

# The Method Acting Exercises Handbook

Lola Cohen

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*The Method Acting Exercises Handbook* is a concise and practical guide to the acting exercises originally devised by Lee Strasberg, one of the Method's foremost practitioners. The Method trains the imagination, concentration, senses and emotions to 're-create' – not 'imitate' – logical and truthful behavior on stage, film and television.

Building on her years of studying with Lee Strasberg and other Method Teachers and her significant and continuing teaching career, Lola Cohen details a series of specific exercises in order to provide clear instruction and guidance to this preeminent form of actor training. By integrating Strasberg's voice with her own tried-and-tested style of teaching, Cohen demonstrates what can be gained from the exercises, how they can inform and inspire your learning, and how they might be applied to your acting and directing practice.

As a companion to *The Lee Strasberg Notes*, a transcription of Strasberg's own teaching, *The Method Acting Exercises Handbook* offers an unparalleled and updated guide to this world-renowned technique.

**Lola Cohen** has thirty years of teaching internationally and at the Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute in New York and Los Angeles, as a member of the NYU Tisch Strasberg Studio faculty, NYC, as an Associate Adjunct Professor of Law at Brooklyn Law School, Brooklyn, NY, and as a guest lecturer at The American University, Washington, DC. She is the editor of *The Lee Strasberg Notes* (Routledge, 2010).



1 Lee Strasberg and Lola Cohen in class, Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute New York, 1978. Photo by Sylvia Plachy.



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**Lola Cohen**

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# Foreword

**Marlon Brando**  
**on**  
**Lee Strasberg and the Heart of The Method**

“Acting – and living, and everything else, for that matter – is compassion. What Lee and Stella [Adler] and Mira [Rostova] and Herbert [Berghof] were all espousing was compassion, an amplification of humanity, which is all that will save a scene or a play or a relationship or the world. The world is so inordinately tiny – not geographically, but spiritually. We shuffle along, happy to do the least amount of work, the least amount of exploration, perhaps because we feel we don’t deserve all the riches that surround us.

Movies and plays and art and music and interaction with other people who sought compassion and understanding saved me. They will save us all. What is at the heart of The Method is compassion, empathy. Go into your private moments and private spaces and realize all that you’ve felt and all that has been given to you and taken away. We will never murder; we might never give birth; we were not Napoleon. But within us are similar emotions, drives, feelings that can place us within an adjoining heart – of a murderer; of Napoleon. Of anyone. What the teachers were telling us – what Lee was telling his students – was to empathize with your own history and to merge with the histories of others. Art means nothing if it does not connect with an audience – even it might be an audience of one. An honesty with our emotions will find a connection with the honesty of someone else with their own emotions. Otherwise, it is performing, which is not to be confused with acting. Call it Method, call it acting, call it art – it is the painful, glorious compassion that joins us all, shared in one space at one time.”

(Continued)

\* \* \* \* \*

“His knowledge of the theater was vast – he was a walking encyclopedia – and he traveled the world to see and to study what was done and what was good. Lee then shared this with his students, and almost anyone who asked him questions. This cannot be underestimated. Imagine yourself in, say, 1952, and you think you want to be an actor, and all you know about are the few productions you’ve done in high school or college – not to mention what you’ve seen on film – and you find yourself in the presence of this man, who can tell you what the Russians, the French, the Italians are doing; who can quote virtually any playwright or critic or philosopher. That was valuable, and it was very cheap – often free – to attend the Studio. This cannot be discarded.”

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Interview conducted by James Grissom, 1990

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# Author's Note and Acknowledgments

What this book stands for is in its content and practice. The reward is the surprise of self-discovery for your artistic process. I was faced with a challenging legacy in presenting clear descriptions of The Method Exercises for future actors. I give my heartfelt appreciation in memoriam to Lee Strasberg for sharing his extensive knowledge and experiences with his students in his mission to solve the problems of the actor. His groundbreaking work and his passion for all the arts has inspired generations of Method Actors.

