

Stella Adler: Teacher Emeritus

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Everything on stage is a lie until you make it truthful.¹

Stella Adler opened her theatre studio in New York City fifty years ago this year. For some forty-three years, she taught her own evolving interpretation of the Stanislavsky System, based in psychological realism. That Adler thoroughly investigated the System and gave it to the American theatre is reason in this golden anniversary year to acknowledge her contribution.

What is less known about Adler and also worthy of appreciation is that she was interested in styles other than psychological realism. Having been a full-time student of Adler for two years, I well know that finding the style of a piece was central to her advanced teachings on acting. In *Script Analysis* she explored Brecht, Beckett, and Pinter. She knew what to do with Restoration comedy though she advised that American actors avoid the Restoration. There was a course in Shakespeare offered at her studio. She called on the ancient Greeks for inculcating the actor with size and a feel for eternity. In *Advanced Character* she taught heightening—she saw all of Tennessee Williams as heightened—and fantastical realism, turning to Maeterlinck for non-human characters in altered realities. Personally, she was drawn to a kind of American expressionism.

When my class graduated from the Stella Adler Conservatory, we formed an acting company and convinced our teacher to come out of directorial retirement. She chose to direct Thornton Wilder's *Happy Journey*, which we performed with silences, repetitive motion, and four chairs on a bare stage. She solicited others to direct us in the craziness of *Alice in Wonderland*, Murray Schisgal's *The Chinese*, and O'Casey's *Bedtime Story*. We were physical in our roles, and Adler loved the accents, the externalization, the costumes, and the audience laughter.

¹ Adler's quotations throughout this article, unless otherwise noted, derive from my own notes over three years in the 1970s as her student and as an actress under her direction.

But that did not mean she rejected the System. Style was not some technique to replace the System but was a melody orchestrated on top of it. So for Adler, acting was to do an action truthfully—in a style—in given circumstances. With all her natural theatricality and love of style, Adler's pedagogy never veered from a sense of truth.

You must travel 10,000 miles to find the person who can give you a technique that makes you secure.

Since 1949, when the Stella Adler Conservatory opened in New York City, until the death of Stella Adler in 1992, new students came to her each Fall to test their histrionic talent and commitment to the way of life of an actor. She introduced them to the historical fact that they had selected a profession with various approaches to training. She recalled, for example, the initiation rites common in the early days of this century, when she earned her own passage onto the stage:

In those days they called it the business of acting. They never called it an art. Persons who wanted to act walked around and went to matinees, and from that they went and knocked on the back-doors of stock companies asking, "Is there any room for me?"

The young actors hung around and listened. They carried a spear, a sword, and they played a monk, an old man, a young man, a little comedy. They learned a scale, a range. They watched other actors at work.

But these approaches are no longer available and this kind of "hit-or-miss" method is inadequate to meet today's theatrical demands.²

To adequately replace the old way of learning in the field, Adler offered the prospect of studying a technique of acting in a studio before entering the theatrical marketplace.

As Adler conceived the idea of a studio, it was a haven in which students would commence to become persons equal to the times in which they lived and actors equal to the demands of the theatre of the time. The students would be given the opportunity to cultivate the habit of looking at themselves, not as persons conforming to a conventional life, but as souls actively pursuing a creative life. It was a refuge in which

² Stella Adler, "The Art of Acting (The Actor's Needs)," *The Theatre 2* (April 1960): 16-17.

the students would be allowed, even encouraged, to fail, so that they need not be pressured, or their work crippled, by a requirement to succeed. It was a shelter in which they would receive the guidance and support of a teacher who would care less about the result of their work than the effort put into it, and who would care about them. It was an environment in which to become secure in a technique that would give them the craft to solve any artistic problem that might confront them in their profession. In short, training in a studio was the preparation most likely to insure an actor's artistic survival.

