

Jr Company—Unit of Study I

Stella Adler Acting Workshop—“Playing the Action and Given Circumstances”

This lesson plan was developed as part of a Unit of Study in acting technique for the Jr Company (ages 11-14) program at Lexington Children’s Theatre. Jr. Company (and its high school equivalent, Company B) is an audition-based theatre training program that helps young people understand the many facets of being a theatre maker. This lesson plan was the first of three that aimed to introduce middle school students to theatre practitioners that developed widely-studied acting techniques. These practitioners were Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Uta Hagen.

Description	Students will explore Stella Adler’s process of script analysis in order to develop a stronger sense of committing to justified actions and behaviors onstage. Beginning with exercises to build up confidence in factual analysis, beginning with everyday objects, then moving into single lines of text, and then into short scenes. These exercises will culminate in a three-stepped analysis of an “Open” or “Context-less Scene,” leading to a physical exploration of the scene utilizing the behaviors the students discovered to be justified by the text. The lesson will conclude with time for students to reflect on their own on how Stella Adler’s technique fits into their own approach to acting in order to promote reflective artistry at a young age.
Age	11-14, 18 students
Date	November 12 & 19, 2019
Curriculum Topic	Acting Technique
Teaching Artist	John Perine
Time	7:00 PM – 8:30 PM, 2 sessions, could be adapted into one 3-hour session
Resources	Notebook Paper Pencils Assorted objects included: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chess pawn• Frisbee• Matchbox car• Calculator• Lego brick• Highlighter• Acorn• Kite string• Easter egg• Miniature stapler

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rubber ball • Sponge • Seashell • Painted Rock <p>Dialogue in this lesson plan comes from the following plays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bob: A Life in Five Acts</i> by Peter Sinn Nachtrieb • <i>Gruesome Playground Injuries</i> by Rajiv Joseph • <i>Peter and the Starcatcher</i> by Rick Elice • <i>The Swing of the Sea</i> by Molly Hagan • <i>Eurydice</i> by Sarah Ruhl • <i>Lungs</i> by Duncan Macmillan • <i>I and You</i> by Lauren Gunderson
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Student Learning:

Objectives	Assessment Criteria
To analyze dramatic literature to justify individual and collaborative performance	Students will engage in various exercises that require deep reading of dramatic literature (from isolated lines to whole scenes)
To further develop the ability to think creatively within justified limits	Students will utilize concrete evidence to justify imaginary circumstances for characters
To collaborate with other artists in an encouraging manner	Students will work with partners to develop scenes together
To create a safe environment where everyone can learn and play	Students will support the choices made by their fellow actors by pointing out their classmates' strengths following each exercise

Guided Practice:

1. Warm-Up (About 10 min)
 - a. Lead students through full body stretches to build awareness of bodies and of limitations
 - b. Lead students an articulatory vocal warm-up
 - c. Lead students through a quick round of object transformation (This is Not A...)
2. Exercise 1: Object Identity (about 15 min)
 - a. **Transition/Introduction:** “For this unit of study, we are going to be learning about three major acting techniques. Tonight we will be starting with the technique outlined by Stella Adler,

who pushed for the actor to operate creatively within the factual confines given in the script. Therefore, before we can approach a script, we must strengthen our understanding of given circumstances.”

- b. Students choose a random object and observe it and point out factual information about it: Colors, shapes, definitive weights/lengths. These are things that are indisputable about the object. Have students point out these aspects about their objects.
 - c. These facts about the object can suggest things about its owner. Have students look at these factual aspects of their object and ask themselves: Why is this object this color? Why does this object have scratches on it?
 - i. These questions can and will lead to inquiries about the owner of the object: What character owns this object? What do they use it for? How often do they use it? How long have they had it for? How did they come to own it? Is it used as regularly/irregularly as it once was? Where does this character store this object—their home, their place of work, at school, in a hidden location?
 - d. One at a time, students will describe their objects: first, focusing on the facts. Then, move into the imaginary circumstances. i.e. the ball is red *because* it is this child’s favorite color, and it has these crescent shaped indentions because when the child gets anxious, they grip into the rubber surface to comfort them.
 - e. **Discussion:** This exercise is a metaphor for how Adler argues an actor should approach a script. We started with pointing out the undeniable facts about the object. How does an actor do that for a play? We then moved onto *justifying* the facts. How does an actor do this with a script? Why do we as actors do exercises like this one? Why study objects? How does this affect an actor’s understanding of character?
3. Exercise 2: Justification of One Line (about 15 min)
- a. **Transition:** “We can use this same detective work when approaching a script as an actor. The playwright leaves clues that help the artists working on the play understand the world and its characters. These clues can take form in actual information in the script (things stated in dialogue or stage

directions) or in the way characters speak (looking at punctuation or word choice). Now let's approach a line of text."