A debt of gratitude to my editor, Matthew D. Rudikoff, for his sustained encouragement and insights in the preparation of this manuscript during every stage.

Special thanks to Anna Strasberg, Co-Founder and Artistic Director and Victoria Krane, President of the Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute for their commitment in keeping Lee Strasberg's legacy available for future generations of artists. To my editors at Routledge, Talia Rodgers, for her kindness, encouragement, and expertise and Stacey Walker and her staff for their support. To James Grissom, author and raconteur, for his wit, and prodigious knowledge of the theater, and for permitting me to use the Marlon Brando, Tennessee Williams and Kim Stanley quotes.

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My deep appreciation to the actors and actresses, too numerous to cite individually, whose photographs in the *Handbook* so artfully demonstrate The Method Exercises.

And especially to my loving Cohen / Brown / Rudikoff family – for everything.

Lola Cohen  
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# Introduction

*The Method Acting Exercises Handbook* is a practical guide to the exercises taught to me by Lee Strasberg during the last five years of his life when I studied with him in New York and Los Angeles. These physical and emotional exercises will help you to achieve a level of excellence and truth in your acting. You will also expand, nurture, and train your imagination, the use of the senses, and your concentration. I continued my training with Jose Quintero and Kim Stanley, incorporating their ideas into my own work during my thirty years of teaching at the Institute and internationally – to further develop what Strasberg taught and shared with us about The Method and the exercises.

Acting isn't a solitary art, and it cannot be taught and absorbed from a book alone. My hope is that the *Handbook* can be used as an introduction to The Method, an accompaniment to your class work, and as a reference for planning future work. The specific descriptions, instructions, and photographs included are designed and offered for you to practice at home or to supplement whatever you are working on in your classes.

Regardless of whether you are investigating a specific character, interpreting a script, or developing a precise vision for a production, this book is a shared experience – for actors, teachers, and directors who want to explore if working with The Method and the exercises can help perfect their craft and refine their work.

The exercises are procedures for activating each of your senses, one by one, in detailed explorations of imagined objects, people, activities, and places. This conscious, sensory process demands concentration and focus. It is a technique to access feelings and behaviors for your characters.

Everything offered here honors Strasberg's philosophy of training your mind, body, and senses in an effort to create a truthful presence on the stage. Strasberg told his students that he believed that being truthful isn't a state achieved by discussion or by a description from an instructor or director. He told us that actors must understand their own nature and how to respond *sensorially* before transforming into a character. He used the word *sensorially* to convey the necessity of experiencing life, the world, people, and objects through the five senses: what you see, smell, hear, touch, and taste. The time and intensity devoted to practicing the exercises trains your concentration and will by utilizing the all-powerful senses to act as gateways to feelings, behaviors, and responses. By re-living sensory experiences when creating a role, the

actor can gain the capacity to fully breathe life – their own and that perceived by the playwright – into the character. As you move forward in your work, characters will emerge organically and unanticipated. Each of these exercises will act as a catalyst for you to discover different sides of your personality, as well as to initiate new and original ideas that ultimately lead to thinking and behaving like the character.

The dynamic is initiated internally. Memories experienced through the five senses will shake your subconscious mind, bringing impulses to the surface. These personal memories triggered through the exercises, where you explore events, places, and people from your own life, ignite your creativity – offering up a limitless range of feelings, actions, behaviors, and gestures needed for your character.

The actor must choose those exercises that give the intensity of feeling called for in a scene. Cultivating your intuitive mind and your emotional intelligence will result in an elevated sense of belief in what you're doing.

