

You are a successful actor. Why teach when you can just act?

“I began teaching almost as soon as I started to act - not that I was qualified to teach but Sandy saw something in me early on so he had me "assist/mentor" - call it what you want - he had me work with the students from his first year classes.

But again, I never had designs on being a teacher. In fact, all the way up to the final day in Sandy's class I thought that was it - that was the end of my "class time" with Sandy. We all lined up to say our thank you's and goodbyes and when it was my turn I was quite emotional and as I tried to gather myself he said, "Relax. I'm not done with you. Next, you'll study with me so that when you're ready to teach, you'll know what the hell you're doing." Shocked, I said (and I meant it), "Sandy, I don't want to teach. I just want to act." And he said, "You'll have to teach. You'll have no choice." Then he smiled and asked, "Do you know why?" I shook my head "No" and he said, "You'll see."

What he meant and what he saw was that I had a very deep respect for craft of acting. I cared passionately about what good acting, good film and good theater could do and could be so he felt it was inevitable that I would have to teach in what he called, "this town full of fast food acting - Hollywood."

So I spent the first four years of my career simply mentoring under Sandy and I've been teaching ever since and now over twenty years later, I teach because I love to teach. I don't have a choice. It's an honor to help anyone who truly cares about the craft of acting - to help anyone with their dream of becoming an actor. Sandy once said, "There are very few master teachers of acting. Most acting teachers in this country are simply out of work actors trying to pay the rent. In fact, every time the rent's due there a thousand actors who run around and call themselves acting teachers and I can't tell you how many of them claimed to have studied with me. And just because you did study with me doesn't qualify you to teach. If someone tells you they teach The Meisner Technique, ask them if they have my blessing then watch their reaction. Trust your gut. You'll know."

For Sandy this was obviously a very big point and it is for me as well. I don't teach for a dollar bill and because I make my living as an actor I don't have to teach. In fact, it actually costs me a great deal financially to teach and not be touring as much. Again, I'm not complaining. It's my choice.

Also, because I make my living as an actor I believe that makes me a much better teacher. I'm not saying you can't be a good teacher unless you make your living as an actor. I just know for me, that I'm a better teacher because of my career as an actor. Since I'm "out there doing it" I'm able to come to class that very next night after a show and "teach" what I learned, what I did well, what I didn't do well. Again, there are many wonderful teachers who don't actually make a living as actors but I believe it's an enormous asset for me, as well as for my students.

2. The North Bay has plenty actors, trained and untrained. Why would a Meisner class be useful/needed/or necessary here?

“It's certainly not necessary or even needed but hopefully, it will be viewed as useful. Sandy once said, "Actors are the laziest segment of the artistic profession. They should be in constant training, and they should work, as other artists, to maintain their fitness for their art. Let someone explain to me why the violinist who plays in an orchestra on the 10th violin must daily perform hour long exercises or lose his power to play? Why does the dancer work daily over every muscle in his body? Why do the painter, the sculptor, the writer practice their art each day and count that day lost when they do not work? And why may the actor do nothing but spend his day in coffeehouses and hope for the gift of inspiration in the evening?" I'll tell you why - actors today simply want to be stars!"

Of course, there are many well-trained actors in the North Bay. I've attended a great deal of theater since my return a few years ago and I've seen many fine performances so if you're an actor who feels you're able to technically and consistently produce truthful, believable work in any medium then this training may not be for you.

And it also would take a great deal of humility to further your training if you've had a success in your acting community.

But for anyone else in the North Bay - both trained and untrained - maybe this level of training would be quite useful for you. And this is not to say that The Meisner Technique is the end all/be all or that it's for "everyone." It's certainly not. But to quote Robert Duvall, "It's certainly was the right approach for me." And it has been for me as well.”

3. Describe, please, your view of the North Bay theater scene, as it relates to the quality of acting here.

“Again, like any community with theater you have everything and everything has its place. It's all important and vital. Community theater provides a wonderful outlet for a myriad of people who are doing it for a myriad of reasons.

And like any community with theater, there are those companies or groups interested in taking it to another level - a much more professional level - and I have certainly experienced that as well. I have met many wonderful, talented, committed people in the North Bay who've been raising that bar for some time so it's clear, the North Bay theater scene is thriving and there are several very strong theater companies and individuals dedicated to taking the North Bay theater scene to a whole new level.

