



**The Presents of Absence:
Inspiring Creation Within the Pedagogical Void in Rude Mechs' *The Method Gun***

By Cason Murphy

The theatrical landscape of the 20th century is littered with the detritus of Method acting. Starting with the Group Theatre in the 1930s, attempts were made to develop a holistic approach to teaching actors, reflecting the desire of modern theatre-makers in every field to find a universal sense of truth in their explorations. Those associated with the Group believed they could develop a pure, comprehensive system of training that would allow their acting students to embody any role in any style of theatre. These actors-cum-teachers collectively insisted that the “inside-out” approach of their new system, “The Method,” was the only approach. Figures like Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner exploded onto the scene through the work of their students—James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Marilyn Monroe, among many others. However, each teacher was expanding upon a transcultural (mis)interpretation of Konstantin Stanislavski’s “System,” while insisting they were the true heir to his philosophy of realistic acting.

This dogmatic absolutism lent itself to fostering a student-teacher relationship that was defined by complete subordination. It highlighted the incompatibility of the means by which the trio hoped to fulfill their universalistic vision. Under this weighty aspiration, The Group

fractured, and each student subsequently staked their claim to the “true” legacy of Stanislavski by founding their own schools of training. Each remained defiantly blind to the weaknesses of their individual styles, and each demanded unflinching allegiance to their school that often left their students incompatible with anything other than psychological realism. Ultimately, each became increasingly militant in their pedagogy at the expense of their students’ well-being. Adler herself considered Strasberg as something of a sadist—even a misogynist to some extent, considering his apparent preference to select women for deeply personal sensory and affective memory exercises in front of his classes. And each insisted on promoting orality in their teaching—chastising students for taking notes, doubling back on earlier ideas, and refuting any responsibility to be quoted directly outside of the books they each wrote. Yet, somewhere along the way, each became immortalized for their contributions to the pedagogy of actor training. Each passed from being a teacher to being a “guru” whose techniques were seen as pure and unassailable.

Eighty years later, the influence of The Method has shown signs of atrophy. The constant bickering between Strasberg and Adler made them suspicious of handing over control of their unique pedagogical modes. By situating themselves as mythic figures at the core of their individual approaches, these teachers all but ensured that their legacies ended with them. With its creators gone, The Method now exists only in varying forms of highly diluted and revisionist second- and third-hand interpretations of the original techniques in universities and specialist workshops. Compounding this problem is that as the oral tradition permeated the Group Theatre and its splinter groups, the loss of the teacher thus became the loss of the keeper of knowledge.

It is this notion of the modern acting teacher as a figure of insight and injury that first inspired the Austin, Texas-based theatre collective, the Rude Mechs. In order to filter this idea through their own avant-garde collective style, they set their sights on another acting guru—one they couldn't lose because they made her up. Thus the "other Stella"—Stella Burden—was born. Since early 2006, the fictional mythos surrounding Burden and the five students she trained in her revolutionary system of acting called "The Approach" have been the focus of *The Method Gun*, a devised performance piece that the Mechs say is "loosely based on real people."¹

In order to "say the most about Stella Burden," the Mechs claim they shifted their focus to her students: "The people she left behind... actors who had each been handpicked by Stella herself."² What emerges in *The Method Gun* then is a literal restaging of a co-dependent guru-based process as imagined by an interdependent theatre collective. The Mechs are adamant that the intent of the project is "not to mock actors or the pursuit of craft."³ However, because they forcefully coalesce the cultish and the cultural within the pedagogy of acting, I argue that the Rude Mechs are using their piece to advance a completely antithetical and far more subversive point of view—that it is imperative the student-artist is able to insulate and protect their creative practice from the inevitable loss of the teacher figure. Or, as Rude Mechs' resident playwright Kirk Lynn puts it, the show thematically digs at the means of how "artists

