

Sanford Meisner

Category : Who's Who: In American Theatre

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Sanford (Sandy) Meisner

You've heard the name but how much do you know about the guy?

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Born August 31, 1905, and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Sanford Meisner graduated from Erasmus Hall in 1923 and attended The Damrosch Institute of Music (now Juilliard), where he studied to become a concert pianist before talking his way into a job in a Theater Guild production of

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In 1931, a fervent group of young actors, including Meisner, Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, and Harold Clurman, among others, joined together to establish the Group Theatre. It was the first permanent theatre company that brought "Method" acting, rooted in the methods of Konstantin Stanislavsky, to practice and prominence in America. Meisner appeared in twelve Group productions, including the first, *The House of Connelly*, and all of Clifford Odets' plays, including *Waiting for Lefty*, which Meisner co-directed with Odets in 1935.

In 1933 Meisner became disenchanted with pure "Method" acting. He wrote, "Actors are not guinea pigs to be manipulated, dissected, let alone in a purely negative way. Our approach was not organic, that is to say not healthy."

Meisner had ongoing discussions about technique with Adler, who worked with Stanislavsky in Paris, and Clurman, who took a deep interest in the American character. Eventually Meisner realized that if American actors were ever going to achieve the goal of "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances," an American approach was needed. The Neighborhood Playhouse provided him with a venue to develop that approach on his own.

In 1935 he headed the Drama Department at The Playhouse, while continuing to act and direct plays produced by The Group Theatre until its demise in 1940. He also appeared on Broadway in *Embezzled* (1944) and *Crime and Punishment* (1948). He directed *The Time of Your Life* (1955) and acted in *The Cold Wind and the Warm* (1958).

Meisner left The Playhouse in 1958 to become director of the New Talent Division of Twentieth Century Fox. He moved to Los Angeles, where he was also able to cultivate his career as a film

actor. He starred in Odets' *The Story on Page One* (1959), *Tender Is the Night* (1962), and later *Mikey and Nicky* (1976).

He returned to the Neighborhood Playhouse as head of the Drama Department from 1964-1990. In 1985 Meisner and James Carville co-founded The Meisner/Carville School of Acting on the Island of Bequia in the West Indies. They later extended the school to North Hollywood, California, where it still exists with Martin Barter as Artistic Director and head teacher. Meisner, Carville, and Barter opened The Sanford Meisner Center for the Arts in March 1995, and later the school and theatre were combined to form The Sanford Meisner Center, today the only school and theatre to operate under Meisner's name.

Upon his death on February 2, 1997, *Backstage West* dedicated an issue to Meisner and his world-renowned "Meisner Technique."

Arthur Miller once said of Meisner, "He has been the most principled teacher of acting in this country for decades now, and every time I am reading actors I can pretty well tell which ones have studied with Meisner. It is because they are honest and simple and don't lay on complications that aren't necessary."

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Famous Meisner Quotes #2

"Acting is the ability to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances."

"The foundation of acting is the reality of doing."

"You know it's all right to be wrong, but it's not all right not to try."

"There's no such thing as nothing."

"Silence has a myriad of meanings. In the theater, silence is an absence of words, but never an absence of meaning."

The best acting, he believed, was made up of spontaneous responses to the actor's immediate surroundings. Meisner explained that his approach was designed "to eliminate all intellectuality from the actor's instrument and to make him a spontaneous responder to where he is, what is happening to him, what is being done to him."

Sources

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Sources:

<http://www.themeisnercenter.com/>

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmas...ner_s.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanford_Meisner

There is much more to learn about Meisner..there are many many books.