

## An Interview with Stella Adler

*Joanna Rotté*

On a May afternoon in 1974, at her fifth floor address on Fifth Avenue with a frontal view of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Stella Adler granted me an interview. We were seated in her dining room at a cozy side table draped in linen where a maid served us tea. I had recently completed the two-year course of actor training at the Adler Conservatory and was struggling to sort out the techniques I had been given, with a mind toward writing about Stella's teachings. I was certain she understood the art and craft of acting better than anyone, and I wanted to know the path she had taken to wisdom. Eventually, as supporting material for my book, *Acting with Adler*, I compiled a history of Stella Adler's career, an abbreviated version of which I am pleased to offer here as context for the interview to follow.

Born in 1901 the youngest daughter of Jacob and Sarah Adler, Stella achieved eminence in the Adler family of theatre professionals, who, in the eyes of Harold Clurman, Stella's second husband, "loved the theatre passionately, down to its minutest details, and were 'idealistic' about it withal" (Clurman 110). Father Jacob, an actor in the heroic style and the undisputed monarch of the Yiddish stage, aroused his children to pursue artistic ideals and shun celebrity. Mother Sarah, illustrious in the style of romantic realism, was of hearty constitution and energy. When Jacob temporarily left her to take a servant as his mistress, she formed her own company, chose and directed the plays, designed and sewed her own costumes, polished and arranged the fruit sold during intermissions, and acted the main female parts. Stella considered her the greatest woman she had ever known. In analyzing Madam Ranevskaya in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Stella evoked her mother who, she said, when there wasn't any money left during the Depression, went out and bought a carpet at Wanamaker's. Stella inherited the noble mien of her father (she was considered the beauty of the family), and the spirit of her mother (she was said to be the most deeply feeling of the Adler children), a spirit that could be called poetic and proto-feminist. My favorite Sarah Adler story, told by Harold Clurman in *All People are Famous*, entails an interview in which she stated her age as 68, which the reporter questioned: "But Madame Adler, how can that be? I just asked your son Jack his age and he told me 60. To which Sarah replied, 'Well he has his life and I have mine.'" (112-13).

In 1924 Stella joined the American Laboratory Theatre, an offshoot of the Moscow Art Studio Theatre. The Lab experience introduced her to the early ideas of Stanislavsky and distinguished her in the Adler clan, all of whom had learned their craft entirely in the theatre. With the exception of Jacob, they

made fun of Stella, since she had been on stage since the age of two, for going to acting school. The end of the 1920s found Stella contracted to Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre, in her estimation a "theatre of love" that provided her the two most enjoyable seasons of her years on stage. In an interview I conducted with Stella's niece Lulla Rosenfeld, a writer and the Adler family historian, she recalled Stella playing Nerissa to Frances Adler's Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* "as if they were two flowers laughing," as well as Stella performing in a Sholem Alelchem piece "as if she were a kind of Lillian Gish perfume."

When the Group Theatre was founded in 1931 under the leadership of Harold Clurman, Stella was prominent in the company. Most of the Group actors were acquainted with the rudiments of the Stanislavsky System, especially emotion-memory exercises, which they practiced under the supervision of Group co-founder Lee Strasberg. But it was not until 1934, when Stella entered into five weeks of intensive scene study with Stanislavsky at his flat in Paris, that she began to fathom the depth of humanity in the System. In 1935 Stella brought back to the Group what she said Stanislavsky wanted the Americans to know: that his emphasis had evolved from Affective Memory to Doing an Action in Imaginative Circumstances. To do an action within a specific situation (the situation of the play, not one's own situation) was, in Stella's evaluation, precisely what had been lacking in the American Lab and Group Theatre practices all along.