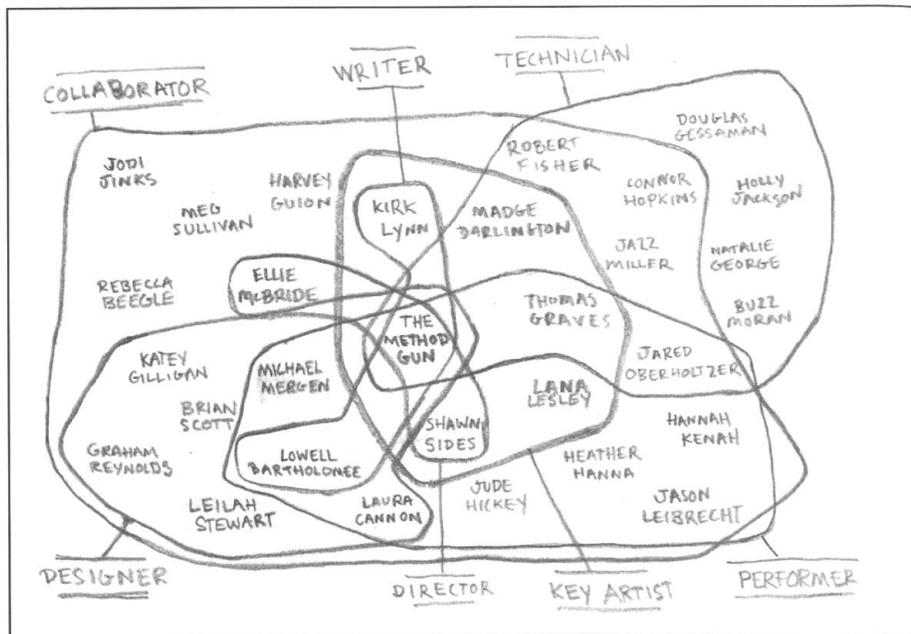
¹ Shawn Sides, qtd. in Joelle Jameson, "Shawn Sides and Lana Lesley from The Rude Mechs discuss *The Method Gun*," *Blast Magazine*, 13 October 2010.

² Kirk Lynn. *The Method Gun*, in *Humana Festival 2010: The Complete Plays*, ed. Adrien-Alice Hansel and Amy Wegener (Louisville: Playscripts Inc., 2010), 173.

³ Robert Faires, "Who Is Stella Burden, and Why Are They Saying Those Terrible Things About Her?" *The Austin Chronicle*, 28 March 2008.

keep trying to fix what’s missing, to say it better, to destroy the shit they hate.”⁴ *The Method Gun* then is a defiant attempt to dislodge the traditional vertical student-teacher codependency in favor of a more rhizomatic interdependent relationship found in theatre collectives.

In order to understand the efficacy of *The Method Gun* in this respect, this essay will explore three aspects of the production’s development. First, I will reconcile the history of The Method against the history of the Rude Mechs’ own style of creative collection (“Ready...”). Second, I will trace the influences and impulses which shaped the content and form of *The Method Gun* (“Aim...”). And finally, I will analyze the production and examine its impact (“...Fire”). By examining each of these layers individually, we can better understand the impact of the Mechs’ self-reflexive attempt to demystify assumptions about the theatrician’s process and their own biggest fears, questions, and anxieties about making art.



A chart of the creative team behind *The Method Gun*, created by the Rude Mechs, that appears in the program at each performance of the show. Note the centralized position of the show itself, from which the people involved radiate out in a constellation of various roles and functions.

⁴ Lynn, interview with the author.

READY...

In discussing “The Method” and “Method acting,” it is largely understood that we are talking about the work of Lee Strasberg, which was a refinement—or corruption, if Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and their protégés are to be believed—of the original training techniques and acting philosophy of Russian theatre-maker Konstantin Stanislavski. Strasberg originated the term “Method” to describe his own approach to actor training and acting philosophy. He intertwined ideas from Stanislavski, his student Yegeevny Vakhtangov, and others from the early years of the First Studio at the Moscow Art Theatre (M.A.T.). Over the years, however, it was largely used as an umbrella term for the training methodologies of Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner. Even as Adler and Meisner vehemently denied any commonalities between their approach to training and that of Strasberg’s, the moniker stuck.

Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner (among others) started in the 1930s as original members of the Group Theatre, the brainchild of theatre-maker Harold Clurman. Clurman had seen Stanislavski’s M.A.T. on tour in the United States, and he was enthused by the sense of unity that permeated its productions. In a time when American actors largely functioned as hired guns from production to production, Clurman sought to develop a company which would dedicate itself to “the essential moral and social preoccupations of our time.”⁵ This would require a style of theatre with a singular vision and sense of purpose.

After recruiting Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg (who had also seen the M.A.T. performances), Clurman managed to convince Stella Adler to join the Group. Adler had previously been introduced to Stanislavski’s “System” by his protégés Richard Boleslavsky and

⁵ Wendy Smith, *Real Life Drama* (New York: Grove Weidendeld, 1990), 8.

