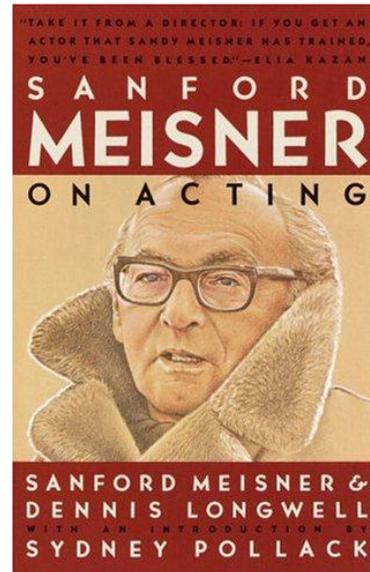


Sandy Meisner on Acting

An Introduction

By Sydney Pollack

We called him Sandy but it felt daring and dangerous, like ordering a martini in a nightclub when you are sixteen and trying to pass for twenty-one. He was too awesome a presence for the familiarity of a first name. It was 1952 and I was eighteen years old and had blundered into his classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York. Nothing prepared me for the intensity of this experience. It wasn't that he was harsh or mean; it was only that he was so frighteningly accurate. You felt he knew every thought, impulse or feeling in your head, that he had an ability to x-ray your very being and there was absolutely no place to hide. Each time he spoke about acting he crystallized ideas that you somehow knew were true, even though you had no idea that you'd ever sensed them before – like those physicists who discovered new particles simply because the theory for their existence is so beautiful. When Sandy spoke it was often difficult to keep from jumping up and shouting, “That’s true! That right! That’s absolutely right!” It was stunning to have him hurl those lightning bolts directly to the inside of your brain. One poor guy simply couldn't contain himself and actually *did* blurt out, “My God, that’s right!” Sandy simply mumbled, “Thank you, you’ve just confirmed twenty-five years of my work.”



Stanford Meisner's work was, and is, to impart to students an organized approach to the creation of real and truthful behavior within the imaginary circumstances of the theater. He has been changing the face of American acting ever since he was first exposed to what has come to be known as 'The Method,' a kind of lazy label that refers to most of contemporary American acting. In effect, he made this his own method, honing down and personalizing his approach over the years. Sandy's approach has always been for me the simplest, most direct, least pretentious and most effective.

The Neighborhood Playhouse offered a two-year intensive course in all aspects of the theater. It was unequalled anywhere. It was Sandy's acting classes that kept our adrenaline pumped up for two years. I graduated in the spring of 1954, I was invited to return the following fall on a fellowship as his assistant, and so I had the extraordinary opportunity to continue to learn from him for another six years. I had no aspirations to teach, and certainly none to direct, but the chance to continue to observe and learn from Meisner was impossible to pass up. When truths about one art are deep enough, they become true about all art, and so although Sandy addressed himself only to the art of acting, I was, without knowing it, absorbing the foundations of what would become a very specific approach to directing. The fact is that every area which I function as a

director – writing, production design, costume design, casting, staging, cinematography, even editing – is dominated by, and concerned with, the principles and ideas I have learned from Meisner.’



Sandy used to say, “It takes twenty years to become an actor.” We thought he was exaggerating. We should have known better; he wasn’t. He was referring to that time, if it should come, when all the

principles and ideas would be chewed up and digested into a kind of actor’s instinct, a technique that functioned almost by itself. He never wanted the work to be *about* technique. If you were his student, you learned technique as a means to an end, never as an end in itself. You’d be surprised how many acting teachers don’t understand that.

In 1981, I went back to New York to film some of Meisner’s classes for a documentary. It had been twenty-one years since I had observed Sandy in action. Of course he had aged. He had a laryngectomy (the removal of his vocal chords), had been struck by a van that shattered his hip, had two cataract operations and wore thick glasses with a microphone attached to them to amplify the new way he’d learned to speak by swallowing air. But the same “high” was there in the class, the same intense concentration and the sense of falling forward into new areas of understanding and experience. Some contemporaries of mine, old-timers who had made the pilgrimage back to take the classes again, were present. They were just as nervous in front of him as they had always been – and they were learning just as much as they always had. The only vivid difference to me was that because of the effort involved for Sandy to speak, there were fewer words. When they came, they were like rich, boiled-down broth. (As I write this, I think of a remark made about Chekhov by Maxim Gorky: “In Chekhov’s presence everyone felt in himself a desire to be simpler, more truthful, more one’s self.”)

This is a book about acting. It is also a book about a lot of other things by a man who has spent his life weeding away what is unnecessary, and trying to demystify this process of igniting an actor’s imagination and disciplining the truth of his behavior. The first thing that will strike you is that there is no mumbo-jumbo here, no mysterious, elitist attitude about theory. Some of it may appear simple. As with all of Sandy’s technique, that appearance is deceptive. It isn’t simple; it is just the clarity with which he offers it. Anyone who has ever tried to work truly and privately on stage or in front of a camera knows that it is anything but simple – at least for the first twenty years.

I believe there are a few people who can really teach the technique of acting. Most are well-read and intelligent, and confuse their ability to theorize and intellectualize about the subject with an ability to cause real growth in an actor. There are almost no good books about acting. This is one of the best. I envy all of you who may be discovering Sandy for the first time.