

SANFORD
MEISNER
O N · A C T I N G

SANFORD MEISNER

AND

DENNIS LONGWELL

INTRODUCTION BY SYDNEY POLLACK

VINTAGE BOOKS

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For James Carville

I wish the stage were as narrow as the wire of a tightrope dancer, so that no incompetent would dare step upon it.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749—1832): *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, book 4, chapter 2

This quotation Meisner has framed and hung on the wall of his office.



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—Dennis Longwell
Sag Harbor, New York
October 1986



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Introduction

We called him Sandy but it felt daring and dangerous, like ordering a martini in a nightclub when you were sixteen and trying to pass for twenty-one. He was too awesome a presence for the familiarity of a first name. It was 1952 and I was eighteen years old and had blundered into his classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York. Nothing had prepared me for the intensity of this experience. It wasn't that he was harsh or mean; it was only that he was so frighteningly accurate. You felt he knew every thought, impulse or feeling in your head, that he had an ability to x-ray your very being and there was absolutely no place to hide. Each time he spoke about acting he crystallized ideas that you somehow knew were true, even though you had no idea that

you'd ever sensed them before—like those physicists who discover new particles simply because the theory for their existence is so beautiful. When Sandy spoke it was often difficult to keep from jumping up and shouting, "That's true! That's right! That's absolutely right!" It was stunning to have him hurling those lightning bolts directly to the inside of your brain. One poor guy simply couldn't contain himself and actually *did* blurt out, "My God, that's right!" Sandy simply mumbled, "Thank you, you've just confirmed twenty-five years of my work."

Sanford Meisner's work was, and is, to impart to students an organized approach to the creation of real and truthful behavior within the imaginary circumstances of the theater. Like his contemporaries from the Group Theatre, he has been changing the face of American acting ever since he was first exposed to the ideas of Konstantin Stanislavsky in the nineteen thirties. Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Bobby Lewis and Sanford Meisner emerged from the Group Theatre as the preeminent teachers of what has come to be known as 'the Method', a kind of lazy label that refers to most of contemporary American acting. Each one of these teachers has really made his own method, honing down and personalizing his approach over the years. Though they all were extraordinary teachers, Sandy's approach has always been for me the simplest, most direct, least pretentious and most effective.

The Neighborhood Playhouse offered a two-year intensive course in all aspects of the theater. It was unequalled anywhere, and even though the faculty boasted such luminaries as Martha Graham, Jane Dudley and Pearl Lang, it was Sandy's daily acting classes that kept our adrenaline pumped up for two years. When I graduated in the spring of 1954, I was invited to return the following fall on a fellowship as his assistant, and so I had the extraordinary opportunity to continue to learn from him for another six years until I moved to California in 1960 to begin directing. I had no aspirations to teach, and certainly none to direct, but the chance to continue to observe and learn from Meisner was impossible to pass up. When truths about one art are deep enough, they become true about all art, and so although Sandy addressed himself only to the art of acting, I was, without

knowing it, absorbing the foundation of what would become a very specific approach to directing. The fact is that every area in which I function as a director—writing, production design, costume design, casting, staging, cinematography, even editing—is dominated by, and concerned with, the principles and ideas I've learned from Meisner.

Sandy used to say, "It takes twenty years to become an actor." We thought he was exaggerating. We should have known better; he wasn't. He was referring to that time, if it should come, when all the principles and ideas would be chewed up and digested into a kind of actors' instinct, a technique that functioned almost by itself. He never wanted the work to be *about* technique. If you were his student, you learned technique as a means to an end, never as an end in itself. You'd be surprised by how many acting teachers don't understand that.

In 1981, I went back to New York to film some of Meisner's classes for a documentary. We worked in a small downtown theater given to us by Joe Papp. It had been twenty-one years since I had observed Sandy in action. Of course he had aged. He'd had a laryngectomy (the removal of his vocal cords), had been struck by a van that shattered his hip, had two cataract operations and wore thick glasses with a microphone attached to them to amplify the new way he'd learned to speak by swallowing air. But the same "high" was there in the class, the same intense concentration and the sense of falling forward into new areas of understanding and experience. Some contemporaries of mine, old-timers who had made the pilgrimage back to take the classes again, were present. They were just as nervous in front of him as they had always been—and they were learning just as much as they always had. The only vivid difference to me was that because of the effort involved for Sandy to speak, there were fewer words. When they came, they were like rich, boiled-down broth. (As I write this, I think of a remark made about Chekhov by Maxim Gorky: "In Chekhov's presence everyone felt in himself a desire to be simpler, more truthful, more one's self.")

