



## Teaching Acting Technique and Building a Character Through Cinema

Curriculum Unit 95.02.09

by Carol Penney

### I. INTRODUCTION

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This curriculum unit will be directed toward second and third year acting students at The Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School. Two prerequisites for this course are: (1) possession of basic acting skills and experience, and (2) strong commitment both to the individual study of acting and to the concept of theatre as a collaborative art form. Prior formal classwork will have included Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, Edward Albee, and August Wilson. My students will have a strong background in improvisation, story-telling, and play and character analysis. My main focus will be an emphasis on acting technique and building a character based on what has come to be known as the Stanislavski system.

The acting style of most American actors is based on this system (known as American Method Acting). Students of acting need a thorough knowledge of this style of acting since they see it every day on American television and in American movies. The students especially enjoy acting scenes from films. Just this spring, they produced a student-acted, student-directed production that included scenes from *COMING TO AMERICA*, *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES*, and *THE BREAKFAST CLUB*.

I plan to teach acting technique and building a character through the practical application of some of the tenets of American Method Acting. This course of study will revolve around the films of Marlon Brando, who is considered to be the quintessential American movie actor. Three of Brando's films will be viewed and studied intensively in regard to building a character. These films are: *ON THE WATERFRONT*, *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*, and *VIVA ZAPATA!*. All three films are directed by Elia Kazan, one of the founders of The Actors Studio, where Brando studied "the Method." *ON THE WATERFRONT* will be studied in conjunction with the final shooting script, which is the last draft of the screenplay submitted before filming begins. *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE: ACTING EDITION*, the playbook for performers published by Dramatists Play Service will be studied. This acting edition is a reprint of the 1947 Broadway production's final, official promptbook. It contains detailed accounts of movement, behavior, and inflection. Kazan's famous set of notes on his concepts and planning of the production contained in *DIRECTORS ON DIRECTING* will be of value to our work. These notes also describe his approach to helping the actors develop their characters. The film of *VIVA ZAPATA!* will be studied along with selected material on the life and times of Emiliano Zapata and a novelette of *VIVA ZAPATA!*

Through the study of the tenets of American Method Acting, the students will learn to critique the acting in the films, as well as their own acting, perform scenes from the films, videotape their work, and develop acting technique through Method acting exercises.

American Method Acting originated in Russia with Konstantin Stanislavski, who opened the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. The Moscow Art Theatre is primarily associated with the productions of the plays of Anton Chekhov and the beginning of Russian dramatic realism.

By observing himself as an actor as well as the other actors with whom he worked, and more especially by studying the great dramatic artists in Russia and abroad, Stanislavski developed an approach to the teaching of acting that became known as the "Stanislavski system." The effects of his teaching were felt in America in the 1920 s when Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, both alumni of the Moscow Art Theatre school, emigrated to America and established The American Laboratory Theatre.

Stanislavski didn't invent his system; he investigated and charted the acting process that good actors used intuitively. He systematized that process so that it could be studied and developed consciously. He was interested in how to maintain a consistent performance and how to be a conscious human being on stage. The Method is a pragmatic way of working to create both the interior life and the logical behavior of a character, a way that can be taught, practiced, monitored, and corrected.

Using method tenets, the students will learn to analyze the work of the actors in the films. They will also look at how the actors play the subtext. According to Stanislavski, an important aspect of building a character pertains to the subtext. The subtext is the meaning behind the words of the text. For Stanislavski, the subtext is the inward "life of a human spirit. . ." that constantly flows under the words of a role. Words are only a part of a given moment on stage, and are related to thoughts, bodily expressions, and images. Actors need to see images and transmit those images to the acting partner. Images need to grow in detail and become richer.

Questions are asked by the actor. Why did the playwright write these words at this time in the play? To make the playwright's words his own the actor needs to know why the author gave these lines to the character: what is my purpose in saying these lines? How do I make that purpose known? Under what conditions would I think, behave, do, and perceive as this character does? As the actor I must be willing to submerge myself in the life of the character.

Some of the tenets of Method Acting are: verisimilitude, seeking logical character behavior, justification and super-objective, expression of true emotion, drawing on the self, ensemble acting, improvisation, and use of objects.

Students will use these tenets as the basis for discussing the acting in the films and film clips that we will be viewing. Through acting exercises based on these tenets, the students will learn specific acting technique in order to portray character. We will also explore some of the fundamental differences between acting for the stage and acting for film.

## II. PROCEDURES

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In order to begin my work with the students, I plan to open up a discussion on the tenets of Method Acting and have the students work on acting exercises used by professional acting teachers.

A great deal has been said and written about what has come to be known as "the Method." It is the preeminent acting style of American actors. It would be very difficult to improve on the following definition of the tenets of Method acting. <sup>1</sup>

1. The actor's essential task is to reproduce a credible reality-verisimilitude-on stage or screen, founded on acute observations of the world. Method teachers do not hold that this restricts actors to any one style of production, but this task does closely link the Method with American naturalism, which has the same aim.

