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## Willful Actors: Valuing Resistance in American Actor Training

**Kari Barclay**

*This article examines sexuality's role in Stanislavskian and Method actor training in the United States. Placing theatre history in dialogue with Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, I argue that some strains of training produce "willing bodies" capable of matching their erotic desires with those of a director, character, or production. First I introduce Stanislavsky's understanding of the educable will, which renders his technique liable to shape performers' sexualities. Next I examine how Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner used the educable will to enforce normative sexual scripts on students. Lastly I underscore how resistant actors have challenged or remade normative sexual scripts.*

**Keywords:** *sexuality, Method, Stanislavsky, consent, history*

In *Sanford Meisner Masterclass*, a video recording of the acting teacher's classes in 1970, Meisner walks among his students, ready to demonstrate the principle of action and reaction. He pinches the arm of one of his male students, who gives an "ouch" and pulls away. Then he turns to a female student and puts his hand down the front of her blouse to touch her breasts. When she giggles and exclaims, "Sandy!" Meisner asks the class if that was an honest reaction. They nod yes. Filmed by Sydney Pollack in the midst of the sexual revolution, the video presents the moment like any other in the class.<sup>1</sup> Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell's handbook, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, unabashedly describes the event as an example of truthful behavior.<sup>2</sup> Moments like this were not uncommon among foundational acting teachers in the United States. In his efforts to "free" actors from inhibitions, Lee Strasberg was notorious for verbally attacking female performers<sup>3</sup> and coaching them to perform sexual and emotional availability.<sup>4</sup> In his manual for aspiring directors, Elia Kazan states, "It is not necessary that you should want to fuck the leading lady, but it is essential that you should feel emotions well past those of ordinary friendship or respect."<sup>5</sup> Mixing eroticism with pedagogy, some of the most famed acting teachers in the twentieth century attempted to shape actors' sexualities in ways that would alarm most artists in today's #MeToo era. In fact, many of their behaviors resemble the harassment, assault, and abuse revealed in recent years at institutions such as Chicago's Profiles Theatre,<sup>6</sup> Houston's Alley

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Theatre,<sup>7</sup> and Massachusetts's Gloucester Stage Company.<sup>8</sup> As scholars and practitioners today promote consent culture in American theatre, to what extent do norms antithetical to sexual consent inform the teaching of Stanislavskian and Method acting? How might advocates like intimacy directors lead scholars and practitioners to envision actor training in a different way?

Focusing on Stanislavsky's system and the American Method, I argue that several of the most prominent schools of actor training in the United States posit sexual desire as inherent to subjectivity and task the director with unearthing it in himself and his pupils.<sup>9</sup> This task, which I term *re-eroticization* following Joanna Brewis and Stephen Linstead, has made it difficult for directors to acknowledge actors' hesitance to perform sexual scripts.<sup>10</sup> As advanced by disciples of Freud, re-eroticization theory tends to imagine sexual desire as nonmimetic—expressive of an authentic interiority—making performers who do not articulate appropriate sexual desire appear inauthentic. To contextualize the role of re-eroticization in Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner's Method pedagogy, I turn to Foucault's repressive hypothesis and Sara Ahmed's account of the will. According to Ahmed, rationalist education sometimes attempts to "strengthen" pupils' wills and instruct them to desire "correct," socially sanctioned objects. She traces this education of the will back to the same psychologist, Théodule-Armand Ribot, who informed Stanislavsky's acting technique. Exploring the role of Ribot in Stanislavsky's thinking, I argue that the belief in a flexible will renders Stanislavskian actor training liable to disregard consent and pathologize performers' resistance. When texts and teachers transmitted Stanislavskian practices values to the United States, some Method acting teachers extended this model of the flexible will to erotic desire and enforced normative sexual scripts for their students. Claiming to free spontaneous impulses, teachers like Meisner and Strasberg stifled impulses that they found illegible and criticized students who hesitated to manifest standard desire. As Method training sometimes attempted to dissolve the distinction between actor and character, recalcitrant actors stubbornly asserted their wants and boundaries. I suggest that "willful actors" like Stella Adler are precursors to the contemporary push for consent in actor training and intimacy directing. Promoting script analysis and adaptation of stock characters, Adler encouraged actors to repeat social scripts with difference, finding pleasure in mimesis rather than in the expression of innate sexual selfhood.

As I historicize the role of eroticism in actor training, I envision today's intimacy directing movement as a reparative practice. Method directors, such as Meisner and Strasberg, are intimacy directors' patriarchal counterparts—they directed stage intimacy nonconsensually and instilled in performers a sense of insufficiency. Claire Warden, who has directed intimacy on Broadway for *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*, *Slave Play*, and *Linda Vista*, reported to the *New York Times* that much of her work is undoing actors' previous training. As intimacy directors,