Maria Ouspenskaya at the American Laboratory Theatre. With the help of these three, the Group was able to swell to its size of 27 actors and three administrators. Each day, Clurman would lecture on various aspects of theatre history or the craft itself; Strasberg would teach his emergent “Method” and direct whatever play the Group was staging. Clurman’s talks were fundamental in setting the direction of the Group, but Strasberg assumed the vision of unity. This remained the status quo until 1934 when Adler completely altered the teacher-student dynamic that had been established in Strasberg’s favor.

During a trip to Paris in 1934, Adler met with Stanislavski himself who was there on vacation. Since his System had been brought to America, Stanislavski had modified many of his early ideas with his actors in Russia. This dissonance became clear to Adler as she absorbed his new techniques; they largely focused on improvisation and given circumstances. She returned to the Group with her ideas fortified by the fact that they were vetted by Stanislavski himself. Strasberg reacted negatively to this and was “angered by her report and her charge of misuse of the work, and concluded that either she had misunderstood what Stanislavski had told her or that the Russian Master ‘had gone back on himself.’”⁶ With no teacher figure to provide a sense of authority, each of the students were forced to interpret all of the information on their own and construct their own systems of meaning.

While most theatre practitioners are able to recognize the differences between the individual strategies employed by Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner, the public at large is often unable to perform the same level of differentiation. Psychiatrist Marc Galanter sees a result of this misperception in the public’s labeling of such groups as “cultish.” This in turn leads

⁶ David Garfield, *A Player’s Place: The Story of the Actor’s Studio* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 33.

outsiders to fixate on most bizarre and destructive behaviors (see any discussion of the acting of Marlon Brando, Daniel Day-Lewis, or Shia LeBeouf), which negates any deeper understanding of the meaningful psychological processes that may account for what is superficially judged as extreme or strange.

He goes on to juxtapose the notion of a “cult” with the notion of a “charismatic group,” one in which members “(a) have a shared belief system, (b) sustain a high level of social cohesiveness, (c) are strongly influenced by the group’s behavioral norms, and (d) impute charismatic (or sometimes divine) power to the group or its leadership.”⁷ With a stable figure of authority like an acting guru, even the most extreme training systems can often successfully avoid the label of “cult” in favor of the “charismatic group.”

Since their formation, the Rude Mechs have avoided establishing a practice centered on a singular figure. Instead, the 28-member company is guided collective consensus, with major decisions being made by the Rude Mechs’ six co-artistic producers (or “co-pads”). Lana Lesley, one of the co-pads, claims the company’s organizational structure was created as a way to protest the “institutionalized misinterpretation” inherent in the Americanized strains of Stanislavski’s system. To them, this critical failure has resulted in “a mass of acting students literally performing their training on stage (as opposed to using that training as a tool to create their performance).”⁸ The exercises and techniques that have been regimented in the modes of Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner are inextricable from the final product, in the view of the Rude

⁷ Marc Galanter, “Charismatic Groups and Cults: A Psychological and Social Analysis,” in *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality, Vol. 1*, ed. Kenneth I. Pargament, Julie J. Exline, and James W. Jones (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), 729.

⁸ Lana Lesley, qtd. in Eliza Bent, “Madness in the Methods? Companies in New York and Texas Take on a Plethora of Techniques in Workshop Productions about Actor Training,” *American Theatre* (January 2008): 137.

Mechs, who employ a completely non-Stanislavskian approach to creating their theatre.

In his 2011 review of the piece, *New York Times* reviewer Jason Zinoman succinctly identified the theme of *The Method Gun* as “the importance of teachers.”⁹ However, I think Zinoman’s broad reading of the Mechs’ investigations simply misses the mark. In most acting training programs, there tends to exist an inextricable dependence on the “other.” Often, this comes in the form of the guru, as mentioned above—the figure that is, according to the Rude Mechs, “what a teacher becomes when they start performing their own teaching.”¹⁰ Yet the show is adamant in its refusal to show us Stella Burden leading her company; in fact, the history of the show has been one of deftly removing her from view.¹¹ Instead our focus is turned to the theatre company she left in crisis, who are desperately trying to get their teacher’s teaching right.