Following her meetings with Stanislavsky, Stella gradually expressed dissatisfaction with a lack of joy she was feeling within the Group. According to Lulla Rosenfeld, in the second half of the Group's decade of existence, the atmosphere, "permeated with the spirit of [Elia] Kazan," grew loveless, ruthless, smug, arrogant, and cold. While Stella was apparently able to see through the atmosphere, other Group actresses [Margaret Barker, Dorothy Patten, and Frances Farmer] were "driven crazy." If not her mental health, her career was compromised. "She," Rosenfeld said, "the most beautiful woman in New York, was made to play aging mothers (Bessie Berger in Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing* and Clara in his *Paradise Lost*). People thought her old. She never forgave Harold Clurman for that."

In 1938 Stella reached from acting to directing, and in 1941 appeared in MGM's *The Shadow of the Thin Man* (a stalwart, detailed, individualized, stylish performance well-worth viewing on video).<sup>1</sup> But neither stage nor movie acting (she appeared in three films) nor directing was to be her end-all. By 1949 Stella was unequivocally prepared for what would become her life vocation: teaching. She was the only American actor (turned acting teacher) to have studied with Stanislavsky. Moreover, because she was, according to Clurman, "always curious about new modes in theatre practice," she had also sought out Bertolt Brecht and worked with Max Reinhardt (Clurman 134). Meeting Brecht in 1935, she asked him "to expound his theories of acting," a request he eagerly answered by working on scenes with her from his *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (Clurman 134–35). In 1943 she accepted a role in Reinhardt's production of Irwin Shaw's *Sons and Soldiers*. Respectful of Reinhardt's reputation but undaunted by his

voluminous production notes compiled before beginning rehearsals, Stella chose to collaborate, as noted by Clurman:

At one of the rehearsals, Stella took Reinhardt aside and said, "Professor . . . the characterization you have suggested to me is first-rate. I shall be glad to fulfill it. But I have something else in mind." Reinhardt said, "Show me!" When she had done the scene her way, he said, "Much better. You should play the part your way." (Clurman 144)

In the 1950s Stella officiated at the symposia of visiting Soviet artists as the American representative of the Moscow Art Theatre. In 1955 she participated in Michael Chekhov's lecture series on character acting presented in Hollywood. In the early 1960s, during two separate tours of Moscow, she attended plays and seminars to assess the changes in Soviet theatre since Stanislavsky's death, including Vakhtangov's legacy. While Stella weaved her experience of world theatre into her teaching, fundamentally she advanced the Stanislavsky System, which she viewed not as a fixed set of rules or codified way of performing, and not as something invented by a person and therefore culturally limited, but as someone's understanding of the logic of Nature applied to an art form. She considered the System, like Nature, open and available, able to be applied by all actors to all acting tasks, and not carelessly.

Stella's ultimate tutorial aim for the student of acting was independence. If the actor truly understood and absorbed the System, he or she would come into contact with his or her own creative powers, rising above any explicitness of the System. While Stella was teaching the System, she was simultaneously helping the student develop the strength to re-formulate the System and go his or her way. Something of a feminist mother or mentor, loving but not particularly maternal, she was encouraging autonomy. The role she set for herself, as stated in class, was "not to teach, but to lessen the anguish."

But Adler *was* a teacher and an earthy, elegant, difficult, demanding, insightfully wise one. She was the teacher of far more than a few notable actors, including Marlon Brando and Robert DeNiro. She was also my teacher within a year of the evening that Harold Clurman, as theatre critic of *The Nation* and my escort, introduced us in the lobby of the Martin Beck Theatre, saying, "This is Joanna Rotté. She's a doctoral candidate in my American Theatre course at CUNY." Stella rose to the height of her glamour and replied, "Yes, but what does she know?" Sensing that Ms. Adler had something remarkable to teach, not to be found in the university, I became her student.