2. The Method justifies all stage behavior by establishing its psychological soundness. To provide a unifying motivation for this behavior, the actor determines a single overall purpose for the character. This is commonly known as a "super-objective," or "throughline," or "spine." This larger purpose is divided into smaller,actable units called "objectives" or "actions."

3. Great value is placed on the expression of genuine emotion, which may be evoked through a technique called "affective memory." <sup>2</sup> (Affective memory has become an extremely controversial device that has, in its most popular version, "emotional recall," split the community of Method teachers.)

3(a) The central purpose of the creative actor's work is the cultivation of "life of our inner feelings." According to Boleslavsky, this involves the development and use of the actor's "affective memory": the recalling and re-experiencing of previously felt emotions.

Stanislavski developed exercises with which the actor, by recalling the sensory details that accompanied an emotional experience, could entice the emotion from his subconscious and re-experience it. Madame Ouspenskaya used to call the actor's affective memories "golden keys," which unlocked some of the greatest moments in acting.

In the last four pages of the "Overture, section of SWANN'S WAY, Marcel Proust describes a perfect example of the affective-memory phenomenon and how it is linked to particular sensory keys that can unlock long-forgotten feelings. <sup>3</sup> The novel's narrator recalls how his mother served him some tea with "those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines.'" He takes a sip of the tea into which he has dipped a piece of Madeleine and suddenly experiences an exquisite sense of joy. He tries another sip of the tea and cake and then another, but the sensation seems to diminish. He considers for a moment, then concentrates on the *sense memory* of the taste of "the crumb of Madeleine soaked in a decoction of lime-flowers," and immediately a flood of reminiscences is released: he remembers the Sunday mornings at Combray, when as a child, his aunt Leonie gave him a piece of the Madeleine she had dipped in her own cup of lime-flower tea, the re-experiencing of which unfolds in the complex of recollections that becomes REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST.

There are many examples in theatre history of performers making unconscious use of their affective memories. For example, Edmund Kean was truly emotionally moved when he picked up the skull of Yorick in the gravediggers, scene in HAMLET. It seems each time he held Yorick's skull he would be reminded of a beloved uncle who had given him his first lessons in

acting and who had introduced him to Shakespeare. By this example we see that the actor had a real emotional response that came from his connection with the play and the character.

Specific acting exercises are used only as a *last resort*. The given circumstances of the play, character, and action are of primary importance. After the performer analyzes his part to see what feeling or emotion is necessary at a given moment in a scene, he searches his own life for a remembered feeling or emotion that parallels the former. Using sensory exercises the actor retrieves the parallel emotion from his affective memory. The actor is not to be concerned with how the emotion will manifest itself, only with finding it and creating the sensory realities that will unlock the memory. When the affective memory is tapped, the mental processes set in motion do cause psycho physical responses. They stimulate the player's physical and mental being with remembered sensations and emotions that color his or her behavior and vocal expression in ways that both the actor and the audience experience as real and exciting. This is what gives fine acting its "aliveness" and verisimilitude.

The Method teacher Robert Lewis has this definition of affective memory: <sup>4</sup>

The theory is that if, quietly relaxed, you think back over a certain incident in your life which moved you strongly at the time, and if you can remember and recreate in your mind the physical circumstances of that moment (where you were, who was there, what happened, the time of day, the place, surroundings) and start reliving it . . . it is possible that a feeling similar to what you felt at that time will recur.

4. Each actor's own personality is not only the model for the creation of character, but the source from which all psychological truth must be distilled. Here's what Brando has to say about "use of self". <sup>5</sup>

People often say that an actor "plays" a character well but that's an amateurish notion. Developing a characterization is not merely a matter of putting on makeup and a costume and stuffing Kleenex in your mouth. That's what actors used to do, and then called it characterization. In acting everything comes out of *what* you are or some aspect of *who* you are. Everything is a part of your experience. We all have a spectrum of emotions in us. It is a broad one, and it is the actor's job to reach into this assortment of emotions and experience for the ones that are appropriate for his character and the story. Through practice and experience, I learned how to put myself into different moods and states of mind by thinking about things that made me laugh or be angry, sad, or outraged; I developed a mental technique that allowed me to address certain parts of myself, select an emotion, and send something akin to an electrical impulse from my brain to my body that enabled me to experience the emotion. If I had to feel worried, I'd think about something that worried me; if I was supposed to laugh, I thought about something that was hilarious.

5. Improvisation is encouraged as a rehearsal aid, and even in some cases as part of performance, in an effort to keep the acting spontaneous, and thus lifelike.

6. The Method promotes intimate communication between actors in a scene, thus striving toward the performance ideal of true, unified ensemble acting. Some acting exercises developed for this purpose are: the mirror, group use of imaginary objects, group movement exercises, and improvisations.

Ensemble acting does mean more than just consistently good acting by all cast members. It generally implies that everyone on stage is acting in exactly the same style, and it requires concentrated group scenes. Unfortunately, the history of American drama and film contains few examples of it. It may be the sad case that for American actors, who strive to create theater in a highly commercial context that supports the star system, moments of intimate

connection between individuals are often the closest they come to ensemble acting. <sup>6</sup>  
7. The use of objects is stressed both for their symbolic value and as reminders of the solid, material world.

