*Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*
*Vol. 7, No. 4, December 2011*

# A Dangerous Method: the Art of Authenticity as a Social Imperative

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## Warming Up with Method Acting

How would it make you feel if I wrote about Method Acting? Or perhaps more importantly, how would it make *me* feel? What is the emotional truth of my engagement with Method acting as revealed in writing an article about it? I don't mean eagerness to please, desire to publish, or delight in attention getting theoretical gymnastics, all the self-regarding crap that often motivates scholarship. All of these motivating factors have been tried and have failed to produce something useful. To be honest, and naked honesty is the most valuable coin in this realm, what I feel is slight embarrassment. Why should anybody care about Method acting at this moment in time? Especially since in the field of performance studies, where the renunciation of Stanislavski and company is often a rite of passage, Method acting is suspect. Still, I must produce something believable, authentic, something with an emotional through line and nail the applause line at the end. I will dig deep into context, research period elements diligently, and most of all make sure to put something of myself into my performance.

The last part is easy. My primary interest in Method acting isn't theoretical, but personal. I grew up in a household filled with Method actors (How Method? When my mother was once asked to say grace at a Thanksgiving meal, she to the dismay of some of our visiting relatives announced, "I'm going to say thanks to Stanislavski!") Like many children, I found myself moving further and further away from the family romance. As I've gone further in my own path in the world, I've thought less and less about that legacy that shaped my childhood. So, when a couple of years ago I picked up a book that has been recommended to me by many acquaintances both scholarly and otherwise, *Mediated* by Thomas de Zengotita, I was at first amused and then pleasantly disturbed to find Method acting as a central touchstone of his analysis.

De Zengotita foreshadows the major themes of his book with a description of acting students in a class he once took as an aspiring actor in the early 60's (1-3). He

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ISSN: 1557-2935 <http://liminalities.net/7-4/dangerous.pdf>

tells the story of the class mistaking an announcement of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as a classic improv exploration of Stanislavski's "magic if": how would I feel if the President was assassinated? There are two types of Method actors, de Zengotita dryly states, those who do anger and those who do tears. As an "anger" type, de Zengotita occupies himself mostly with a restless brooding. The crying actors, on the other hand, have a field day, sobbing and keening with abandon. Then it finally sinks through with the next announcement; JFK *has* been shot, it's *real*. The intense embarrassment that de Zengotita feels (and suggests his fellow actors share) sets the tone for his book, a tour through a funhouse mirror of postmodern culture where media saturation has reduced everything in life to staged experiences and seamless performance. Authenticity has largely vanished, de Zengotita tells us repeatedly. But also he wants you to know that he feels embarrassed by this fact. The detachment, the wry cataloging of paradoxes, is too hip and self-aware to express itself as anger, defiance, or outrage. But de Zengotita's embarrassment remains as a reminder that something is being violated by all this performance.

De Zengotita's use of the Method to exemplify inauthenticity is an interesting detour from most critiques of the Method. Phillip Auslander gives a paradigmatic critique when he places the Method squarely in the Western logocentric tradition of "the metaphysics of presence"(28). The very word "Method" adds to this mystery. From Ramus onward, Method is a word that marks the abnegation of the self, a way of removing one's own personality from discourse. As a college student, I took an acting class where we were assigned as our basic text Eric Morris's *No Acting Please*, which was subtitled "Beyond the Method." But as Morris made clear, the Method isn't what's being left behind. Rather, the aspiring actors have to first break down their own psychological barriers in order to make the Method work for them. For Morris, all the distortions of ego and personality must be exploded before one can even deign to approach the Method. "How" Morris asks, "can a system designed to be personal work for actors who are not personal and don't even know how they feel?" (2). Morris doesn't so much go "beyond" the Method as he zeros in on its major conundrum … what if in the search for authenticity there is no "there" there?

**Rehearsing Stanislavski as a Nietzschean Thinker**

For Stanislavski, developing his system with the Moscow Art Theater, self-realization is not the goal of (what will eventually become) the Method. Emerging from the tradition of 19th century theater, the production of the self is a question of technique, of doing a job successfully. The problem seems to be that most acting is bad, conven-

tional, mechanical, ego-driven, and predictable. All of these things, unfortunately, make such "bad" acting easy to reproduce. "Good" acting is the result of "inspiration" and "intuition" where actors forget themselves and start spontaneously "living a part," reacting freely and without self-consciousness to the dramatic situation as if it were a unique and contingent event (13). Conceived in this way, good acting can hardly be reproduced at will. The students in "An Actor Prepares" find themselves unable to remember how or why an inspired performance occurred when asked about it. There is no self, no actor who can reliably produce such states; it only happens as a kind of spiritual possession. Long before Morris, Stanislavski confronts the modern paradox of authenticity, how difficult it is to find, or even create, authenticity (as that other great modernist George Burns put it, "Sincerity . . . if you can fake that, kid, you've got it made"). In Stanislavski, authenticity is something that can only be achieved, acquired, created through assiduous practice.

