
LETTERS

Strasberg vs. TDR

The Editors:

When the two issues on the Stanislavski System [T25 and T26] were published about a year ago, I had many corrections and comments to make. There were so many that it would have needed an equivalent amount of space; I therefore gave it up. However, in the light of some recent events, I realize that statements uncorrected tend to be accepted as fact. I therefore must request space in your magazine to correct some statements by your critic and your reviewer.

The critical chronology by Paul Gray [T26] is a valuable attempt. It is unfortunate that it was not carried out in a less biased fashion. Here are some statements which are not only errors but seem to derive from some peculiar bias. P. 32: "Vakhtangov's article, close to Stanislavski's ideas and containing little of Vakhtangov's own vivid theatricality, became the touchstone of Strasberg's work."

Mr. Gray's endeavor to suggest my ignorance only serves to reveal his own. There is no Vakhtangov article. The material is taken from a book on Vakhtangov and his studio by Boris Zakhava, which describes in detail Vakhtangov's work on his production. It is still the best description available of Vakhtangov's "own vivid theatricality," written by the man who was for many years the head of the Vakhtangov Theatre. In addition to this material, the Group also translated for its own use the book on the Second MAT with its discussion of the work of Vakhtangov and Michael Chekhov in that Studio, the book by B. Alpers on Meyerhold, most of the two-volume biography of Meyerhold, and other valuable material. Some of this

material is available in mimeographed form in the New York Public Library.

P. 38: "The Group failed [in 1936] to realize a projected musical by Kurt Weill." Now what kind of a fact is this supposed to be? In 1937 the Group Theatre did produce Paul Green and Kurt Weill's *Johnny Johnson*. I am proud to have directed the first American musical play with what John Anderson characterized as "extraordinary sensitiveness and power, with resourceful humor and vivid imagination . . . it has released the inventive gusto of the group." By not mentioning this and other facts, Mr. Gray is then able to make baseless statements about the work of the Group Theatre and say that it did not produce non-naturalistic plays. An interesting, critical but much more correct, evaluation is presented by John Gassner, who also happens to have seen the work of the Group Theatre, in his article, "Social Realism and Imaginative Theatre" (*Theatre Survey*, 1962).

Mr. Gray states on p. 41: "Clurman, Kazan and Lewis became notable directors. The others set up their own schools . . . or associated themselves with schools, as Meisner did at the Neighborhood Playhouse . . . thus the influence of the former MAT members was neutralized and Strasberg's interpretation of Stanislavski—now called the Method—prevailed." Now this sounds quite logical and consistent were it not for the fact that Mr. Gray throughout the article has constantly quoted from Mr. Lewis, Mr. Meisner and Miss Adler to show their strong disagreement with Strasberg's interpretation. How this could lead to the opposite result is really something for Mr. Gray's imagination to explain.

P. 49, Mr. Gray: "A Private Moment at the Studio: Enter two actors, one male, one

female, both dressed in abbreviated attire. One property—talcum powder. Action—they powder each other, oblivious to the audience, for nearly a half-hour” and other tid-bits of like spicyness. What can one say to such ignorance and deliberative distortion as Mr. Gray here reveals? In the first place, this is not a “private moment.” In the second place, why doesn’t Mr. Gray if he’s really interested reveal what Mr. Strasberg commented on this scene. Argument on this level seems to me frankly useless, and unbecoming if not to Mr. Gray certainly to a magazine like TDR.

There are other statements to be corrected or that should have been checked by anyone interested in a factual recitation. Mr. Gray mentions Mr. Lewis’s description of the incident with *Awake and Sing*, but somehow forgets to point out that it was Mr. Odets who in the 40’s returned to work with Mr. Strasberg in a continuous association. He mentions the opinions of some of the members of the Group on Mr. Strasberg but somehow conveniently forgets to mention that Mr. Strasberg was later—but before the demise of the Group in 1940—approached with the request to return in order to ignite some of the previous artistic enthusiasm. I am not sure these details have much to do with a critical chronology but since Mr. Gray thought they did it seems to me that these and other facts should have been stated.