she said, “We are having to, at a fundamental level, subvert the conditioning that all actors are put through—right from like, high school acting—which is that no is a dangerous word. We’re subliminally told and conditioned that if I say no—to anything—I’m being the diva. Or I’m not dedicated enough. Or I don’t want it enough.”<sup>11</sup> Re-eroticizing actor training produces in minoritarian subjects the feeling of not wanting enough, of wanting to want more. Strasberg and Meisner’s acting techniques position desire—especially erotic desire—as an imperative. The sexuality studies scholars Joanna Brewis and Stephen Linstead write that re-eroticization expresses “a certain conception of mental health, so that liberation is undertaken under the guise of dissolution of the psychopathology produced by repression.”<sup>12</sup> Strasberg and Meisner attempted to dissolve the divide between public and private, to make theatre emotionally intimate, and to bring eroticism into the public sphere. The movement to standardize intimacy directing shares with re-eroticization a concern with mental health and trauma (for example, Intimacy Directors International encourages courses in “mental health first aid”).<sup>13</sup> However, instead of hoping to dissolve the public/private divide entirely, some intimacy directors attempt to preserve elements of performers’ privacy. Intimacy directors encourage performers to decide the kinds of intimacy that they will perform and to set boundaries for their emotional involvement. In this way, intimacy directors combine Method directors’ interest in re-eroticization with elements from consent culture that emphasize sexual autonomy. As I propose, intimacy directors might restore an element to Stanislavskian training—a performer’s dual awareness of himself as actor and character—that Strasberg and Meisner attempted to eliminate. To promote consent, instead of indiscriminately denouncing actors’ resistance, actor training can treat an actors’ resistance as embodied knowledge about their identities, desires, and strengths.

### **Educating the Will**

For decades, Anglo-American feminist scholars have debated the merits and shortcomings of Stanislavskian and Method actor training. In “A (Female) Actor Prepares” (1985), Linda Walsh Jenkins and Susan Ogden-Malouf argue that Stanislavskian acting in the United States has promoted guru-like teachers “for whom the performer must be absolutely vulnerable (opening the way to both psychological and sexual exploitation).”<sup>14</sup> In *Feminism and Theatre* (1988), Sue-Ellen Case highlights how the Method relies on a Freudian framework separating active, aggressive male sexuality from female passivity and victimhood.<sup>15</sup> In *Unmaking Mimesis* (1997), Elin Diamond argues that the Method and early naturalism place the acting teacher, director, and audience in the voyeuristic position of psychoanalyst dissecting the deviant “fallen woman” or “hysteric.”<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, in “Rethinking Feminism, Stanislavsky, and Performance” (2002), J. Ellen Gainor suggests that these critics were taking issue with naturalism’s

scripts, not its techniques: “What has really underlain the Anglo-American feminist opposition to Stanislavsky and the Method, as well as its championing of Brecht, is not really technique, but text.”<sup>17</sup> In “Mining My Business” (2000), Deb Margolin of Split Britches writes that Method Acting can benefit feminist performers. Margolin claims that her Method training allows her to draw on her own biography and to productively explore the disjuncture between her life and social expectations.<sup>18</sup> In *Method Acting and Its Discontents* (2015), Shonni Enelow underscores that, although the Method falsely promotes the white male actor as universal subject, it can show the fissures between the body and language.<sup>19</sup> By delving into actors’ psychology, the Method brings about performances that exceed text and signification. While claiming to understand human psyches, the Method ultimately reveals their incomprehensibility.<sup>20</sup>

As the variety of these responses suggests, there is no singular practice of Stanislavskian acting in the United States, nor are Stanislavsky and the Method equivalent. Although it is tempting to view Stanislavsky and the Method as synonymous, the theatre historian and acting teacher Sharon Carnicke emphasizes that Stanislavsky’s system underwent significant changes as theatre practitioners transformed it into the American Method.<sup>21</sup> Following Jonathan Pitches’s use of cultural transmission theory, I examine Stanislavskian acting as a “culture” with shared vocabularies, traditions, and values.<sup>22</sup> As Stanislavskian acting collides with other cultures and value systems, it has the potential to transform them and be transformed.<sup>23</sup> I focus on one element in Stanislavskian culture—a focus on the flexible will—to examine how practitioners in the United States adapted his techniques to educate performers’ sexualities for better or for worse. If the will is flexible, an actor need not be “willing” to perform an act onstage—education can make hir willing. Sara Ahmed connects this fungibility of the will to sexual violence. Although definitions of rape have historically relied on physical force,<sup>24</sup> Ahmed suggests, “We need to hear the cases in which yes involves force but is not experienced as force.”<sup>25</sup> To do so is to uncover the dynamics that shape subjectivities and make “unbearable...the consequences of not willing what someone wills you to will.”<sup>26</sup> A system of economic and social incentives disciplines performers’ desires.

