



WHY HOLLYWOOD WENT METHOD ACTING CRAZY

More than ever, we seem to want to catch actors “at it” – and in return, they seem increasingly keen to be caught.

You may well not have heard of him, but Spencer Tracy, who died in 1967, was one of the most natural actors to have ever stepped in front of a camera. He gave three pieces of advice to every young hopeful who asked for his secret: ‘Show up on time, know your lines and don’t bump into the furniture.’ Sometimes he’d throw in a fourth, which outlined what he saw as the proper relationship between the audience and the film actor’s craft: ‘Never let them catch you at it.’

This final piece of advice is something that Jared Leto seemed not to worry about when preparing to play Batman’s nemesis, the Joker, in one of the more recent comic book movies. Maybe playing the unsettling role of the Joker is damaging to an actor – it certainly had a weird effect on Jared. The actor famously got himself into character, partly through a series of in-character tricks and stunts. These were widely accepted as **part and parcel** of the forty-four-year-old Oscar winner’s method acting approach – a way of acting that encourages actors to totally immerse themselves in the character of the role they are portraying. Leto required the crew to address him as Mr J during the shoot – J for Joker rather than Jared – while after hours he remained in character, playing horrific Joker-like pranks on the cast and crew.

Behaviour like Jared’s appears to be almost a point of pride – a kind of off-screen validation of an actor’s commitment to their art. *The Revenant*’s promotional campaign **made a lot** of its cast’s arctic ordeal. Had Leo DiCaprio not suffered so much during his preparations, would the film be quite so riveting? Shia LaBeouf talked about pulling his tooth out to play a

Second World War tank gunner in *Fury*. More than ever, we seem to want to catch actors ‘at it’ and in return, they seem increasingly keen to be caught. There’s always a lot of talk about actors ‘disappearing into roles’, but in situations like these that’s not what’s actually happening at all. Instead, what ends up on screen is a kind of actor-character **hybrid**, and the hard labour of bringing the role to life becomes part of the reason – sometimes even the main one, in fact – we want to watch. We ask ourselves, ‘If these weren’t truly dedicated and talented actors, would they have put themselves through such ordeals?’

One problem with the new craze for so-called method acting is that it has almost nothing to do with the original method acting (developed by Russian director, Stanislavski). It was adapted by the American acting coach Lee Strasberg in the 1930s. Strasberg was intrigued by what he called the actor’s ‘central problem’: having to **plausibly** ‘feel’ things along with their character while remaining in control of their craft. He took as his jumping-off point a question posed by one of Stanislavski’s **disciples**: if your character has to behave in a particular way, what would motivate you, the actor, to behave that way for real? Strasberg’s answer was a technique that became known as substitution: rather than **conjuring** the emotion cold, actors should dip down into their own lived experience to find a mood or behaviour that fits.

Strasberg never planned it this way, but method and the movies turned out to be a perfect match.

56 Films’ splintered shooting style, in which scenes are often completed out of story order and are performed over and over again until the right take comes along, made it impossible for actors to coherently live out their characters’ stories. But method is all about moments – it’s a technique that thinks in shots and close-ups. For his part, Strasberg didn’t think he’d come up with anything new: he’d just given a name to the technique actors had always used, mostly unconsciously, to produce their best work.

One of the most successful modern method actors is Daniel Day-Lewis, who over the course of his career won three Oscars. His extensive off-screen preparations are legendary and really do seem to yield **tangible** on-screen results, although he rarely discusses them – and when he does, it is with reluctance. He never left his wheelchair while playing the cerebral-palsy-stricken artist Christy Brown in *My Left Foot*, the role for which he won his first Oscar. Dedication like that rather puts playing nasty tricks on your co-stars into **perspective**. Whether method acting’s reputation can survive the like of Leto’s antics remains to be seen – although if it doesn’t, that might come as some relief. A great screen persona is its own kind of dramatic truth – and it’s an act you can’t be caught in.

Christian Bale lost 30 kg for his role in ‘The Machinist’. He then put on 50 kg for his next role in ‘Batman Begins’.

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Read on

- 2 Do you know what method acting is? Read the article to check your answer.

exam tip: multiple choice

Don't panic if there are unfamiliar words or phrases. You may:

- not need to understand the exact meaning to answer a question.
- be able to work out the meaning from the context.
- be able to work out the meaning from the part of speech or the root.
- find it is similar to a word in your language.

In the final paragraph of the article, look at the words surrounding the phrase 'while playing the cerebral-palsy-stricken artist Christy Brown'. What do you think *stricken* means? What helps you understand the meaning?

- 3 e Read the article again. For questions 1–6, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text.

- 1 What does 'it' refer to in line 7?
A learning lines
B getting into character
C interacting with the audience
D dealing with problems on stage or set
- 2 What point does the writer make about Leto's pranks?
A He wanted to impress the cast and crew.
B He wanted to live up to a previous actor's standards.
C He wanted to act like his character off the set.
D He wanted to encourage other actors to develop their characters.
- 3 In the third paragraph, the writer mentions some recent films to
A show the difficulty directors face in pleasing the public.
B illustrate the change of audience interest from performance to preparation.
C express admiration for the sacrifices actors have made.
D explain the actors' need to talk about their techniques.

- 4 According to the writer, Strasberg confronted an apparent difficulty relating to how
A his interpretation of method acting differed from Stanislavski's.
B actors could replace their own emotions with a character's.
C to focus on reasons for a character's actions.
D actors could avoid getting completely lost in a role.
- 5 According to the writer, the 'film's splintered shooting style' in line 56 can affect
A the development of the storyline.
B the audiences' understanding of plot and characters.
C the way method acting is used.
D the shooting schedule of the film.
- 6 The concluding paragraph shows us that the writer
A admires the method acting techniques actors like Jared Leto use.
B agrees with Spencer Tracy's comments in the introduction.
C is concerned about the authenticity of future performances.
D believes actors should not talk about their acting methods.

- 4 Complete the sentences with the words and phrases in bold in the article.

- 1 This article explains very the reasons for the politician's actions.
- 2 We need results before we can go any further with the project.
- 3 Both authors were of the French philosopher Sartre.
- 4 Look at the bigger picture and it puts everything into
- 5 I'm sorry, but doing the paperwork is of the job.
- 6 I would love a car that uses both petrol and electricity but they are really pricey.
- 7 The reviews the money spent on special effects but for me, it was the acting that stood out.
- 8 My dad is great at wonderful meals from just a couple of basic ingredients!