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“Mapping Meisner – How Stanislavski’s System influenced Meisner’s Process and why it matters to British Drama School training today.”

Philippa Strandberg-Long

Given his remarkable contribution to the development of acting technique in the USA and his undoubted influence on some of the world’s most celebrated performers, directors and writers, it is somewhat surprising to discover that, until relatively recently, the work of Sanford Meisner remained virtually unheard of in Britain.¹

It is fair to say that within the European acting community Sanford Meisner’s name has long been synonymous with one of his core exercises, *the repetition exercise*, often mistakenly perceived as the extent of the technique. Nevertheless Meisner’s influence on twentieth century American actor training has been vast, and his teachings has over the last decade seen a surge in popularity in Europe as well; there are today very few UK drama training institutions that do not teach Meisner technique in some shape or form. The introduction of said technique to the UK has however resulted in the links between Stanislavski’s practice and Meisner’s work becoming slightly blurred, partly due to some practitioners’ own versions of the process being confused with the full technique, and partly due to the lack of documentary evidence of the complete practice. This has led to Meisner, sometimes undeservedly, attracting criticism as someone who did not only reduce aspects of Stanislavski, but also as someone who *betrayed* him.² In this paper I seek to highlight the strong influence Stanislavski and his disciples had on Meisner’s work, as well as challenge the misconception that Meisner technique is confined to the first few exercises; and not in keeping with Stanislavski’s extended practice. This belief which, I propose, is responsible for the delayed inclusion of Meisner technique in British Conservatoire Schools.

An American institution

In the 1930s Meisner became a founding member of the Group Theatre in New York, alongside well-known practitioners such as Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Robert Lewis. While the Group Theatre worked primarily as a repertory theatre company, many of its members were passionate about actor training, especially since Strasberg, Adler and Clurman had studied Stanislavski's system with renowned disciples Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya at the American Laboratory Theatre. It was the Stanislavskian practice, and their varied views on it, that years later led to the group going their separate ways and consequently the development of three noteworthy acting schools; The Actors Studio (Lee Strasberg), The Stella Adler School of Acting (Stella Adler) and The Neighbourhood Playhouse (Sanford Meisner) – all stemming from Stanislavski's system, but more often referred to as the American Method.

These teachers [Strasberg, Adler and Meisner] manipulated principles of action, imagination, attention, and affective and sense memory to help the actor reach for what Stanislavski called “the inner creative state” - a complete engagement with the work.³

Although these three practitioners were seen as the creators of the method practice, up until the 1980s Meisner was relatively unknown compared to his method counterparts. When his book⁴ was published in 1987 Meisner's reputation within US theatre training circles would slowly begin to rise and in time even eclipse that of his rivals. Following his death in 1997 his popularity has continued to reach beyond the United States and around the world making his technique more well-known and widely practiced than during his lifetime.⁵

The influence of Stanislavski

The Meisner Technique (is) one of the several schools of actor training that arguably fall under the rubric of the “American Method,” derived from aspects of Stanislavski's system.⁶

Konstantin Stanislavski has been credited with founding a so-called *system* for actors, a collection of exercises engineered to help the actor engage both mentally and physically with a role, born out of years of research and practice.⁷ He was the first practitioner to draw on scientific and psychological research into human behaviour, basing his theories on studies by psychologists including Ivan Pavlov and Theodule Ribot, whose notion of *affective memory* was the foundation of Stanislavski's earlier work⁸.

During initial developments of his technique Meisner was highly influenced by the Group Theatre and its work on Stanislavski's practice⁹, however, he opposed the increasing emphasis on intellectual and "inward looking" exercises, and in particular Lee Strasberg's fascination with affective memory, which Meisner saw as introverting the already introverted.¹⁰ He found Stella Adler's convictions regarding Stanislavski's modifications, placing emphasis on action rather than emotion, much more in line with his own ideas, and focused on ways to tap into the actor's inner instinct. This was something that Stanislavski himself spent the latter part of his life exploring, which implies that Meisner's agenda was similar to the conclusions Stanislavski drew towards the later stages of his career.

This shift in emphasis away from the emotional interiority and intellectual introspection chimes with Stanislavski's own deliberations on the system and his subsequent development of what became known as the method of physical actions.¹¹

Shirley's observation regarding Stanislavski's development of a more action-based technique in *method of physical actions* is correct, but the intention to form a more spontaneous and reactive practice is even more evident in his very last invention of *active analysis*. Active analysis, due to its censorship and consequent banning by the Soviet state, did not surface within actor training establishments until the 1960s and the main text books on the subject, written by Stanislavski's apprentice Maria Knebel, are yet to be published in the English language.¹² The reason for its suppression was due to its holistic approach; it is said to encompass mind, body and spirit into its text analysis, and works by combining study of the dramatic dialogue

interspersed with improvised études, focusing on action and reaction and using your fellow actors as the basis for your response.