When my class completed the course of training at the Adler Conservatory—there were seven of us remaining from a starting group of 40—we formed an acting company and persuaded Stella to emerge from directorial retirement. She chose Thornton Wilder's *The Happy Journey* (in which, though too young for the role, I played the mother), which she directed with silences, repetitive motion, and four chairs on a bare stage. She did not view our performance style as a

replacement of the Stanislavsky System of so-called psychological realism, but as a melody orchestrated on top of whatever aspects of the System we needed for Thornton Wilder. So, for Stella Adler, acting was to do an action truthfully—in a style—in imagined given circumstances, as a character, affecting the partner, in the presence of an audience. With all her natural theatricality, including a love of style, Stella's pedagogy never veered from a sense of truth.

The power of Stella's truth shook me during tech weekend of *Happy Journey*. Our cast of five had made a mess of the backstage area, which served as our dressing room and all else. The room was way too small, with costumes and makeup, clothes and books, but still, we hadn't helped the situation by strewing coffee cups, cigarette butts, used tissues, and stuff in general. Stella came backstage to greet us before rehearsal, and to say that she was appalled would not be overstating. She called for a garbage can, a bucket of water, some detergent, and a scrub brush; and after we had cleared away the trash, she got down on her 73-year-old hands and knees to scrub the floor. She wouldn't let any of us help. In discomfort, we watched. I wanted to grab the bucket away from her, and instead I cried. Someone begged her to stop. When the floor was clean, for the first time, she spoke: "The actor is the sanity of the theatre. It's up to you to keep the theatre healthy." This authority permeated Stella's teaching and, it seems to me, shapes her discourse in the following interview, which until now has not been published.<sup>2</sup>

### The Interview

*Who were your influences in terms of becoming an actor and teacher?*

I was exposed, enormously exposed, to acting, to the craft and the art form of acting, by my father who was certainly the influence that made me think, "Art is better than anything else," and by my mother, who was a very, very great actress, the greatest I have ever seen. They played in so many kinds of plays and their styles were so varied that somebody said, "All the styles came from them." They had a big repertoire. My mother's influence on me was tremendous. More than anybody, she gave me fortitude. She was not a strong woman in the conventional sense but she was a brave woman. She didn't so much say anything, she never talked, but her behavior influenced me. Whatever courage made me go on in a very desperate and hectic career, some of it very good and some of it very bad, was this sort of optimism and courage I got from her. I had enormous admiration for her as a person. So in the beginning I worked mostly with my parents' influences, and with what I saw. I started taking notes very early in life on people that impressed me.

*I remember when you used to come into the beginning Technique of Acting class. You always talked about something new you had seen on the way, about the cab driver or someone you had noticed in the park.*

Yes, the vision was there from early on. But what I wanted was a more grabable technique. I was opened up to the influence of craft by Stanislavsky,

through the personal work with him, and even before I met Stanislavsky through Harold [Clurman] and the Group Theatre.

*How about the influence of Boleslavsky and Madame Ouspenskaya on your work at the American Lab?*

Yes, I worked with them at the American Laboratory Theatre. That was my big opening up through technique.

*When you went to study at the American Lab, were you still acting with your parents?*

No, I was already out in the broad world, touring and playing in different countries.

*What kind of prestige did the American Lab enjoy? Could you say it was the avant-garde or the underground?*

Yes, it probably was. For some reason or other the avant-garde, which consisted then of Harold Clurman, gravitated to the American Lab. That's where Harold and I first met, although I didn't know him. Since he studied there, you could say it was the underground.

*Was your study at the American Lab, then, what inspired you to want to know more about the Stanislavsky System?*

The acting techniques taught at the American Lab were a little bit obscured by the presentation. A great deal of obscurity came from the teachers' lack of command of [the English] language, but the Lab was the beginning. I really clarified everything later on when I worked with Stanislavsky.