This is a book about acting. It's also a book about a lot of other things by a man who has spent his life weeding away what is unnecessary, and trying to demystify this process of igniting an

actor's imagination and disciplining the truth of his behavior. The first thing that will strike you is that there is no mumbo-jumbo here, no mysterious, elitist attitude about theory. Some of it may appear simple. As with all of Sandy's technique, that appearance is deceptive. It isn't simple; it's just the clarity with which he offers it. Anyone who has ever tried to work truly and privately on a stage or in front of a camera knows that it is anything but simple—at least for the first twenty years.

I believe there are only a few people who can really teach the technique of acting. Most are well-read and intelligent, and confuse their ability to theorize and intellectualize about the subject with an ability to cause real growth in an actor. There are almost no good books about acting. This is one of the best. I envy all of you who may be discovering Sandy for the first time.

—Sydney Pollack

Prologue

When they learn that I teach acting, people who love the theater but are not of the theater often ask me just what one teaches to hopeful aspirants that turns them eventually into trained actors.

"Decent diction, of course," they go on to suppose. "And then voice control and bodily grace. But what else—or is there anything else?"

There is. The other elements in a person's training that will make him or her a distinctive and interesting actor are the most delicate factors that a teacher can impart. One can use standard principles and textbooks in educating people for law, medicine, architecture, chemistry or almost any other profession—but not for the theater. For, in most professions, every practitioner uses

the same tools and techniques, while the actor's chief instrument is himself. And since no two persons are alike, no universal rule is applicable to any two actors in exactly the same way.

I once spent four lovely months in Puerto Rico in a little house on the beach where I went specifically to write a book about these matters. I wrote two chapters. Later, when I reread them, I didn't understand them, and I thought that was the end of the book. I decided that a creative textbook about acting was a contradiction in terms, and that it was foolish, even wrong, to attempt to write one.

Still, friends whom I respected convinced me that my experience in teaching young actors their craft was of value, and that perhaps with a collaborator my ideas could be put into the form of a book. A collaborator was found, a book was written, and I was bitterly disappointed at the results. My basic principles were now on paper, but, paradoxically, how I uniquely transmit my ideas wasn't sufficiently apparent. My students weren't in those pages either, nor was the classroom in which we interacted week in and week out. Lastly—and this was the greatest lack—the drama inherent in our interaction, as they struggled to learn what I struggled to teach, was missing. I came to realize that how I teach is determined by the gradual development of each student.

That particular book was never published. My theatrical instinct should have told me why. The confessional mode is impossible to sustain at length in the theater, which is an arena where human personalities interlock in the reality of doing. When we think of the characters in a play, we naturally think of them in active, objective terms. Oedipus, he. Phaedra, she. *Exeunt* Lear and the Fool.

All this past history is related to explain to the reader the form this new collaboration has taken. In it I appear not as "I," but as "he." That is, I appear as I am: a teacher, surrounded by gifted students, of a difficult and ultimately mysterious art, that of acting. Bernard Shaw, who I believe was the greatest theater critic since Aristotle, wrote: "Self-betrayal, magnified to suit the optics of the theatre, is the whole art of acting." By "self-betrayal," Shaw meant the pure, unselfconscious revelation of the gifted

actor's most inner and most private being to the people in his audience. In these pages the student actors reveal themselves through the various demands of the exercises in order to achieve the self-knowledge needed to apply the basic principles of my concept of acting. I, too, betray myself in the sense that here, in order to teach what I know, I am forced to reveal much more of myself than any prudent man would confess to his priest.

One final word: if I risk censure for making myself the central character in the chronicle that follows, I do so in the name of the art of theatrical self-revelation, which is exactly the role I play in in my classroom. Stage center!

—Sanford Meisner
New York City
October 1986

1 Setting the Scene: Duse's Blush

Everything should be as in real life.

—Anton Chekhov to the cast of the first production of his play, *The Seagull*, St. Petersburg, 1896

At first glance, except for the twin beds, the room resembles any number of small classrooms almost anywhere in the country. Its white plaster ceiling, pale yellow tongue-and-groove wooden walls and waxed, black-asphalt tile floor evoke the campus of a teachers' college somewhere in the Midwest or, in its cloistered quiet, the interior of a one-room schoolhouse at dawn.