4. Define simply, if possible, what The Meisner Technique is, compared to things like 'The Method.'

Well, this is always a wonderful question to answer. The Method. What does that even mean anymore? First, a little background is needed.

The Method was created by Constantin Stanislavski over one hundred years ago and his "theories" were so revolutionary and advanced that he *literally* changed the world of acting.

And one of his greatest "influences" was upon a group of dedicated actors, writers and directors who had come together in the early 1920's. They called themselves The Group Theater and this "group" went on to also *literally* change the world of acting. In fact, The Group Theater went on to produce the most influential acting teachers America has ever known - Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Harold Clurman and Bobby Lewis.

It's almost impossible to grasp the significance of who they were and what they did. And every one of these master teachers was *heavily* influenced by The Method well before they ever began to teach.

What happened was in 1924 Stanislavski came to New York and blew away all members of The Group Theater - *everyone* was so impressed with the quality of his actors' work that soon they all became disciples of The Method. Led by Lee Strasberg, they began to "play and experiment" with the exercises that made up The Method.

But soon there was a revolt.

Many members felt Lee's interpretation was not only wrong, it was quite unhealthy. So Stella headed off to Europe, tracked down Stanislavski and spent several months with him clearing things up. When she returned to New York she announced to the entire Group that Lee was way off base. Strasberg became very angry and then announced, "I don't teach the *Stanislavski* Method. I teach the *Strasberg* Method." And he quit The Group in that moment and began teaching his version of The Method ever since.

Now almost 100 years later, there have been so many "offshoots" of The Method that it truly doesn't have a tangible, concrete, consistent meaning anymore. Sandy used to say, "The Method. What a silly phrase. It doesn't mean anything anymore because there are over 250,000 Method acting teachers in New York City alone all with their own interpretation of The Method. Hell, you're more Method Actors than most of those people who call themselves Method Actors."

Next, I'd like to stress that all *legitimate* teachers of acting want the exact same thing - they want their actors to be able to consistently produce truthful, believable work. And Sanford Meisner did not have the corner on the market as the only way. In fact, that's one of the things that I respected most about Sandy - his humility. So many acting teachers claim "their way" is the only way. Sandy was the opposite of that. He constantly told us, "Whatever works for you, use it. There's no right way or one way to work. Whatever works!"

That said, The Method was created over one hundred years ago, but the realities facing an

actor in the twenty-first century are quite different from those faced by Russian actors in the nineteenth century. The actor's medium has obviously changed and so has the craft of acting. It has matured and evolved.

Sandy saw this clearly. He saw the need for an "American approach" to acting - especially with the advent of television and film. He then spent the next half-century developing his "approach," which because of the success his students started to have, soon became known as The Meisner Technique.

So back to the question - what's the biggest difference between The Method and The Meisner Technique? The biggest difference - the place where he and Lee Strasberg were diametrically opposed was in the area so critical to good, strong, believable work - the actor's emotional life. Sandy believed that the core Method exercises for getting to the actor's emotional life - emotional memory and sense memory - was "quite unhealthy." Instead of "dredging up the scars from your past and reliving traumatic experiences," Sandy believed the actor was better served (and so was the work) to have a developed imagination instead of some tortured, troubled past.

Now, I know this is an over simplification to say the least, but it cuts to the heart of the difference between the two approaches. But there is *so* much more.

It's called The Meisner Technique for a reason. Sandy developed a very practical, applicable process to train the actor to be able to work in any medium and as he said, "To call yourself an actor and have it truly mean something." He didn't say that to be arrogant but because when you finished studying with him you were a craftsman. You knew how to consistently produce truthful, believable work independent of him.

As far as The Meisner Technique goes, all I can say is that Sandy taught acting for sixty-five years. During that time he was constantly evolving "his way," but the foundation to his approach came early on and never wavered - people are horrible listeners and actors are even worse because they're so nervous, distracted and insecure they couldn't possibly be listening. So before anything believable, connected, authentic, organic can happen the actor must be present. For that to happen, they must get out of their heads and put their focus and attention on the most important thing - the other actor. And from this very simple principle, Sandy created The Meisner Technique - a series of exercises to get actors out of their heads and in the present moment.

And finally, The Meisner Technique is about *not* acting and instead, being authentic. Sandy would say, "How does it feel to be in an acting class where no acting is allowed?" And that's what this work does - it strips away all artifice in the actor's instrument. Actors who are properly trained in The Meisner Technique don't act, they don't fake, they don't push, they don't give more than they've got in their work so consequently, their work is "believable" - a big word for an actor.

