

The Actors Studio: A Brief Portrait By Andreas Manolikakis

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The Actors Studio was founded in New York by Elia Kazan, Cheryl Crawford and Robert Lewis in 1947. For more than six decades it has been devoted to the service and development of theater artists —actors, directors and playwrights. To a select number of theater professionals, mainly actors, the Actors Studio offers free Life Membership, with no fee or tuition required, which entitles them to a unique opportunity to explore and improve their craft in a safe, laboratory environment with colleagues with whom they share the same process of work.

The roots of the Actors Studio go back to the Group Theater (1931-1941) whose work was inspired by the discoveries of the great Russian actor and director Constantin Stanislavski and his best student Eugene Vakhtangov as revealed in the legendary productions that the Moscow Art Theater toured in America in 1923. In fact, Stanislavski's dedication in his book *My Life in Art* (1924) reads: " I DEDICATE THIS BOOK IN GRATITUDE TO HOSPITABLE AMERICA AS A TOKEN AND A REMEMBRANCE FROM THE MOSCOW ART THEATER WHICH SHE TOOK SO KINDLY TO HER HEART."

When the Moscow Art Theater ended the American tour, several members of the theater stayed behind and trained artists, including Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman and Stella Adler, who would go on to form the Group Theater along with other artists such as Elia Kazan, Sanford Meisner and Robert Lewis. These artists studied, explored, developed and improved the work of the Russian masters with extraordinary results that were unique in the history of the American theater and a new kind of acting was born.

After the Group Theater closed, in 1941, many of its members went their separate ways. Elia Kazan has stated that one of the principal reasons he created the Actors Studio, in 1947, was in order to preserve and develop this new American acting. He wanted to create, not a school, but a not-for-profit organization that would provide a laboratory, a private workshop in which the professional actor could work on his or her craft, far away from the commercial pressures of casting, rehearsal and performance. It was to be a place that would offer its member-artists an ongoing training, a continuity of work and the feeling of an artistic home like they had at the Group Theater.

At the Studio, it was eventually decided that Life Membership should be achieved through an audition process of preliminary and then final auditions, where the only requirements are talent and the possibility of improvement.

In 1948, Lee Strasberg was asked by Elia Kazan to join the Studio as one of its teachers and in 1951 he became its Artistic Director, a position he maintained until his death in 1982. Strasberg's deep understanding of the Stanislavski System and the reformulations of Vakhtangov, together with his own personal discoveries and improvements on the acting process, provided the foundation on which the Actors Studio based its work. At the same time, the concurrent work of Elia Kazan as a theater and film director demonstrated in the most powerful way the extraordinary results of the deep and personal process of acting espoused by the Actors Studio.

For six decades, the very existence of the Actors Studio, the principles and values that it represents, the methodology of its work process, its consistency and long life have established the Studio as a unique theater organization and a

guiding light for actors, directors and playwrights around the world. For many it is considered the temple of the acting process.

Today the work that is done at the Actors Studio continues the Stanislavski-Vakhtangov-American approach, and most of the leading members of the Studio today have studied with more than one of these great American teachers: Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, Elia Kazan, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner and Robert Lewis.

Currently, Ellen Burstyn, Harvey Keitel and Al Pacino serve as Co-Presidents of the Studio. Ellen Burstyn is also the Artistic Director of the Actors Studio in New York, while Martin Landau and Mark Rydell serve as Co-Artistic Directors in West Hollywood at the Actors Studio West branch, which opened in 1966. The Actors Studio is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of a group of Life Members from both coasts.

After 62 years, the Actors Studio continues to thrive because it is needed. Goethe has said that: "The actor's career develops in public, but his art develops in private." The Studio provides its members with this special kind of privacy, along with a group of colleagues who share the same passion for what Studio members refer to as "The Work."

Lee Strasberg once summed up the essence of the Studio experience this way: "There are actors all over the world (who) regardless of their circumstances, professional or personal, regardless of whatever difficulties they are facing, whatever problems or changes—there is one thing they can rely on and that is that at 11 o'clock on Tuesday and Friday mornings come rain, shine, snow or what you have, there is a session in the Actors Studio. And in that session work is being done. And the fact that actors can count on that, that they know that that exists, can help them get through."

In spite of the presence of the Actors Studio over many years and its extensive influence in America and worldwide, there still persist many misunderstandings of the Studio, its mentors, its philosophy and its process. These errors most often arise from discussions by some academics, theoreticians, historians and even by some theater professionals who attempt to analyze and interpret a process of work that they have never learned through serious practice. The work of Stanislavski, Vakhtangov and the Actors Studio was arrived at through deep and lengthy practical experiments that elude rational analysis by non-practitioners.

Fifteen years ago the Actors Studio entered a major new phase with the creation of the Actors Studio Drama School MFA Program in acting, directing and playwriting, in order to bring the Studio's Method into a university setting. In September 2006 the Program moved to Pace University in downtown New York City, which also is the home of one of the Program's most visible teaching platforms, *Inside the Actors Studio*, hosted by James Lipton.

The above text, now updated, was published in the Official Program of the Rome Film Festival in October 2006 as part of a series of films and events honoring the Actors Studio.

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