To the left of the room's center stands a large, gray wooden desk—clearly the teacher's—set at an angle before a slate blackboard. To its left is a wall of windows, which look out into a courtyard where, through venetian blinds, only the tops of trees can be seen. Below the windows on a simple platform are two rows of folding chairs, about twenty in all, for the students. Two

framed exhortatory maxims written in the style of pseudo-illuminated manuscripts hang on either side of the blackboard. Be Specific! says one, and the other, An Ounce of BEHAVIOR is Worth a Pound of WORDS.

The room seems ordinary except for the two beds, which someone has pushed against the wall opposite the windows. Squat and wide, the beds were specially constructed of two-by-fours bolted together with six-inch steel bolts, and seem sturdy enough to support the combined weight of a soccer team. The striped ticking of each mattress is partially covered with a rumpled green cotton bedspread and a pillow without a pillowcase. Like the teacher's desk, the beds have been painted battleship gray. There is something surreal about them. Perhaps it is their exaggerated sturdiness or their utilitarian color that makes them seem more like trampolines than beds or, conjoined as they are now, like the canvas-covered floor of a boxing ring.

Other objects not noticeable at first share the Magritte-like surrealism of the beds: an empty bookcase with a black desk phone and two empty whiskey bottles on its top; a cotrack missing one of its three legs; a console television set with no insides; a mirror propped against the wall, reflecting the sky outside; a long wooden table also painted gray. Together they complete the room's spare furnishings.

In this special New York City classroom in the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre, as in dozens of similar rooms reaching back in time to the early 1930s, Sanford Meisner has taught acting. After fifty years the number of his students is unknown, but it certainly runs into the thousands. While no individual can speak for all of them, perhaps Joanne Woodward, who studied first as a college student with Sandy (as he is invariably called by his students) and later returned to him as an adult, suggests most succinctly what he may mean to the majority of them. "I went back to Sandy because to me he was a teacher," Miss Woodward recalled recently. "To me he was the *only* teacher. This was after I had done *Three Faces of Eve* and had won an Academy Award. It was 1959, and it was a revelation to me. It was a whole turning point in my growth as an actress."

The American playwright David Mamet, who studied acting

with Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse, also spoke recently of his importance. "Here was a man who, especially to my generation in the sixties, actually knew something. One of the first authentic people that I, and most of us, had ever met in our lives. Of course he was autocratic about those things he believed in because he knew them to be the truth. And we knew we were being exposed to the truth—that is, to something which was absolutely practicable, which absolutely worked, and which we wanted desperately to learn."*

Sanford Meisner was born on August 31, 1905, in the Greenpoint section of the New York borough of Brooklyn, the firstborn child of Herman and Bertha Meisner. The Meisners, both Jews who had emigrated from Hungary—she as a baby, he as a young man of sixteen—fled the anti-Semitism of the Polish immigrants of Greenpoint and moved to the Bronx a few months after the birth of their son. They settled in an area of the South Bronx in a house on Honeywell Avenue where, two years later, a second son, Jacob, was born. During a trip to the Catskills, made in an effort to improve three-year-old Sanford's health, little Jacob was inadvertently given unpasteurized milk to drink, and the disastrous result was a wasting disease, bovine tuberculosis, from which the second son never recovered.

"I have had considerable experience in psychoanalysis," Meisner recently told an interviewer, "so I know quite clearly that the death of my brother when I was five and he was three was the dominant emotional influence in my life from which I have never, after all these years, escaped. When I went to school—after school, anytime—I lived in a state of isolation as if I was some kind of moral leper, because my parents, who were good people but not too bright, told me that if it hadn't been for me, they wouldn't have had to go to the country, where my younger

*The Woodward and Mamet quotes are from transcripts of filmed interviews made for the documentary *Sanford Meisner: The Theater's Best Kept Secret*, produced by Kent Paul and distributed by Columbia Pictures.

brother got ill, and from which illness he died. The guilt that this caused was horrendous. In my childhood I rarely had friends. I lived, as I'm afraid I still do, in a world of fantasy."

A sister, Ruth, to whom Meisner was close—she died in 1983—and a second brother, Robert, born when Meisner was sixteen and the family had moved to the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, and with whom he has lost contact, completed the household.