### **III. OBJECTIVES:**

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My overall objectives for this unit are:

- To increase the student's critical thinking skills in analyzing the theme of the films and the actor's characterization.
- To develop the student's acting skills through exercises designed to encourage the actor's continual search for logical character behavior.
- To develop the student's acting skills through specific exercises and scene study that focuses on the tenets of Method acting and the understanding of subtext in character development.
- To develop the student's writing skills through the writing of character analysis and by keeping a journal of notes and ideas pertaining to film characterization.
- To develop the student's awareness of fundamental differences between acting for film and acting on stage.

## IV. CASE STUDIES of FILMS

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### A. ON THE WATERFRONT

(1.)Background:

#### **Credits 7**

Screenplay by Budd Schulberg; based on an original story by Mr. Schulberg and suggested by the series of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles by Malcolm Johnson; directed by Elia Kazan; produced by Sam Spiegel; cinematography by Boris Kaufman; a Horizon picture presented by Columbia. The film also features Leonard Bernstein's first film score. Filmed: 1954.

Terry Malloy-Marlon Brando

Edie Doyle-Eva Marie Saint

Father Barry-Karl Malden

Johnny Friendly-Lee J. Cobb

Charley Malloy-Rod Steiger

Pop Doyle-John Hamilton

Kayo Dugan-Pat Henning

Glover-Leif Erickson

Big Mac-James Westerfield

Truck-Tony Galento

Trillio-Tami Mauriello

Barney-Abe Simon

Mott-John Heldabrand

Moose-Rudy Bond

Luke-Don Blackman

Jimmy-Arthur Keegan

J-P-Barry Macollum

Specs-Mike O'Dowd

Gillette-Marty Balsam

Slim-Fred Gwynne

Tommy-Thomas Handley

Mrs. Collins-Anne Hegira

*ON THE WATERFRONT* won Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Actor (Brando), Best Supporting Actress (Saint), Directing, Writing, Cinematography, Art Direction, and Film Editing.

Included here are excerpts of reviews of Brando's work. <sup>8</sup>

Mr. Brando has a number of astonishing tour de force to his credit but this must surely be his subtlest performance-the slow awakening, the groping for the truth is brilliantly done.

-Fred Majdalany, TIME and TIDE

His basically decent, inarticulate dumb-ox is high art-meticulous, subtle character acting. To take an eye off him for a second is to miss something vital and telling.

-Stephen Watts, SUNDAY CHRONICLE

The movie has its roots in Malcolm Johnson's Pulitzer Prize winning series of investigative newspaper articles about organized crime on the New York docks in 1949. The film is in the tradition of the 1930s gangster movie with a social message. Bud Schulberg's screenplay is a powerful indictment of the way the mob corrupted the union, controlling all employment, extorting crippling dues, and murdering anyone who stood up to the mob bosses. *ON THE WATERFRONT* remains a powerful film because, even though it-has pretensions to social commentary, its subtext is the revelation of character through psychological motivation.

Marlon Brando plays Terry Malloy, an ex-prize fighter who is the mob's errand boy and hanger-on. He realizes the depth of union corruption only after he unwittingly sets up the killing of a young longshoreman who is about to "sing" to the Waterfront Crime Commission. The murder and his own involvement in it finally begin to awaken his conscience.

The enduring qualities of *ON THE WATERFRONT* derive from its inexhaustible stores of psychological material more than any pretension to social commentary. The confrontation between the mob and the longshoremen is no more than a moving and motivating background for the profound inner conflicts that beset each character's conscience. These conflicts remain alive and memorable for us in part because they are our own, and because the film leaves them deliberately unresolved. Father Barry cannot reconcile personal principles with church protocol. Edie cannot choose between honoring the memory of her murdered brother and loving the man who betrayed him. Terry Malloy believes until the last moments of the film that he can remain simultaneously loyal to his brother, his employer, and himself.

Kazan emphasizes the hopelessness of Terry's case by consistently focusing the camera's attention on Brando's face. The halting progress of the ethical debate is marked when Brando's eyes narrow, when his face falls slack, or when he withdraws a hesitant smile.

Kazan had been very much influenced by Stella Adler, and what she brought back from meeting with Stanislavski. Stella Adler was a noted actor of the stage in the 1940s. She studied at The American Laboratory

Theatre with Boleslavski and was a member of The Group Theatre, along with Kazan and Lee Strasberg. She was Marlon Brando's acting teacher.

Kazan was considered to be an actor's director (he was an actor with The Group Theatre) and always tried to create spontaneity and the illusion of reality. Most of the film was shot on location on the docks in Hoboken, New Jersey, where longshoremen were hired as extras. The weather during the shooting was very cold and Kazan was happy with the fact that the actor's breath showed on film.

In Marlon Brando's autobiography <sup>9</sup>, *Brando: SONGS MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME*, he illustrated how Kazan worked by citing one of the most famous two-character scenes in film history, the taxi-cab scene. In this scene, Brando, as Terry Malloy, and Rod Steiger, who plays his brother, Charlie, a corrupt union leader, is trying to improve Terry's position with the mob. As Brando describes the rehearsal of the scene, Charlie has been told to set Terry up for a hit because he is going to testify before the Waterfront Commission about mob corruption of the union.