One of the main differences between Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis is that the line of physical actions (and the sense of truth in those physical actions) depends wholly upon your stage partner.¹³

As Bella Merlin states, there is a dependency on your fellow actors, which is the very foundation of Meisner technique, and in line with his mantras of *don't do anything unless something happens to make you do it* and *what you do doesn't depend on you; it depends on the other fellow*.¹⁴ Merlin herself comments on the similarities between Meisner's theories and Active Analysis, saying that: "I find Meisner's words strike so many chords with my own experience and understanding of Stanislavski's Active Analysis, his principles are gold dust".¹⁵

In an interview with Paul Gray,¹⁶ Meisner admits to having been inspired by Stanislavski as well as the ideas and scholarship of Russian theorists Sudakov and Rapoport. The latter were both directors at the Moscow Art Theatre and the Vakhtangov Theatre, and their work was strongly influenced by Stanislavski's. Sudakov and Rapoport's writings introduced Meisner to the concepts that would become cornerstones of his technique and inspire his work with not just the notion of our actions being dependent on someone or something external, but also the *reality of doing*.¹⁷

The table below outlines the ideas and theories of Sudakov and Rapoport that are closely linked to the concepts underpinning Meisner's stance on training, and most likely to have inspired the development of the process.¹⁸

Rapoport:

- **Outward attention = less self-consciousness and more presence**
- **Important to train listening, observation, and perception in actors**
- **Real emotional root within fantasy = finding connection easier**
- ***What* and *why* are conscious decisions, but the *how* should be involuntarily**
- **Living relationships have to be built 'in the moment'**

Sudakov:

- **Action is the basis of the creative state – feelings stem from action**
- **Action comes from a spontaneous reaction**
- **The creative state is destroyed by self-consciousness**
- **Diffused – or internal – attention leads to inability to act**
- **The reality of doing is a practical engagement, not just intellectual**
- **Complex psychology – reduced to simple physical acts – brings concrete behaviour**

Taking all this into account, and by close inspection of Meisner's earlier work, it would be a safe assumption that he was also inspired by the communicational and interactive areas of Stanislavski's work, in particular *communion*:

The particular Stanislavski tool that Meisner picked up on and ran with was 'communion', with his technique channelling actors' energy into detailed observation of each other with the quality of dynamic listening.¹⁹

The earlier Stanislavski concept of communion was also an integral part of the creation of active analysis. Merlin refers to communion as *irradiation* or *energy*, which is exchanged between stage partners. She states that communion still allows

your actions to come from an inner emotional connection, however the attention placement of the actors is directed outwards towards the other actors and not inwards towards the self, which in turn allows the actors to achieve a finer quality of listening and adapting to the present moment.²⁰ Despite active analysis being banned by the Soviet state, Meisner and Stanislavski had both chosen the same aspect of the system upon which to focus in their quest to develop a more spontaneous and action based process. One can argue that communion was in fact the starting point of both Meisner's technique and Stanislavski's latter work, making the link between the two creators' intentions even stronger.

Meisner in the UK

Amongst those that have adopted (Meisner's) teaching methods, agreement about how they should be taught is far from unanimous.²¹

Although Meisner technique is becoming increasingly prevalent in UK drama training institutions, and has remained one of the cornerstones of American actor training, its relatively late arrival in the UK means that question-marks about the origins and pedagogy of his teachings still lie firmly over his legacy, prompting serious questions about *how* the technique should be taught and *when* in the training it should be introduced. Whilst Shirley acknowledges the presence of disagreements, in relation to Meisner technique, within the teaching community in the UK he also credits actor trainer and director Scott Williams with bringing the technique to our shores, stating that he, through his work with the Actors Centre in 1996, introduced the Meisner technique to the UK.²² What is more interesting here is the addition that Scott indeed teaches his *own version* of Meisner's technique.