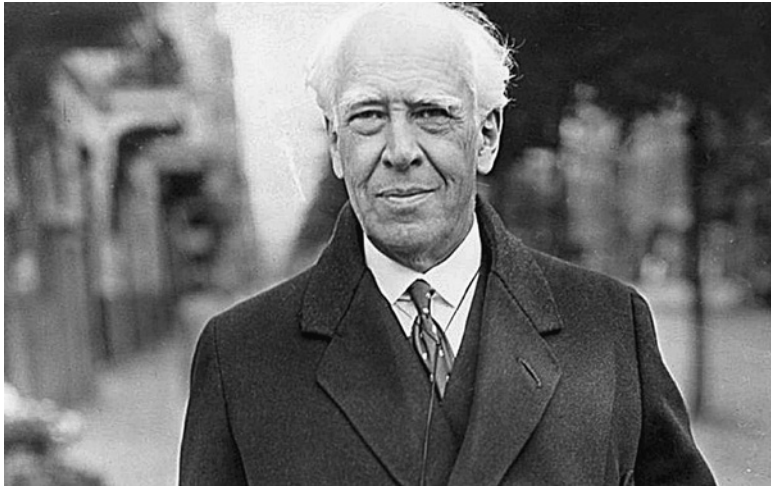
Ultimately, the exercises make it possible for you to experience and re-experience every conceivable combination of traits, habits, feelings, and actions at will. One of the greatest gifts you can possess is the ability to switch effortlessly, moment to moment or comedy to drama, for example, as well as remembering the behavior, dialogue, and cues for a scene. This entails discipline and intellectual control. Having this ability – switching from one extreme to another effortlessly – will contribute many unexpected moments that touch audiences deeply.

To prepare for the creation of any role, either in a class or in a performance, you must do the Relaxation Exercise detailed in Chapter One. Strasberg called relaxation and concentration the “two sides of the acting coin.” The many demands made upon the actor throughout a performance call for the elimination of fear and tension, and Strasberg believed that actors must relax their bodies in order to concentrate and have control over their minds.

As you regularly work on the Relaxation Exercise, you will find that your concentration and your will are solidified to enable you to relax and stay relaxed. Stanislavski said that relaxation is the emotional and physical state required to enter into what he called the “creative mood.” It is in this mood that great acting is achieved. Relaxation allows for fluidity, seamlessness, focus on the task at hand, and the merging of action and awareness which are essential conditions for good acting.



0.1 Lee Strasberg, circa 1979. Courtesy Photofest.



0.2 Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski. St. Petersburg Theater Museum.

The Foundation Sense Memory Exercises described in Chapter Two adhere to the same sequence that Strasberg followed in his classes and which I continue in my classes – moving from simple to more complex tasks. Initially, you practice non-emotional and basic daily

activities and situations, such as having a breakfast drink or looking in the mirror and putting on make-up or shaving. The sequencing progresses with the more physical exercises called Overall Sensations, which require active movement and are an “all-over” or enveloping experience and might include taking a shower or bath, responding to weather conditions such as extreme cold and heat, rain, or strong wind, or the disorienting condition of being drunk. This series of exercises trains you to engage areas of the body that are often ignored or which you might not even be conscious of.

The Foundation Sense Memory Exercises aren't for the purpose of evoking emotional responses, but to activate and train your imagination and the individual senses for optimal use. It's natural that real and potentially strong emotions may unexpectedly bubble up during the exercises, but you are not to go along with those emotions. In the course of doing these exercises, be aware of the feelings that do arise and note the senses that triggered the emotion. This will be placed in your acting inventory, but let it go and continue with your work.