The technique Adler taught was based on her own life experiences and observations, her work as an actor and director, the influences of her parents, and primarily the teachings of Constantin Stanislavsky. Adler promulgated the Stanislavsky System not as a fixed set of rules or codified way of performing. It was not something invented by a person and therefore culturally limited. It was rather a person's understanding of the logic of nature applied to an art form. As such, she considered the System, like nature, open and available, meant to be applied by all actors to all acting tasks.

She also knew that the System was not meant to be applied carelessly. The result of carelessness, which Adler had witnessed in our theatres, was the emergence of "the mumbling, stumbling young actor without vocal, physical, or emotional discipline." She said that Stanislavsky had insisted upon a respect for the training of the actor along traditional histrionic lines, including voice production, impeccable speech, and physical agility. But in Adler's opinion, the instrumental aspect of the actor—his whole vocal, physical, imaginative, and mental tuning—had tended to be neglected by Method training (in favor of an emphasis on emotional tuning). One of her tutorial aims was to stress the development of the actor's instruments in order to prevent a misuse of the System.

Adler's ultimate tutorial aim 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. Thus, while her students were learning a technique of acting and acquiring good working habits, Adler was behaving as a guide, helping them develop the strength to re-formulate the System and go on their way. The role she set for herself was "not to teach, but to lessen the anguish."

But Adler was a teacher, a great one, and the only American teacher of acting ever to have studied with Stanislavsky and also with Brecht, as well as the only one to have acted under the direction of Reinhardt. Also, she was the teacher of America's two most effective male screen actors, Marlon Brando and Robert DeNiro. She was also my teacher,

within a year of the night that Harold Clurman, in his capacity as theatre critic of *The Nation* and my escort, introduced us in the lobby of the Martin Beck Theatre. He said, "This is Joanna Rotté. She's a doctoral candidate in my American Theatre course at CUNY." Adler rose to the occasion and replied, "Yes, but what does she know?" Sensing that Stella Adler had something remarkable to teach, I became her student. How she evolved into a teacher of merit is the landscape of this article.

My family has always believed in the majesty of acting.

Born in 1902, the youngest daughter of Jacob P. Adler (1855-1926) and Sarah Lewis Adler (1858-1953), Stella Adler achieved eminence within the Adler clan—that family of theatre professionals who delivered more actors to the American stage than any other. Her father's patriarchal custom was such that, whenever any of his several children born in or out of marriage could walk or talk, he or she entered theatrical life. Stella's career commenced at the age of two, when she was carried on stage by her father in an appeal for economic support of his theatre. Since the audience response was to throw money all over the stage, it may be suggested that Adler's role in sustaining the American theatre began in infancy.³

The family of Adlers, in the eyes of Stella's second husband, director and critic Harold Clurman (1901-1980), were as a litter of cats, an inseparable race unto themselves: "They all loved the theatre passionately, down to its minutest details, and were 'idealistic' about it withal. They would talk all through the night, reminiscing, telling tales, and, above all, laughing."⁴ Their idealism was based on a propensity for good acting in good plays. They knew the classics, particularly Shakespeare, as well as contemporary European drama. They believed an actor must make of him or herself an articulate, large-spirited human being, as well as a creative craftsperson responsible to a sense of truth. The inspiration for these ideals and the focal point of their lives was their father, who asserted, according to his daughter Stella, that art is better than anything else.

Jacob Adler, an idol in the Yiddish theatre on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, devoted his professional efforts to revolutionizing Yiddish

³ Joanna Rotté, "Personal interview with Lulla Rosenfeld" (New York, NY, June 10, 1975).

⁴ Harold Clurman, *All People Are Famous* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), 110. All subsequent reference will be cited parenthetically in the text with the initials APAF.

productions. As theatre-manager, stage-director, and leading actor, he condemned the common taste for buffoonery and melodrama. He sought to replace conventionality with scripts and acting that bore some resemblance to human nature.