*Do you mean they at the American Lab didn't have the vocabulary to present the System?*

They had the theatre vocabulary, I would say, but certain things were obscure. They were wonderful on the exercises, and on each aspect of the technique. But when I worked with Stanislavsky, he related the technique to working totally on a part. He taught by example. For instance, he explained, "This is what I did when I played [Dr. Stockman in] *Enemy of the People*, and these were the things that were missing." He spoke not so much to me as a student, but as an actor to an actress. There the whole clarification came for me, because at its best it's not an easy technique, but at its best from Stanislavsky it was very inspiring. I got a tremendous lot at the American Lab from Bolev [Boleslavsky] and from Madame Ouspenskaya, a tremendous lot. I couldn't have survived with my temperament unless I had been reinforced by a technique, which they gave me at the Lab, because, from their point of view, I had a complete instrument but I didn't know how to control it.

*That was in the 1920s that you were at the American Lab, and did you go directly from the Lab to the Group?*

Yes, it must have been in the late '20s, '28 and '29. I went in '31 with the Group Theatre.

*You didn't work with the Theatre Guild at all?*

I did work with the Theatre Guild. I played in The Guild's production of [Capek's] *The Insect Comedy*.

*In an article you wrote for The Theatre (April 1960) you speak of the differences between Vakhtangov and Stanislavsky. Do you feel that your theatre teaching went at all in the direction Vakhtangov had headed?*

Not really. When I went to Russia in '34, I went to the Vakhtangov Theatre. I went to the Vakhtangov Theatre every time I went to Russia. The last time, which was in '63 or '64, I even studied there.

*Vakhtangov got into a way of working that is more theatrical and more fantastical than Stanislavsky, correct?*

Yes, much more heightened in costume and scenery.

*Yes, and heightened in characterization. We could say that Vakhtangov provided a whole social point of view, which, in fact, I find very similar to what you teach in the Characterization class. For example, in heightened character you teach seeing a New England spinster through the eyes of a New York showgirl.*

Yes, when you take a character from a social point of view, it heightens the role and makes it theatrical immediately. I don't know if it's the right way in which to do character, but it gets very good effects for the actor. I remember they did very good work at the Vakhtangov Theatre.

*Was producing the social viewpoint Vakhtangov's central contribution?*

No, the most important thing Vakhtangov had was a unique vision of each script, so that each script gave him the opportunity to give birth to a style. He directed each play in a totally different style and the actors had to jump very far into the style. For instance, he did *Turandot* in a completely far out mixture of Chinese and Russian [aesthetics]. Then he did *The Dybuk*, which Harold [Clurman] noted as really a religious ceremony, almost a Catholic interpretation [of a Jewish play]. It was tremendously theatrical. So stylization was Vakhtangov's big contribution. There was nothing permanent with Vakhtangov that you could put your hand on.

*What about with the playwrights you teach in Play Analysis? Is there something permanent in a playwright that we can put a hand on? For example, Ibsen: do you acknowledge a certain stylistic line that is carried through Ibsen?*

Through his realism, yes, and then the moment you get to *Little Eyolf* and *When We Dead Awaken*, it changes. Even with *Hedda Gabler*, you immediately get a certain thing that is Strindbergian, because Hedda is all mixed up, she's all confused. But Ibsen dances all over the place. He has Brand on the mountain. We don't see the Ibsen style productions in our theatre.

*So, Vakhtangov was contributing a whole production style for each play he undertook to direct, which included not only an acting style but also a specific scenic design style, music style, everything style.*

That's right. That was his big, big contribution. He said that he knew the style of every leaf of whatever production he was doing. So it was entirely a great experience seeing all the levels on which he worked. He would introduce an acting style depending upon the production, so that everybody acted in the same style, the style he had created for the production. He would heighten every character in costume and in posture. I mean, a woman would sit this way with a great big bosom and never would sit any other way. Or a sailor would be standing this way and the other sailor would be standing another way, and there would be boards slanting on the stage that would make the line of the sailors' postures important. He was a genius. But then Meyerhold was a genius also.

*But Meyerhold was not so much for the actor, was he?*

No, no. He gathered good actors, mostly the actors were very good, and their work went through him and so did the play go through him. The actors were filtered through his vision.