The script called for Steiger to pull a gun and threaten Terry. If Terry didn't change his mind about testifying at the hearings, he would be killed. Brando complained to Kazan that it was totally unbelievable that his brother, who had looked after him for thirty years, would suddenly stick a gun in his ribs and threaten to kill him. He and Kazan argued about this until finally Kazan said, "All right, wing one." Brando and Steiger improvised the scene, changing it completely.

Kazan was convinced and printed the scene. Brando, describing the improvisation says, <sup>10</sup>

When my brother flashed the gun in the cab, I looked at it, then up at him in disbelief. I didn't believe for a second that he would ever pull the trigger. I felt sorry for him. Then Rod started talking about my boxing career. If I'd had a better manager, he said, things would have gone better for me in the ring. "He brought you along too fast." "That wasn't *him*, Charlie," I said, "it was *you*. Remember that night at the Garden you came down to my dressing room and said, 'Kid, this isn't your night.' MY NIGHT! I could have taken Wilson apart. So what happened? He gets the shot at the title outdoors at a ballpark and what do I get? A one-way ticket to Palookaville. You was my brother, Charlie, you should have looked out for me a little bit. You should have taken care of me better so I didn't have to take the dives for the short-end money . . . . I could have had class. I could have been a contender. I could have been *somebody* instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it. It was you, Charlie. . ."

Brando goes on to say that when the movie came out he was credited with a marvelous job of acting. But he believes that the scene was "actor-proof," and that it demonstrated how audiences often do much of the acting themselves in an effectively told story.

It couldn't miss because almost everyone believes he could have been a contender, that he could have been somebody if held been dealt different cards by fate, so when people say this in the film, they identified with it. That's the magic of theater; everybody in the audience became Terry Malloy, a man who'd had the guts not only to stand up to the Mob, but to say, "I'm a bum. Let's face it; that's what I am. . ."

## (2.) STRATEGIES:

I have chosen four lessons that focus on the practical use of Method acting exercises utilizing the film ON THE WATERFRONT. The film and The final shooting script will be our text.



LESSON ONE: To encourage ensemble acting, the students will begin their acting exercises on the film by doing sensory exercises (with imaginary and real objects) and by doing first reading exercises. These lessons will combine ensemble exercises, sensory exercises, and improvisations. Lesson One will be outlined in Sample Lesson Plan One.

LESSON TWO: Improvisation, as we've seen, was the basis for the taxi-cab scene. In Lesson Two, the students will discuss the immediate given circumstances for the characters of Terry and Charlie: they will improvise what each character is doing before the written scene begins. Students will also improvise the taxi-cab scene by studying the scene in the film and in the final shooting script.

LESSON THREE: Lesson Three will include the scene of Terry walking Edie home. This scene also has improvisational elements. Apparently, Eva Marie Saint accidentally dropped her glove in this scene. Therefore, all of Brando's business with the glove was improvised. Students will view the scene, discuss each character's behavior, and look at the use of objects (the glove in particular). Working through tenet number seven, students will discuss the value of objects in the scene, both as behavioral tools and symbolic tools. Students will act the scene.

LESSON FOUR: Lesson Four will include a larger group improvisation. Johnny Friendly's Bar and poolroom office will be explored in a "place exercise." After reviewing the first scene inside the Bar, students will set up the place. Each student will enter the place as a character from the movie or as an imaginary character who might have been in this scene. Each character will come in with an objective.

## SAMPLE LESSON PLAN ONE

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### LESSON ONE:

#### *Ensemble and Object Exercises*

The exercises and improvisations we make use of will primarily be designed to encourage communication between the actors, work with imaginary and real objects, and explore group improvisations.

#### **Materials**

The class will work from the film and the final shooting script of ON THE WATERFRONT. In this lesson plan we will work on scene 12 & 13. We will use facsimile props and objects that would be true to the scene (i.e. beer mugs, beer bottles, etc.)

#### **Description:**

Scene 12: Terry and Tommy are on the rooftop with Terry's pigeons. Edie is hurrying across the rooftops toward Terry. The actors will work through the dialogue and actions of the scene with special attention on handling imaginary pigeons and pigeon eggs. After one work-through with the dialogue, they will improvise the scene.

1. Actors will memorize scene 12 and continue rehearsing paying special attention to the use of the imaginary objects in the scene.

2. After work on the above scene, the actors will improvise Edie and Terry walking to the neighborhood bar. This scene is not in the film or script. The actors are finding the life of the characters from their own imaginations. This improvised scene is the "immediate previous circumstance" for scene 13.

Scene 13: In this scene Terry and Edie are having their first date. The place is a neighborhood bar. They are sitting at a table and Edie is having her first drink. After reading the script, the actors will watch the scene in the film.

The actors playing Terry and Edie and the bartender will begin the scene with scripts on the bar table. The place will be set up as close to the scene in the film as is possible with real objects and facsimile props.

