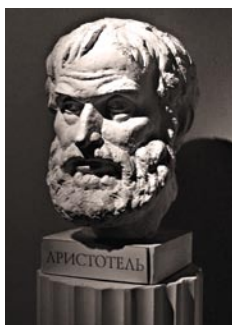


APPROACHES TO THEATRE TRAINING

MIND IN THE

companies in NEW YORK and TEXAS take on a plethora of techniques

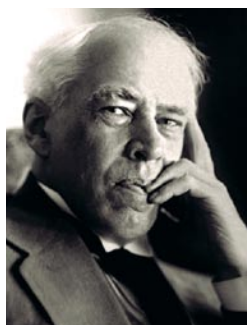
384–322 B.C.



Aristotle's *Poetics* define the six elements of tragedy: plot, character, language, thought, the visual and music.

ARISTOTLE

1863–1938



KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKY



MOSCOW ART THEATRE

Stanislavsky founded the Moscow Art Theatre and wrote *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*, the twin bibles of modern acting.

ADOLPHE APPIA

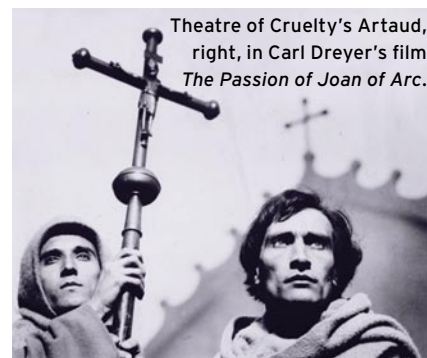
Appia—the Swiss stage designer known for his interpretations of Wagner's operas—pioneered the three-dimensional set. His theories on light and its connection to the actor ushered in a new realism for 20th-century theatre.

1862–1928



WAGNER'S THE RING CYCLE AT METROPOLITAN OPERA, 1990 / PHOTOFEEST

ANTONIN ARTAUD



PHOTOFEEST

Theatre of Cruelty's Artaud, right, in Carl Dreyer's film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

1896–1948

I F YOU'VE EVER had to walk like a manatee or dance like a giraffe, chances are it was in acting class. Think back. Did your high school teacher, a misunderstood soul who wore all black, throw fits during tech rehearsals? Did you secretly admire your college professor even though you hated it when she insulted your posture? Maybe you went to graduate school and had a coterie of coaches, one more mystical than the next. Can you cry on command? Laugh like a hyena?

Acting techniques abound. Stanislavsky, Meisner and Adler are all part of a theatre nerd's lexicon. But what, ultimately, do all these

methodologies mean? Is any one better than another? Do successful actors employ some secret combination? Perhaps most important: How do you emerge from actor training without imitating the shaman who taught you?

Recently two groups, Rude Mechanicals of Austin and Theatre MITU, a Manhattan-based company in residence at New York Theatre Workshop, creatively delved into these questions and some related ones. Both *The Method Gun*, by Rude Mechs, and *DRC (or How I Learned to Act in 7 Steps)*, by MITU, are workshop productions that at press time remained in nebulous states. Austin audiences got a first look at *The*

METHODS?

in workshop productions about actor training

BY ELIZA BENT

1898–1956



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Brecht sought an alienation effect in his plays (including *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *The Good Person of Szechwan*), in which the actor and character were present simultaneously on stage.

BERTOLT BRECHT

LEE STRASBERG

Strasberg, a co-founder of the Group Theatre, interpreted Stanislavsky for America and trained iconic actors such as Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe.



1901–1982



MARLON BRANDO IN A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE, 1951

STELLA ADLER



JOHN CHASSAN

Adler had her own view of the Method, which she taught at her conservatory in New York.

1901–1992

Method Gun Dec. 6–15 and *DRC* began development in December at the Sundance Theatre Lab at White Oak, in Florida, and will get its first public presentaion in New York in the fall of 2008. Though the two pieces tackle more or less the same questions, they do so using very different styles and approaches.

The Rude Mechs ensemble is shaping *The Method Gun* around a meta-fictional acting guru named Stella Burden [see sidebar, page 58]. The company's members kicked off the process by crafting faux archival documents, interviews and diary entries relating to Stella Burden's "legacy" and her mythic acting method, known as "The Approach."