Stanislavski's various solutions for this process of crafting authenticity—techniques like affective memory, the "magic if" and the through-line of action—are at the heart of what makes the Method controversial, particularly as taken up by his American interpreters: Strasberg, Adler and Berghoff. Critics like Colin Counsell, Richard Hornsby and Robert Brustein charge that "Method actors devote attention to the self at the expense of the text . . . they graft their personality onto the role while ignoring its context" (Krasner, 16-17). Auslander charges that "Stanislavski states that the actor's self is the basis of performance, but his own working out of this idea leads him to posit that the self is produced by the process of acting . . . the self does not exist independently of the processes by which it is revealed to itself and others" (36). That Stanislavski was not blind to this paradox is suggested by one of his most cited aphorisms: "love the art in yourself, not yourself in art" (Zubizarreta, 261). Where the actor's self is stated explicitly as an organizing principle in *An Actor Prepares*, it is often qualified: "never lose yourself on stage, as an *artist*" (177). By artist, Stanislavski means not a unitary self, but a protean one who applies emotional life "in an infinite variety of combinations of objectives, and given circumstances" (177).

Investigating the status of art further, we should follow David's Kornhaber's suggestion to read Stanislavski alongside Nietzsche. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche states that the "problem of the actor has disquieted me the longest," wondering "whether one could not get at the dangerous conception of 'artist'" through that perspective (148). As Kornhaber points out, it is surprising that Nietzsche posits a "problem of the actor" in the first place since "much of Nietzsche's philosophy would seem to predispose him in favor of the actor—from his insistence that the body is the only valid means of assessing truth to his explorations of the manifold ways in which we assume and disassume roles to construct our sensation of inner being" (244). Acting

may from a certain perspective be the very definition of *froliche Wissenschaft,* "Gay Science" of perpetual self-fashioning and renewal. "Falseness with a good conscience; the delight in pretense erupting as a power that pushes aside, floods, and at times extinguishes one's so-called "character"; the inner longing for a role and mask, for an appearance" (148). In considering the actor, Nietzsche leaves open the possibility that the actor is the paradigmatic artist; that it is in acting that the positive, creative, poetic changeable force that is art is made manifest. For Kornhaber, "the actor in Nietzsche's formulations becomes a prime vehicle for communicating the necessary but impossible fiction of the self" (241).

Where it comes to the actual practice of the acting profession however, Nietzsche is less than impressed: "What do I care for the drama! What do I care for the spasms of its moral ecstasies, in which 'the people' have their satisfaction! What do I care for the whole pantomimic hocus-pocus of the actor! . . . It will now be divined that I am essentially anti-theatrical at heart" (152). Certainly, bad acting for Nietzsche cannot even come close to incarnating his aspirations of self-overcoming and constant change, since such actors never change or overcome anything, they simply repeat their own rote, conventional behavior. Nietzsche's aversion to bad acting is closely connected with his rejection of Wagner, the epitome of 19th century romantic and presentational theatre. Within the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, performance is just one formal element in the total artwork, "only an opportunity for a number of dramatic attitudes." Surprisingly enough, Nietzsche is not the cliché of a postmodernist, reveling in the sparkling surface. Wagnarian performances of gestures and attitudes appear to Nietzsche to present subjects as puppets without will.

If Wagner represents the nadir of art for Nietzsche, he sees art's potential in actively aiding human self-transformation through narrative, narrative which it is the actor's job to serve by making such narratives plausible and relevant. In the section of *The Gay Science* entitled "Why We Should Be Grateful" Nietzsche states that "It is only the artists, and especially the theatrical artists, who have furnished men with eyes and ears to hear and see with some pleasure what everyone is in himself, what he experiences and aims at: it is only *they* who have taught us how to estimate the hero that is concealed in each of these common-place men and the art of looking at us from a distance as heroes, and as it were simplified and transfigured" (56). The "magic if" that allows actors to transmit themselves into fictional contents in Stanislavski's system is for Nietzsche the transformational power of art upon the human subject, which compels spectators to project themselves into narrative "as if" they are more than themselves, perhaps even more than human. Nietzsche enlists art, and acting in particular, in a post-human process of overcoming man's reactive nature. What such art and acting can provide is a narrative process of transformation. By making such

narratives compelling, especially by depicting a process of *willing*, acting in an active sense can inspire the spectator to achieve such a post-human will in themselves.