Scott Williams, prefers to focus almost exclusively on Meisner's own exercises and teaching methods, arguing that the approach is so self-contained that the need for actors to identify objectives/super objectives etc. becomes redundant.²³

Shirley's revelation makes us aware not just of Meisner's *own exercises*, but also highlighting that Williams *prefers* to focus on those is indicative of other

elements existing within the technique, which when neglected must render it reduced in its entirety. Although modifications will be present in most teachers' work (and often made in good faith to simplify teaching and encourage learning) when introducing an established method such as Meisner's the unintended consequence of reducing a process can be damaging in terms of it being seen as one-dimensional and 'gimmicky'. Even though Williams has stressed that he indeed teaches his *own version* of the Meisner technique, his provocative statement regarding the lack of an *objective* in the process would make the technique difficult to establish within British actor training institutions that still rely and focus heavily on the Stanislavskian tradition. Any such worries, however, would easily be diminished by closer inspection of the complete training.

The elusive 'second year'

Meisner created a down to earth two-year acting curriculum (...) before the actor could speak, he had to master the art of listening and behaving naturally. In the second year of Meisner training, character/text analysis was introduced. Sandy taught action/problem/given circumstances.²⁴

At the Neighbourhood Playhouse Meisner established a two-year training programme, with the first year dedicated entirely to his own exercises geared towards listening, reacting and responding impulsively whilst placing attention on the partner. The positioning of the improvisational exercises before analytical engagement was key to the process, which meant the instinctive work was embodied and fully explored ahead of embarking on any intellectual investigation of the text. Exploring this further I discovered that American Meisner teacher Victoria Hart²⁵ uses definite Stanislavskian concepts when describing the progression of the training into the second year, even going as far as to state that 'this is where the technique finally functions.'²⁶

In the second year of Meisner training the students learn to identify the information and to create what we call a score. The smaller units that make up each scene, often called beats, allow us to examine this little by little as we apply our newly acquired tools to building a character.²⁷

The indication here is that Meisner, after establishing the instinctive communication, subsequently steered his actors towards the idea of method of physical actions. In an email interview with Hart I queried what the ‘tools’ she mentions are and what she meant by ‘scoring’; Hart tells me that the tools summarises all the work the students do in the first year, which boils down to reacting truthfully in the moment. However, she insists that Meisner emphasised the objective in second year script work, and the process started by the analysing of the text, by which she means breaking down the script into beats (or bits) and pinpointing the characters’ actions and objectives throughout the scene.²⁸ During my time researching and discussing Meisner technique in the United States, I have yet to come across the view that Meisner technique begins and ends with the first year training, however there is very little written evidence to the contrary.

Whilst (Williams) stopped short of attempting to argue that this was a view shared by Meisner himself, it is worth noting that very little space is given over to this aspect of Stanislavski’s work in Meisner’s own book.²⁹

Meisner on Acting (1987) only covers the first year of training, hence the exercises presented are predominately Meisner’s own creations, and there is a clear shortfall of literature exploring the full two-year practice. William Esper (Whose first book *The Actor’s Art and Craft* (2009) also concentrates on the first year of the process) recognised the lack of publications highlighting the full extended technique and wrote his second book, *The Actor’s Guide to Playing a Character* (2014), as an extension to the first; focusing on the second year of the Meisner process. He states in the prologue that ‘Actors who nurture a vision of themselves as true theatre artists will want to push their talents further. They’ll know that they won’t be able to bring the greatest roles ever written to life using the first year work alone.’³⁰ This book contains many demonstrations of how Stanislavski’s system was deeply ingrained in the Meisner technique but especially by the introduction of both *actions* and *particularisations*³¹ and makes it clear, that these will not compromise the spontaneity of the first-year training and are just as important to the actor’s process. Esper reiterates that Meisner technique not only originates from Stanislavsky’s system but also that, although the preliminary focus may be different, it does not refute or reduce his principles – it extends on the work Stanislavski had already

established. The only aspect shunned by Meisner is affective memory, from which Stanislavski in time distanced himself:

Despite a realisation that the system he developed is derived from the work of Stanislavski, the extent to which Meisner believed it should sit alongside other elements of the Stanislavskian methodology is not always clear.³²

Several British actor trainers admit to adapting the way they teach Meisner technique, to include the *what*, *where* and *why* aspects that are often fundamental to the students' training; others see it as an add-on to the Stanislavski training that should be introduced once that aspect is fully ingrained.³³ As someone who teaches both Stanislavski-based scene study as well as Meisner technique, I have encountered nothing that suggests that the process is not fully compatible with Stanislavskian training and as long as the tutor makes a point in using similar terminology to that which the students come across in other lessons. In order to allow for Meisner's vision with regard to the "what is taught first" question this can be addressed by the shift in emphasis to and from objectives and given circumstances as required through the layering of the exercises. Taking into account the reasoning behind Meisner's first year curriculum, as compared to the second year, it can be argued that instead of adding Meisner technique at a later stage in the training, the introduction of it in the first year would benefit the students in finding a balance in the crossover from embodied instinctual practice to analytical engagement, as they would be experienced alongside one another. In doing so, the training would not champion one aspect over the other but value both as essential components to the training of actors.

