

Stella Adler on...

Category : Book Reviews

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Paris, Barry, ed. *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. 323 pp. \$27.50 hardcover.

Every noted acting teacher, it seems at some point, writes the definitive book on technique. From the great Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* to Peter Brook's *The Open Door to Acting: The First Six Lessons* by Richard Boleslavsky, actors may gain valuable insight in the "how-to" of acting. The Method is not only actor training, it has become dogma. Even playwrights have written about actor training, David Mamet's recently penned *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*. Stella Adler has been the champion of Stanislavsky for decades. After being taught by Stanislavsky, Adler returned to the States "afire with revelation and a desire to pass it along and correct Strasberg's misinterpretation"(xiii). This text is the compilation of a select few of Adler's lectures given to students, mainly those of The Group Theatre. The editor Barry Paris sets the general mood of the book: Paris's "collaboration" with Adler; "projected to take about two years, would in fact consist only of those five hours. Stella died seven weeks later."(xiv) The book amounts to nothing more than a beautiful tribute to the work of Adler. After only one meeting with Adler, Paris identifies Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov as the "greats" of the European stage for the purpose of this book. The choice of these playwrights supports the critical opinion that modern drama began with them, and as the beginning of serious interest in modern actor training to deal with the new Realism they created. The project initially included a second volume to deal with American playwrights, but whether this volume will appear is not clear. The book, according to Adler, "is for actors. It's for directors. It's for other people. It's for readers"(ix).

The book contains three separate sections each focusing on one of the three playwrights in chronological order; Ibsen, Strindberg, and then Chekhov. Each section is then broken into the individual lectures given by Adler, giving the book twelve separate chapters with subsections within the whole. With titles like, "Truth and Lies," "Father knows Abyss" and "Russian Revolutions," the general content of each chapter appears. The book culminates with chapter twelve titled "Craft and Creation: Exercises In and Out of the Void," a series of improvisational exercises for the actor or director. Paris's emphasis, however, is not equal. The basis for his choices seems more to do with Adler's affection for each playwright, rather than on critical merit. Chekhov receives the greatest emphasis, while Strindberg the least. Adler appears to distinguish each playwright based on the influence of their personal environments. Obviously, Adler's biased attraction to and teaching of Stanislavsky's method directly influences the structure and content of the book. Although not as concise and organized as her earlier *Technique of Acting*, the lectures in this book directly relate to Stanislavsky's methods and her overall philosophy of the "craft" of the actor.

Agreeing that each playwright wrote internally motivated, realistic drama, the differences between each lie with the character motivation. Adler approaches each individually. Ibsen, born of the middle class, wrote about the middle class. Strindberg observed the dangerous merger of the working and middle classes and the invasion of the independent woman through his own life experiences. Chekhov struggled with identity in a country begging for revolution.

Ibsen "won't let us lie"(x). For Adler, Ibsen wrote essentially about the search for truth within the changing social order, which appears to be solely representative in *A Doll's House* and *Enemy of the People*. Few other texts are mentioned. Ibsen's characters not only represent realistic individuals, but the universal community in which each character belongs; a father represents all fathers. "The size of his characters is as great as Shakespeare's"(18). Ibsen presented both the truths and the lies in society. He accepted the changing social order within the family and society, especially the middle class, and exposed the personal struggles inherent to change.

Strindberg wrote "about such a monumental change in the society that it might make civilization go under"(119). The pessimistic view of both women and society make Strindberg less appetizing to theatre artists generally and Adler in particular. Her treatment of Strindberg is cursory to say the least, although she gives him credit for the birth of the modern drama. Strindberg introduces the duality of man to the stage and the violent battle between men and women because of this duality. "In Ibsen, there is a conflict of ideas. In Strindberg, there is a conflict of sex"(123).

Chekhov, Stanislavsky's personal playwright, receives the greatest accolades from Adler. Chekhov "has no theory of life to explain things like Shaw or Ibsen or Strindberg. But he is perhaps the greatest author in the understanding of human beings"(178). Chekhov introduced the disconnection of consciousness within the structure of a play. Each character is an individual, working purely from moment to moment, scene to scene. He wrote each character with the human inconsistency of thought and action.

Although each playwright is distinctive, Adler teaches essentially the same approach to all three based upon the understanding of the individual playwright and his world. It is no longer enough simply to know the words, an actor must know what is beneath the words. This is The Method. Credit must be given to Adler's ability to make the ideas of The Method accessible to contemporary students, she uses modern example and personal insight to convey her message. In these lectures, Adler teaches the actor to dissect the character's psychological being in the following contexts. With Ibsen, the actor encompasses the universal truth. Strindberg embodies the life or death struggle to survive, while Chekhov begs for understanding. The answer to playing these characters remains with the playwright. "Don't go to yourself. Don't be bigger than the author. Don't impose on the author"(79).

The text gives sporadic interpretive information and also helpful advice in achieving "realism." The commentary on specific plays aids in the understanding of Adler's philosophies and the basic interpretation of each playwright. Paris includes sections devoted only to the character study of the best-known plays from each writer. Chekhov's *The Seagull* and *Three Sisters* each get chapters. In the section on Strindberg, Adler discusses the characters of *Miss Julie* and *The Father* under the title "Six Characters in Search of an Actor," and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* occupies ample discussion of his works. This helps keep the text within reach of the amateur or the beginning actor, while the value for the advanced actor or even serious theatre scholars is speculative. The text rambles repetitively, being a consequence of publishing lectures of someone intently devoted to her technique. However, the writing engages the reader and adds a human quality to the book; Adler's voice permeates the text. Paris captures the dynamic nature of Adler as both a person and a teacher. There are often jibes at politicians, the dismal state of society today and the overall lack of art in Hollywood.

To be useful practically to the more advanced actor, a more diverse treatment becomes necessary. Adler's impressions and comments on Strindberg's *A Dream Play* would be interesting. Showing actors how to deal with the significant changes in Strindberg's writing in his later plays would be extremely valuable. Unfortunately, the text allows the reader to come away unsatisfied, without knowing the full scope of these particular writers. However, Paris gives no clear indication of what was left out "from a two-foot stack of three thousand pages"(xiv). The significance of Adler as a teacher is not in dispute; however, the presentation of these lectures largely reduces her work to sentimental commentary. The text works as homage to one of the most influential acting teachers of our time, but fails as a serious tool for the advance theatre practitioner. The best advice to all artists appears in the final lines of the text, "you can't give anybody anything that is not already in them. All you can do is awaken it"(323). At the very least, part of Adler's great legacy to the stage remains to be shared by all of us.

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