His personality was in conflict with his theatrical intentions. Though wanting "to be natural, to be real, to express the actual life of the people with serious intent,"⁵ Jacob Adler's nature—passionate, mesmeric, and theatrical—made his playing more heroic and his staging more doctrinaire than natural. His life was also paradoxical. By means of the same enormous tenderness with which he had aroused his family to pursue artistic ideals and shun celebrity, he seduced his audiences into heralding him as the undisputed monarch of the Yiddish stage. More than 50,000 people followed the funeral procession of this man who looked like an emperor. Still, to the day he died, Jacob Adler believed that if he had been formally educated, he could have been a good actor and well liked (APAF, 110-11).

Sarah Adler, more so than her amply gifted husband, based her acting on an in-depth portrayal of emotions, supported by confidence and technique.⁶ Her evocative yet simple variety of romantic realism rather than romantic heroism—"meticulous, subdued, though still intense, never failing to convey a largeness of feeling (APAF, 112)"—caused audiences to comment that she acted as people do in real life. They did not, however, shower her with the adulation enjoyed by Jacob Adler. Remembered by her family as having the endurance of a Russian peasant, Sarah was a woman of energy, will, and sense. 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 (APAF, 112).

Conceived by magnificent beings, Stella Adler, in pursuing her own life and work, did not deny herself the nourishment of her roots. That she had absorbed an intermingling of her parents' resources can be read in Clurman's 1967 description:

Stella is an extraordinary human being. She spreads the air of real theatrical glamour. I sometimes feel that the glamour part has obscured to many people the degree of knowledge and work that goes with it. The actress in her is so colorful, people don't

⁵ Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Chetto* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1967), 156.

⁶ Interview with Rosenfeld.

realize the real substance and idealism that lies behind it all. She has grandeur in a society that lacks it.⁷

Having inherited her father's noble mien (she was considered the beauty of the family) and having been influenced by her mother's spirit (she was said to be the most deeply feeling of all the Adler children), Stella's career was determinedly stage-bound.⁸

She did not of course instantly spring into full theatrical bloom, as if from the mind of Dionysius. Reflecting on her beginnings as a Yiddish actress, she said that she had worked with her parents' influences:

I was exposed enormously to acting and to the craft and art of acting by my father; also, by my mother, who was the greatest actress I have ever seen. Since their styles were so varied—as somebody said, "All the styles came from them!"—and since they played in so many kinds of plays, they influenced me most.

She had also worked with her own observations: "I started taking notes very early in life on people who impressed me (JR)."

In remembering her young self, she pictured a girl socially ill at ease and emotionally undisciplined. Adler's picture agreed with a description given by her first husband, Horace Eliascheff, an Englishman of Russian lineage, whom she married in her early twenties:

She was a retiring, hyper-sensitive girl. Wall-flowerish, shy, closed inside her shell. And beautiful, very beautiful. . . . Performing on the London stage with her parents . . . she was in the first stages of her development—a young girl full of energy and curiosity—still unformed. Too sensitive to know how to channel her sensitivity.⁹

Aware of the need to discipline her talent and looking for what she called a "more grabable technique (JR)," in 1924 Adler joined the American Laboratory Theatre, a Moscow Art Studio Theatre offshoot. As

⁷ Harold Clurman, quoted in John Gruen, "Stella at Yale," *New York/World Journal Tribune*, 8 January 1967, sec. "The Lively Arts," p. 15.

⁸ Joanna Rotté, "Personal interview with Stella Adler" (New York, NY, May 23, 1974). All subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the initials JR.

⁹ Horace Eliascheff, quoted in Gruen, 15.

well as being her introduction to the early ideas of Stanislavsky, studying at the Lab marked her as unique in the Adler group of actors, who had learned their craft entirely from experience on stage. With the exception of her father, the family made fun of Stella for going to acting school. She had already been on the stage for years—with her parents, in vaudeville, in London with Holbrook Blinn, and on Broadway—but, according to Clurman, she joined the Laboratory (as both a member of the company and a student) to make fresh inquiries.

