Theatre Styles- Meisner/Adler Methods

**Who was Sanford Meisner?**

From a young age, Meisner knew he wanted to be an actor. After studying piano in the conservatory that later became the Juilliard School, he trained with the Theatre Guild. There, he met Harold Clurman—the eventual co-founder of The Group Theatre, an acting troupe that changed American acting history. Clurman introduced Meisner to Lee Strasberg, whose interpretations of [Stanislavsky’s System](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/the-definitive-guide-to-the-stanislavsky-acting-technique-65716/) would become the iconic acting technique known as [the Method](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/the-definitive-guide-to-method-acting-65816/).

In the Group’s ensemble, Meisner also met actor [Stella Adler](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/the-definitive-guide-to-the-stella-adler-acting-technique-66369/), who developed her own acting theories that were the opposite of Strasberg’s. Strasberg and Adler fundamentally disagreed about the Stanislavsky principle of affective memory; Strasberg emphasized it while Adler thought it manipulated and tortured actors. Adler’s and Strasberg’s disagreement split the Group’s ensemble. In the end, Meisner sided with Adler (who was also supported by Stanislavsky himself).

After Strasberg left the Group, the ensemble shifted focus away from affective memory and instead emphasized “given circumstances,” the conditions that influence a character’s decisions. The shift towards given circumstances made space for Meisner to put his unique spin on acting technique. While Adler trained actors to develop a rich imaginary life to animate the stakes of a scene’s given circumstances, Meisner felt that a mental approach was too internal. Instead, he insisted that an actor must have their actions provoked by fierce attention to their fellow actors, creating tension the audience can observe.

What is the Meisner technique?

The Meisner technique is centered around three tenets: emotional preparation, repetition, and improvisation. The logic of Meisner's method is that these components work hand-in-hand to help actors remain present and engaged with their scene partner instead of relying solely on rehearsal or memory.

Emotional Preparation

Meisner explained emotional preparation as doing whatever is necessary to enter a scene “emotionally alive.” He instructed actors to use whatever affected them personally to put themselves in their character’s emotional state. Actors could use imagined circumstances or real personal memories. But the prepared emotion was only to be played in a scene’s very first moment. After that, all action and reaction must be based organically on what other actors in the scene are doing. In this way, Meisner created a symbiotic ecosystem in a scene where actors build off one another.

Repetition

Meisner used repetition exercises to develop his students’ skills of observation and instinct. He believed that repetition gets actors out of their heads so they can rely on their organic instincts. Meisner taught that these authentic instincts, as provoked by another person in the live moment, capture realistic human behavior.

Improvisation

All the preparation ultimately leads to [improvisation](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/everything-know-improv-3218/) and flexibility in a performance. Meisner preached that an actor should not make any choices until something provokes them, thereby justifying their behavior.

Meisner’s repetition acting exercise

Meisner’s repetition exercise (which he called “the Word Repetition Game”) requires an actor to sit across from their scene partner and make an observation about them. The scene partner then repeats the observation back. This exercise aims to create a connection between the actors by ensuring that they are actively listening to one another. Meisner described it as a ping-pong game that becomes the foundation for emotional connection.

**Who was Stella Adler?**

Stella Adler was an American actor and acting teacher. She was on stage at an early age and grew to be a celebrated actor herself. Adler was also a fierce intellectual. Her professionalism, proficiency, and comprehensive knowledge of plays primed her to become one of the most influential acting teachers in American history.

In the 1920s, actors who trained at Konstantin Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre arrived stateside to perform and lead classes. For intellectually curious actors like Adler, the arrival of [Stanislavsky’s System](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/the-definitive-guide-to-the-stanislavsky-acting-technique-65716/) was a bolt of lightning.

The Group distinguished itself as a revolutionary ensemble. But Adler was frustrated with Strasberg’s interpretation of the System. Strasberg had never met Stanislavsky. But he insisted that his interpretation—which emphasized “[affective memory](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/sense-memory-use-58145/)”—was correct.  Adler felt that affective memory was torturous and warped younger actors in the Group. So she traveled to Paris to ask Stanislavsky himself—and prove Strasberg wrong.

In Paris, Stanislavsky clarified his teachings and shared how his thinking had evolved. Stanislavsky constantly refined his techniques, so his former students who taught in America were working with an outdated version of the System. The primary difference was affective memory; Stanislavsky had moved away from it altogether. The father of the System vindicated Adler’s interpretation of his techniques.

Adler became the only American acting guru who studied with the creator of the System and had his blessings. So, Adler returned to the United States and began teaching her Stanislavsky-approved theories.

What is the Stella Adler technique?

Adler’s technique is founded on an actor’s ability to imagine a character’s world. Adler believed that over-reliance on personal, emotional memories limited an actor’s range. Her technique encourages actors to expand their understanding of the world, to create compelling performances. Adler taught her actors to deliberately observe the textures, aesthetics, and sounds of everyday life, enabling them to conjure detailed and realistic mental images on stage. When those mental images are nuanced—and the actor can authentically express this imagery to the audience—the actor delivers a truthful performance.

In addition to imagination, the Adler technique also relies on:

* Discipline: Because Adler grew up in a family of professional actors, she believed acting was a lifestyle. This belief manifested itself in an undying insistence on discipline. To Adler, discipline required actors to maintain their health, stand by their commitments, and strengthen any weak points—from a quiet voice to a bad back—that could limit their performance.
* Text analysis: Adler taught her actors to [analyze the text](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/approach-script-analysis-58077/) for key elements that dictate the character’s nature. Adler also emphasized learning history and prized an actor’s ability to understand many time periods, languages, fashions, and geographic locations.
* Action: According to Adler, [an “action”](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/difference-action-objective-intention-63814/) is something one character does to another character to elicit a specific desired response. First, the actor must identify ways to convey the play’s circumstances by completing an action. Second, the actor’s actions must honestly reflect what the actor has observed from life.