In *Willful Subjects*, Sara Ahmed describes “the education of the will” as the attempt to bring individual desires in line with social norms.<sup>27</sup> Although Ahmed’s genealogy of the educable will dates as far back as St. Augustine in the fifth century, according to Ahmed, theories of the will gained scientific grounding at the time of Stanislavsky.<sup>28</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, the French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot developed a theory of the will that seemingly resolved a central question of psychologists of the era: how can one have an impulse and not act on it?<sup>29</sup> From a political perspective, this question could yield a seemingly scientific answer to why some people were not acting on the “correct” impulses. In his 1883 treatise, *Diseases of the Will*, Ribot ascribes “weakness” to nonnormative

desire. As Sara Ahmed writes, the alleged diagnosis was not with people wanting the “wrong” things but rather with their desire for the “right” things being too weak. Weakness got in the way of “natural impulses.”<sup>30</sup> Ribot called this weakness *abulia* and categorized it as a bodily defect. Ribot provides the example of a man, Mr. P, who will not sign over the deed to his house. According to Ribot, he has “healthy judgment” and a working hand but is “unable to command the fingers to apply the pen to the paper.”<sup>31</sup> Between the want and action is a barrier, an inhibition, in Ribot’s words, a “paralysis.”<sup>32</sup> Bodies that would not give consent were cast as disabled, and disabled bodies cast as stubborn. John Smith and Jennifer Terry write that *abulia* had such far-reaching implications that psychologists later used it to pathologize queer existence.<sup>33</sup> By psychologists’ account, queer subjects did not desire the wrong object—they merely desired the right object too weakly.<sup>34</sup>

In his 1900 *Essay on the Creative Imagination*, Ribot goes so far as to extend his medical diagnosis, *abulia*, to the field of creativity:

In its normal and complete form, the will culminates in an act, but with wavering characters and sufferers from *abulia* deliberation never ends... The creative imagination also, in its complete form, has a tendency to become objectified, to assert itself in a work that shall exist not only for the creator but for everybody. On the contrary, with dreamers pure and simple, the imagination remains a vaguely sketchy inner affair; it is not embodied in any esthetic or practical invention. Reverie is the equivalent of weak desires; dreamers are the *abulics* of the creative imagination.<sup>35</sup>

In Ribot’s view, if the artist hesitated, grew tense, or could not demonstrate desire, he was weak-willed. To correct *abulia*, Ribot attempted to strengthen the will through education, particularly education of the body. He wrote that a strong will was result “of art, of education, of experience. It is an edifice constructed slowly, piece by piece.”<sup>36</sup> The construction of a strong will was for Ribot a scientific system meant to eliminate inhibition, much like Stanislavsky’s approach to actor training.

The question Ribot and other psychologists were asking at the time—how can one have an impulse and not act on it?—was of interest to Stanislavsky as well. Trying to remedy actors’ self-doubt and its partner, exhibitionism, Stanislavsky hoped to produce in actors a “creative state” in which actors’ performances flowed unobstructedly through their bodies. According to Sharon Carnicke, Stanislavsky owned six of Ribot’s books and filled them with marginalia.<sup>37</sup> Stanislavsky explicitly cited Ribot in part 1 of *An Actor’s Work*, where he adopted Ribot’s term “affective memory.”<sup>38</sup> Stanislavsky attempted to strengthen an ability that Ribot cites in rare cases: the ability to reexperience sensation based on memories from one’s past. Stanislavsky wrote that “affective memory is weak, because it is never developed.”<sup>39</sup>

According to Carnicke, Ribot's conjectures were "easily assimilated by Stanislavsky the artist and later became Lee Strasberg's very definition of acting, 'the ability to react to imaginary stimuli.'"<sup>40</sup> However, affective memory was only a fraction of Ribot's influence on the Russian acting teacher. Affective memory was merely a means to the end of what Stanislavsky called *willfeeling*. As Stanislavsky argued based on psychology of the day, wants and emotions are inseparable, and an actor needs to muster his will and feeling to motivate action onstage. Stanislavsky aimed to strengthen willfeeling so that actors could perform their roles unimpeded: "If the line of willfeeling comes to a halt, the human being/actor and his role will have no motivation, there will be no experiencing. The human being/actor and the human/being role live all these lines almost continuously...If they are broken, the life of the role is cut short and paralysis or death occurs."<sup>41</sup> In Stanislavsky's view, to be human was to have a will; desires—erotic or otherwise—characterized human life.

With his work on physical actions, the technique he pursued in the latter part of his career, Stanislavsky sought to keep the actor's willfeeling alive at all times. By Stanislavsky's account, the actor must align his will with the character's actions and keep his body open to express that will. As a result, the science-oriented acting teacher created a technique that would activate both the imagination and the body and try to dissolve the boundaries between the two. Stanislavsky writes in *An Actor's Work*, "In every physical action, there is something psychological and in the psychological, something physical."<sup>42</sup> Stanislavsky's technique resembles Ribot's recipe for creative activity:

Two elements are required—one, coming from without, the physiological stimulus acting on the nerves and the sensory centers,...the other, coming from within, adds to the sensations present appropriate images, remnants of former experiences.<sup>43</sup>

Stanislavsky's disciple Sonia Moore writes that the discovery that humans behave in life in a psychophysical way animated his entire theory of physical actions.<sup>44</sup> "Since the System is based on natural laws of human behavior," Moore argues, "it is the same for old and young actors, for classic and contemporary plays, for conventional and unconventional productions, for all nationalities and in all times."<sup>45</sup> With a scientific appeal to universality, Stanislavsky's system affirms a vision of the natural will that claims to apply across societies.