Most memorable to Adler about the Laboratory was the answer given by Richard Boleslavsky, its founding director, to the accusation that his method was Russian. He said, "It may be Russian, but I have never met a drunk anywhere that did not behave drunk whether he was in America or Russia. He was drunk the same way (JR)."

The Laboratory experience was in Adler's estimation the "big opening up" through technique, by means of which she was eventually able to work on a role in its totality. She said that, with her temperament, she would not have survived in the world of theatre without the reinforcement of technique from Stanislavsky: "From the Lab's point of view, I had come with the complete instrument but did not know how to control it." Nor would she have survived without the fortitude imbued by Sarah Adler:

She was not a strong woman in the conventional sense, but she was a brave woman. She did not so much say anything—she never talked—but her behavior influenced me. Whatever courage made me go on in a very hectic, desperate career—some of it very good and some of it very bad—came from this sort of optimism and courage I got from her. (JR)

For the 1926-27 season, the Irving Place Theatre engaged Adler. Under the direction of Max Wilner (stepson to actor-manager David Kessler, colleague of Jacob Adler), the Irving Place company strove to heighten the artistic value of Yiddish theatre. During 1929 and 1930, Adler played on tour and in New York with Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre, the vanguard of the Yiddish art movement. Schwartz's professed purpose, a further advancement of Jacob Adler's preliminary endeavors, was to produce plays of literary merit, using an ensemble system of acting.¹⁰ Several members of Schwartz's company, which from

¹⁰ Judd L. Teller, *Strangers and Natives* (New York: Delacorte, 1968), 22. Teller writes of Schwartz: "He would assure his actors that he believed in the ensemble system. He would engage experienced European directors and give them similar assurances. However once rehearsals began, he pre-empted everything, and ended

time to time included Rudolf Schildkraut, Ludwig Satz, Jacob Ben-Ami, Paul Muni, and Celia Adler (elder stepsister of Stella), had variously been exposed to the innovative staging and ensemble approaches of such vanguard directors as Jacques Copeau, Max Reinhardt, Harley Granville Barker, and the directors of the Moscow Art Theatre. On the whole, the Schwartz members, excepting Schwartz himself, were wont to break with the grandiloquent tradition of declamatory acting and the star system.¹¹ In Adler's recollection, the Yiddish Art Theatre was a "theatre of love," and her two seasons with it were the most enjoyable of all her years on the stage. The fondest visions of her aunt, in the remembrance of Adler's niece Lulla Rosenfeld, were Stella playing Nerissa to Frances Adler's Poria (in *The Merchant of Venice*) "as if they were two flowers laughing," and Stella appearing in Sholem Alechem's dramatization of *Wandering Stars*, "as if she were a kind of Lillian Gish perfume."¹²

The next year, 1931, the Group Theatre was founded under the leadership of Harold Clurman, with Stella Adler and Franchot Tone prominent among its members.¹³ Up to then, Clurman's theatre background had included classes with Copeau in Paris, membership in the American Lab and the Theatre Guild, and immersion in the Yiddish art theatre movement. In his biography, *All People Are Famous*, Clurman traced the origin of his fascination with theatre:

When I was six my father took me to see Jacob Adler, the greatest Yiddish-speaking actor of the day, in a translation from German called *Uriel Acosta*, and a while later to see Adler play *Shylock*. . . . That visit to *Uriel Acosta* had "taken," and I never ceased imploring, insisting, crying out to be taken again and again to the theatre. (APAF, 5, 7)

The Group's intention was to combine a study of theatre craft with a content reflecting the life of their times. Their interest was in social and

up starring in most of the plays and directing himself."

¹¹ David S. Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965), 284-289.

¹² Interview with Rosenfeld.

