



**More Than Repetition:  
Meisner and BA Performance Training**

By Dennis Schebetta

**Introduction**

The Meisner technique has been taught successfully as a concentrated two-year sequence in private studios and MFA programs across the country. But is Meisner an “all-or-nothing” approach, or is “a little Meisner” better than none at all?

As Head of MFA Performance Pedagogy and Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, I began to revise the undergraduate BA acting curriculum in 2014. The curriculum was primarily a Stanislavski-based training with some integration of Uta Hagen. More advanced acting classes examined heightened language and played with “styles,” using textbooks that seemed outdated. As there had been transitions in the faculty of the performance area of the department, many instructors taught from different methods; therefore, there existed an inconsistency of concepts and terminology throughout our courses. My primary goal in revising the curriculum was to give students a solid foundation of skills and maintain consistency throughout their educational journey. As my background was training in Meisner as well as other physical techniques, I searched for ways of incorporating multiple techniques in order to give students multiple entries into their craft. While doing so, I had several questions about

integrating Meisner's exercises with other techniques. Is it beneficial to use only his Word Repetition Game separate from the whole, as many have done? How could we apply more advanced exercises of the Meisner technique, such as textual analysis, emotional preparation, and character development? Furthermore, is it possible to integrate this approach with other methodologies if the objectives are similar and the outcomes are overlapping or complementary? Would this "cherry picking" of exercises dilute the technique altogether? These questions were especially important as I addressed the needs of a BA program where students typically only take one or two semesters of actor training that are not requirements for the degree.

As the objectives of our acting courses are to teach students to react spontaneously in the moment and build their imagination by creating given circumstances, the Meisner technique seemed to be complementary to other training methods and therefore could be integrated. The challenge was to ensure attainment of the overarching pedagogical choices, which required a strategic and deliberate approach. Even Stanislavski knew that an actor can overcomplicate a system or strip it away until there is nothing left to apply to any practical work.<sup>1</sup> As Nick Mosely, author of *Meisner in Practice* and Senior Lecturer in Acting at Central School of Speech in Drama, cautions, "like most actor training techniques, [Meisner] cannot be applied indiscriminately or simply delivered as a package... the process is endlessly diagnostic."<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will clarify some objectives and methods of Meisner-based exercises and demonstrate how I integrated aspects of the approach in three different levels of acting courses

---

<sup>1</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. and ed. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), xxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Mosely, *Meisner in Practice* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2012), 8.

in relation to other methodologies in the BA curriculum at the University of Pittsburgh.

Although an integrated approach, our training at the University of Pittsburgh does not aim for a “unified theory” of acting. My curriculum and pedagogy draws upon my experience studying as an actor for two years with William Esper at his private studio in New York City, although I have witnessed others teaching Meisner and have taught the exercises myself for several years.

Therefore, this paper relies heavily on my own experience as student and teacher as well as the research I have conducted at the University of Pittsburgh.

### **Meisner and the Repetition Game**

The most fundamental exercise of the Meisner technique is the first exercise of the sequence: what Meisner coined the Word Repetition Game.<sup>3</sup> It’s so simple and so well known that it’s easy to equate Meisner solely with repetition in the same way we may equate Michael Chekhov solely with Psychological Gesture. Simplifying a pedagogical approach to one foundational element can be helpful for easier categorization, but it can also hinder understanding of the full system. William Esper, who apprenticed as a teacher with Sanford Meisner for 17 years before teaching for several decades at his own studio in New York and at Rutgers, explains a dilemma of the repetition exercises:

One pitfall of the Meisner Technique is that the beginning exercises are easy to learn and easy to teach. This attracts a lot of underqualified practitioners. They teach versions of Repetition and claim that they’re teaching Meisner’s work without progressing to the next steps, all of which are necessary to build genuinely accomplished actors capable of creating characters with deep and compelling inner lives.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner On Acting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 22.

<sup>4</sup> William Esper and Damon DiMarco, *The Actor’s Art and Craft: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Technique* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 9.