*Do you think that Vakhtangov's sense of style influenced your sense of theatre after you had studied with Stanislavsky?*

I don't know. I would say that my own feeling is to go away from the realistic style.

*I know. It's so strange. It really is. Because if you think of how rooted your training is in Stanislavsky, which is to say in Chekhovian realism, then it seems strange that your heart goes to style, like with the Thornton Wilder play (The Happy Journey from Trenton to Camden) that we did together.*

Yes, completely. Before the Wilder I directed *Don Perlimplin* by Lorca and I directed *Alice in Wonderland* [by Eva LeGallienne] and all the plays that I did, I used to do a lot of plays at the studio, were always something that made me go further than the realism. I don't know what it was myself.

*Well, maybe it was a harking back to your family, since you said they worked in many different styles?*

Yes, and the actors [who had studied at the studio] were capable of stylizing their performances tremendously, un-recognizably. So I guess it was an early influence that said, "Do it all." But from the point of view of technique, most important is that the base has to be clean. Then you can jump from that base anywhere, to any style.

*As an American actor, did you have to adjust what Stanislavsky gave you and at the same time try to keep Stanislavsky solid?*

The American emphasis, I thought, was distorted, which I felt both as an actress and as a student. I felt it was distorted. That's what I worked on with Stanislavsky: clarifying the approach to the craft. For instance, he made two off-the-cuff very important statements concerning the use of the stage:

Get very friendly with that stage before you act. Let the stage help you, let every object on stage help you much more than you're accustomed to, so you don't squeeze the acting so from inside yourself.

And he made another very important statement, which stayed with me:

It's the use of the imagination that gives you everything you want. The things that you consciously use of your life are more limited than your imagination, because your imagination contains your whole life and everything in the universe.

So he made that clear.

*Did you feel the need to translate Stanislavsky's technique into American terms?*

One of the things Boleslavsky said, finally, when people said to him, "Your method, your technique, is Russian," he said, "It may be Russian, but I've never met a drunk anywhere that wasn't a drunk. Whether he was in America or in Russia, he was drunk the same way." That the human being actually is human: that's what the Moscow Art Theatre found out and Stanislavsky described a way to create it.

*But Harold [Clurman] told me that you said to him that you could wash dishes in 12 different languages.*

Yes.

*Does that mean you could wash dishes as a Hungarian and as an American and a Russian and a Chinese?*

I believe that I would wash dishes from the point of view of social class.

*And also from the point of view of culture?*

Yes, and class, which would make an enormous difference in the way of washing dishes.

*So is there such a thing as an American style of acting?*

I don't think there is. I think the American in himself is recognizable all over the world for what America does in general to the personality. The American is varied, but he walks in a certain way, his attitude toward money is different, his attitude toward class is different, and that comes over.

*Does that attitude come through, also, do you think, when American actors perform foreign works, if we produce, for example, a Chekhov play?*

I don't think it should come over. I think what would take a performance away from being typically American is the very qualities that are needed to play Chekhov. In doing a foreign playwright, there has to be something in the performance that's standard. The language has to be standard. It can't be the 1970s. You can't play Chekhov and speak 1970s English. Everything else in Chekhov is completely available to American actors, if you have the gamut of emotions and of understanding what Chekhov is saying. The Americans are closest anyway to the Russians. Yes, I think Chekhov is very much within our reach.



*So then, really, the Stanislavsky technique has no cultural barriers?*

I don't think so. You find with Michael Redgrave and John Gielgud, that they all say the same thing. They all absorbed Stanislavsky.