¹³ By 1933, Harold Clurman was well acquainted with Stella Adler. In Gruen, Clurman is quoted: "I first beheld her on the New York stage. It was in *Goat Song* by Werfel. I looked at Stella up there and knew that that was a woman I could fall in love with. I soon began courting her." (15). The year was 1929.

political change and artistic development. They were searching for an acting style to convey the truth of the contemporary scene.¹⁴

For the most part, the Group actors had already had some measure of acquaintance with the rudiments of the Stanislavsky System. During the early 1930s, they spent their summers together experimenting with aspects of the System. They worked on emotion-memory exercises, mainly under the supervision of Lee Strasberg, co-director with Clurman. They studied voice and movement. They did their homework and grew—to a point. It was not until 1934, when Stella Adler delivered the results of her five weeks of private classes with Stanislavsky at his flat in Paris, that Adler and Stanislavsky changed the course of American theatre. Altogether, according to Clurman, who introduced them, it was an encounter:

He [Stanislavsky] was regally handsome, with beautiful white hair, and must have had a decided appeal for Stella: her father had also been majestically tall, with snow white hair. But Stanislavsky, despite his imposing figure held erect in perfect relaxation, was somehow reticent, whereas Jacob Adler had never been at all shy with women. . . .

When he looked up and saw Stella with me, he rose to his great height—he must have been six foot four—and addressed himself first to her, saying that he had heard that her father had been a wonderful actor. (APAF, 82)

The story was taken up by Adler:

I sat quietly in my chair, too awed to utter a word. But I observed him. I looked at this gracious man—full of wit, full of warmth—totally unaffected. He chatted with Madame Chekhova, joked with her, talked of her husband's plays, and, at one point, laughed and called her a ham.

After a while he turned to me and said, "Why don't you talk to me?" and I answered, "Because you have ruined the theatre for me!" It was true. In America, at the time, Stanislavsky's writings just didn't seem to penetrate. The school of Russian acting was taken to be grim, breast-beating, morbid form of expression. There was no joy

¹⁴ Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 31.

to be found in it anywhere. I could not believe that Stanislavsky really meant the actors to wail so, and sigh, and cry, and carry on.

When I told him all this, Stanislavsky stood up and asked if I would like to take a little walk with him in his garden. We did, and as we walked and talked, he began to clarify all that had confused and distressed me.¹⁵

Adler had not seen the Moscow Art Theatre's performances in America or anywhere. Her disparaging references were presumably based upon her experience with Americanized versions of Stanislavsky's teachings, Strasberg's in particular. As a Group Theatre instructor, Strasberg had concentrated upon extracting the actor's personal psychology. As a Group Theatre director, his ideology had fixed upon the actor's building a character out of "affective memory."¹⁶ That he emphasized using the actor's personal life to create a role had been a point of antagonism between him and Adler. Her preference was to create a character imaginatively. Thus she had felt, both at the Lab and in the Group, that the American emphasis had been distorted.

Adler brought back to the Group what she said Stanislavsky wanted the Americans to know. It was, in effect, a clarification of his System. To demonstrate his theories to Adler, he had worked with her through scenes from John Howard Lawson's *The Gentlewoman*, a play with which she had had difficulties in performance. She said that Stanislavsky had told her, speaking as an actor to an actress, that

acting was not merely a question of technique—technique was essential, yes—but more importantly it was a matter of truth, and how this truth could be found within the circumstances of the play. He would say, "The truth in art is always centered in the circumstances [the situation of the play], but it must first be found in life [from which nature derives]."¹⁷

¹⁵ Stella Adler, quoted in Gruen, 14.

¹⁶ "Affective memory" or "emotion memory" was defined by Stanislavsky as "that type of memory which makes you relive the sensations you once felt." See Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Handbook* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1963), 55.

¹⁷ Stella Adler, quoted in Gruen, 14.

Also, he had explicitly and concretely explained just what he had done in the circumstances of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* when playing Dr. Stockmann.