While teaching at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York, Sanford Meisner (1905 – 1997) created his training approach using inspiration from the tenets of the Stanislavsky system. He had goals similar to those of Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, his fellow members of The Group Theatre, but he had a different approach.<sup>5</sup> Over several decades, from 1935 until the 1980s, he developed his exercises with his students and the system became more structured, becoming a two-year progression.<sup>6</sup> He was particularly interested in spontaneity and the dynamics between people, stating: “All my exercises were designed to strengthen the guiding principle... that art expresses human experience.”<sup>7</sup> The Repetition Game was Meisner’s way to build tools that would help an actor avoid the trap of intellectualism by inculcating an improvisational element to “get to where the impulses come from.”<sup>8</sup> He thereby eliminated the need to create text or any narrative within the construct of that improvisation. An actor studying in a two-year Meisner program, such as at a private studio, engages in the Word Repetition game for only the first few months. As detailed in Esper’s book *The Actor’s Art and Craft*, repetition exercises are gradually replaced by dynamic structured improvisations followed by application to text work.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the Joanne Baron/D.W. Brown Studio in Santa Monica, which is dedicated to the integrity of Meisner’s technique, posits that although the “repetition exercises are unquestionably a powerful tool for teaching actors to be unselfconsciously in the moment, which is fundamental to any quality performance, they’re

---

<sup>5</sup> Richard Brestoff, *The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods* (Lyme, NH: Smith & Kraus, 1995), 128.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>7</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Sanford Meisner On Acting*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> There is, in fact, a third year of training at The William Esper Studio, as well as other studios, where students focus on classical and other heightened language.

only the first stage of the system.”<sup>10</sup> Other teachers with private studios, such as Roger Manix in Brooklyn, agree, stating that “repetition without imaginary circumstances is not acting”<sup>11</sup> as per Meisner’s definition (famously: “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances”<sup>12</sup>).

Although Esper learned to teach the technique from Meisner himself, he freely admits to his own modifications. In *The Actor’s Art and Craft*, he tells an incoming teacher apprentice, “If you come here, you won’t be learning Meisner Technique. You’ll learn my technique, the Bill Esper technique. And—God willing—if you leave here, you’ll leave with your own technique.”<sup>13</sup> In this same vein, I don’t profess to be a “Meisner” teacher. First, I lack the apprenticeship and experience necessary to lead a student through a two-year journey of the program. Yet, the principles and foundations of acting I learned in my two years training at the Esper Studio have informed much of my own teaching and practices. Second, as I’ve learned many other methodologies as an actor, director, playwright, and dramaturg, I infuse all my experience into my pedagogy, constantly examining and evaluating the effectiveness of my teaching. Like any artist, and as Stanislavsky suggests, I am aiming for my own system.<sup>14</sup> As a teacher, it is essential that I move beyond my training and modify this technique according to the needs of my students and the industry. As Meisner is more than repetition, my teaching is more than Meisner. And yet, in all I teach, there are unifying ideas and principles. It is these unifying principles that create bridges from Meisner to other methodologies. I am in full agreement with teachers such as Robert Benedetti who believe that the complexity of the craft of acting, which

---

<sup>10</sup> Joanne Baron and D.W. Brown, “the craft,” *Backstage*, September 4, 2007, [http://www.backstage.com/news/the-craft\\_32/](http://www.backstage.com/news/the-craft_32/).

<sup>11</sup> Roger Manix, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Sanford Meisner On Acting*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Esper and DiMarco, *The Actor’s Art and Craft*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Stanislavski, *An Actor’s Work*, xxvii.

engages the left and right brain simultaneously, is best taught “through a multi-faceted approach that offers a variety of learning environments appropriate to each.”<sup>15</sup> Some students will respond well to the Meisner Technique, while others will find their way to truthful connection and spontaneity through other techniques. The rationale for introducing students to these various methods is not to dilute the methods, but to allow students to find the one that is right for them. They must find their own system, a reliable technique they can utilize when their teachers are no longer there to guide them.

### **A Problematic Relationship: Meisner and Academia**

A handful of practical books have been written in the decades since Meisner’s *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, co-written with Dennis Longwell, was published in 1987. The earliest and perhaps most practical for students and teachers are Larry Silverberg’s workbooks, beginning with *The Sanford Meisner Approach: An Actor’s Workbook* (1994). His subsequent workbooks focus on emotional preparation, textual work, as well as playing a role. William Esper’s book, mentioned previously and published in 2008, details the first year of training. Esper’s most recent book, *The Actor’s Guide to Creating a Character* (2014), details the student’s progression through the second year, delving into textual analysis and character development. Perhaps most notably for teachers, Victoria Hart’s “The Meisner Technique” in *Training of the American Actor* (2006) gives an excellent and thorough breakdown—indeed a self-proclaimed “how to”