*Did you have to adapt certain things for students here in America? Did you have to teach certain techniques differently from the way Stanislavsky was using them at the Moscow Art Theatre, because you were dealing with American mentality?*

No. First of all as an American of European parents, and growing up in the Yiddish theatre, my influences were bi-cultural. That bi-cultural background influenced me as an actress and it influenced my needs. The American didn't ever need to be Michelangelesque in his approach to his work. Whereas when Ibsen writes *Brand* or writes the *Master Builder*, it's all over-sized. These men are tremendous. That has withered, so to speak, in America, so that when we do a gigantic man, when we do *Brand* or *Prometheus*, it seems terribly gigantic, whereas it's *Man*. It needs to be big (even if American size has withered).

*After you began teaching you worked with Brecht and later you worked with Reinhardt. Did you incorporate their ideas into your teachings?*

I worked with Brecht for clarity and then I studied his plays so I would be able to understand him as an actress. I worked with him as his student. With Reinhardt, I worked as an actress. He also, like Stanislavsky, expected a full performance from you. It didn't matter to him if you were Turkish or English or Russian, he expected the performance. He depended a lot on the actor to create the production.

*What I most want to know is what you put into your teaching of the Stanislavsky System, what you added to Stanislavsky that was different from straight Stanislavsky.*

The fact of the Stanislavsky theatre that is little known, and what he himself was trying to make clear, is that he was not a naturalist or a realist, because his productions were very heightened and in many styles. When he did Molière or Gogol or any play, he was much more varied than people realize. If you just take an album of the different characters that he played and just look at them, like *Woe From Wit*, you will realize that he played it all in verse and the externalization of it was enormous. He was not only in *Enemy of the People*. He did everything Vakhtangov did. He was much more varied than people understand or know about. I would say that he had it all. Even now in Russia there is Zavadsky who has a theatre, who worked for ten years with Vakhtangov and twelve years with Stanislavsky. All his productions are both realistic and unrealistic, and surrealistic. The Russians have had an enormous sense of variety that we don't begin to understand in this country. Their productions are practically circus performances. I saw (Zavadsky's production of Materlinck's) *The Bluebird*. It was very far-out in the acting and in the interpretation and in the style. They knew how to do it. This isn't so hard to do, you know.

*Why can't we do it?*

Well, we did it, didn't we, when we performed Thornton Wilder's *Happy Journey*? The production was far-out and the play needed it, it certainly needed it. The writers are writing for the theatre to do it. I don't know why people don't do it more. They don't have the actors or they don't have the directors. They don't have the directors.

*You have started teaching a course called Technique III, which is a line-by-line breakdown of a scene. Now is that approach something that Stanislavsky had been working on at the end of his career?*

I think that he had always worked on it. In *Othello* he worked on it.

*That's a line-by-line--*

Yes, going through the scene line-by-line revealing how you cannot push the line, how you have to build the background of the line and the social situation and the class and the whole given circumstances.

*Well how come you just started teaching that, what led you to put that in now?*

Out of necessity.

*Because you saw a lack?*

I just saw a lack between the technique and the performances. So that the actors just didn't know where to go when they got to scripts. So I thought, "Well, let's put that in," and it is very helpful.

*That's what we did working on Happy Journey.*

That's right. That's what we did. We had to find a way of interpreting the moments and the interpretation couldn't just run over the whole play. It happened that we had to find the interpretation line for line and in the relationships. That's what has to be done. So you don't end up thinking that if a boy sits opposite a girl that they're going to fall in love, because you know, for instance, that the play has told you that marriage is unhappy or that it has problems. Knowing that, immediately you know that no good author is going to solve the problem of marriage.

*Is there anybody else, since your time with Stanislavsky, that influenced--*

Tony Guthrie. He didn't influence me but I played with him mostly out of deep curiosity because I admired him as a director. I'd seen his work. As a director, he was theatrical to the extreme, absolutely brilliant.

*I remember you mentioned one time that Guthrie expected a great deal from the actors, that when you worked with Guthrie (in 1946 as Zinadia in Andreyev's He Who Gets Slapped) you understood that he didn't so much care if an actor's work was good or bad, that he was the director and he wasn't responsible for what the actor was doing, so you had better do your job.*

If you were good, that was fine. If you weren't good, he let you alone. He said it was not his job to improve you. Also, he came from an old theatre where there were weak performances and strong performances, so with him not everything had to be death-quality.