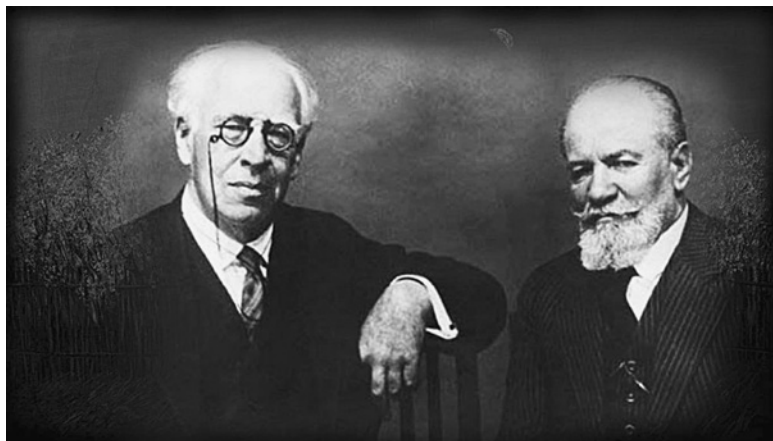
Once you have a good grasp of the Foundation Exercises, you will move on to the more Advanced Sense Memory Exercises, found in Chapter Three, including Personal Objects, Place Exercise, Private Moment Exercise, and, the jewel in the crown, the Emotional Memory Exercise, which has tremendous value in the area of repetition and intensity of emotion.

Eventually, you will perform multiple exercises simultaneously, learning to do what is known as “Combinations.” Divergent activities and behaviors will train and strengthen your will and stimulate a level of acute awareness. The complexity of the exercises will increase as we focus on the Script and Character Development described in Chapter Four. This area of development includes Improvisation, Spines, Substitution, Need, Private Moment for the Character, Painting, Animal, and Music Exercises.

To help you understand and use the exercises, I include several guides to incite a keener sense of detail by giving you examples of sensory observations that can expand the boundaries of your imagination – a state that leads you to dig deeper into the character's world. The guides will inspire you to reach beyond ingrained habits, stereotypes, and self-limiting beliefs, helping you play characters unlike yourself and to discover your own individual strengths by developing a strong sensory life.

You need to connect with your scene partners on stage and listen, letting their responses affect what you feel, think, and how you react – not just relying on your memorized lines or behaviors. To strengthen this interconnectedness, I've introduced the process of Improvisation into several of the exercises. In *Painting, Animal, and Private Moment* for the Character Exercise, the improvisations force you to respond to the other actors, verbally and nonverbally. The technique of Improvisation is also used with some of the other exercises to further assist you in overcoming your limitations.

Lee Strasberg told his classes that he formulated his ideas in response to the great Russian director and actor Konstantin Sergeyeovich Stanislavski, co-founder with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko of the Moscow Art Theater (MAT), Yevgeny Vakhtangov, visionary actor/director, member of the MAT known for "Fantastic Realism" and founder of his own theater, and Vsevolod Meyerhold, prolific actor/director, member of the MAT, who created his own acting system called "Biomechanics." Both Meyerhold and Vakhtangov were students of Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko. Strasberg learned the Stanislavski "System" from Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, esteemed MAT actors who immigrated to New York City and formed the American Laboratory Theater where Strasberg eventually enrolled. Although the lives of Strasberg and Stanislavski overlapped, they never met. They were kindred spirits who shared a heartfelt immersion into the world of art and the mystery of creativity.



0.3 Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. St. Petersburg Theater Museum.



0.4 Yvegeny Vakhtangov, Russian actor/director (1883–1922) after whom the Vakhtangov State Theater is named.



0.5 Vsevolod Meyerhold, Russian actor/director (1874–1940). Courtesy HIP/Art Resource, New York.



0.6 Richard Boleslavsky in *The Mistress of the Inn* by Carlo Goldoni. MAT. Photo by K. Fisher. Moscow, 1914.



0.7 Maria Ouspenskaya in *Dodsworth*, directed by William Wyler. 1936. Courtesy United/Photofest.



0.8 Moscow Art Theater, Yalta, 1900, including most notably – standing in the rear on the extreme right is writer Ivan Bunin, third to his right is Maxim Gorky, second to his right is Anton Chekhov, to his right is writer Alexander Kuprin, to his right is Konstantin Stanislavski and second to his right in a top hat in front of three women is Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. Seated second to Danchenko's left in front of Stanislavski is Stanislavski's wife, Lilina, seated second to her left is Olga Knipper-Chekhova, to her left is the actress Margarita Savitskaya, and seated on the ground in front of them is Vsevolod Meyerhold.