---

<sup>15</sup> Robert Benedetti, “Zen in the Art of Actor Training,” in *Master Teachers of Theatre: Observations on Teaching Theatre by Nine American Masters*, ed. Burnet M. Hobgood (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 89.

and rationale for instructors of the two-year system—as taught at Rutgers’ MFA acting program.<sup>16</sup>

A challenge of teaching the Meisner technique in an academic setting is that Sanford Meisner developed his exercises at a time when private studios, not universities, were the primary place to learn your craft as a professional actor. Student actors of the 1940s and 1950s, some of whom may have had a theatre degree, would flock to New York City for studio training in a specialized technique by the great master teachers of the age. But a shift in education and training came after World War II: “Between 1945 and 1955 the number of theatre programs at American universities increased by 28% to bring the total to more than 300 and 176 at the undergraduate and graduate levels.”<sup>17</sup> As the regional theatre movement exploded in the US in the 1960s, more universities created or expanded their theatre programs. Zazzali continues: “This development marked a significant shift in the dispensation of theatre curriculum in US high education, insofar as prior to 1950, the overwhelming majority of so-called drama courses were only offered through English or Speech Departments.”<sup>18</sup> In 1971, a consortium of 11 schools, including Yale and NYU, formed the first League of Professional Theatre Programs “to establish a standard for developing actors in a psychophysical manner to give regional theatres the skilled artists they sought.”<sup>19</sup> A prime example of this growth was at the University of Pittsburgh, which operated and performed as part of the speech department until finally growing into an official theatre department in 1982.

---

<sup>16</sup> Victoria Hart, “The Meisner Technique,” in *Training of the American Actor*, ed. Arthur Bartow (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 51-96.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Zazzali, *Acting in the Academy: The History of Professional Actor Training in US Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 61.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

This history is relevant as the pedagogical model of a studio system is difficult to replicate in an academic curriculum at the BA level, though it is not impossible with a BFA and is certainly more manageable in an MFA program. Sanford Meisner is known for despising academia and may not have desired to see his training techniques be diluted (or outright misinterpreted) by scholars and academics.<sup>20</sup> To study the “pure” Meisner approach, a student’s best option is to work for two years with someone who studied with Meisner, either at a studio or in an MFA program. The “pure” Meisner technique is always elusive, as several torchbearers will carry variations of the same flame. Teachers have already integrated some of the Meisner technique in the university environment by gearing it specifically towards undergraduates and focusing on the first aspect of the sequence—the Repetition Game—with little examination of how this repetition exercise builds to create dynamic improvisations.<sup>21</sup> Due to the constraints of academia, such as larger classes, shorter class times, and a shorter semester, this is inevitable. The danger is that if students are only exposed to the repetition exercise, they will continue to spread the misconceptions that Meisner is solely repetition and little else. More importantly, the students will not engage in the deeper and more exhaustive training that Meisner had desired when he developed these exercises. It would be like a ballerina only learning the first few positions, but not knowing why they exist or that there are other more advanced steps which can be applied in a performance.

---

<sup>20</sup> Esper and DiMarco, *The Actor’s Art and Craft*, 125.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that master teacher Larry Silverberg, who learned to teach from Meisner directly, currently conducts a summer teacher-training program through the True Acting Institute. Many professors are alumni and have introduced Meisner techniques to university students. As I have not studied with him, I have not written about the results and effects of his student teachers in other academic environments.



## **Theory and Rationale of Meisner in a BA program**

In revising the acting curriculum at the University of Pittsburgh, I kept in mind that these acting courses are not required for graduation with a theatre arts major (though they can be included as electives). Out of approximately 100 majors, only a handful train in the entire sequence. Before the curricular revision, the acting courses were designed to explore playwrights and time periods, moving from present day to the 19<sup>th</sup> century to classical literature. My first revision of the curriculum was to shift the learning objectives of the courses from exploring different textual choices to focusing on building practical acting skills. The fundamental course, Acting I, shifted to focus on skills such as building spontaneity, listening, being present, and crafting behavior using given circumstances and other Stanislavskian concepts. Acting II shifted to character building and working as an ensemble. Acting III continued to focus on classical text, but with a clearer emphasis on Shakespeare rather than Greek and Restoration. Once my objectives for each course were clear, I then began introducing the Meisner technique throughout all three levels, finding ways to use appropriate exercises at various points. It was not my aim to replicate the full sequence of a two-year program, as that was impossible given the structure and time constraints. Instead, my aim was to build foundational skills, a common vocabulary, and develop the actor's instrument in order to create openness towards all methodologies. To meet those objectives, the Meisner exercises were one of many tools used.