Despite Stanislavsky's universalist appeals to psychology and natural law, the science on which he relies emerged from a specific sociopolitical context that has implications for the system's treatment of consent. In an increasingly heterogeneous urban society, Ribot's theory of weak and deviant wills attempted to create the illusion of a unified public. Ribot and his followers reflected a late nineteenth-century sensibility focused on reproducing a healthy labor force.<sup>46</sup> Pathologizing



political dissent or nonproductive desire as “weakness,” French and English societies that affirmed Ribot’s theories could manufacture consent for those who rejected dominant norms.<sup>47</sup> Per Ahmed, this attempt to manufacture consent runs throughout rationalist thought. Those in power have historically branded some wills and desires as deviant or weak, thereby pathologizing and disciplining those from marginalized identities—queer folks, people of color, women, those with disabilities. Those who refuse to bend their wills become “willful subjects”; their stubbornness causes the rest of society to think of them as problematic.<sup>48</sup> While Stanislavsky many never have expressed an explicit bias against minoritarian actors, his system’s grounding in psychophysical theory leaves it open to misread nonconsent as weakness. If an actor hesitates or refuses to perform an action, Stanislavsky’s system might read the actor as “paralyzed.” The system might try to change the actor, transforming a no into a yes, rather than recognizing the actor’s hesitation or refusal as a sign of his needs or expertise.

The Moscow Art Theatre housed its own willful subjects, who pushed against the barriers they encountered at the time. Stanislavsky’s student Olga Knipper talked back to her teacher and implemented her own mode of acting. The theatre historian Maria Ignatieva writes, “She, just like Stanislavsky, preferred to make her own decisions. She would not surrender to someone else’s will.”<sup>49</sup> Despite—or perhaps because of—her resistance, Knipper earned great success as Arkadina in Stanislavsky’s production of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* and Masha in *Three Sisters*.<sup>50</sup> Another student, Maria Andreyeva, enjoyed “test[ing] the limits of female power” as Hedda Gabler but struggled with ingenue roles.<sup>51</sup> Moscow Art Theatre’s co-director, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, described Andreyeva as “the troublemaker of the whole venture,” and the company started edging her out of leads.<sup>52</sup> Not content as solely an actor, Andreyeva devoted her efforts to Communist revolutionary activity, leading Lenin to dub her “the phenomenon” and eventually appoint her as commissar of theatres and performance in Petrograd.<sup>53</sup> Although Moscow Art may have attempted to align these wayward women’s willfeeling with the roles available to them at the time, their wills overflowed. Their desires were not weak at all—they merely went in nonnormative directions.

### Re-Eroticizing the Actor

As actors, directors, and educators in the United States adopted Stanislavskian acting techniques in the 1930s, they brought their own interpretation to the education of the will. In New York City in the midst of the Great Depression, members of the Group Theatre sought to unearth artistic ideals deeper than commercial success. Like Stanislavsky, they wanted to release honest impulses, and they added to the work an Emersonian search for a nonconformist, authentic existence. Stanislavsky’s “work on the self” resonated with their search for “self-reliance.”<sup>54</sup> The playwright Clifford Odets hung a portrait of Emerson in his room and praised the philosopher as the



“wisest American.”<sup>55</sup> Other Group Theatre members idolized Walt Whitman for his iconoclasm and idealism; they quoted Whitman and dramatized scenes based on his life and works.<sup>56</sup> Group Theatre co-founder Harold Clurman wrote, “I am American enough to say that the jungle which the American forefathers fought with tools, I will fight again in a new way, and just as they conquered the outer world, I will conquer the inner.”<sup>57</sup> The English and Native American studies scholar Mark Rifkin emphasizes that transcendentalists like Emerson and Whitman, although queering some aspects of masculinity, incorporated colonial frameworks into their visions of country and selfhood.<sup>58</sup> Settler masculinity in the United States, which prized exerting one’s will over self and others, informed Group artists’ pursuit of self-mastery.<sup>59</sup> This pursuit combined with Stanislavskian ideals to produce a synthesis present in Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner’s practice of the American Method.

Free will and American freedom reinforced each other in Method ideology, and embedded in American freedom was a specific conception of masculinity. David Krasner writes, “Method acting, particularly Strasberg’s version of it, is rooted in ideas of free will... The Method maintains that actors are free to perform and control actions and to determine their goals and objectives.”<sup>60</sup> The actor must be able to shape his choices and impulses onstage such as to be able to reproduce the action every night with conviction and clarity. In *Strasberg at the Actors Studio*, Robert Hethmon writes, “Will enters every phase of training from the beginning. Nothing is allowed to happen ‘without the actor’s will being thereby strengthened.’”<sup>61</sup> Trying to free the will from its social constraints, Strasberg’s acting technique set its sights on eliminating inhibitions. Hethmon describes a lesson in which Strasberg coached a young male actor on *Mourning Becomes Electra*. After the actor performed a scene, Strasberg states, “I saw a terrific tension, a fight with the muscles of the mouth which indicates a great inner struggle taking place. In the future I do not wish to see any of this. I do not wish to see any of the struggle. The struggle must take place inside.”<sup>62</sup> Strasberg instructs the actor to push through the struggle and say, “I’m going to follow through. I’m going to go through with it come hell or high water. I will not let myself slide back the moment I feel insecure. I will go on.”<sup>63</sup> In the US context, Strasberg amplified the system’s tendency to view hesitation and struggle as a sign of weakness. Socialization in the United States has trained cisgender men to hide their pain and struggle, and Strasberg here enforced this norm in the name of strengthening the actor’s will. Showing one’s willpower was a mark of masculinity. Despite the supposedly universal applicability of Stanislavsky’s system, the Method incorporated gendered and racialized assumptions about who was to will and who was to be willed upon.