Stanislavsky's focus on doing action within a specific situation (the situation of the play, not one's own situation) was, in Adler's appraisal, precisely what had been lacking in the American Lab and Group Theatre classes all along. This focus—*doing an action within specific circumstances*—became the center of Adler's technique of acting. It was her foundation, and she bolstered it with two of Stanislavsky's, as she said, "off-the-cuff" but utterly essential statements:

1. Get very friendly with that stage before you act on it. Let the set, the circumstances, and every object help you. Don't squeeze it so from inside yourself.
2. The imagination contains everything you need. If you use only your own conscious life, the work is limited. (JR)

Stanislavsky's instruction to the Americans via Adler was thus not about churning up emotion, nor about using one's own life to feel something on stage. It was about the doing of an action, within the circumstances of the play, brought to life through the actor's imagination.

Adler's account of her sessions with Stanislavsky caused the Group to alter its rehearsal methods, resulting in the Group's achieving, in the judgement of critic John Gassner, the best ensemble acting Broadway had ever known.¹⁸ With Adler as a prime mover, the Group influenced American acting monumentally. During the Group's lifetime and after its final curtain in 1941, the Group members, on stage and screen, by writing, teaching, directing, and lecturing, helped to make the Stanislavsky System the dominant technique studied in New York and elsewhere.

After the Group disbanded, Adler spent a few years performing and producing in Hollywood, and then acting on the New York Stage and abroad. In 1946, three years after her marriage to Harold Clurman, she announced the end of her acting career, closing in Andreyev's *He Who Gets Slapped* under the direction of Tyrone Guthrie. Her break with the stage had been a long time brewing.

Following her 1934 meetings with Stanislavsky, though optimistic, Adler had gradually begun to express dissatisfaction with the lack of joy she felt within the Group. According to her niece, Lulla Rosenfeld, in the

¹⁸ John Gassner, *The Theatre in Our Time* (New York: Crown, 1954), 300.

second half of the Group's decade of existence, its atmosphere, "permeated with the spirit of [Elia] Kazan," grew loveless, ruthless, smug, arrogant, and cold. It was a space in which one could not be happy. Because Adler apparently saw through the atmosphere that psychologically harmed other Group actresses (Margaret Baker, Dorothy Patten, and Frances Farmer were "driven crazy"), she was not irreparably hurt. But her career was damaged. "She," Rosenfeld said, "the most beautiful woman in New York, was made to play aging mothers (Bessie Berger in Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing* and Clara in his *Paradise Lost*). People thought her old. She never forgave Harold Clurman for that."¹⁹

Whether playing the Odets mothers had ruined her acting career or not, three years before the dissolution of the Group, Adler had already begun to expand beyond acting into directing. When she accepted her "last"²⁰ stage role (in 1946 as Zinadia in the Andreyev play) it was, she said, not to perform but because of an admiration for Tyrone Guthrie as a director. She had considered his productions "theatrical in the extreme," decided to work with him out of a deep curiosity, and was gratified to do so.

He came from an old theatre where there were weak performances and strong performances. Not everything had to be death quality. If you were good, that was fine. If you were not good, he left you alone. He said that it was not his job to improve you. (JR)

With the Guthrie production, Adler's acting career came full circle. Rather than the commercialism of Broadway, she found a climate akin to the Yiddish art theatre in which her career had begun.

Though no longer on stage, but given her thespian blood, Adler did not absent herself from the world of theatre. From 1949 on, she made the teaching of acting her life-work. Also, during the 1950s, she officiated at the symposia of visiting Soviet artists as the American representative of the Moscow Art Theatre. And 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, Adler attended plays and seminars to assess the changes in Soviet theatre since Stanislavsky's death. She was especially interested in Vakhtangov's adaptations of Stanislavsky's techniques, as explored in study sessions

¹⁹ Interview with Rosenfeld.