MITU's *DRC*, on the other hand, seems to employ fewer tongue-in-cheek tactics. Against a backdrop of the early 20th-century silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (which provides a "physical score" and the etymology for the acronym *DRC*), the group has set out to examine the written texts of seven of history's seminal thinkers on the subject of acting: Aristotle, Adolphe Appia, Stanislavsky, Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski and Anne Bogart.

WHY CHOOSE TO EXAMINE THE MECHANICS OF ACTING through playmaking? Why not write an essay, like the ones in this issue, or hold a roundtable discussion (theatre people *do* love their

APPROACHES TO THEATRE TRAINING

roundtables!) in which people from different training backgrounds trade war stories? “Why art at all?” muses Rubén Polendo, founder and artistic director of MITU. The answer is in the company’s mission: For MITU, theatre is the tool, the medium, through which questions are posed. Acting about actor-training is a natural impulse. The examination of acting in *DRC* is a consciously inward investigation, Polendo admits.

Rude Mechs’s project, by contrast, was chosen in the Texas company’s customary democratic way—the members went on a retreat, discussed different ideas that interested them and then held up those questions to the lens of what makes a good play. Questions regarding truth, beauty and falling under the spell of an acting teacher fit the bill. Kirk Lynn, one of the company’s five co-producing artistic directors and playwright of *The Method Gun*, insists that the show isn’t so much about specific acting methodologies as it is a metaphor for methodologies in general. “In an age of competing fundamentalisms, theatre has its own figures who say, ‘This way is the right way’—and that makes *The Method Gun* a nice metaphor to investigate what it is about programs and methods that are so attractive to our species.” He likens acting methods to religions that manufacture systems of belief on topics that are not only intangible but ineffable.

1951–present



BRENNAN CAVANAUGH

ANNE BOGART

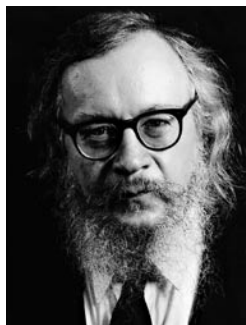


Bogart founded the SITI Company and expanded the Viewpoints method developed by Mary Overlie.



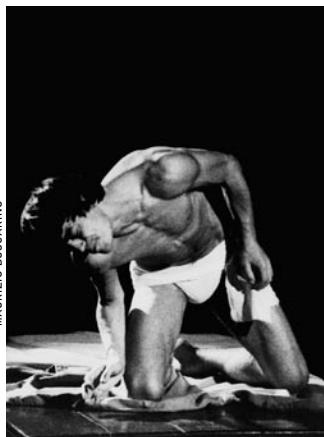
SITI COMPANY / MICHAEL BROSILOW

JERZY GROTOWSKI



MAURIZIO BUSCARINO

1933–1999



RYSZARD CIESLAK IN THE CONSTANT PRINCE / MAX WALDMAN

Grotowski espoused the relentless, un sentimental pursuit of truth through rigorous techniques and exercises. *The Constant Prince*, developed at his Polish Laboratory Theatre, came to New York in 1969.

SO THE QUESTION ARISES: IN THESE TWO GROUPS SO intrigued by the ins and outs of training, just what sort of educational background do the artists have?

Rude Mechs members claim not to depend upon a singular school of thought. Most of them have MFAs in acting, and Lynn notes, “We’re fairly well trained in *each other*.” (The ensemble was formed 13 years ago.) The group identifies no specific methodology—at least not “beyond apologizing to one another for the mistakes and hurt feelings from the last show and trying to make adjustments on the next show,”

“THE OTHER STELLA” TELLS IT LIKE IT IS

Some classic quotes from legendary faux acting guru Stella Burden, central figure in Rude Mechanicals’s *The Method Gun*:

On truth and beauty: “I heard a joke once that from the dual concerns of ancient Greek theatre, truth and beauty, America had clearly made its choice because if you look in the phonebook under truth there was nothing, but if you looked under beauty you would find parlors, salons and supplies.”

On her own career: “I quit working so other people could land the big roles.”

On finding new talent: “I’m just as good as Keanu Reeves should be tattooed on every new immigrant who comes through Ellis Island.”

On theatre and religion: “God is entirely unrealistic and 100 percent believable. What would be the point of believing in God if he were realistic? The theatre is the church of culture. Journalism is the science of culture.”