Martin Barter, instructor at the Meisner Center in L.A., claims that Meisner created his technique because he believed actors had two main problems. First, they were self-conscious.

Second, they didn't really listen.<sup>22</sup> I have found that the improvisations expand the actor's focus to address five other areas of development: **actions or the reality of doing**, **observational skills**, **impulse awareness**, **unique point of view**, and **imagination**.

"Acting is doing" is a common refrain, and it is core to Meisner's definition of "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances." Esper further defines this by saying "living is doing" and "the reality of doing is the cornerstone on which all of Sanford Meisner's work is built."<sup>23</sup> Our focus on **actions or the reality of doing** begins with "really listening" in the repetition and builds to doing activities in the improvisation and in scenes. Emotion is important but emerges as a result of activity and the actor's faith in the imaginary circumstances. Emotion may arise from the actions involved in activities while doing the exercise, and emotional preparation is introduced further on in the sequence as a way to bring an actor to life prior to an entrance. As a cornerstone, this reality of doing progresses into developing presence and attention, therefore building spontaneity. The ability to be present and actively engaged has become quite useful for film and television. However, it is also foundational to physical theatre, clowning, classical theatre, or any other performance style.

Second, we develop the student's **observational skills**—not in an intellectual way, but in an active way, focusing on their responses to what that behavior makes them do or feel. As Meisner said, "what you do doesn't depend on you but what the other person does to you."<sup>24</sup> The repetition, and all further improvisations, are grounded in what the student observes in the

---

<sup>22</sup> Sanford Meisner, Martin Barter, Sydney Pollack, Open Road Films, and Sanford Meisner Center, *Sanford Meisner Master Class* (2006; Los Angeles: Open Road Films, 2006), DVD.

<sup>23</sup> Esper and DiMarco, *The Actor's Art and Craft*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Sanford Meisner On Acting*, 34.

other actor. This builds from a factual observation (for example, the color of their shirt) to their behavior. Always, the focus should be on the present moment and what they are observing and reacting to in that moment.

Third, the improvisational exercises develop *impulse awareness*, thus building spontaneity in partner contact. Students build the ability to focus on being present with what is happening right now, not what they think should be happening or what they expect to happen. In Meisner, the actor's impulses are always true and always lead to spontaneity. For Meisner, "acting without spontaneity is like soup without salt."<sup>25</sup> This is the next step after observation—what does the observation or the behavior make the student want to do?

Fourth, these exercises develop the student's *unique point of view*—what Meisner called their "sense of truth." Students are pushed to define not just their own identity in the exercise, but how they feel about everything—what matters to them. In a society that seems to be growing more and more apathetic and disconnected, this is a vital skill for any student, but especially an actor. Developing a specific point of view also becomes a foundation for scenes as it strengthens their idea of relationships and character. When the repetition moves beyond the factual, from the color of a shirt into subjective view of behavior—"you look tired" or "you're being rude"—the students can begin to see how they might have conflicting ideas of what is happening in the present moment. This duality of perception becomes important in later exercises.

Finally, the technique develops the actor's *imagination*. Once the repetition evolves into independent activities, the students craft their own imaginary circumstances and endow

---

<sup>25</sup> Esper and DiMarco, *The Actor's Art and Craft*, 86.

objects with meaning, creating justifications that have personal significance. Later in the series of exercises, the imagination becomes a primary tool for generating emotional preparation for a scene; daydreaming provides more freedom and less psychological damage than the method of emotional recall.<sup>26</sup> Developing the imagination becomes a challenging yet critical part of the work—many of my students struggle with creating a justification for their independent activities that are beyond their everyday lives. For instance, a student may say they are learning to juggle for an audition. This, in itself, is only a beginning. The next step is to question the student about who they are auditioning for. What director or what type of audition might excite them? Can they daydream and fantasize about justifications that have meaning for them, and how can they apply that to their work as an actor?