By placing Burden in an era when the American Method-based realism was at its most potent, the Rude Mechs are able to refine their own anti-realistic practice through their degrees of difference between methodologies in which she trained her students. Their postmodern, physical, “outside-in” approach acts in opposition to the cerebral “inside-out” approach championed by modern realism. The Stanislavski System and all its derivatives are fundamentally based on psychological observations. The goal of staying completely immersed in a character is not just for show, but it is a means by which an actor can actually experience the thoughts and emotions of said character until they can identify with it and, therefore, act as

⁹ Jason Zinoman, “Stell-aaa! Where Are You? And Where’s Your Sister?,” *The New York Times*, 6 March 2011, C2.

¹⁰ Lynn, interview with the author, 19 March 2015.

¹¹ In the “final” version presented in 2014 at the University of Texas-Austin, the only time Stella is seen is briefly at the top of the show in the form of an obfuscated black and white photograph placed for a few seconds on an overhead projector and then is never seen again.

if they are it.

One of the Rude Mechs' hallmark theatrical devices flies in the face of this goal. Often, they employ the concept of "doubling," wherein purposeful tactics are used to dissolve the boundary between performer and performed. Both character and actor in their show are both simultaneously visible (or "doubled") to the audience. Unlike Stanislavski's idea that character is layered over the actor, the Mechs' "doubling" approach is much closer to the more antique Elizabethan notion of the "doubling consciousness" in which "the theatrical person is simultaneously 'real and unreal,' and that the person emerges as both 'present and absent, physical and non-material.'"¹²

From the moment the Mechs' performance space is opened, the performers mingle and chat with the audience until the show begins—another Rude Mechs standard. Before any "doubling" (or even acting) begins, the Rude Mechs are confronting their audiences with the physical presence of the actor—and resisting the traditional character-first presentation which is ubiquitous in mainstream theatre. When the show starts, the Rude Mechs actually create a more complex "tripling" effect which requires them to deftly navigate three concentric rings of narrative. The first ring is the show proper, which takes the form of an irreverent research project undertaken by the Mechs to understand the nature of how "artists keep trying to fix what's missing, to say it better, to destroy the shit they hate."¹³ The second ring emerges as the Mechs engage in actually re-creating the Company's successes and failures. Their investigations become a tricky patchwork of vignettes which document the rehearsals, training techniques,

¹² Vicky Blue Lemay, "Shakespeare's Posthumus God: Postmodern Theory, Theater, and Theology," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2007), 19.

¹³ Lynn, interview with the author.

and arguments binding the Stella Burden Company together. They approach the third ring: a performance of the group's landmark production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Or, to put it more simply, imagine the show as a set of Russian matryoshka nesting dolls. Fragments of Tennessee Williams's script are contained in a portion of the Burden Company's rehearsals and performance, which is, in turn, enclosed within the Rude Mechs' reenactment of that staging process.

In *The Method Gun*, the Mechs have made the Burden Company the Trojan horse by which they are able to infiltrate the Method in order to tear it down from the inside. It is no surprise then that the major era the show investigates is the mid-1970s, a time when the ascendancy of Method-based realism was being met with avant-garde counter-cultural movements like the Living Theatre and the Performance Group.

AIM...

In *The Method Gun*, one of the characters suggests that Burden's "ideas became beyond understanding... so the only map [to understanding the Approach] is in if you follow her."¹⁴ Where Burden's students took this as metaphor and locked themselves away in their rehearsal room, the Mechs opted to take her a bit more literally. In 2007, the Mechs tacked a map of the world to some hay bales. Co-pads took turns putting on a blindfold, grabbing a .22 pistol, and taking a shot. Lana Lesley hit Baghdad, but the Rude Mechs claim there is a standing rule that they don't travel into any contemporary war zones.¹⁵ In reshooting, Lesley hit Ecuador, which

¹⁴ Lynn, *The Method Gun*, 180. As noted earlier, Adler herself didn't like students to take notes during her class, leading to a sense of mysticism about her words.

¹⁵ Faires (see bibliography).

was conveniently enveloped into the mythos as the South American country where Burden is said to have last been seen in the 1970s.

While in Ecuador, the Mechs may not have found their elusive guru, but they did access a new pedagogical approach that reframed their contemporary, Westernized values. During their time in Ecuador, the Mechs encountered Nelson Diaz, director of Humanizarte in Quito, who explained the concept of the Andean folk dance that is engrained in the cultural fabric across the country.¹⁶ They found that different groups perform the dance in various permutations, yet each group recognizes the dances of the other groups as valid. Within a mestizo culture, the notion of being obsessed with purity is a wholly foreign concept—thus no one group has claim to the one true Andean folk dance. Among other Western institutions, this flies in the face of the American guru-based acting techniques in which one way to truth is identified and pursued. It also calls to mind the insistence of the acting gurus that each was the sole inheritor of Stanislavski’s legacy. Naturally, the Mechs made this single-mindedness the focus of their next stage of development.