On the audience: “When they wanted great acting I worked to give it to them. When they wanted crap I moved to the jungle.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 137

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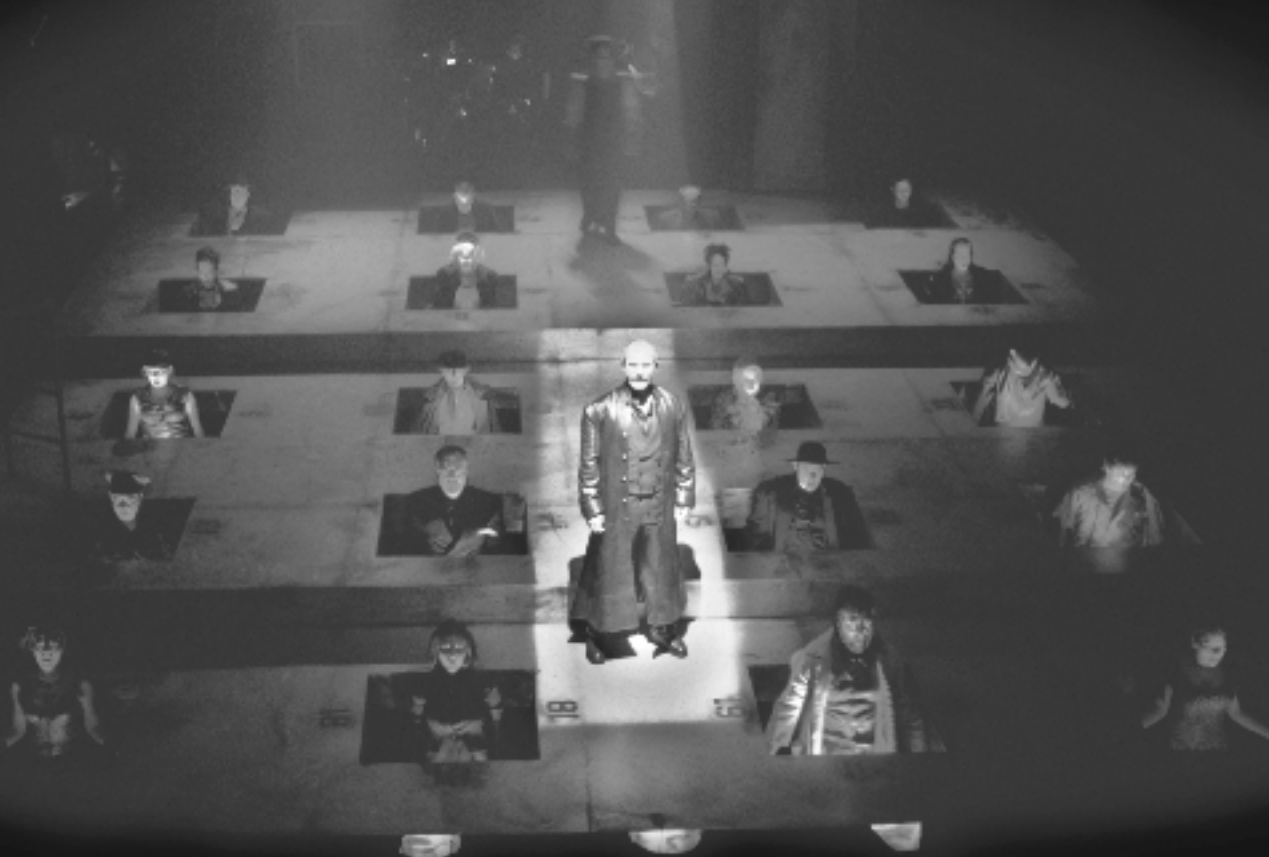
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FOR WORKING ACTORS, THE READINESS IS ALL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 134

space, and a perseverance to make those relationships extraordinary. Art is not a mother tongue. It demands deep commitment and study. Anyone can have a good day and be wildly effective. But to sustain a life in the theatre takes constant practice.”

Just having finished a run in Langston Hughes’s *Black Nativity* at Classical Theatre of Harlem, the veteran De Shields retains the passion of youth. “My training has instilled the following values: fearlessness, the thrill of being perched capriciously on the precipice of the abyss, the refusal to be satisfied with theatre as a way of life, but rather to pursue it as a way to life, to take my place on the world stage, and to be my authentic self by getting out of my head and into my gut.