There are many other corrections but these do not refer to the Group Theatre or my own work and must therefore be left for clarification at a later occasion. Nonetheless, let me repeat that the essay remains a valuable and useful first effort. It is too bad it could not have been an unbiased one.

Your critic’s [Gordon Rogoff in T26] article on “Lee Strasberg: Burning Ice” can claim no such excuse. It is so completely personal, based on hearsay, rumor, and insinuations, that it is difficult to know where to begin. Let me attempt to deal with some declarations that pretend to be statements of fact.

On p. 145, your critic builds a veritable edifice supposed to lead towards an indictment of “Strasberg’s underground message . . . composed of studied omission, marketplace values, darkly inspired insecurities, and downright spiritual paralysis.” The proof: the omission of “serious discussion on

Brecht” and the presence of a “silent five years” between the time when I first saw *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and when, through some devious process and the passage of an “indecently long” time, I finally (in 1961) gave my imprimatur. This is a complete fabrication. As long ago as 1956, when I returned from England, I shared my observations in long description and analysis. The tapes are available at the Wisconsin Theatre Center and the recent publication, *Strasberg at the Actors Studio*, contains a long extract for anyone who is interested. The whole thing is a hoax palmed off by your reviewer.

P. 146: your reviewer proceeds to illustrate the “commercial impulses that are remarkable only in that they are almost always wrong. *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, said Strasberg at a time when it seemed as if it would be the Studio Theatre’s first production, is the kind of play the Studio should do even though it would never be commercial.” In the first place, this should if anything be proof against the marketplace mentality he imputes to me. But in addition there is just a slight distortion, but significant and deliberate. For my feeling was that *Virginia Woolf* could be successful. But my point was that the Studio should participate in the production *even if* it would never be commercial. The same dubious logic is exhibited in the next example cited by your reviewer.

P. 147: “When Zeffirelli’s production of *The Lady of the Camellias* was about to open on Broadway . . . he [Strasberg] demanded an entire change in the script’s development because he . . . knew best what succeeds in the commercial theatre.” “The production,” adds your reviewer, “ran for twelve performances.” I don’t know how many lies and distortions can be packed into one statement. Does your reviewer mean to imply that the changes were made? If so, it is a lie. Is he saying that they weren’t made and the production didn’t last and is he therefore accusing me of correctly judging the situation? In that case I would have to plead guilty. But even here I must admit I am not as stupid and naïve as your reviewer. I doubt that these changes would have had the desired effect. Despite my appreciation of Zeffirelli’s talents and his exciting ideas, the production did not achieve the results he had visualized. But what can one say of the pretense about inside knowledge, the reliance

on rumor and downright distortion and innuendo exhibited by your reviewer?

On p. 132, Mr. Rogoff states his thesis: "Considerations of joining Lincoln Center, though at the time an issue between Kazan and the Lincoln Center Board and also between Kazan and Strasberg, were not really the point... Was he [Strasberg] willing to turn preparation into performance?" The imputation of this is the insinuation that I was not in favor of going forward to create a theatre. I must brand this an outright lie. By 1959, when Mr. Rogoff's association [with the Actors Studio] started, we had already been in communication with Lincoln Center for over two years, had presented a plan based on the concept of a large enough company to be a floating permanent company, an idea developed by me (and later utilized by the Actors Studio Theatre) of an American repertoire together with the world classics. To imply that my public activity and known opinions are not serious is a libel supported only by his own supercilious and condescending statement that "a man in power who cannot move... is a figure of

grave concern." Your reviewer has a right to his opinions but not to libelous statements of my own point of view.

Your reviewer now comes to the final point, in which he is joined by Mr. Gray and more recently by Mr. Gilman. "Once willing or being dragged into the battle, what would he [Strasberg] reveal?" It is no secret that they didn't like the production of *The Three Sisters* directed by me. They have a right to their opinion, but to imply that this was widely shared is to use the technique of the "big lie." The production received such reactions as Jerry Tallmer, in the *New York Post*: "Lee Strasberg proved that he could direct a play—if the right play—with all the creative truth and strength a human being can command... I do not think I have ever seen 16 or however many actors walking a stage with more valid and interrelated inner lives than those Mr. Strasberg has elicited from his brilliant cast." Douglas Watt in the *Daily News*: "The Actors Studio Theatre production of *The Three Sisters* is a stunning achievement... serving notice that there is still room for artistry in depth. Lee Strasberg, the Studio's artistic director, has staged the play—his first venture in this capacity in some years—and he is the true hero of the occasion." Norman Nadel in the *New York World-Telegram*: "*The Three Sisters* conveys an abundance of meaning and feeling beyond anything you might suspect from a reading or from most productions of this classic." Howard Taubman in the *New York Times*: "Under Lee Strasberg's direction, the Actors Studio Theatre is doing the best work of its youthful career... there is an admirable sense of unity in the production."