For Strasberg, the manifestation of erotic desire on stage was emblematic of the actor’s willpower. In a class session at the Actors Studio captured on tape in 1960, Strasberg describes the dilemma actors face when performing intimacy in theater:

The body with which you make real love is the same body with which you make fictitious love with someone you don't like, whom you fight with, whom you hate, by whom you hate to be touched. And yet you throw yourself into his arms with the same kind of aliveness and zest and passion as with your real lover—not only with your real lover, with your realest lover. In no other art form do you have to do this monstrous thing.<sup>64</sup>

Although he presents acting in intimate scenes as “monstrous,” Strasberg captures one of intimacy directing’s central dynamics—that the nonfictional body performs what is fictional, and the fictional circumstances shape the nonfictional body. Intimacy is both performance and performative. However, in contrast to today’s intimacy directors, he urges the gendered female actor to suppress her offstage inhibitions in order to manifest willpower. To say yes to “be[ing] touched” and to “throw yourself into [a man’s] arms” demonstrates female actors’ “realest” desires. Michel Foucault argues that with the advent of Freudian psychology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, “Sex was constituted as a problem of truth” to be unearthed by psychologists and educators.<sup>65</sup> In keeping with psychology of the day, one of Strasberg’s tasks was to elicit demonstrations of truthful desire, a task that I frame as re-eroticization.

While some scholars tend to associate Strasberg solely with Freud, the director and scholar Peter McAllister writes that Strasberg had also read Ribot, Ivan Pavlov, Wilhelm Reich, and Alexander Lowen, among other psychologists.<sup>66</sup> Strasberg explicitly cites Ribot twice in *A Dream of Passion* in relation to his affective memory exercises.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, he uses the language of “impulse, stimulus, response, transmission, volition, tension, relaxation, habit, conditioning, sensation, emotion etc,”<sup>68</sup> drawn from psychology literature of the era that Joanna Brewis and Stephen Linstead term “re-eroticization theory.”<sup>69</sup> Re-eroticization theory calls to bring eroticism into the public sphere, eliminate the public/private divide that relegates eroticism to the home, and challenge the historical opposition of eroticism and reason.<sup>70</sup> As the *re* in *re-eroticization* suggests, re-eroticization imagines itself as recovering something lost in twentieth-century Europe and the United States. Wilhelm Reich, for example, writes, “Psychic health depends on orgasmic potency, that is, on the capacity for surrender in the acme of sexual excitation in the natural sexual act [heterosexual penetrative intercourse]...Mental illness is a result of a disturbance in the natural capacity for love.”<sup>71</sup> Seeking to establish an authentic existence defiant of social repression, Strasberg and other artists of the Group Theatre imagined the erotic as a realm of liberation. Re-eroticizing the actor entailed a physical and psychic approach to remove inhibitions, what Reich describes as “character armor.” Character armor is the muscular tension present in the body resulting from personal history, habits, and socialization.<sup>72</sup> As Reich

suggests, experiences in the past in which it was rational to say “no-no” endure into the present, when the *no* been transformed into a “neurotic and irrational ‘no-no.’”<sup>73</sup> The primary result of character armor is not only an irrational *no* but “the incapacity on the part of the organism to say YES.”<sup>74</sup> Building on Reich’s body-oriented psychotherapy, Strasberg fought against manifestations of tension and hesitation as interfering with the orgiastic *yes*.<sup>75</sup>

While in men Strasberg encouraged a stoic follow-through (as with the aforementioned actor in *Mourning Becomes Electra*), in women he often encouraged a generic sexual willingness. In keeping with re-eroticization’s resistance to the public/private divide, Strasberg’s “private moment” exercise encouraged actors perform behaviors they would only do in private, thereby dissolving the “character armor” they might put up in front of an audience.<sup>76</sup> Strasberg describes one experience with a female actor who achieved “startling abandon” through a private moment exercise. She lay around in bed listening to Turkish records until she started dancing. Strasberg recounts, “You have never seen such abandon as this girl on the stage. It was what I call hot dancing, and it was exciting, thrilling, and shocking as you didn’t think of this kind of thing with that girl. She hadn’t seemed like that kind of girl.”<sup>77</sup> For Strasberg, it is precisely the abandonment of character armor that demonstrates control over the body. Simultaneously, Strasberg frames the student as “that kind of girl,” a disparagement of the desiring female body that Strasberg seems so eager to evoke. Rather than signaling a freedom from sexual scripts or an authentic privacy, the student’s behavior wields sexual scripts (and perhaps the sexualized orientalism of Turkish music) to get a specific response from Strasberg.<sup>78</sup> She performs a script of abandon that registers to Strasberg as liberating, a script of interest to re-eroticizing acting teachers in the mid-twentieth century.