Meisner remembers telling his first-grade teacher that he wanted to be "an actor" when he grew up, and, during his teenage years, directing various cousins in *tableaux vivants* based on themes of death and honor inspired by newsreel views of American soldiers in World War One. But for most of his youth he found an emotional release in playing the family's piano. After graduating from Erasmus Hall High School in 1923, he entered the Damrosch Institute of Music (later absorbed into the Juilliard School) for an additional year's study of the piano and related subjects. But the idea of acting professionally persisted, and at nineteen he began.

"I always wanted to be an actor," Meisner recalls. "I had a friend—I was in Flatbush then—who also wanted to be an actor; his name was Monkey Tobias. He told me that a place called the Theatre Guild was hiring kids, so I went there. Philip Loeb and Theresa Helburn interviewed me, and I remember lying elaborately about my past in the theatre; it may have started with Salvini for all I know. I remember them laughing, but not laughing at me. So I got a job as an extra in Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted*, and starring in it was the great Pauline Lord. She was a genius, pure and simple. She'd sit backstage and work on her crossword puzzles. 'What's a three-letter word for something a man wears on his head?' she'd ask. 'Hat? Cap?' How could she decide? That's how simple she was. But she was a genius. She had been the original Anna Christie, and I loved to see her play. By that time I was beginning to realize that acting which really dug at me was what I was looking for."

Herman Meisner had become a furrier on his arrival from Hungary, a job he held for over fifty years. His son does a wonderfully funny imitation of Herman in which he is introduced to a young woman wearing a mink coat, suavely kisses her hand and

then deftly blows onto the sleeve of the coat to determine the quality and value of the fur. A career in clothing manufacturing was his father's expressed wish for him, and briefly, to please his father, Meisner worked as a stockboy in a pants factory and a lace store. This was before his success at the Theatre Guild. The elder Meisner's response to his son's new career was at first stunned silence. "I told them at dinner," he recalls. "I announced that I had become an actor. Dead silence. No one said a word. My father, my mother, my sister. Then, during dessert, my father asked, 'How much are they paying you?' I said, 'Well, after the first four weeks, if the play is a success, they give you ten dollars a week.' All hell broke loose! The chaos, the eruption at the table when I said ten dollars a week was terrific! But I went right on!"

Meisner received a scholarship to study at the Theatre Guild School of Acting, which was directed by Winifred Lenihan, an American actress who had been the first to perform Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* in New York. She was, in Meisner's opinion, "a stock-company technician," and the school was "a very mediocre place." At this time Meisner was introduced through a musician friend to Aaron Copland, a young composer newly returned from studying in Paris, who in turn introduced him to a recent student at the Sorbonne, his friend Harold Clurman, who, Copland realized, was as passionate about the theater as Meisner was. In a short time Clurman became a stage manager, then a play reader, for the Theatre Guild. Through this friendship, Meisner was introduced to another young theater lover, Lee Strasberg. "Strasberg had a great, uplifting influence on me," Meisner recalls. "He introduced me to quality actors and artists of various kinds, and this helped enormously to solidify my emotional needs. I learned from him. I solidified my natural tastes and inclinations with his help. For example, together we went to the Metropolitan Opera and saw the great Russian singer Chaliapin. What made him preeminent was his possession of deep emotional truth and theatricality of form."

Clurman and Strasberg joined with another Theatre Guild worker, Cheryl Crawford, and in 1931, after three years of talks and fund-raising, the triumvirate selected twenty-eight actors to form the legendary Group Theatre. Although it existed as an

institution for only ten years, the Group was to exert a profound influence on the developing art of American acting. Meisner, only twenty-five at the time, was a founding member. The result was fortuitous. "Without the Group," Meisner has said, "I would have been in the fur business."

For an insight into the importance of the Group Theatre in the artistic life of the United States in the 1930s, here are the words of playwright Arthur Miller:

"[My] sole sense of connection with theater came when I saw the productions of the Group Theatre," Miller wrote in the introduction to his *Collected Plays* (published in 1957, over three decades after the Group had been disbanded). "It was not only the brilliance of ensemble acting, which in my opinion has never been equalled since in America, but the air of union created between actors and the audience. Here was the promise of prophetic theater which suggested to my mind the Greek situation when religion and belief were the heart of drama. I watched the Group Theatre from fifty-five-cent seats in the balcony, and at intermission time it was possible to feel the heat and the passion of people moved not only in their bellies but in their thoughts. If I say that my own writer's ego found fault with the plays, it does not detract from the fact that the performances were almost all inspiring to me. . . ."