“The greatest achievement,” De Shields maintains, “is to see theatre as an infinite, not a finite, journey. You learn to love that life on the precipice and to jump—you either sprout wings and soar, or the net will appear. Failure is only known by those who do not jump.” ❏

For more than 30 years Charlie Hensley has been a working actor, director, artistic director and teacher.

An internationalist, he has worked in Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Central Europe.

MADNESS IN THE METHODS?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 58

Lynn jokes. Despite this, various institutions have courted Rude Mechs, asking its members to teach classes and workshops. Thus far they’ve demurred. “We kept going back to our own process for playmaking—or rather, our lack of a singular process that we can easily articulate,” says Lana Lesley, another artistic director. One of the collaborators’ concerns, which can be seen in their construction of Stella Burden’s individualist “legacy,” is the “institutionalized misinterpretation” of a guru’s teachings—which, as Lesley puts it, results in “a mass of acting students literally performing their training on stage (as opposed to using that training as a tool to create their

performance).” She concludes, “This kind of codification also results in a disturbing singular style among students today.”

Not unlike Rude Mechs, MITU’s inception as ensemble in 1997 began with a sense of wonder over the impossible. “The initial hope was to conceive ideas [for productions] that we had no clue how to act, direct or design, knowing that this impossibility would lead us onto new ground,” Polendo says. Lately that’s changed for the group—there was a feeling among its members that they had fallen into a rut of “A + B = C”—and the hunger to challenge itself anew and create “Z” pushed MITU into making *DRC*. As for training, the company’s actors have a motley mix of undergraduate and masters degrees. Polendo trained as a biochemist, spent time in India studying religious ritual and later received an M.A. in non-Western theatre at Lancaster University in the U.K. and an MFA in directing from University of California–Los Angeles.

MITU has embraced pedagogy: Along with workshops, classes and intensives

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throughout the year at various institutions around the world (one summer intensive takes place in Bangkok), the troupe also teaches a semester and yearlong track at New York University's Playwrights Horizons Theatre School. All of this training swirls around "Whole Theatre," the company's own defined philosophy, which draws from a wide variety of world rituals and performance techniques (South Asian, East Asian, Latin American and Middle Eastern, to name a few). Whole Theatre is based on seven steps ("a pure coincidence for *DRC*," Polendo clarifies)—context, foundation, icon, dilation, beauty, time and impossibility. *DRC*'s examination of specifically Western acting methods is a departure from MITU's usual sensibilities—though it's hard to imagine the tenets of Whole Theatre won't permeate the outcome.

WHAT DISCOVERIES ABOUT ACTING methods have these theatremakers made? Rude Mechs sees something of the fundamental in what the group is examining (and lampooning). "The majority of acting methodologies posit themselves as *the way*," Lynn notes. (The Method is called *the method*, after all—as if there were only one!) "Art is a featureless landscape—at least to the extent that there is no right way. Acting methodologies are at best an attempt to plant a flag and say: This is where we are. At worst they are a way of dismissing the different influences of others."

So is there a methodology that's best? The problem with such a question lies in the very language with which it is posed. "The methodologies that are more tolerant of difference and more flexible are better than the autocratic ones," Lynn reflects. "How's that