This reaction was reinforced after the visit of the MAT, when some compared the two productions to our favor. One of the most favorable reactions came from a reviewer abroad, uninvolved in the quarrels about the Method, who, comparing mine with many productions she had seen including the MAT one stated:

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up a lamp, as it were, to genius, was achieved on the London stage a quarter of a century ago when Michel St. Denis directed Chekhov's "The Three Sisters". It is only now, 28 years later that I have seen a production which, besides being almost perfectly cast throughout, equals that of St. Denis in its marvellous evocation of changing mood and season and the nuances of human relationships, of gaiety, hope and frustration, that parallel the springs and autumns of the Russian landscape. (Audrey Williamson in *The Scotsman*.)

Mr. Rogoff goes further. He proceeds to rewrite the past, of which he has no personal experience. He uses a perfectly sound statement of Stark Young's in reference to my direction of *A Kiss for Cinderella*. Is this his summation of my work? Has he or Mr. Gray or Mr. Gilman read the reviews of my productions in the Group Theatre? Has he examined the reaction to the first production directed by me outside the Group Theatre—the production directed for the Theatre Guild—the production directed for the ANTA theatre and the first production I directed for the Actors Studio Theatre? To

disregard facts, to use a collective "we" when what is meant is "they" is a common technique in politics but one somewhat unexpected in theatre discussion. That TDR would condone such a procedure is hard to explain. Since your magazine has done me the honor of singling me out for a special article—though a somewhat dubious one—perhaps you will permit me to make some short but basic remarks.

1. Any discussion of the Stanislavski System which fails to relate it to the historic concern with the problems of actors throughout the world reveals ignorance of what is involved. To forget that at the same time there took place the discussions between Irving and Coquelin, the confrontation of Duse and Bernhardt, the inquiry of Archer's *Mask and Faces*, and that this was preceded by equivalent incidents in previous periods, is to treat the Stanislavski effort as a special and peculiar and individual contribution arising out of particular Russian conditions. This precludes any possibility of understanding what it is all about.



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2. The formulation for understanding Stanislavski's effort must start from his own statement of what he was seeking:

All that has been written about the theatre is only philosophizing, very interesting, very deep, it is true, that speaks beautifully of the results desirable to reach in art, or criticism of the success or failure of results already reached. All these works are valuable and necessary, but not for the actual practical work in the theatre, for they are silent on how to reach certain results, on what is necessary to do firstly, secondly, thirdly, and so forth, with a beginner, or what is to be done with an experienced and spoiled actor. What exercises are needed by him? What scales, what arpeggi for the development of creative feeling and experience are required by the actor? All books and works of the theatre are silent on this score. There is no practical textbook. (*My Life in Art*, pp. 166–167)

3. Failure to separate Stanislavski's approach to the actor from his own directorial achievements leads only to confusion. Without this it is impossible to understand how Vakhtangov could try to combine Stanislavski's approach to acting with Meyerhold's ideas of the theatre.

4. It is essential to stress the relation between theory and practice. To compare or oppose the opinions of someone no matter how brilliant with those based on actual achievement as embodied say in the work of the Group Theatre is to make a mockery of any discussion. It leads only to confusion. This seems to me the basic weakness of Mr. Gray's critical chronology, as also of Christine Edwards' useful compilation, *The Stanislavski Heritage*, recently published.