The system of exercises that Sanford Meisner devised is an attempt to bridge the gap between Stanislavskian *will* and the revelation of the *unwilled* spontaneous reaction.³⁴

Durham's observation about bridging a gap between what you consciously do to get what you want, and the spontaneous reactions that are dependent upon your partner highlights not only why Stanislavski was integral to Meisner's process, but also why Meisner's process is an equally crucial element in Stanislavski's training,

and also how through this combination we can allow the actor to achieve maximum potential in their craft. To use Durham's notion of bridging a gap; as important a structure as a bridge may be, to take away its destination would render it useless, similarly without the bridge the gap might prove too big a leap to make.

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Notes:

- ¹ Shirley, *The Reality of Doing*, 199
- ² Krasner, *Method Acting Reconsidered*, 29
- ³ Blair, *The Actor Image and Action*, 40
- ⁴ *Meisner On Acting* was a collaboration between Sanford Meisner and his former student Dennis Longwell, whom wrote the book from a series of observations and discussions of Meisner's classes and work.
- ⁵ Malague, *An Actress Prepares*, 111
- ⁶ Halba, *Play – But Don't Play Games!*, 127
- ⁷ Carnicke writes in Krasner (2000:13) that "Stanislavski became the first practitioner in the twentieth century to articulate systematic actor training. He developed what he called a grammar of acting".
- ⁸ Information based on literature by Sharon Carnicke (2008, 162-163), Bella Merlin (2003, p.16), David Krasner (in Hodge, 2000, p.135) and Rose Whyman (2008, 248-253)
- ⁹ Merlin, *Acting the Basics*, 183
- ¹⁰ Meisner, *Meisner on Acting*, 36
- ¹¹ Shirley, *The Reality of Doing*, 201
- ¹² The English version of 'Action Analysis' will be available from October 2018, 'Action Analysis' combines Knebel's two books, 'The Verb in the Art of an Actor' and 'Action Analysis of the Play and the Role' in an edition conceived by Knebel's most famous student, the renowned director Anatoli Vassiliev. This is the first English translation of Knebel's work.
- ¹³ Merlin, *Konstantin Stanislavsky*, 143
- ¹⁴ Meisner, *Meisner on Acting*, 16 & 36.
- ¹⁵ Merlin, *Acting the Basics*, 183
- ¹⁶ This interview was published in The Tulane Drama Review, 1st of October 1964, and featured the same questions, regarding inspiration and Stanislavski, answered by Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler and Vera Soloviova.
- ¹⁷ Meisner, *Meisner on Acting*, 37

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- ¹⁸ Sudakov and Rapoport's writings are included in 'Acting: A Handbook of the Stanislavski Method' by Lee Strasberg and Toby Cole, 1960, pages 35-81
- ¹⁹ Merlin, *Acting the Basics*, 183
- ²⁰ Merlin, *Konstantin Stanislavsky*, 42
- ²¹ Shirley, *The Reality of Doing*, 210
- ²² *ibid*, 208
- ²³ *ibid*, 210
- ²⁴ Gordon, *Stanislavsky in America*, 178-9
- ²⁵ Hart studied extensively with Meisner's protégé William Esper in New York, both as an actor and a teacher, before embarking on a decade of teaching for his studio dedicated to the teachings of Meisner. She consequently became the head of BFA Acting at Mason Gross School of Arts and has in later years headed up The Meisner Studio at NYU Tisch School of Arts.
- ²⁶ Hart, "Meisner Technique", 72
- ²⁷ *ibid*, 77
- ²⁸ Personal email correspondence with author, Jan 2012
- ²⁹ Shirley, *The Reality of Doing*, 210
- ³⁰ Esper, *The Actor's Guide to Playing a Character*, 6
- ³¹ Particularisations are used to personalise something for the actor and works in the same way as Stanislavski's 'as if'.
- ³² Shirley, *The Reality of Doing*, 210
- ³³ Information based on data from Shirley's article Meisner and British actor training 2010:211, as well as personal email communication with several different drama schools (Jan 2012).
- ³⁴ Durham, *Acting on and Off*, 152