2. The two actors will begin their work on the scene as a "first reading" exercise. Since they have not memorized the scene, their scripts will be beside them. The actors (not concerned about picking up cues at this point) will look at their scripts, "pick up their lines" and say their lines to their partner with continuous eye contact. In this exercise the actors are beginning their work by REALLY looking and listening to each other; they will pick up nuances of thought and feeling from each other that will color their physical and vocal expressions.

3. Students will improvise the wedding reception in a banquet room in the bar. They will each develop a specific character with objectives.

## **B. A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE**

(1.) *Background:*

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is a record of the 1947 Broadway stage performance, directed by Elia Kazan and featuring most of the actors from the original production, except for Vivien Leigh as Blanche. Jessica Tandy played Blanche in the Broadway production, but was not considered enough of a "name" to play the lead in the film. Most of the film was shot on a soundstage and it is a harsh and powerful translation of Tennessee Williams's poetic drama.

Blanche DuBois (Vivien Leigh), a faded Southern belle, comes to New Orleans to stay with her sister, Stella (Kim Hunter) and Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski (Marlon Brando). She is horrified by the squalor of the French Quarter where they live.

She is revolted by Stanley, yet attracted to him. She overstays her welcome by five months, during which she constantly attempts to break up his marriage. She tells her sister that he is common and animal like, pleading with her "not to hang back with the brutes". Stanley takes revenge by dragging up her sordid past and stripping her suitor, Mitch (Karl Malden), of his illusions about her. He eventually rapes her, driving her over the edge into madness.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is an extremely and peculiarly moral play, in the deepest and truest sense of the

term. The rape of Blanche by Stanley is a pivotal integral truth in the play without which the play loses its meaning, which is the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate by the savage and brutish forces of modern society. It is a poetic plea for comprehension. <sup>11</sup>

The above is a portion of a letter to the censor Joseph Breen written by Tennessee Williams in 1951 before the filming of his play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The Breen office was the censoring arm of Warner Brothers Studio and they wanted to cut the rape scene from the screenplay.

My primary interest in our study of this film will be to look carefully at Kazan's *Notebook on Streetcar*. His character outlines will be our guide to the student actor's work on building a character.

Kazan organized his notebook by descriptions of the four major characters, beginning with a statement of the "spine" of each part. He used this familiar Method term because his mentors in the Group theatre had learned it from their mentor in the late 1920s, Richard Boleslavsky of the American Laboratory Theatre, who learned it from his teacher, Stanislavski. "Spine" is used as a handy metaphor to describe two things: (1) the play's main action and (2) a character's main action.

Kazan describes the "spine" of the four major characters in *Streetcar* as follows: <sup>12</sup>

Blanche wants to "find protection."

Stanley wants to "keep things his way."

Stella wants to "hold onto Stanley."

Mitch wants to "get away from his mother."

Compounded, these desires account for much of the conflict. These characters are each other's given circumstance.

In his notebook Kazan refers only to the character's "spine," which means the character's "throughline" (tenet 2). The "throughline" is the dominant action of a character's soul that unifies his varied activities and lends structure and coherence to the actor's work on and in the part. In orthodox Stanislavskian practice, the key to defining a character's spine is to use an infinitive verb or phrase, usually with an object at the end ("to get to Moscow," "to avenge my father's death," "to wait for Godot"). The verb phrase pictures a spine as "the movement of the psyche, not a passive state, like a mood," In a dramatic role, the best kind of spine is a line that turns into an arrow--it is a DESIRE. Directors in a rehearsal frequently call to the confused actor, "But what do you want?"

Kazan has said; "I put terrific stress on what the person wants and why he wants it. What makes it meaningful for him. I don't start on *how* he goes about getting it until I get him wanting it."

The next step in this process is to introduce the actor to "the circumstances under which he behaves; what happen before the scene begins". This is what Stanislavski calls "the given circumstances." (How do I as the character behave in this situation?) Kazan says, "I will say nothing to an actor that cannot be translated directly into actions. The life of a play is in behavior."

**Credits:** <sup>13</sup>

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE (the play) was produced by Irene Selznick at the Barrymore Theatre in New York

City on December 3, 1947 (Movie 1951). It was directed by Elia Kazan, and the setting and lighting were by Joe Mielziner.

The cast was as follows:

Negro Woman-Gee Gee James

Eunice Hubbell-Peg Hillias

Stanley Kowalski-Marlon Brando

Stella Kowalski-Kim Hunter

Steve Hubbell-Rudy Bond

Harold Mitchell (Mitch)-Karl Malden

Mexican Woman-Edna Thomas

Blanche DuBois-Jessica Tandy

Pablo Gonzales-Nick Dennis

A Young Collector-Vito Christi

Nurse-Ann Dere

Docter-Richard Garrick

A few nonspeaking parts, a sailor, supernumeraries.

The scene is the two rooms of the Kowalski apartment in the French quarter of New Orleans. The action of the play takes place in the spring, summer and early fall.

The production won a Pulitzer Prize for drama and a New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best original American play (Williams's second such award). Jessica Tandy won a Tony for the 1947/48 season as Best Actress for her Blanche.