5. Finally, you may be interested in a note on the "Theory of Physical Actions." For an initial understanding it is important to remember, as Miss Moore has stated: "Though it was at the end of his career that Stanislavski gave the name to this key to the subconscious, it was not a late addition to his System. His teachings on action impregnate the whole technique from beginning to end; it is the leitmotiv of the whole System" (*The Stanislavski System*, p. 14). Secondly, it is important to realize that there are two versions of Stanislavski's ideas. One occurs in the prompt book of *Othello*, pp. 184–185.

An actor who prepared his part and play for years, who has endowed every moment of the play with a whole poem of his imagination, who has experienced the illusion of its scenery and lighting in his mind, who is fully conscious of his make-up and costumes, is in constant contact with other actors living in the same world and creating the same atmosphere and then, stimulated by the audience, reaches the highest fervour—can one imagine that such an actor, if given a task suitable to his situation on the stage, would remain cold in its performance?

The second statement is in the essay, "On the Theory of Physical Action." This essay was first published in 1948, some years after Stanislavski died. It is this second statement which is the basis for those who maintain that it represents an essential revision of his system. The publication of this essay led to a serious discussion of its significance in the Soviet theatrical magazines. For those unable to consult these in Russian, some of these contributions and other valuable discussions of the Stanislavski system can be consulted in German translation. I am surprised that so little attention has been paid to them by all the American experts.

Lee Strasberg

In reply:

Once, during a discussion on the claims, possibilities, and counter-claims of historical drama, Robert Lowell spoke quietly and unhysterically on the nature of facts. (The subject was *The Deputy*, with argument flying from Kazin to Sontag and back again over the validity of Hochhuth's portrait of the Pope.) He drew a distinction between two families: the *unmediated* fact and the *mediated* fact, the first so nakedly observable as to lie beyond disputation, the second so heavy with ambivalence as to be arguable forever.

I suggest that when Mr. Strasberg uses such words as libel, fabrication, hoax, lie, hearsay, and rumor so indiscriminately and interchangeably, he is referring not to the language of law courts, but to the large body of mediated facts in my article intended to support an argument which, by its nature, is a mediated fact of its own: namely that

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Mr. Strasberg has been less than an auspicious force in American theatre. In short, his use of language here is no more precise, considered, or disciplined than it is—as I think I have demonstrated—in the classroom.

For the record, then, my article stands as written, with these few minor amplifications. First, when I referred to Strasberg on Brecht in 1961, I was referring to the meeting at the Morosco Theatre where he said nothing to convey the impression that he was speaking of his *second* viewing, five years after the first, of the Berlin Ensemble. The point was that he spoke of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* production as if he had just seen it that past summer. But it wasn't in the repertory that summer. What struck me forcefully at the time was that, in my days at the Actors Studio, the subject of Brecht was kept at bay from the actors, *as if* to raise it would be to introduce not a challenge, but a threat to the Strasberg positions. In this regard, then, there is one *unmediated* fact that I omitted in my article. In the winter of 1959–60, I had a translation made of Brecht's brief notes, *Some of the Things that can be Learned from Stanislavski*, at that time unavailable in English [see T25, p. 75]. It wasn't that I thought Brecht's points startling, or even very sophisticated, only that they seemed relevant to the work of the Studio, and could stand usefully as the basis for a discussion (and discussion was just one of the pedagogical elements I wished to bring into the Studio's life). When I presented this translation and suggestion to Mr. Strasberg, his answer was—and I quote from my-say, not hearsay—"Don't bother, it isn't necessary."

Second, nothing is more mediated as a fact than a critic's opinion. Even in this context, however, Mr. Strasberg might have spared himself a plea on behalf of *The Three Sisters* based on quotations from the gentlemen he mentions. What mediates between a good and bad critic, after all, are the relatively large issues of intelligence, taste, and imagination. Mr. Strasberg's production of *The Three Sisters* may have been the victim of an organized highbrow conspiracy in both New York and London, but to so argue, one would have to marshal an army of unmediated facts. And this Mr. Strasberg plainly fails to do. Certainly, if he is happy with his favorable notices, he has every right to be—and indeed, is welcome to them.