### **Acting I Exercises: Repetition and Beyond**

In Acting I, our foundational class, students are introduced first to vocal and physical techniques that include Linklater, Boal, and Lecoq. We lay a foundation of a sense of play and spontaneity. Linklater provides a supplementary method for the student to be aware of their voice and body and connect to the breath in order to relax. This work is vital for several reasons, most importantly because many of our students—some of who are double majors or minors—may not have taken or may not enroll in a Voice & Movement course.<sup>27</sup> The physical exercises of Boal, particularly the nonverbal exercises with images and other improvisational games, are easy for beginning students to engage in. They also build observational skills of

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>27</sup> Voice & Movement is offered at the University of Pittsburgh, but it is not required to graduate with a BA.

behavior, planting the seed that the text is not always the primary ingredient in performance. Lecoq exercises, such as playing with levels of tension or ensemble games of “balancing the space,” combine observational skills with listening and spatial awareness. By the end of the second week of the semester, these physical exercises have already introduced the beginning student to many of the primary concepts of the Meisner technique. Repetition is then introduced as if it is an extension of the physical games and ensemble work—as if the next logical step is applying speech to our primal instincts.

The Repetition Game is a simple yet profoundly effective improvisational interaction that demands complete attention. There are variations on how this game is taught; at the University of Pittsburgh, two actors stand across from each other. One partner makes a concrete factual observation about another partner, such as, “You have a blue shirt,” and the other partner repeats exactly what she hears. The repetition can change based on a few simple rules. First, the student must keep his or her honest point of view (for example, changing pronouns), altering the text to say, “I have a blue shirt” in response. If the student actually has a grey shirt, the honest response would be, “I have a grey shirt.” Second, the repetition may become so repetitive that there is a “pile up,” creating an impulse to change it even slightly: “Yeah, you have a blue shirt.” Third, a student can respond to some behavior in the other person if the impulse is created: “You smiled.” The objective is to take out all the intellectualism and focus on impulses and connecting to a partner. The interaction should not be conversational or logical. The goal is to respond truthfully, moment to moment, like a “ping pong game of impulses.”<sup>28</sup> As a teacher, the task is to build awareness to the moment when

---

<sup>28</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Sanford Meisner On Acting*, 22.

students pause to think about a reaction or deny an impulse. I encourage them to “act before you think.” Students often want to be “nice” or try too hard to do it “right,” unable to trust themselves. As Larry Silverberg states in his book, “trying to do the exercises right is not doing the exercise right... [it] creates a tension that will shut down your availability.”<sup>29</sup> Much of this game is geared toward stripping away social conditioning or defense mechanisms ingrained since childhood. The student develops the ability to really observe, listen, and perceive behavior, either verbal or nonverbal. They also begin to trust their own instincts. This builds a foundation for deeper work later in the semester.

Due to its simplicity, the Repetition Game can seem easy to teach. For instructors, skill must be developed and honed in terms of how they recognize impulses within students, side-coach, and decide when to interrupt. A teacher must first recognize and quantify a “truthful” impulse. Here arise many issues with teaching the technique and the reason why at many professional Meisner studios a teacher apprentices for years before teaching it themselves.<sup>30</sup> Teachers may not be skilled in their own observations and analyses of students’ truthful impulses, and even the arena of “truth” becomes subjective. As with other training methods, the teacher also must know what to say and when to interrupt an improvisational exercise to guide the student toward awareness of their acting partner and their own impulses. A key part of teaching Meisner is developing self-awareness in the student. In moments of uncertainty, merely stopping the student to ask, “What was your impulse?” or “What did you see in your partner’s behavior to elicit that response?” focuses their attention on knowing the difference

---

<sup>29</sup> Larry Silverberg, *The Sanford Meisner Approach* (Lyme, NH: Smith & Kraus, 1994), 17.

<sup>30</sup> For example, professional actress and Meisner teacher Erin Cherry apprenticed for two years at The Maggie Flanigan Studio before being allowed to work directly with a student, as per her website: [erincherry.com](http://erincherry.com).

between social conditioning and suppressing another impulse to avoid conflict. Many of my students fall into a false “politeness” at this stage, or they create provocations that aren’t truthful in an effort to be interesting. The teacher must encourage the student that his or her uniqueness and simplicity in this moment is enough.

At this point, the student has not actually engaged in acting—not by Meisner’s definition. This is also the danger of the misconception that “Meisner is repetition.” Repetition is not acting in the same way that a ballerina at the barre is not dancing, a musician practicing scales is not making music, or a golfer hitting balls at the range is not actually playing golf. These are exercises only.