After returning to Texas, the *Method Gun* project was opening up to the full company. Any of the 28 members who had an idea to explore, no matter how tangential it felt to the project, could lead a night of lab work. Co-pad Thomas Graves led an evening about gurus where various company members took turns teaching one another acting techniques in the style of gurus they knew. At one point, a company member shouted, “This is bullshit,” and left. According to co-pad Madge Darlington, “We were 80% sure she was just going to pick up her

¹⁶ Ibid.

kids. But we were 20% sure she'd really left us for good."¹⁷ Thus, a defining Rude Mech concept was born—the “80/20 principle,” in which a spectator should be 80% sure something they are watching is fake, but 20% sure that it might be real.

According to performance theorist Peggy Phelan, theatre's power and significance lies in its ability to “respond to a psychic need to rehearse for loss.”¹⁸ The loss that Burden's company suffers at the hands of their guru happens literally mid-rehearsal, complicating Phelan's view and resulting in a state of arrested development for the students. Instead of being freed by Burden's absence, her students have been hobbled. One student, Connie Torrey, explains that the Approach “isn't a way of getting to something, it's a way of deserving what you get.”¹⁹ Instead of being a resounding endorsement of the Approach, this sentiment sounds eerily reminiscent of a coping strategy for trauma.

When we encounter The Burden Company in the mid-1970s in *The Method Gun*, they have been left to their own devices to finish a nine-year rehearsal process in an effort to realize Burden's dream production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This version of *Streetcar* has been conceived to be performed “in its entirety... every line, every stage direction that does not involve one of the main characters—Stanley, Stella, Blanche, and Mitch.”²⁰ As many questions as that concept raises, answers are nowhere to be found. As we come to find out, Burden abandoned her quintet of disciples a few years earlier by spiriting away to the jungles of South America without a trace.

¹⁷ Adrien-Alice Hansel, “About *The Method Gun*,” in *Humana*, 163.

¹⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

¹⁹ Lynn, *The Method Gun*, 182.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

In the aftermath of her alleged abandonment of the group, her fledgling pupils have grasped onto the last permutation of the “Approach”—one that found Burden shifting her interest away from the concepts of beauty and truth and leaning toward the more dangerous ideas of risk and tension. Like children without a mother, they have naturally shifted toward an even more chaotic misunderstanding of her ideas. The surname Burden is, for the Mechs, a purposeful evocation of performance artist Chris Burden. However, it also serves as a symbolic metaphor for the intense pressure a guru places on their students and the problematic aspects of living up to a teacher’s expectations.

In *The Method Gun*, each of the characters has internalized the damage that Stella has caused them while projecting it back out onto their fellow actors. For Connie, it is a seething nihilistic teenage-style anger constantly kept on boil. For Robert “Hops” Gilbert, it is a Dionysian desire to be torn apart by his own students at stage combat workshops he organizes. For Carl Reyholt, it is a self-reflexive propensity toward emotional flagellation, wanting to know why he wasn’t “good enough” for his instructor to stay. For Koko Bond, it is an intensified religiosity, manifested through constant vocalized praying. And for Elizabeth Johns, it is a militant assumption of the role of *de facto* leader, a new “Stella” to fill the gap.

In a sense, each of them has been reduced to their most concentrated form of emotional wreckage from their past—the exact antithesis of the freedom from such obstacles promised by rigorous training. Even the Rude Mechs themselves were not spared this trauma. Lynn remembers a teacher, Doc Ayers, as “the closest to a guru that all of us [in the Rude Mechs] had.” Ayers was the faculty coordinator for the Shakespeare at Winedale program where the Rude Mechs met while in graduate school at the University of Texas. Yet, Lynn

continues, “We all love him to a person, but he is also crazy as a shit house rat. He would yell and rant and emotionally manipulate the group... but he had a deep passion of theatre and he taught us to love each other. In fact, I think he would let himself be the bad guy sometimes so that groups could band together against him.”²¹ The absence of a figurehead in the Stella Burden Company warps the group into a bizarre version of the Mechs themselves, where leadership is a shared burden amongst the six co-pads.