**Lights, Camera, Affect**

This fusion of the "as ifs" in Stanislavski and Nietzsche suggests a link between these two systems of thought, although it is true that the one is a technique for achieving consistency in stage acting, and the other a radical critique and program for overcoming human history and thought itself. It is this idea that humans can give birth to themselves, to achieve a self where none existed before through the narrativizing process, that the techniques of Method acting reflect. What is more, the Method is just one part of the puzzle that supports the teleological self, along with narrative tropes, and with the advent of visual media, cinematic grammars of filmic representation. The Method joins the ranks of the reliable narrator in fiction, the POV shot in film, and location in physics, as relics of the B.D. age (Before Derrida) that have, like vampires exposed to the light of day, dissolved in the face of the postmodern critique. Or not. These illusions of the Western ego persist, albeit in a state of crisis. Apparatus theory was answered by Lucas and Spielberg, *Twilight* is narrated in the lugubrious tones of first-person teenage narcissism, many working class people still need to catch the bus to get to work. The persistence of such techniques is easier to understand if we recognize them not as a futile attempt to uncover an originary presence but a desperate attempt to create such presences *ex nihilo*.

And Method Acting continues. Not, it is true, on college campuses or theater workshops, but in the multiplex, where film actors react to a CGI effect with emotional substitution. While the theatrical legacy of the Method still retains a kind of kitchen sink realism, similar techniques now sell us on the reality-effect of increasingly outlandish and fantastic narratives. What else can a modern star do but, faced with a green screen, fall upon her own resources? When a movie star looks into the distance and whispers "oh my God" as asteroids destroy the Pentagon, while really standing on a bare sound stage and uttering those words ten, twenty, a hundred times, is it their own God they are thinking about (Kathy Griffin's Emmy)? Or do they imagine a God that they cannot believe in but feel that the character, or the audience, must? Modernist foundational authenticity does not melt away under the postmodern challenge, it becomes weird, baroque, overdetermined in its acknowledgement of its constructed nature as well as even more stubbornly insistent on the need for authenticity, the authenticity of authenticity if you will, authenticity to the second power. Authenticity is the ultimate product of postmodern capitalism, and the most pervasive means

for producing authenticity in our world remains Stanislavski's "magic if," which is Nietzsche's "magic if" as well.

While the exponential growth of visual narrative has driven the ubiquity of on screen emoting that is the Method's legacy, so has the drive to craft the self through the production of emoting become all of our burdens. In many ways, what de Zengotita chronicles in *Mediated* is the utter pervasiveness of affective labor in postmodern capitalism (Hardt 90). The question of how to produce believable emotion on stage has become, at this social moment, the imperative to produce emotion throughout the social collective in the workplace, in social gatherings, occupying the (Wall) street. A renewed look at Method techniques has much to tell us about biopower, immaterial labor, desiring production, and other essential topics of our day. In particular, it can help see all the myriad short circuits, bypasses and patch-arounds by which society subverts Nietzsche's call for a sustained practice of transformations into hundreds of daily micro transformations, mini-narrative closures, hourly epiphanies and continuous catharses, all of which are duly invested with the requisite emotion, but can only with great difficulty coalesce into an actual becoming.

All of which returns us to Nietzsche and the "problem of the actor," which eventually points to a problem with the technologizing process of producing emotion that Stanislavski initiates and becomes eventually the Method itself. Nietzsche is concerned with the mechanical nature of some forms of acting in everyday life, particular those that are adopted by necessity by people disenfranchised by society in some way: the lower classes, Jews, women. Given his aristocratic value system Nietzsche does not see such a process as noble, although we might well celebrate a strategy of feigning emotion as a subversive means of undermining power structures. And of course the need to feign emotion is one of the most onerous aspects of affective labor, from the cheeriness of customer service to the necessity of laughing at a superior's sexist jokes. However his main source for disquiet (and I think de Zengotita's as well) is that such practices may themselves become rote, no longer serving a subversive function but becoming second nature, "thus, having gradually qualified themselves to adjust the mantle to *every* wind, thereby almost becoming the mantle itself" (148).

As serfs of capital we, therefore, confront the same issue Stanislavski did over a century ago; but while for him the concern was narrowly professional: how can a stage actor emote more convincingly on demand? His profession has now become all of ours, and the need to reliably display emotion that is convincing and appropriate is one that we must learn to master to survive, or else suffer the consequences. As Jon McKenzie aptly put it, we must perform . . . or else. Luckily, we don't have to worry about feeling emotion because so much of our emotion is already being felt for us by professionals, both in the media and elsewhere, who have mastered the techniques of

manufacturing emotion on cue. Clearly the Method is powerful, dangerous even. But can it still be a subversive and powerful tool? Not as a means of uncovering an origin that was never there, but for producing new emotions that have never been experienced before? There is much in this tradition, still central to our culture, which has yet to be explored, and the future is bound to reveal more twists and turns. What will happen when Siri the Apple Virtual Assistant gets a hold of *An Actor Prepares*? What kind of "database" will she draw her emotional memory from? Stay tuned.

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