Academy Awards for this film were: Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Art Direction/Set Decoration (Black-and-White)

## (2.) STRATEGIES:

I have chosen four lessons that will focus on aspects of the objectives of this curriculum unit. These lessons relate both to the film and play of A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE. Before beginning the specific lessons, the students will have viewed the film, discussed it, read the play and viewed the film again. (This procedure will be true of all the films and texts in this curriculum unit).

LESSON ONE: The objective is to increase the students' critical thinking skills in analyzing the themes of the film. The students will read and discuss the handouts of Kazan's *Notes on Streetcar*. They will already possess knowledge of Kazan's working methods with actors.

LESSON TWO: To develop the students writing skills, each student will select any character from the play and write an in-depth character study. The actors will ask themselves these questions: What do the other characters say about my character? How do I relate to each character in the play? What do I say about the other characters? In my study of the text, why do I say each line? What do I want in each scene? When I break the scene down into beats what do I want in each beat? (A beat is the smallest unit of action in a scene).

LESSON THREE: Students will rehearse the "trunk scene" (Act I, ii) and " the poker night" (Act I, iii), having as their objective the exploration of each character's "throughline" or "spine". They will also explore their objectives in three ways.

- (a) They will break the scene down into beats.
- (b) They will improvise each characters "immediate previous circumstance" before the scene begins.
- (c) They will explore the scenes through place and object exercises. (See Sample Lesson Plan).

LESSON FOUR: Students will rehearse each scene in the play beginning the scene with an improvisation on the "immediate previous circumstance" for each character. Students will also work on sensory exercises for the scenes, especially on heat, drunken behavior, and any other sensory exercises that they feel are pertinent to the scene.

## **REVIEW OF BRANDO/KOWALSKI IN STREETCAR:**

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Brando received rave notices for his Stanley Kowalski. In one of his most favorable notices, Irwin Shaw described how Kazan and Brando manipulated the audience's sympathies throughout the play:

Marlon Brando arrives as the best young actor on the American stage. Most young men in our theater seem hardly violent enough to complain to a waiter who has brought them cream instead of lemon. Brando seems always on the verge of tearing down the proscenium with his bare hands. Representing the healthy, driving forces of the flesh, Brando plays a useful trick on us. He is so amusing in a direct, almost childlike way in the beginning, and we have been so conditioned by the modern doctrine that what is natural is good, that we admire him and sympathize with him. Then, bit by bit, with a full account of what his good points really are, we come dimly to see that he is one of the villains of the piece, brutish, destructive in his healthy egotism, dangerous, immoral, surviving. By a slouching and apelike posture, by a curious submerged and almost inarticulate manner of speech, by an explosive quickness of movement, Brando documents completely a terrifying characterization. <sup>14</sup>

## SAMPLE LESSON PLAN

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### LESSON THREE:

The emphasis in this lesson plan is on building a character, focusing on the "throughline" or "spine" of the character. Students will explore character through exploring place and object exercises.

### **MATERIALS:**

Film: A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE. Script: A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE: ACTING EDITION. The class will work on Act I, ii & iii. Video equipment will be used. The props are specified in the following descriptions.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

1. Act I, ii (the trunk scene) is a confrontation between Blanche and Stanley. The actors will define for themselves their character's action in this scene, based on their knowledge of their character's "throughline" of action in the play. After rehearsing the scene, actors will discuss with the class their intentions and what they felt they accomplished in the scene.
2. Act I, ii will be worked on using real objects. The class will borrow a period trunk from the props department of the Alliance Theatre. Students and teacher will bring in as many objects as possible to fulfill this scene (i.e. Blanche's wardrobe, box of letters from young husband, legal papers, etc.). Special attention will be paid to the creation of the place. A believable place and the use of real objects ground actors in the play's reality and help actors build characters organically.
3. Act I, iii (the poker night) will be worked on to develop character behavior. This scene especially lends itself to the development of logical behavior because the scene opens with the characters playing poker and drinking. The actors will set up the scene with all the objects they feel they will use in the scene. They will work out the poker game so that it truly corresponds to the script. In my experience of working on this scene, I have always found that the actors enjoyed the poker game and the building of the action into the physical conflict at the end of the scene.

### C. VIVA ZAPATA!

(1.) *Background:*

#### **Credits:** <sup>15</sup>

The screenplay by John Steinbeck; directed by Elia Kazan; produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; photographed by Joe MacDonald; presented by Twentieth Century-Fox. Filmed: 1952.

Emiliano Zapata-Marlon Brando

Soldadera-Margo

Josefa-Jean Peters

Eufemio Zapata-Anthony Quinn

Madero-Harold Gordon

Pablo-Lou Gilbert

Huerta-Frank Silvera

Fernando-Joseph Wiseman

Lazaro-Will Kuluva

Don Nacio-Arnold Moss

Senor Espejo-Florenz Ames

Colonel Guajardo-Frank De Kova

Pancho Villa-Alan Reed

*VIVA ZAPATA!* won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor (Quinn).