How *The Method Gun* re-creates successes and failures of the Stella Burden Company in wrestling with Burden’s “Approach” appears at first to be a straight send-up of Method pedagogy and exercises. However, instead of writing off the behavior of this acting system as cultish (as Method-haters tend to do in our own theatrical culture), the Mechs have opted to put “the most dangerous acting technique in the world” rigorously into practice before the audience’s eyes to more deeply understand those meaningful psychological processes that occur in cultish behavior.²²

...FIRE

The show itself begins with a round of “crying practice,” in which a kitchen timer is set for three minutes and the actors begin a process of wringing out tears without any motivation. The exercise is presented to the audiences without context, as it often is in the most programmatic of acting classes. The audience is not sure what they are looking at, and as such, tends to laugh at the actors, who are so internally focused that they cannot even attempt to

²¹ Lynn, interview with the author.

²² “The Method Gun,” *Playbill*, 16 March 2015.

bridge the gap between audience and performer. The sequence plays as a clear demonstration of the sterility and senility of such practices as Strasberg on-the-spot emotional recall and affective memory.

The other ways in which risk and tension manifest themselves are sometimes equally banal; “kissing practice” is a rigidly mechanistic exercise lifted wholesale from an old Glencoe/McGraw Hill acting textbook. Other times they are exotic, like when a rasaboxes demonstration goes off the rails when traditional *rasas* like “joy” and “desire” are replaced by more esoteric ones like “foreign repose” and “horse.” In Stella’s absence, the Burden Company has latched onto any source they can to fill in missing information withheld by Stella. However, by sampling everything from Stanislavski to Schechner, the Mechs themselves slowly but surely reveal the range of both modern and postmodern “teachers” from which they have derived their own potent system. Occasionally, the exercises are dangerous; the company keeps Stella’s (supposedly) loaded pistol in a bird cage that Burden brought to rehearsals to show that anyone in the room could kill another actor at any time.

This dovetailed nicely into the Rude Mechs’ exploration of Anne Bogart’s notion of “things you can’t fake” in the theatre. One night after running naked in the woods during a retreat, the co-pads challenged themselves to uncover a way of not faking nudity in *The Method Gun*. Thus was born “Snakes on a String,” a sequence in which the show’s two male performers tie balloons to their genitals and bound across stage nude (in emulation of one of Stella’s supposed radical acts of protest). According to Lynn, “Stella’s someone who specifically looked for moments of extreme risk—not just emotionally, but extreme physical risk. Those

moments are super-real.”²³ At the performance I saw of the “final final” version of the show last September in Austin, this super-reality manifested itself. As the men cavorted across the space, their separate bunches of balloons managed to unexpectedly intertwine as they passed mid-stage. With enough give to allow the actors to just about to make their exit, the balloons snagged mid-air during the final leap, resulting in yelps of raucous laughter while every male member of the audience sat up just a bit straighter. I can’t help but think it was a moment of unfaked risk and tension of which Stella would have been proud.

However, it was during their years-long investigation that the Mechs came to the conclusion that no matter how hard they tried, the act of firing Stella’s gun was always going to have to be faked. Following the dictates of Chekhov, the Mechs knew that the gun did indeed need to go off. So, the Mechs sought a way to satisfy both Bogart and Chekhov as the show reached its conclusion. In a sequence just prior to the opening night of the Burden *Streetcar*, they found their moment. The character Elizabeth suggests the company disband, sell their equipment, and leave behind the crater which Stella and her Approach have created. Carl, having flashbacks to the first abandonment, grabs the gun in panic and fires at Elizabeth. With the gun revealed as fake, all pretense is abandoned. The female figure being shot at is suddenly doubled before us, speaking both as the character Elizabeth and the actress Shawn Sides. She scoffs, “Of course, it’s fake... This is bullshit. The Approach is bullshit. And Stella is bullshit. And everything we’ve done is nothing.”²⁴ Only then, upon this proclamation of the inherent artifice of the entire evening, when the sole believer loses faith, is the truth that *The Method Gun* has

²³ Lynn, qtd. in “The Method Gun,” *Creative Capital Artists Projects*, http://creative-capital.org/project_contexts/view/217/project:260 (last accessed 20 April 2015).

²⁴ Lynn, *The Method Gun*, 203.

been sitting on finally revealed.