5. Some people talk about the Meisner training method as being a bit like T.V.'s Survivor, with those you can't "cut it" being voted "off the island," and with classes

gradually dwindling down to a few hard-core actors who "get it." Is this far off the mark of what the Meisner training method is like in practical application.

That's quite funny, actually.

Here's the "reality." This training is *not* for everyone. This is not a typical acting class or an "acting intensive" that is so popular these days. This is world-class training, one branch removed from Sanford Meisner - a teacher who has produced a more prodigious "who's who" of actors than all of the other top acting teachers *combined*.

Added to that is the reality that I'm one of only a handful of people in the world personally trained by Sandy to teach his way and his last teaching protege as well, an honor and opportunity I do not take lightly - which means you're going to be held to the same standard and respect for the craft of acting that I was held to.

So, right away, this is where the bar is - quite high.

And because this training is a major investment of time and effort on the actor's part, I'm only interested in people who want this information very much, which is why they must be interviewed for acceptance into my school.

The next thing to consider is, unlike a lot of acting classes where you can join "whenever" - we start on day one and we finish 16 months later. In other words, when the train leaves the station who ever is on board is who is in the class. You can't join after the fact. It would be impossible, actually - a lot like trying to sign up for second year calculus having no exposure to it.

For example, my class with Sandy started with twenty and we finished with thirteen - four quit and three were asked to leave, all for the same reasons.

My class in Santa Rosa actually was two separate classes - one had 12 and the other about the same. By the end of the first year, we were down to eight in both and combined the two classes to make 16. And we finished a year later with 16 - however most quit early on (and are not thrown out, btw) because what happens early on is people get "exposed." They said this was important to them, they said they were ready to make this commitment but soon into it, it's quite clear that talk is cheap. They realize they are not serious enough for this level of training because they're sitting in the same class with people who want this training very much.

And that's fine. It's actually great! It's also why students can only sign up for each three month session and they must be invited to return because a student may start strong, but if their level of commitment wanes then I speak to them immediately and if they don't address it they're not invited back.

And I get it. This training requires so much work *outside* of class and since the class is only as strong as the weakest link then if you're a weak link, it's my job, my responsibility

to get you to either turn it around or remove you from the class because your partner *does* care *passionately* about their dream, even if you don't.

You can call it getting "voted off" or whatever. I call it standards.

7. What is your hope for the future of the North Bay actor scene? Is it more like a Mecca where people come to learn and practice their art, and where audiences come to see great theater, or more like an Ashram where people learn how to make great theatrical art in a remote setting (where few great theater experiences actually happen on stage) but from which great actors and artists are sent out into the world?

I see it as both. Currently, the "North Bay actors scene" is already quite vibrant and as I mentioned before, there are many groups and individuals responsible for that, *many* wonderful, talented people who've been doing extraordinary things in the North Bay for a very long time, long before me - David Lear and John Moran to name just a few - so the North Bay is already a place where audiences can see wonderful theater and where actors can be a part of something quite special without having to move away.

And there is no reason why the North Bay can't evolve into something even grander. I just spent a month in Edinburgh, Scotland, at what is the largest theater extravaganza in the world, The Fringe Festival, and there were over 3,000 shows every day and I'll tell you, Edinburgh's very cool but I'd much rather live and work here any day.

And I've spent time in Ashland, and again, very pretty but Ashland has nothing on Sonoma County. What Ashland and Edinburgh have is simply people with great vision who came together and harnessed the talent from their community and created an incredible mecca for theater. I see no reason why we can't do the same here.

That said, one of things I promise my students the very first day of class is when they finish their studies they'll be able to call themselves actors and it will truly mean something. They'll be "trained and ready" to get to work in any medium, anywhere in this country.

We currently have over a hundred actors at The Meisner Technique Studio and they run the gamut – strong training, credits and a career to those who've never acted in anything seriously before my class. Which for me is an important point, I don't care what your previous training or experience is. All I care about is that you're serious, you care *passionately* about becoming an *actor*. As far as my students – some want a career in Hollywood, New York, wherever. Some never want to leave San Francisco, the North Bay or wherever. They don't want to be big stars. Their dreams are different, but just as intense, private and sincere. And *passionate*.

But no matter who they are, they'll have a foundation that is solid and they'll have a respect and standard for the craft of acting that will carry them for their entire career.

And they will be not only authentic actors but also authentic human beings.