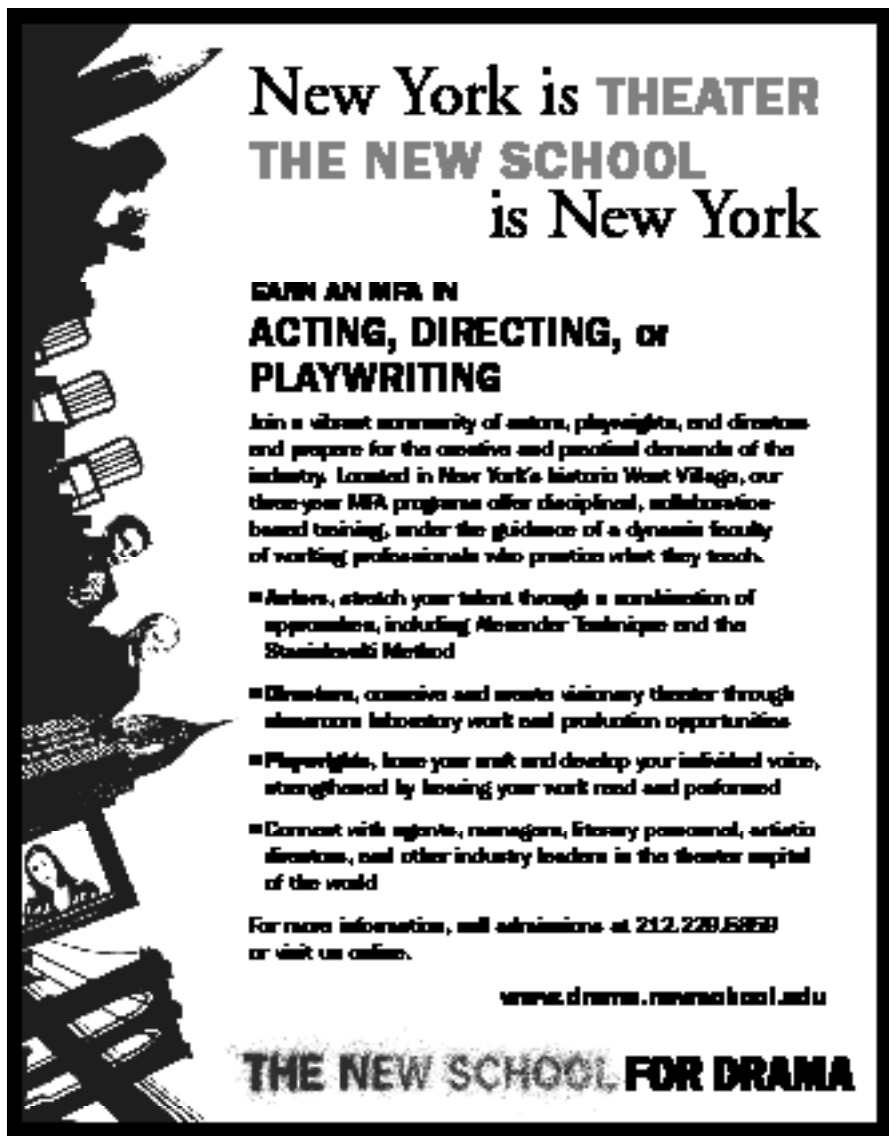
for a paradox: The methodologies that deny superiority are superior!" As for the problem of avoiding becoming the teacher who taught you, Lynn likens it to the age-old dilemma of turning into your parents: It's inevitable. But existing in an ensemble where others understand your tics and tendencies can help keep them at bay and prevent them from becoming problematic. Plus, Lynn notes, "There are lots of teachers that one wishes one could imitate perfectly." Polendo echoes that sentiment. "In most primary theatre traditions, particularly in Asia, one of the initial key steps is, in fact, to imitate or mimic your master. The hope is to discover your limits and weaknesses when measured up to a master."

As with all workshop pieces, the process is one thing, the result is another. *DRC* will be unapologetically exploratory. What fascinates Polendo is that the seven chosen thinkers "are more interested with the human heart and its workings than they are in acting as a craft—yes, their ideas manifest in a vocabulary about acting and making art—but at the core is a study of human behavior, interaction and contradiction."

Rude Mechs members aim for exploration as well. "Our production is really about investigating universal principles surrounding mendacity, truth versus beauty, gurus and the lengths people will go to achieve greatness," Lesley says. Perhaps Rude Mechs's "monologue to be burned," created during *Method Gun* rehearsals, explains it best: "If you ever believed in something stupid—if you ever believed a guru who turned out to be a fraud—if you ever accepted something as true just because it was beautiful—you get another chance."

PERHAPS THAT SECOND CHANCE

comes for actors in the bosom of the ensemble. What saves the actors in MITU and Rude Mechs from falling under the spells of just one method or just one teacher is the very nature of the collective in which they exist, with its built-in system of checks and balances. Being surrounded by a group of smart, inspiring, talented people is probably the best way to steer clear of "bad actor" habits and the best way to learn and grow. Working in a group that knows and understands you makes it easier to shine as an actor—and makes delving into the difficult questions of acting methodologies not only possible but rewarding too. ☑



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