Inspired by Stella's own dichotomy of risk and tension and the questions raised from the "80/20 principle," a set of five swinging work lights are suddenly released from the grid and crisscross the stage. The actors silently re-perform their various isolated bits of blocking from *A Streetcar Named Desire* we've seen lackadaisically scattered throughout the show. They do this while they walk in, around, and straight through the now-dangerous performance space, narrowly avoiding catastrophe with each second that passes. The performance that occurs exists before us as both *Streetcar* and *The Method Gun*, where the Burden Company's Method-based realism and the Rude Mechs' postmodern theatricality are fused together to into a most extreme coup de théâtre—a dangerous display of anti-realistic Meyerholdian biomechanics.²⁵ As a result, the Rude Mechs simultaneously become visible to the audience as the Rude Mechs, Burden's actors, and Tennessee Williams' characters. The three concentric rings of time and identity coalesce into one dizzying singularity.

On the heels of this "production" of *Streetcar*, Elizabeth takes the key she's been wearing around her neck and unlocks the box containing Stella's final letter—a totem which seems increasingly significant in light of Stella's tendency to not write anything down. The instructions inside are for a "monologue to be burned," wherein the reader is told to set fire to the paper and try to read as much as you can before the flame forces them to drop it. It begins: "If you ever believed in something stupid—if you ever believed a guru who turned out to be a fraud—if you ever accepted something as true just because it was beautiful—you get another

²⁵ Meyerhold is the father of the avant-garde "destroy the teacher" mentality, having forcefully separated himself from his mentor Stanislavski's teachings after leaving the Moscow Art Theatre.

chance.”²⁶ Upon reading these words, as if summoned, an anthropomorphic tiger appears, come to take Elizabeth away.

The tiger appears several times earlier in the show, often as the literal manifestation of the fear of emotional and physical abuse at the hands of the guru. In its first appearance, the tiger begins to extol the virtues of including a tiger in every play, settling predominantly on the symbolism of the tiger; it claims that a tiger represents important Burden-esque dualities like life and death or danger and beauty. Yet, just before it leaves, the tiger gives a deeper, more directorial meaning for its appearance: “If you have trouble for a scene... just remember, any moment, any moment, I could run through and eat the person you are most bored with or the person you are most interested in or the person you are sitting next to... be careful.”²⁷ The absurdness of this demand for action justification sounds like many a desperate acting coach encouraging a student to raise the stakes in a scene. And it is telling that one of Stella’s students, Connie Torrey, claims that the last words Stella spoke to her were “watch out,” a close companion to the tiger’s final “be careful.”

Once Elizabeth and the tiger depart, the scab of leadership has once again been ripped from the wounds of the Stella Burden Company. This bit of business is compounded by the fact that Sides, the actress playing Elizabeth, directed *The Method Gun* as well, so the many embodiments of authority have been excised from the stage before the final moments. In response, the kitchen timer is once again set for three minutes and the remaining actors (leaving an empty space for Elizabeth) repeat the “crying practice” sequence, bookending the

²⁶ Lynn, *The Method Gun*, 204.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

opening of the show. While they cry, a list of teachers' names submitted by the audience earlier in the evening scrolls up the back wall. It is a simultaneous credit sequence for the Mechs and an in-memorial segment to those that have influenced the audience. This is Stella's final lesson, a way of "honoring and destroying the lessons that [we've] learned," momentarily intertwining presence and absence yet again.²⁸

Having spent the majority of the show convincing the audience that a process without a strong teacher figure can be nothing but "rude," it is in the final sequence of the show that the Mechs reveal their ideological long con by showing us the fruits of their own extreme process of rehearsal. By successfully combining beauty, truth, risk, and tension in the physical form of the five actors onstage, the figure of the authoritative teacher is minimized and essentially removed, which I believe is what the Rude Mechs aimed at all along. It's why they made Burden and her Approach up in the first place. By jumping together into the void typically occupied by the "teacher," the collective nature of the Rude Mechs has allowed them to cobble together a contemporary theoretical and practical approach to theatre: one that avoids bowing before its teachers, but instead hauls itself up to stand on their shoulders. They have visibly demonstrated a movement from the tenuous co-dependence of traditional guru-based pedagogy to the far more stable interdependence found in avant-garde collective theatre creation.

It must be recognized that in their creation and pursuit of Stella Burden, the Mechs spent exactly nine years staging, rehearsing, and enacting one breath-taking performance. In

²⁸ Ibid., 171.

that way, maybe the fictional Stella Burden Company and the very real Rude Mechs aren't so different after all.

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