VIVA ZAPATA!, based on the life of the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, is a mixture of truth and legend with scenes of the Mexican revolution. It is a political statement on the corruption of power. In the first scene, we see a group of peasants who have come to Mexico City in 1909 for an audience with President Porfirio Diaz. The camera moves from one man to the next until it picks out Brando's Zapata. The peasants are asking for their land rights. Zapata stands up to Diaz and rejects his offer.

Diaz and Zapata never meet again, but Zapata's life becomes dedicated to overthrowing Diaz. Zapata decides to join his peasant revolt with Madero, who in Texas, is plotting revolution against Diaz. Diaz is forced into exile, but Zapata finds that Madero is a weak leader. Madero is killed by another would be dictator. Finally, Pancho Villa leaves the burden of power to Zapata, who accepts it reluctantly.

Next comes Brando's Zapata awakening to the corruption of power. His brother Eufemio (Anthony Quinn) is denounced by the peasants for taking graft and for being a petty tyrant. In a scene constructed to look like the first scene of the film-his confrontation with Diaz-Zapata sees that he is being corrupted by power; he rejects the presidency and goes back to his home.

Finally, only Death and Transfiguration remain for Zapata. Weary, stoic, he walks into the trap set for him. The problem is that the murderers do their job too well. His body is so riddled with bullets that the people wonder whether it is really Zapata. The peasants choose to believe that the bullet-riddled corpse in the square is not that of their warrior hero. The movie fades out with Zapata's beautiful white horse galloping through the mountains. <sup>15</sup>

(2.)STRATEGIES:

I have chosen four lessons that focus on acting exercises, building a character, and a variety of rehearsal methods based on the tenets of Method acting. The film, VIVA ZAPATA!, and the novelette of the film printed in Argosy Magazine, will be our text.

LESSON ONE: I will provide bound handouts of the novelette from Argosy Magazine. This text, in novelette form, has dialogue like a screen play. The students will study the text and divide it into scenes. By studying the film and the novelette they will be able to find the natural scene breaks.

LESSON TWO: At least one third of my students are Hispanic; these student will translate scenes of their choosing into Spanish. They will perform these scenes in Spanish. The class will research and discuss their research into Mexico of the early twentieth century and the Mexican revolution.

LESSON THREE: This lesson will combine study of visual arts and acting. From our library of visual arts books and prints that I will bring to class, the students will choose paintings to recreate. By physically recreating the painting, they will create a living picture or tableau vivant. This exercise will stimulate their imaginations, and they will enjoy the ensemble effort of creating this tableau vivant. Paintings and murals of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo will be studied for this purpose.

LESSON FOUR: This lesson will focus on four memorable scenes: the first scene of the peasant delegation to President Diaz; the scene of the arrest and rescue of Zapata by the peasants; the scene of the assassination of Modera; and the final ambush and murder of Zapata. See Sample Lesson Plan Number Four.

## **SAMPLE LESSON PLAN**

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### **LESSON FOUR:**

The focus of this lesson plan will be on building a character through improvisation, writing character studies, and using exercises from the pervious lesson plans to create verisimilitude.

### **MATERIALS:**

Film: VIVA ZAPATA!; bound copy of the novelette of VIVA ZAPATA!, video equipment, costume pieces such as ponchos, sombreros, mantillas, serapes, etc. The class will need a theatrical makeup kit, books with pictures of the period, and historical information about Zapata, Pancho Villa, and other historical figures of that time.

### **DESCRIPTION:**

1. After writing character studies, the actors will recreate Zapata's first appearance with the peasant delegation in Mexico City in 1909 for an audience with President Diaz. The students are especially interested in stage and film makeup. Each student will experiment with character makeup for this scene. (In the film Brando has a two-way stretch inside his mouth, his eyelids glued together at the edges, and plastic rings in his nose. <sup>16</sup>)
2. Students will improvise the arrest and rescue of Zapata by the peasants. This scene, as with most scenes in the film, especially lends itself to improvisation. Prints of Diego Rivera will be used as a starting point for improvisations. Students will physically recreate the painting, forming a living picture or tableau vivant. One of their objectives will be to continue to use the physical characteristics found during the recreation of the painting
3. The students will learn the dialogue from the novelette and the given circumstances to work on the assassination of Modera. The contrast between the characters of President Modera and his



assassin, General Huerta will be explored. In the film, the President is portrayed as a rather quiet, scholarly man, while General Huerta is a large, frightening, cigar smoking villain. The students will decide what exercises they will use to explore character and situation.

4. The scene of the ambush and murder of Zapata is another scene that will be worked out through improvisation. Each actor will do an individual exercise based on their decision as to where and what their character is doing before the beginning of the scene. This is an imaginative "day in the life" of the character leading up to "the immediate previous circumstances" before Zapata is murdered.