²⁰ Stella Adler did have a stage comeback in 1961, playing Madame Rosepettel in Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad* at the Lyric Theatre in London.

and seen in Vakhtangov-conceived productions at the Vakhtangov theatre.

Vakhtangov's contribution was stylization, so individual, you could not put your hand on it. He knew the style necessary for every leaf. It was entirely a great experience seeing all the levels—Chinese, Russian, Jewish, Catholic, religious ceremony—on which his genius worked.

However, the fact of the Stanislavsky theatre that he [Stanislavsky] was trying to make clear, but that is little understood, is that he [Stanislavsky] was not a naturalist or a realist, but worked in very many styles. When Stanislavsky did Moliere, or any play, he was much more varied than people understand. If you just take an album of the different characters he played and look at them—his Gogol, or *Woe from Wit*—you realize he played in verse, and his externalization was enormous. He was not only in *An Enemy of the People*. He began everything that Vakhtangov did. I would say that he had it all. (JR)

Adler's pursuit of new directions in world theatre distinguished her among teachers of acting. She was not just the only American acting teacher to have studied with Stanislavsky—whom Clurman named the one great contributor to the technique of acting of our time. She was also the only American acting teacher who had been indirectly in contact with Vakhtangov, and directly in contact with Brecht and Reinhardt—whom Clurman called three of the four great directors of our time, Meyerhold being the fourth.

Adler met Bertolt Brecht in 1935, the year after studying with Stanislavsky, and trained with him "for clarity." Brecht's study method with Adler was similar to that employed by Stanislavsky. They worked on scenes together, in this case from Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, and their association, according to Clurman, was agreeable:

Stella, always curious about new modes in theatre practice, asked Brecht . . . to expound his theories of acting to her. . . .

Brecht was eager to have this opportunity to work with an American actress and all the more eager to work with Stella, since he had given her half-sister Celia Adler a difficult time when the Theatre Union had produced his version of Gorki's *Mother*. (APAF, 134-35)

Adler later analyzed Brecht's plays (and eventually taught them in her European Play Analysis course at her Studio) in order to understand them from the actor's point of view.

Her experience with Max Reinhardt was as an actor in his short-run 1943 production of Irwin Shaw's *Sons and Soldiers*. Prior to rehearsals, Reinhardt wrote, in a letter to his son, of his initial acquaintance with Adler:

I find . . . Miss Adler . . . most sympathetic . . . an intelligent Jew . . . with an inner drive toward better things, toward art.

I have never seen her act. Though that never made much difference to me when casting. What is important is that she looks good, is of theatre blood, has a strong temperament, pronounced humor, and a sharply critical brain; above all, she is a personality, which, in the theatre, is always the most important thing.²¹

Adler likewise respected Reinhardt. In spite of his voluminous production notes compiled before beginning rehearsals, Reinhardt depended a lot upon the actors, according to Adler. "He expected a full performance from you. It did not matter if you were Turkish or British, he expected the performance (JR)." Undaunted by Reinhardt's reputation, Adler was prepared to deliver a performance, 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." (APAF, 144)

From 1949 on, Adler put her experience, ability, intuition, and energy into teaching—and refining the teaching of—the craft and art of acting. Teaching was not something alien. She had started a simple acting school when an ingenue in the Yiddish theatre and had given lessons to the Group after her meetings with Stanislavsky. She said, however, that making teaching her profession was a development, a

²¹ Gotfried Reinhardt, *The Genius* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 115.

progression. Over the years, she arrived at a philosophic view of teaching and a philosophy for the actor.

I'm not really interested in helping an actor become a good actor unless he becomes the best self he can. There has to be a level of grandeur—grandeur is the wrong word—of size in him: in the instrument and in the soul of the actor. Size forces open all the channels which life closes off. It opens them up and allows the actor to achieve himself.

