder’s theory in accordance with the “System,” we see that while she did not utilize every aspect of the “System,” she did draw upon and expand various ideas. Being such a prominent force in modern acting in America, Stella Adler and her theory’s ideologies in comparison with Stanislavski’s help give context as to the extent his ideas are present in her theatrical teachings. Seeing that she drew upon many of his ideas and not

others helps prove that portions of the “System” are extremely still relevant today, even if in entirety it may not be when dealing with Stella Adler’s acting method.

Finally, perhaps the greatest testament to Stanislavski’s relevancy to the theatre today can be seen by taking a look back at his initial impact. Without his introduction of the “System” to America, theatre in America would not be what it is today. “Constantin Stanislavski’s work signaled a shift in 20th century acting and inspired a whole new generation of techniques and teachers” (Wright, 2014) This allows us to see the idea that his work shifted the beliefs and ideas of those acting at the time it was presented. In addition, it is seen that

Today in the United States, Stanislavski’s theories are the primary source of study for many actors. Among the many great actors and teachers to use his work are Stella Adler...Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg...Many of these artist have continued experimentation with Stanislavski’s ideas. (Constantine Stanislavski, 2017)

The publishing company of this information, PBS, does not present an author to evaluate for bias or the like however, being an education platform broadcasted across the United States it has a vast amount of editorial staff to check for accuracy in facts such as those given (About PBS, 2016). The information provide shows us that many great actors and teachers continue to study his work in order to experiment with their own ideas which help further the “System.” In relation to this, according to Carnicke (2010),

The history of actor training from the twentieth-century onward can be seen as a series of explorations, inspired by Stanislavsky’s guide, and each probing a different pathway into the actor’s unique creativity as a performer.

This example argues that while any exploration of actor training may not directly match that of the “System” or Stanislavski’s original ideas, they are all initially inspired by the direction Stanislavski provided within his “System.” With these examples, we can see the vast amount of inspiration Stanislavski and his “System” has provided to actors and their teachers alike. With this inspiration, teachers have then taken ideas from Stanislavski to develop their own system that they believe

works best for them and their students. Therefore, while the “System” may not be fully encapsulated in any of the theories taught today, they all stem from Stanislavski’s original ideas thus making him and his “System” relevant to American theatre today.

## Conclusion

With all of this information in consideration, I have found that this question cannot be answered in any one way. When looking at the various impacts Stanislavski and his “System” has had on American theatre, it would be hard to say that he is not relevant at all to the American theatre today yet we can see that it is to a much lesser extent and for the most part it’s relevancy is only due to its initial impact it provided. Perhaps Sanford Meisner put it best when he said in an interview,

...nowhere in the entire United States is the Stanislavski System truly practice...We are Americans. We are not nineteenth-century Russians. We create from ourselves and from our world...The creative teacher in America finds his own style, that is to say his own method, as indeed every artist must (Soloviova, Adler, Meisner, & Gray; 1964).

In addition, I believe that while the “System” may not be as truly practiced nor as relevant as it once was, Stanislavski accomplished what he wanted to with the introduction of the “System” to America. To quote the man himself,

The System is a guide. Open and read. They System is a handbook, not a philosophy. The moment when the System begins to become philosophy is its end. Examine the System at home, but forget about it when on stage. You can’t play the System. There is no System. There is only nature. My lifelong concern has been how to get ever closer to the so-called ‘System’, that is to get ever closer to the nature of creativity. –Stanislavski (Carnicke, 2010)

I believe this captures the relevancy of the “System” in American theatre perfectly. While it is not necessarily taught today as the “System” itself, one of the main theories taught correlates very little with Stanislavski’s ideas, and the fact that when it was brought about it was incomplete,

Stanislavski's "System" opened up the minds of theatrical teachers who continue to use and explore the ideas his "System" initially presented. Therefore, I have come to the conclusion that while Stanislavski is not as relevant as he once was, without him, American theatre would not be what it is today making him and his "System" ever relevant to American theatre.

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