The first step of our Acting I student’s transition from exercise into acting begins after introducing the independent activity. One partner engages in a physical activity, such as fixing a broken watch, while the other partner observes and plays the Repetition Game. The first parameter of the activity is that it needs to be difficult, involving the student’s full concentration. A second parameter is that it must have some standard of perfection or a metric by which to gauge the activity’s completion. After succeeding at playing repetition with complete focus on an activity, an imaginary circumstance—a justification of the activity—is introduced into the exercise. This crucial turning point in the exercise is where it becomes more than merely scales and transforms into an actor training tool. This imaginary reason for doing the activity allows the student an opportunity to be creative but also find reasons that resonate personally. An element of time is then added to the justification, raising the stakes. This develops the student’s point of view as they discover what stakes have meaning for them. As students create imaginary circumstances, they ideally find things that bring them to emotional

life. The repetition continues but becomes less objective and more subjective: less talk about objective issues like shirt color and more on subjective opinions about the partner's behavior.

After the students grapple with these elements, a new progression is introduced. One partner leaves the room while the other is in the space crafting an independent activity with a meaningful justification. The partner who left knocks on the door, and the student in the space must comment on the knock as the partner enters, thus starting the repetition in a new way. This simple addition teaches students that not only does "every moment [have] a meaning,"<sup>31</sup> but that they can react and be attuned to nonverbal cues as well as their partner's words. Following this addition, a justification for knocking on the door is introduced, thus creating an imaginary given circumstance for both actors and leading into the idea of objectives.

At this point, I remind my students of two key principles. First: we are developing the imagination, and the creation of an independent activity is vital to that development. Often, students will bring in real homework or prepare for a real audition. It is imperative that the teacher urges the student to explore and expand their fantasy world and to embrace the imaginary circumstances; this will become important for further development, either with scene work or emotional preparation. Second, I remind students that our goal is to be working off each other so well that the repetition fades away. Meisner technique is focused not on the words or even the repetition itself, but on the end goal of "responding truthfully to another person."<sup>32</sup> I tell them that, when in doubt, repeat, but an honest impulse is an honest impulse. If an exercise takes off in an exciting way, I remind them: "don't be a slave to the repetition."

---

<sup>31</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Sanford Meisner On Acting*, 46.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.



This may seem contradictory or confusing, but it's a little like using the training wheels on your bike (the repetition) until you don't need them anymore. Eventually, we want to get rid of the training wheels. The students also continue working concurrently with other vocal and physical exercises to reinforce the ideas of play and spontaneity. Roger Manix explains that at this point in the process "the repetition, like going to the gym, strengthens the muscles of observation and spontaneity, so over time there is naturally less repeating because each moment is now... its own moment."<sup>33</sup>

In the sixth week, we introduce text by assigning their first scene. Students are asked to approach it as an acting exercise, not as if they are playing the role. As an extension of the Meisner improvisation, I strategically choose scenes with the same parameters of the earlier exercise: one student performs some kind of independent activity that may or may not align with the givens of the scene, and another student enters. This aspect of the scene work becomes particularly tricky, especially with those eager actors who desire to perform. Students are instructed not to treat this like a rehearsal for a production, which means not to read the entire play or to think about their "character." They memorize their lines by rote. This concept is also derived from Meisner; he wanted actors to remain "open to any influence" so the lines can come straight from the heart.<sup>34</sup> The rationale is that at this point in the process, the intellect can begin to divert the instinctual choices of the actor, resulting in deliberate line readings. In short, they can get back "in their head" and not in the moment. It's important to note that later in the semester, learning lines by rote does not become a requirement of

---

<sup>33</sup> Roger Manix, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 69.

entering a scene. In their final scene, students have ample time for text analysis and character development. Their objective for this first scene is to continue working off their partner with spontaneous moment-to-moment contact, but now using a script. As a teacher, the goal is to steer them away from anticipating the next moment or using preconceived ideas of how they think the lines should be delivered. With repetition, spontaneity is easier as they don't know what will happen. Now the focus is on how to remain present without anticipating or "trying to do a scene." There are moments, in coaching, when I will purposefully have them repeat the lines as if they were in the repetition scene, to reinforce the type of interaction they have already been creating in the improvisations; then I urge them to find that throughout the scene.