The actor must not remain small but must take his place as an artist who can collaborate with any artist. That is the most important thing for me and is what acting is all about. And that is what is missing for me in the actor in performance today. (JR)

The actor has the platform and through himself can express a whole world of ideas, of experiences. If I am able to instill this [size] in my students, I consider it a victory.²²

The period between her divorce from Clurman in 1960 and her marriage to physicist and writer Mitchell Wilson in 1965 was telling in Adler's own self-development.²³ After separating from Clurman, she gave herself to the vocation of teaching: to the technique, to her love of dramatic literature, and to her students. The response to her involvement was more than compensatory, as indicated by the appreciation of her most renowned graduate, Marlon Brando:

Stella has had the deepest influence on me. . . . She has influenced my personal life and my professional life. I am devoted to her. As a teacher, she has an infallible instinct for character, and for knowing who people are. The spectrum of her talent is reflected in all that she does. She has that rare gift: producing lightning states. My debt and gratitude to her are enormous. As a teacher of acting, she has few peers. As a human being, few equals.²⁴

²² Stella Adler, quoted in Gruen, 17.

²³ In her interview, Lulla Rosenfeld revealed: "Harold Clurman said that Stella developed late intellectually."

²⁴ Marlon Brando, quoted in Gruen, 17.

During her seven years of marriage to Wilson, Adler continued to follow her own evolution. Her husband's experience of her was of an exciting, volatile, imaginative scholar with integrity, who reads and studies, and whose life is rooted in work. Following the untimely (and grievously lamented) death of Wilson in 1973, until her own death in December of 1992, Adler lived as a single woman. She remained a teacher, with gratitude for her Adler origins.

We are truly a family of the theatre. We're all tied by the now invisible iron of Sarah and Jacob Adler. We have all come to understand that the theatre—acting, creating, interpreting—means total involvement, the totality of heart, mind, and spirit. The craft of involvement restores you, makes you never lose interest. The life inside you reflects the life around you. And the world is your home. You don't feel a stranger.²⁵

Eighty-eight of Adler's ninety years were connected to the world of theatre. During this time she gained a perspective on acting. She acknowledged that there is only one Stanislavsky and that no actor can copy his work. At the same time, she asserted that the actor, to be a genuine actor, must master (before he can legitimately transcend) the techniques that Stanislavsky developed:

These techniques were the outcome of [modern] playwriting, which required a new kind of actor . . . [and] are not an end in themselves. . . . [They] make great demands on the actor. The ignorant actor, the half-baked actor, the exploiter have no place in the theatre of today.²⁶

Adler worried that the United States has not given birth to a theatrical tradition of its own, producing great ensemble acting. She thought that the Group Theatre had come closest to generating a tradition of American acting, but that it failed further development with the cessation of the Group. She believed that since the Group, there has been a resignation in the actor's nature. The American actor of today has been demeaned—because of theatre as commerce and because of the mechanical and uncaring attitude of the film and television industries. Actors of today aim at only the show. They exclude the large meaning

²⁵ Stella Adler, quoted in Gruen, 17.

²⁶ Stella Adler, "The Art of Acting (The Actor's Needs), 17.

of the script. Ultimately, they exclude the meaning of themselves as human beings.

In contrast to the demeaned position of the contemporary actor, Adler conceived of the actor in an elevated position.

The artist and the man must meet somewhere. If the aim of the production—what the play is saying—is made clear to the whole body of actors, they can rise above their normal level. That growth comes out of doing the performance. The inspiration for it can come from the director, or from the actors working together with each other. It can also come from the guidance of a teacher.

There used to be a lot of growth in the theatre. You see the actors of old—you saw them as young people, and you see them twenty-five years later—their heads have changed. Everything about them has changed, and you can see those changes in their work. You can also see that in the artist, in the novelist. He does not remain the same. He becomes bigger through working. The actor must not remain the same. (JR)

Unto her death at the age of ninety, I am pleased to remark in this anniversary year, Stella Adler did not remain the same.