*You haven't told me what is uniquely yours about the technique.*

I don't think anything, except my sense of theatre, sense of theatricality, sense of measure. I don't think I'm unique.

*Well I know that you're unique.*

That's more than I expect.

*In the letters I read from former students there is a constant stream of gratitude for the opening-up, not just as an actor but also as a person.*

That is the thing that's emerged that is so surprising. There are hundreds of letters all stating the same thing.

*It's true. The letters are tremendously redundant. But it's wonderful to see from every level of actor, from successful and not successful, that they're all saying the same thing: "I'm a new person," and they all want to thank you for a new life. I think I can say concerning the technique, that you brought Stanislavsky's clarifications back to America, of course, but it's innately your personality, your ability to instill high artistic standards and to focus on big ideas right from the beginning that makes your contribution unique.*

I think if we get together on this point, it would be this: That I'm really not interested in helping an actor become a good actor, unless he becomes the best self that he can become. That is missing for me in the actor in performance. There has to be a level of grandeur about him, grandeur is the wrong word, of size in the instrument, in the soul of the actor. That's the most important thing to me. That he doesn't remain small, that he can take his place as an artist and collaborate with any artist. When he has that, then I feel that's actually what acting is about. Acting with size forces open all the channels which life closes off. It opens them up and allows you to achieve yourself.

*Is lack of size part of the reason Hollywood or TV can be offensive?*

They do not work with that sense of size particularly in mind, where I do. They don't care. They don't care enough.

*Is that why Hollywood was not good for you?*

I just feel that the aim of the performance must be made clear to the whole body of actors. When they're together getting that aim clear—what the play is saying—then the person rises above his normal level. Whereas in Hollywood, I feel, they aim just at the performance. That isn't what the artist is about. The artist and the human being must meet somewhere. They can't separate entirely. Most good actors have that growth coming out of the performance. But they lack it in the institution of the movies, because it's so mechanical. There isn't a way in which the camera can be made human enough for that sort of inspiration to come from the camera. But it can come from the director or from an exchange among the actors with each other, or from guidance of an older actor for a younger actor. There used to be a lot of that in the theatre. Your emphasis on me being unique, it's just that something has gone wrong. Earlier, acting on stage resulted in the refinement of the person's nature. You see the actors of

old. You saw them when they were young, young artists, and you see them 25 years later. Their heads have changed, everything has changed, and you can see that change in their work. You can see that in the novelist. He doesn't remain the same. He becomes bigger through working.

*So finally, we can't really say that there is an American tradition of acting. Would you say there's a British tradition or a Russian tradition? Does such a thing exist?*

The English are so connected with their literature and their verbal forms, which are extremely verbal, that it has created for them an Elizabethan theatre and a Restoration theatre that's theirs. Nobody else can do those plays (as they can).

*Do we have anything like that or could we have, and do you think in terms of an American theatre when you are teaching?*

No, I don't. But I do think that Harold Clurman was able, through his unique gift of keeping many talented people together, to create an ensemble theatre of real distinction in this country. And afterwards, each one in the Group Theatre was personally able to go on achieving a certain stature. But Harold created it.

*There is a review I read by James Agate of the Group's Golden Boy production, that you redirected (in 1938) for the London stage. He said, "The acting achieves a level of quality the likes of which we've never seen in this country." I wish I had seen it.*

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#### Notes

1. For my description of Stella Adler's performance in *The Shadow of the Thin Man*, visit [www.homepage.villanova.edu/joanna.rotte](http://www.homepage.villanova.edu/joanna.rotte). Click on Comments on Acting, then June 2001.
2. Some of the material in this article appeared in the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* (Fall 1999), and is used here with permission.

#### Works Cited

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