Finally, when I wrote of "a man in power who cannot move," I was not questioning his personal images, his dreams, his plans, or his good intentions, only his capacity to act on them. Examples are not difficult to find. For the moment, however, let one suffice. My article, so personal and so mediated in its facts, and, therefore, an obvious challenge for an immediate answer, was published in T26. Mr. Strasberg's reply (which arrived too late for publication in the last issue) is appearing here in T33. Allowing for the peculiarities of any quarterly publishing schedule, this gave Mr. Strasberg the period in which five issues were published to write and post his answer. That is to say, some fifteen months intervened between his anger and his action. And I suggest that this is not an unusual instance of the rhythm in which he moves.

Gordon Rogoff

In further reply:

I welcome additions to the Stanislavski chronology, which was difficult to compile. Robert MacGregor's additions (T28) concerning Oliver M. Saylor were particularly important. The work was put together over a period of eight months as a service for those of us interested in how and with what alterations or deviations the Stanislavski method of acting came to America. The response to the article has generally been an appreciation of the service rendered. Mr. Strasberg's letter is distressing since he contributes more justification of his personal ego than he does facts. Nobody, not even Lee Strasberg, can control or adjust the criticism of his contemporaries to suit him.

The critical chronology I assembled made no attempt to be unbiased—it *did* attempt to be fair. Mr. Strasberg was referred to as a successful teacher of acting, not a successful director. It is regrettable now to discover him reduced to the level of quoting reviewers from the New York City daily newspapers in defending his directorial abilities. As it happens, there are a great many doubts concerning Strasberg's directorial talents. He refers to his Actors' Studio Theatre production of *The Three Sisters*. This is essentially the same production, give or take a few ringers (like George C. Scott), which was

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critically damned when it appeared in London. It was referred to by some British critics as one of the worst American productions ever imported by Great Britain. Serious doubts about Strasberg's capability as a director also persisted during the days of the Group Theatre. Lee Strasberg mentions *Johnny Johnson* as an example of his directorial skills as well as to exemplify the Group Theatre's success with a non-naturalistic play. However, his chief colleague, Harold Clurman, announces in *The Fervent Years* that the quality of this production certainly alarmed the membership of the company, who "felt that the directorate had been at fault in the handling of the play."

The chronology recognized beyond a doubt Lee Strasberg's enormous contribution and influence as a teacher of acting, which has only recently declined. The major critical point the chronology did make was to indicate that Mr. Strasberg had misrepresented, for his own limited purposes, the work of Eugen Vakhtangov in this country. For the critical reader, a close appraisal of Nikolai

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Gorchakov's collection of Vakhtangov's notes on his training of actors and on his *mise-en-scène* conceptions for Chekhov's *The Wedding* and Gozzi's *Turandot* (a production which Strasberg saw) will reveal this misrepresentation without doubt. These notes are collected in the volume, *The Vakhtangov School of Stage Art*. Because his letter indicates that he is persisting in this misrepresentation, one is led to wonder about Mr. Strasberg's basic integrity as a theoretician. Vakhtangov's work was dedicated to the internal justification of wide open and vivid theatrical gestures and imagery—a phenomenon hitherto unknown to Lee Strasberg or to the method-oriented practitioner in the American theatre.

Paul Gray

Svendsen's Brecht

The Editors:

Juris Svendsen on Brecht's *Eduard II* [T31] did a great service in drawing the attention of the playwright's potential American audience to this often neglected early play—a play that easily measures up to *Baal* and *In the Jungle* and deserves better than being dispatched as an adaptation of Marlowe, as it happens so frequently. One might argue with Mr. S.'s concluding paragraphs. There is certainly more to the enforced composure of Brecht's characters, in general, than the "fear of castration." Aren't we ever going to abandon psychoanalytic patterns in literary criticism—the least interesting approach to the most inconsequential discoveries?

There are a few errors in Mr. S.'s English rendition of quoted lines. P. 166: a *Gerber* is a tanner, in German, and the alley in which the King puked is a "tanner's alley," rather than "Gerber Alley." On the same page, "A woman crawled across his liver" is a puzzling verbatim rendition of a German idiom the equivalent of which is "A woman got his goat." On p. 168: "Because some huts still manage to stand their ground before a dog" (?) should read "Because today some hats are doffed to the ground before a dog" (*i.e.*, some people show disgusting signs of