Part of the dynamic of Strasberg’s actor training was to provide “evidence” of erotic desire that might reveal women’s deviance. Foucault describes the imperative on sexual subjects to confess their disorderly desires and render desire visible to surveillance. Foucault emphasizes “the pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it.”<sup>79</sup> How might the re-eroticizing director and the re-eroticized actor play this game in exercises like Strasberg’s private moment? In some cases, the game can be pleasurable and reciprocal, and we need not read the student dancing to Turkish music as disempowered. It is worth asking, however, whether this game teaches lessons about acting and, as importantly, whether all acting students want to take part in it. Foucault continues, “One confesses—or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat.”<sup>80</sup> Some actors experienced acting exercises to break through character armor invasively. In *An Actress Prepares: Women and the Method*, Rosemary Malague argues that Strasberg drove women to emotional

“breakdowns” as a way to “break through” their inhibitions. Strasberg’s classes praised “weeping women” for their performance of truth.<sup>81</sup> Margaret Barker of the Group Theatre recounts:

My whole feeling was that if you cry, you cry; and if you don’t, you don’t. But it was awful, with Strasberg, because you felt that if once you cried and had a full emotional thing, you weren’t acting if it didn’t happen every time...Strasberg was so interested in what he called “real emotion” that he reduced us to a pulp.<sup>82</sup>

As Barker’s scare quotes around “real emotion” suggest, the “truth” behind Strasberg’s ideal performance for women was never free from bias. If true masculine performance meant showing an ability to stick to action without inhibition, then true feminine performance meant showing woundedness. Women enacted victimhood to prove their emotional and sexual availability to the spectator. Moreover, whereas Freudian and Reichian psychology imagines that repetition allows one to overcome trauma, Barker experiences the repetition of victimhood scripts as damaging.<sup>83</sup> Seeking spontaneous shows of emotion and desire, Strasberg did not adequately prepare performers for theatrical repetition.

Strasberg was not the only Method acting teacher to develop a plan to unlock spontaneous intimacy for performers. Basing his technique on repetition, one of Strasberg’s collaborators in the Group Theatre, Sanford Meisner, saw a similar need to free actors from societal repression. Amplifying a performer’s ability to “live truthfully under imaginary circumstances,”<sup>84</sup> Meisner developed a technique to reveal actors’ impulses, which he taught at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City. In Meisner technique, the measure of a performer is how well ze embodies “natural” impulses.<sup>85</sup> However, according to Rosemary Malague, this approach has two pitfalls: (1) Meisner positioned himself as arbiter of the natural, and (2) the seemingly natural is often socially constructed.<sup>86</sup> Malague argues that Meisner employed a simplified conception of Freudian psychology.<sup>87</sup> In *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, Meisner cites several times the assertion that individuals only want sex and power. He opens his chapter on improvisation with a quote from Freud about daydreams: “In young women erotic wishes tend to dominate the fantasies almost exclusively, for their ambition is generally comprised in their erotic longings; in young men egoistic and ambitious wishes assert themselves plainly enough alongside their erotic desires.”<sup>88</sup> The re-eroticizing acting teacher instructed performers to embody this pattern of desires. When performers failed to embody impulses legible to Meisner, he criticized actors for their restraint and “weak” impulses.

A telling example of this discipline is Meisner’s treatment of a young actor, José, in an acting class videotaped and later released as *Sanford Meisner Master*

*Class*. In an improvisation exercise, he sends José offstage and whispers to his female scene partner that she is to seduce José upon his entrance. Sure enough, when José walks in the door for the scene, the female actor wraps her arm around José and brings him to the bed. José, queer man of color who has spoken in a past class about his boyfriend, does not show any interest in sex with his female scene partner and instead looks confused. Meisner stops the scene and asks José what happened to him. José scratches his head and says he didn't understand what his scene partner wanted. Meisner insists that it should have been obvious: "What more do you want? A diagram?"<sup>89</sup> For Meisner, there was only one natural impulse that José should have followed—the desire for heterosexual sex. Rosemary Malague writes, "Training presumes (or pretends) that an actor's 'natural' impulses will be heterosexual."<sup>90</sup> As Ribot pathologized nonnormative desire, so Method actor training attempted to remedy weak wills by enforcing traditional heterosexual sexual scripts.<sup>91</sup> Adrienne Rich describes this dynamic in society as "compulsory heterosexuality," the social mores that naturalize heterosexual desire and repudiate those who desire differently.<sup>92</sup> In improvisation and scene work, the scripts available to performers limit the horizon of expectations.