## V. Fundamental Differences Between Stage Acting and Film Acting

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### A. Stage Acting:

In theatre, once the curtain goes up, the actor tends to dominate. A stage actor has more control over his or her performance than an actor in film. The requirements are different for stage acting and film acting. <sup>17</sup>

1. It is essential that the stage actor be seen and heard clearly. The actor should have a flexible, trained voice and must be trained in vocal projection.
2. The playwright's language is a major source of meaning in the theatre. To convey nuances of dialogue the stage actor must have variety and vocal expressiveness. Proper stress, phrasing, and breathing are necessary. The stage actor must be *believable*, even when reciting lines of dialogue that may be stylized.
3. A theatrical performance depends on the acting and the actors receive most of the credit for a production. This means that they are also assigned most of the blame when the production is boring.
4. On the stage good actors can play roles very different from their own ages-younger or older.
5. Since the stage actor's entire body is always in view, the actor must be able to control it. Activities that one does every day (sitting, standing, walking, moving one's hands) are performed differently on stage. Actors must know how to move in period costume and how to adjust their bodies to different characters. The actor must convey the inner life of the character through his or her body.
6. Acting in theatre is in real time; therefore the actor must pace performances and build scene by scene. Stage actors must create the "illusion of the first time" for every performance, sometimes for a long running play.
7. Actors must maintain an energy level from scene to scene and for the whole performance. The actor must correct mistakes because a scene cannot be replayed or cut. The actor needs stage technique.

## B. Film Acting

1. The film actor needs very little stage technique. Essentially what a performer in movies needs is "expressiveness." The actor must have a photogenic face. Too much technique can make a performer seem to be overacting.

2. Acting in film is almost totally dependent on the director's approach to the screen play.

*The realistic director* relies more on the abilities of the actors, filming more *long shots*. This technique keeps the actor's entire body in the frame, and this camera distance corresponds to the proscenium arch of the theatre. The realist tends towards *lengthy takes*, in order to help the actors sustain performances without interruption.

*The formalistic director* prefers to convey ideas and emotions through *edited juxtapositions*.<sup>18</sup>

3. The film actor is not dependent on vocal flexibility. Many actors have succeeded with relatively inexpressive voices. Marilyn Monroe, Clint Eastwood, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, come to mind. Even the quality of a film actor's voice can be controlled mechanically.

4. Most films are shot out of sequence, due to economic considerations. The actor may be required to perform a climactic scene before an earlier low-keyed scene. The film actor must have a high degree of concentration to be able to turn emotions on and off.<sup>19</sup>

5. Film has *Close-Up* shots. Michael Caine in his book, *ACTING IN FILM: AN ACTORS' TAKE ON MOVIE MAKING*, says:<sup>20</sup>

It (the close-up) can give an actor tremendous power, but that potential energy requires enormous concentration to be realized. The close-up camera won't mysteriously transform a drab moment into something spectacular unless the actor has found something spectacular in the moment. In fact it will do just the opposite: the close-up camera will seek out the tiniest uncertainty and magnify it. "Drying" (forgetting your lines) can be covered up on stage. . . . But the camera will betray the smallest unscheduled hesitation. If a member of the crew walks across my eye-line, off camera, when I'm doing a close-up, I immediately ask for a retake. I may not have thought my concentration lapsed-the director may assure me everything is fine-but the camera will have caught that minute flicker at the back of my eyes.

6. Michael Caine gives this advice to theatre actors entering the world of film for the first time:<sup>21</sup>

Not only have you got to know your lines on day one, you will also have directed yourself to play them in a certain way, and all this accomplished *without* necessarily discussing the role with the director, *without* meeting the other people in the cast, *without* rehearsal on the set. The stage actor is used to slowly wading

into the play's reality. First a read-through with the assembled cast to acquaint him with the broad outline of the author's intentions. Then the director's view. Then maybe a free-for-all discussion. Gradually, book in hand, stage actors splash themselves with gentle doses of the play, scene by scene, starting with Act One, Scene One. Pity the poor stage actor who is about to be immersed, Baptist style, in the movies. Plays are performed. Movies are made.

## NOTES

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1. Steve Vineberg, *METHOD ACTORS*, 6-7.
2. David Garfield, *THE ACTOR'S STUDIO*, 15.
3. Marcel Proust, *SWANN'S WAY*, Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Random House, 1970. 62-66.
4. Steve Vineberg, *METHOD ACTORS*,13.
5. Marlon Brando, *BRANDO*, 416.
6. Steve Vineberg, *METHOD ACTORS*, 17.
7. Bud Schulberg, *ON THE WATERFRONT*,2.
8. Robert Tanitch, *Brando*, 40.
9. Marlon Brando, *BRANDO*,197.
10. *Ibid*,198-199.
11. Robert Tanitch, *BRANDO*, 35.
12. David Richard Jones, *GREAT DIRECTORS AT WORK*, 140-41
13. Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire: Acting Edition*, 3.
14. David Richard Jones, *GREAT DIRECTORS AT WORK*, 151.
15. Merle Miller, *VIVA ZAPATA!*, 82.
16. Robert Tanitch, *BRANDO*, 43.
17. Louis Giannetti, *UNDERSTANDING MOVIES*, 223-225.
18. *Ibid*, 228.
19. *Ibid*, 232.
20. Michael Caine, *ACTING IN FILM*, 8-9
21. *Ibid*, 14-15

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