When in 1938 the Group Theatre took to London its most celebrated production, Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy* (in which Meisner played the featured role of the menacing gangster, Eddie Fuseli), the critic for the *London Times*, James Agate, said simply: "The acting attains a level which is something we know nothing at all about."

The source for the quality of the acting in the Group Theatre sprang from the famed Moscow Art Theatre and from the theory and practice of acting, the System, evolved by its co-director, Konstantin Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky was doubly important to the Group. First, he was the teacher of Richard Boleslavski and Maria Ouspenskaya, two noted Moscow Art Theatre actors who

emigrated to New York and in 1924 founded the American Laboratory Theatre. In its six years of activity, this school trained several hundred American actors and directors in an early version of the Stanislavsky System. Actresses Stella Adler, Ruth Nelson and Eunice Stoddard were students and members of the Lab's repertory company before joining the Group. Lee Strasberg was a student there in 1924, and he and Harold Clurman also studied in the directors unit.

Clurman was later to write in his history of the Group Theatre, *The Fervent Years*: "The first effect [of the Stanislavsky System] on the actors was that of a miracle. . . . Here at last was a key to that elusive ingredient of the stage, true emotion. And Strasberg [who was the chief director of the Group's productions during its early years] was a fanatic on the subject of true emotion. Everything was secondary to it. He sought it with the patience of an inquisitor, he was outraged by trick substitutes, and when he had succeeded in stimulating it, he husbanded it, fed it, and protected it. Here was something new to most of the actors, something basic, something almost holy. It was revelation in the theatre; and Strasberg was its prophet."

Stanislavsky's second point of contact with the Group was more direct. In the spring of 1934 Harold Clurman and Stella Adler met with the Russian director, who was convalescing in Paris, and for more than five weeks Miss Adler worked with him to clarify those aspects of the System (in the version taught to her by Strasberg) that caused difficulty for her and other members of the Group. The result of her work, which she reported to the Group the following summer, was to deemphasize the importance Strasberg had placed on "affective memory"—which might be defined as the conscious attempt on the part of the actor to remember the circumstances surrounding an emotion-filled event from his real past in order to stimulate an emotion which he could use on the stage. Rather, Miss Adler said, Stanislavsky now thought that the key to true emotion was to be found in a full understanding of the "given circumstances"—the human problems—contained in the play itself. This shift of emphasis was critical, and it led directly to a diminution of Strasberg's hold

on the acting company and to his eventual resignation from the Group in 1935. On this issue, Meisner sided with Stella Adler, who was later to become a noted acting teacher and close friend, and affective or emotional memory plays no role in the system Meisner has evolved.

When an interviewer asked, "How were you introduced to the Stanislavsky System?" Meisner's reply was straightforward. "In the Group Theatre, by the pioneer leadership of Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg; from Stella Adler, who worked with Stanislavsky and to whom I listened attentively and rewardingly; and by the actor Michael Chekhov, who made me realize that truth, as in naturalism, was far from the whole truth. In him I witnessed exciting theatrical form with no loss of inner content, and I knew that I wanted this too. And finally, from the lucid and objective approach of [Ilya] Sudakov and [I.] Rapoport," Russian theorists whose writings stressed the importance of the reality of doing, the foundation of Meisner's system, and were circulated throughout the Group in an English translation in the 1930s.*

On November 30, 1936, the Group Theatre's new production, *Johnny Johnson (A Legend)*, by Paul Green opened. The play is remembered today primarily for its musical score, which was the first work the German expatriate Kurt Weill wrote in the United States. In the program for the play, under "Who's Who in the Cast," Sanford Meisner published a biographical note which is remarkable on two counts. First, it provides an insight into how he felt about his career as an actor; second, the final sentence announces the beginning of a new career: "Sanford Meisner (Captain Valentine) was so long entrusted with the carrying of a spear that it came as a great shock—but a pleasant one—to see him do a full-fledged characterization in 'Gold Eagle Guy.' [This work, by Melvin Levy, was produced in 1934.] He carried the

* Paul Gray, "The Reality of Doing," *Tulane Drama Review* (special edition, "Stanislavsky in America"), Fall 1964, 139.