### **Wayward Actors and Script Analysis**

With a focus on strengthening willpower and eliminating inhibition, Strasberg and Meisner's versions of Method actor training strove to produce a congruity between a performer's desires and those of a character. In practice, this goal caused educators to suppress the differences and to ignore the limited spectrum of roles available to actors. As a result, some performers from marginalized identities challenged Method training or channeled their desires elsewhere. Together, they created a history of resistance that was as much a part of the Method's history as its sexual normativity. As Group Theatre actors studied and rehearsed under Strasberg at a summer retreat in Brookfield, Connecticut, some kindled intimacies outside the bounds of normative heterosexuality. Performers from wealthy, Anglo-American backgrounds were surprised by the amount of casual sex.<sup>93</sup> Actors snuck off after class for "lesbian and homosexual" encounters.<sup>94</sup> Harold Clurman and Stella Adler carried out a openly erotic relationship outside of marriage.<sup>95</sup> The Group Theatre could be a safe haven for wayward intimacies, but it could also take advantage of the vulnerable. The gossip columnist Cindy Adams reports in her biography of Lee Strasberg that anonymous sources said Luther Adler was a "grabber" and Clifford Odets would "make you [have sex with him] if he could."<sup>96</sup> In later interviews, women of the Group Theatre would speak openly about the Group as male-dominated and biased against them.<sup>97</sup> At the time, though, gossip may have itself been a mode of resistance. As women warned each other of aggressive men, they formed a much-discussed fixture of the #MeToo movement today: a whisper network. Many grew critical of Strasberg's way of working. Margaret Barker,

who was grappling with her sexuality and later had openly queer intimacies, felt “clobbered” by the acting teacher.<sup>98</sup> Ruth Nelson asked to leave Strasberg’s class. After one of Strasberg’s outbursts in rehearsal, Nelson even charged at Strasberg and would have physically fought him if her fellow actors had not stopped her.<sup>99</sup> Many female actors voiced their concerns about the largely male leadership at group meetings. Some later fled the Group Theatre to join workers’ theatres, get involved with the Communist Party, and participate in solidarity efforts with anti-fascists in Spain.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps the most concerted rebellion within the Group Theatre came from Stella Adler, who challenged Strasberg’s authority and staked a claim as the Group’s rightful acting teacher. Frustrated with Strasberg’s probing and use of emotional memory, Adler visited Stanislavsky in Paris to discuss actor training, which Rosemary Malague suggests was a conscious career move aiming to set herself up as Stanislavsky’s rightful spokesperson in the United States.<sup>101</sup> When Adler returned to the Group Theatre, she denounced Strasberg’s way of working and started teaching the Group technique based on given circumstances and the power of imagination. Adler called the confrontation a “revolutionary moment,” and Rosemary Malague describes it as a crucial point in feminist theatre history in the United States.<sup>102</sup> According to Malague, Adler rebelled not only against the Method’s way of working but against gender norms that female actors repeatedly encountered. Stella Adler says, “The Group Theatre was really a man’s theater. It was male dominated. The theater was aimed at plays for men. They understood men. There were really no women in the group. The women were ruined, absolutely neglected. Any actress that stayed there was an idiot.”<sup>103</sup> Even after she started teaching acting to the Group Theatre, Adler quit after the Group’s directors kept casting her as desexualized “Jewish mothers” instead of the leading roles she wanted to play.<sup>104</sup> Whereas some critics might view Adler’s departure as her being self-absorbed or a “diva,”<sup>105</sup> her action repudiated the sexual and gender politics of the Group Theatre. Adler refused to align her desire with that expected of her and purposely went on to found her own studio.

In *The Art of Acting*, Adler states:

You have to reach the point where acting is pleasurable, not a source of anxiety. A lot of people think of actors as neurotic. That’s because the actors they’re thinking of are bad actors... There are, I’m afraid, teachers who encourage them to dwell on their neuroses. If the students are neurotic, then the teacher looks strong. They become dependent on the teacher, which is something I’ve never wanted. The teacher becomes a parent, or, even worse, a kind of therapist.<sup>106</sup>



Adler denounces the tendency to turn actor training into pathology and to instill in performers a sense of their inadequacy. By contrast, Stella Adler's actor training moves performers closer to recognizing the gendered, racializing, and sexual scripts that other teachers and directors ask of them. Her pedagogy emphasizes script analysis and imagination, giving actors tools to examine identity categories and imagine alternate ways of being. In *Beyond Method*, Scott Balcerzak describes Stella Adler's influences from the Yiddish Theatre that led her to distinguish between slanted character types and realistic types. The slanted type contains an actor's comment on the character (similar to Brecht's V-effekt), while a realistic type attempts to leave that comment behind.<sup>107</sup> In this way, Adler encouraged actors to recognize and understand archetypes and acknowledge that all characters are "types," whether visibly so or not. When she coached Marlon Brando in his film work, Balcerzak argues, Adler taught Brando to recognize the dynamics of postwar masculinity that would inform his performances in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *On the Waterfront*, and other signature films of his career.<sup>108</sup> Brando could perform a type onscreen but go back to a more gentle masculinity offscreen. Adler writes that the actor's "job is to experience and interpret...the ideas of the playwright."<sup>109</sup> The actor responds to the script and lets his vision shape his performance rather than performing the script uncritically.

