

The Role of 'Me' in Method Acting: A Narrative Exploration of the Impact of Acting on Adult Identity

Ted McCadden
Pennsylvania State University-Harrisburg

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Abstract: The development of a character in the Method acting tradition is a highly introspective and personal process, and may have significant influence on the actors' processes of development. This narrative study seeks to examine the relationship between character portrayal and adult development, particularly sexual identity development.

Anecdotally, actors often report that the characters they play leave behind a lasting mark on who the actor is and how he or she engages the world. The praxis of Method acting, the predominant style of training actors in the United States (Bandelj, 2003; Bartow, 2006), guides the performer through an introspective process *as the character* to identify the social, cultural, and emotional forces that shape the character and determine how that character engages the world (Stanislavsky, 1961). In this process, the actor engages in critical reflection around issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation as they impact his or her character. The language of Method acting suggests that it is important to reinforce, rather than confront, these forces in striving for *verisimilitude*, the process of providing a recognizable reality on stage for the audience (Stanislavsky, 1961). In popular culture, examples of Hollywood actors "living as" their characters stand as illustrations of the Method tradition.

There are several critiques of the Method in the literature of acting pedagogy, most suggesting that the Method reinforces a hegemony steeped in racism, classism, sexism, or heterosexism (Aston, 1999; Bosson & Prewitt-Freillino, 2006; Esch, 2006; Gainor, 2002; Gilbert, 1994; Russell, 2007). If the actor explores and embodies his or her character within these forces of oppression, he or she also tacitly reinforces the oppression and may extrapolate it to his or her own life.

Drawing on the work of Foucault (1994) and hooks (2000), who suggest that identity is derived from the interaction of the individual with the oppressive or liberating forces in the social world, Method acting can have profound negative implications for the actor's sense of self. By acting to intentionally reinforce oppressive forces, the performer may internalize the traits of the oppressor and make that oppressor part of his or her identity without purposeful critical reflection. Popular culture is rife with examples of the actor struggling emotionally and in relationships after playing a particular role.

Several schools of theatre use the tools of critical pedagogy to engage social issues and raise consciousness for the audience in safe, depersonalized ways (Boal, 1979; Picher, 2007). Others, in their critique of the Method, engage the actor in ways that bring to light the oppressive influences of society, rather than reinforcing hegemony (Beck, Malina & Amitin, 1981; Brecht, 1964; James, 1971). Whether engaging the audience or the actor, theatre and the praxis of acting have significant implications as tools for critical pedagogy.

Given the tools of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren, 2007), the actor could use the character as an impetus to examine his or her own experience with the same oppressing

forces. The resulting consciousness-raising allows the actor to depersonalize the oppression that impacts his or her character, while critically examining how those same forces may impact his or her own life. The literature of acting pedagogy is limited in its treatment of character development as a critical pedagogy, while the adult education literature, in its exploration of theatre as an arbiter of social issues, overlooks the experience of the *performer* and how he or she can engage this process introspectively.

The purpose of this narrative study in progress is to explore the retrospective stories of actors to identify how their character development has shaped their own senses of identity. The intersection of critical pedagogy, identity development, and Method acting, overlooked in research to date, may hold significant implications for the training of actors and their adult identity development.

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