After the completion of this first scene, we move away from the Meisner improvisations and switch our focus to more technical aspects of staging and analysis with monologues and audition techniques. We reinforce the idea of focus, concentration, and relationships to others on stage while introducing Uta Hagen's Six Steps and Stanislavski's objectives and super-objectives. At this stage, the students begin learning how to break down scripts into beats and tactics. These skills in textual analysis, although more aligned with the second year of the Meisner sequence, will inform some of the students' work in the final scene when they learn to integrate the earlier Meisner work with these analytical skills. Typically, scenes for this final project are slightly longer, more intense, and have characters that may be larger than life or outside their own experience. For this scene, the students begin to treat it like a rehearsal for a production and learn to apply basic techniques to practice. They read the entire play, analyze the text, and work through the scene as if in rehearsal. They do not learn their lines by rote as before, but they do have to be open to their partner and avoid preconceived line readings. At

times, the Repetition Game is reintroduced to remind the students what moment-to-moment contact feels like and how they can use that to jumpstart their scene. The emphasis remains on impulses and partner contact, but now they are crafting specific choices about their point of view and objective. At this point, character is introduced by examining an alternate point of view, but the teacher primarily selects these scenes to focus on maintaining contact with the acting partner in a state of heightened given circumstances rather than on complete character transformation.

This transition from working spontaneously with text in the Meisner technique to utilizing Stanislavski's and Hagen's techniques is a big leap for many of the students. Often, much of the conditioning and their ability to be present with their partner gets forgotten or displaced by more analytical or intellectual practices. The bridge for this transition is continuing and reincorporating the physical exercises that were introduced earlier. The success of the scenes is reliant on the teacher's focus on objectives and resisting the temptation to analyze character creation or more advanced techniques that may be found in a typical scene study.

In Acting II and III, we build on these techniques and introduce aspects of character development and heightened language. For character development, we further explore point of view and physicality. In Acting I, the point of view is filtered through the student's own identity as well as what they believe and feel about their partner and circumstances. In Acting II, we explore other points of view through various exercises stemming from the second year of the Meisner sequence. In addition, we complement the character studies by examining the work of an ensemble and physical-based theatre. Using a text such as the first scene from *The Government Inspector* as a jumping-off point, the student chooses a character from the play,

begins to experiment with physical choices, and decides the relationships to the other actors/characters. They must define their point of view on life, the circumstances, other people, and the environment. Meisner explains that actors must know how they feel about their lines in relation to the circumstances, saying “you have to know what you’re saying means to you... that is how you work on a part.”<sup>35</sup> Working with *The Government Inspector* introduces more dense text, and the challenge becomes how to remain spontaneous and truthful. The character exercises begin with modifications of physicality, particularly imitations of people they know. These imitations are essentially “springboards to inspire individual responses and to expand the actors range.”<sup>36</sup> Other exercises borrowed from Meisner training involve playing with physical impediments, such as a limp, broken bones, and blindness. These exercises are not intended as ways of training actors to replace disabled actors who would be more appropriate to play a specific role; they are simply training exercises. For instance, the effects of playing blind (or any movement or partner work involving blindness) develops the actor’s ability to listen fully and to not rely on sight. Dialects are also explored, although this depends on the comfort level of the student. Our method of working on these character traits is filtered through the idea that adding a physical modification is similar in focus to doing an independent activity (from the earlier Meisner exercise). The students relate to that idea and find they can both do their “activity” and still work truthfully off their fellow actors. Students also explore altered states of being by performing various types of inebriation and intoxication, such as alcohol, marijuana, or

---

<sup>35</sup> Meisner and Longwell, *Sanford Meisner On Acting*, 146

<sup>36</sup> William Esper and Damon DiMarco, *The Actor’s Guide to Creating a Character* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), 86.

cocaine. This exercise not only opens up physical awareness and forces them out of a “neutral” state, but it also requires a level of research about the effects of their chosen drug. These exercises illustrate another common misconception about Meisner: that it concentrates on an “inside-out” approach and rarely involves physical or psycho-physical work like that of Michael Chekhov or Jacques Lecoq. In addition to this ensemble project, students also engage in partner work or develop scenes with selections from modern playwrights like Arthur Miller, Henrik Ibsen, or Anton Chekhov. With these more complex and challenging texts, students again review analytical concepts, strengthen their ability to commit to choices, and yet remain present and responsive to their fellow actors.