When Adler encouraged performers to distinguish themselves from their characters, she restored a key element of Stanislavsky's system that Strasberg and Meisner's schools of acting had attempted to excise: a double awareness of one's self as both character and actor, subject and object. In Stanislavskian acting, the actor experiences a performance as the character living through imaginary circumstances and the actor viewing the character from the outside. David Krasner compares these two layers of awareness to W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness."<sup>110</sup> As Du Bois argues, black Americans experienced their society from the dominant view of whiteness and from their minoritized subject position of blackness.<sup>111</sup> An often-disorienting experience, double consciousness enables "conflict and self-investigation" as "two warring souls" work on the same body.<sup>112</sup> Whereas Strasberg and Meisner imagine identification as a path to a stable, liberated subjecthood,<sup>113</sup> Du Bois's identification destabilizes the categories of whiteness and blackness to prompt a confounding awareness of social scripts. The fragmented subject, cognizant of stereotypes projected onto black body-minds, might deploy or subvert these stereotypes, as the performance studies scholar Brandi Wilkins Catanese argues in her analysis of double consciousness.<sup>114</sup> Reading Du Bois's concept into Adler's actor training, I want to gesture toward a minoritarian vision of identification that might challenge the false universalism of Strasberg and Meisner's identification, in which "white is universal, while black is particular."<sup>115</sup> In *Black Acting Methods*, the directors and scholars Tia Shaffer and Sharrell Luckett offer visions of actor training like Clinessha Sibley's Afrocentric script analysis, which



denaturalizes whiteness,<sup>116</sup> and Kirby Ferguson's acknowledgement that "everything is a remix," which defetishizes originality.<sup>117</sup> The ability to recognize and shape social scripts might equip performers to say no to stereotyped roles or repurpose roles for their pleasure.

### **Conclusion: Toward a Politics of Pleasure in Actor Training**

Willful actors like Olga Knipper of the Moscow Art Theatre, José de Sanford Meisner's master class, and Stella Adler of the Group Theatre might be precursors to today's intimacy directing movement. Articulating their noes in the face of training that attempted to direct their desires, they resemble the contemporary artists who denounce sexual exploitation and create opportunities for their colleagues to articulate boundaries in the rehearsal room. Although intimacy directors can perform some of the specialized work of choreographing erotically charged scenes for the stage, educators also have a role in cultivating critical performers. In Adler's call for pleasurable acting and the analysis of social roles, I read a framework to prepare actors for stage intimacy. This framework, which I call sexual script analysis, strives not to uncover authentic erotic desire, as re-eroticization does. Rather, sexual script analysis readies actors to identify, challenge, and rework sexual scripts and to locate pleasure in mimesis. If, as Lynda Hart suggests, "All desire is theatrical"—an entry into a shared fantasy with others—then performers can find accessible entry points into sexual scripts and let desire follow from theatrical action (if desire is to follow at all).<sup>118</sup> Performers can enjoy imitating intimacy without finding their offstage sexualities under scrutiny.

In an acting class toward the end of her career, Adler told a group of young performers, "Every physical action is yours, if it bears your signature. You must reach your norm, not my norm."<sup>119</sup> Adler urged performers to adapt scripts to suit their needs, much as intimacy directors today urge performers to say no and offer alternatives to blocking in rehearsal. Exploring textual analysis, Adler insisted, "Get pleasure from language. If you don't, change the style."<sup>120</sup> Adler's vision of resistance focused on pleasure more than consent. The history of re-eroticizing acting technique suggests that actors can consent to acts that undermine their pleasure. As the legal scholar Joseph Fischel writes, consent is a "checkbox. A feminist, democratically hedonic sexual culture—by which I mean a culture that facilitates and more equitably distributes its possibilities for pleasure and intimacy—requires a whole lot more than the check of consent."<sup>121</sup> Willful actors like Adler, while encouraging no-saying, are also highlighting the importance of self-advocacy and experimentation. When teaching performers Stanislavsky's physical actions, Adler encouraged performers to "complicate the action."<sup>122</sup> Rather than pursuing a straightforward action (combing the hair), the actor might experiment with more challenging actions (tousling the hair).<sup>123</sup> Claire Warden describes a similar dynamic in intimacy directing, "If we just say yes to the first idea we all have, then we never

get the brilliant stuff.”<sup>124</sup> Resistance might be part of a project of crafting more fascinating and enjoyable intimacies on stage.

In every acting class, there will be moments of resistance. When some strains of Stanislavskian and Method actor training attempt to reshape an actor’s will to align with normative sexual scripts, actors’ bodies may rebel, consciously or not. Habits persist. Gestures keep surfacing. Per Ahmed, “Arms can disobey; they can wander away. The wayward arm could be heard as a call to arms.”<sup>125</sup> While the history of rebellious actors is an archive of willfulness, so too each individual actor might host her own history of stubbornness—“willfulness can be deposited in our bodies. And when willfulness is deposited in our bodies, our bodies become part of a willfulness archive.”<sup>126</sup> As intimacy directors and advocates for consent culture intervene in the field of actor training today, they urge educators, directors, and actors to heed the willfulness housed in bodies. Confronted with a legacy of minoritarian actors taught to ignore their needs, intimacy directors might encourage actors to honor their resistance and to advocate for their pleasure.

## Notes

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