In Acting III, students are introduced to more advanced techniques to develop their skills with heightened language—particularly Shakespeare. We use selections from Patsy Rodenburg’s and John Basil’s books to develop vocal, physical, and folio technique as well as textual analysis; we also play with meter, stress, rhythm, and rhetoric. As with Acting II, approaching the technical aspects of heightened language is similar to working on an independent activity. Students can react truthfully on one hand and speak poetically on the other. Even the most advanced students can become intimidated by the poetic text and retreat right back into their head. This is sometimes apparent when they need to listen to their partner deliver a long monologue. It is helpful at this stage to remind the students of the two fundamental goals of the Meisner technique: to listen, observe, and put the focus on the other person. This is where I reintroduce the Repetition Game, this time using the Shakespearean text. I have one student say a line, have the other student who is listening repeat it, and so on. This exercise forces them to really stop and listen to the text and each other. For students

delivering and witnessing long speeches, it is a particularly useful tool for both actors as they find themselves comprehending more of their content and actions by playing off of each other's behavior and impulses.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

An approach to acting is only beneficial if it is indeed practical for the actor. So how will new forms and media, such as web series and interactive games, change the way our actors need to be trained? How can we further develop Meisner's exercises with classical text like Shakespeare? When I use exercises derived from Lecoq and Boal, I ensure that students recognize they are developing skills of listening, presence, concentration, and spontaneity—the same concepts and skills that they were working with in the Repetition Game.

Recently, I participated in a biomechanics and Michael Chekhov intensive with Sergei Ostrenko. I noted that several of the principles conveyed in the training aligned with or complemented the Meisner technique. In this physical theatre training, the idea of “physical attention” and the use of imagination was essential to the development of the actor. Is that not the same as with Meisner? As devised and ensemble-based theatre become more prominent, I am curious how the Meisner technique might evolve to become a useful tool in developing this type of performance. One disadvantage of traditionally taught Meisner training is that it does not emphasize ensemble creation or ensemble exercises such as those used by Viewpoints, Lecoq, or Grotowski. However, as it develops awareness of one's partner(s), it certainly isn't a

---

<sup>37</sup> There is an example and detailed description of this exercise in the following: Nick Mosely, *Meisner in Practice* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2012), 158-59.

hindrance to ensemble work. I have found that combining ensemble-based methodologies with the Meisner exercises has been quite effective for students in understanding how they can apply the technique in various ways. I continue to experiment with how I might integrate them even further. These are the questions I continually ask as I move beyond repetition—beyond Meisner—to discover my own system as Stanislavski urges us all to do.

## Bibliography

- Baron, Joanne, and D.W. Brown. "the craft." *Backstage*. September 4, 2007.  
[http://www.backstage.com/news/the-craft\\_32/](http://www.backstage.com/news/the-craft_32/).
- Benedetti, Robert. "Zen in the Art of Actor Training." In *Master Teachers of Theatre: Observations on Teaching Theatre by Nine American Masters*, edited by Burnet M. Hobgood. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988.
- Brestoff, Richard. *The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods*. Lyme, NH: Smith & Kraus, 1995.
- Cherry, Erin. "Private Acting Coach." *Erin Cherry*. Accessed February 12, 2016.  
<http://www.erincherry.com/coaching>.
- Esper, William, and Damon DiMarco. *The Actor's Art and Craft: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Technique*. New York: Anchor Books, 2008.
- . *The Actor's Guide to Creating a Character*. New York: Anchor Books, 2014.
- Hart, Victoria. "The Meisner Technique." In *Training of the American Actor*, edited by Arthur Bartow, 51-96. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006.
- Meisner, Sanford, and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner On Acting*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.
- Meisner, Sanford, Martin Barter, Sydney Pollack, Open Road Films, and Sanford Meisner Center. *Sanford Meisner Master Class*. 2006. Los Angeles: Open Road Films, 2006. DVD.
- Mosely, Nick. *Meisner in Practice*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2012.
- Silverberg, Larry. *The Sanford Meisner Approach*. Lyme, NH: Smith & Kraus, 1994.
- Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*. Translated and edited by Jean Benedetti. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Zazzali, Peter. *Acting in the Academy: The History of Professional Actor Training in US Higher Education*. New York: Routledge, 2016.