- b. Students are given a line of dialogue from a play without any context (attached). Have students pay attention to the punctuation or lack thereof. What does this say about the character and their circumstances? Where is this character? Who are they speaking to? What is the exigency of the situation? Is it a private or public conversation?
 - c. **Discussion:** What discoveries did you make simply by looking at the text itself? What are the kinds of clues that playwrights can give actors in scripts that weren't necessarily in your assigned lines? i.e. punctuation, run-on sentences, word choice, common sentence structure (frequent questions), etc.
4. Exercise 3: Mixed Up A/B Scenes (about 40 min)
- a. **Transition:** "Things get more interesting with more characters and more dialogue. Let's explore some longer scenes."
 - b. Students are given a blank piece of paper and are instructed to write an eight-line scene (ABABABAB). They then put it on a surface, remembering where they put it. Once everyone has turned in their piece of paper, they choose a partner and will receive two random selections of dialogue that they did not write. They must now create a 14-lined scene pulling from the 16 lines that they have. The order can be whatever they like, but student may not change the wording or punctuation of any line. Line distribution does not have to be even. Consider the circumstances that justify this conversation, and how those circumstances take form in *action*. Action is the task that must be done in a scene for the story to move forward. Action is often interrupted by the other character(s) wishing for the action to change in order to fulfil their own needs. Action should be justified by the circumstances.
 - c. **Discussion:** What was easy about developing circumstances for these mashed-up scenes? What was difficult? What discoveries were you able to make about the *action* of the scene based upon the script your playwrights gave you? Why is it important to look back to the script when considering the action of a scene?
5. Reflection (about 10 min)
- a. Using notebook paper and pencils, allow students the

opportunities to jot down their current thoughts outlooks on the technique explored so far.

- b. Encourage students to start with a simple Pros and Cons list regarding the technique—what do they like? What do they not like?
- c. Note that this process of reflection is vital for a growing actor and will help when we create actor philosophies at the end of the unit.

Note: At this point, the lesson split so Stella Adler could be covered for two weeks, but this lesson can be taught in one fell swoop without the previous reflection period and the following review period.

6. **Discussion:** Review of Lesson #1 (about 5 min)

- a. Whose acting technique did we introduce last week? What were big ideas in this technique? What kinds of exercises did we do last week? How did those exercises relate to the technique?

7. Exercise 4: Introduction and Analysis of the A/B Scene's Circumstances (about 15 min)

- a. **Transition:** "We are going to continue looking at utilizing our detective work to understand the context of scenes. However, this time, we will be using a scene from an actual play."
- b. Students are split into pairs. Have students decide who will play character A or B. Hand out the open scenes to partners. Have students read through the scene. Then, students will fill out the first column of the attached worksheet: Factual Information in the Text. Once, and only once, the first column has been completed, students can move onto the second column: Assumptions that are Justified by the Text.
- c. **Discussion:** What discoveries did you and your partner make about your scene?
- d. *Note: all of our pairs had the same scene, cut from I and You by Lauren Gunderson. By using the same scene that was analyzed nine different ways, we stressed Adler's belief that the actors' imaginations can greatly shape a performance.*

8. Exercise 5: Action in the A/B Scene (about 15 min)

- a. **Transition:** "Now that we have a stronger understanding of the context of this scene and who these characters are, let's look at how these things influence action. Who here likes watching a play where characters sit or stand still for the entire thing? No one? Great! Neither did Stella Adler. But our actions and behaviors have to link back to what the text gives us in

order to be *justified*.”

- b. Students return to their isolated pairs and look at the third column of the worksheet: Justified Actions. By addressing analysis in the first two columns, students must devise a list of actions and behaviors that are supported by the text.
 - c. **Discussion:** What kinds of discoveries did you and your partner make about the physical action of the scene? Why should we as actors analyze a character’s behavior in this way?
9. Exercise 6: A/B Scenes on Their Feet (about 30 min)
- a. **Transition:** “You now have the most excellent cheat-sheet at your disposal. You know what kinds of things you can do onstage that make sense for the character you are playing. We’re now going to have the chance to get on our feet and explore this scene physically. The point of this exercise is not to have a perfectly-blocked scene at the end. Your objective is to become more comfortable with making physical choices. Run through the scene in one fell swoop, and then discuss choices that you thought worked or did not work, and continue playing and discovering from there.”
 - b. Partners begin running through the scenes, paying attention to the *actions* that they just took note of. If something feels unnatural, have students go back to the observations that inspired students to justify those actions. How factual are they? Explore other actions that are equally justified. Actions exist on a spectrum, so the character’s justified action might be one thing, but the student might be playing it too far to one extreme.
10. Sharing (about 15 min)
- a. Pairs share their scene. Audience members point out actions that were clear and what they illustrated about the circumstances of the scene.
11. Reflection (about 10 min)
- a. With their paper and pencils, students have time to reflect on the exercises of the day. What worked for them? What did not?

Context-Less Lines for Exercise 2

<p>You were left at the White Castle. I wasn't supposed to take you. But then I looked into your eyes.</p>	<p>Promise me you won't stop your journey and I won't stop mine. And then, maybe at another rest stop somewhere, we can meet again.</p>
<p>Why are you talking to me right now? Why don't you go back to your dance?</p>	<p>I'm not going back to the dance, okay? Leave me alone.</p>
<p>Wait—I just remembered today's my birthday. I'm fifteen.</p>	<p>Great, now we can count the seconds 'til we die.</p>
<p>It isn't a contest. Though, if it were, I'd win.</p>	<p>I was so worried. We waited and waited. I told you'd come. We waited—and then the rain and the dark and I was so worried—.</p>
<p>What was the last thing he said to you? You really can't remember the last thing he said? Not even that?</p>	<p>I knew him too. You don't have to keep inviting me to things like I don't even know like I don't know what's going on like you know better.</p>
<p>Could you not stand here, please? People are looking at me weird because you're standing here.</p>	<p>You didn't have to come tonight if you were going to be like this. If you don't like me like that you can just say it.</p>
<p>Oh. I'm on my way to a party where there are really very interesting people. Would you like to join me?</p>	<p>Say it again because before I couldn't hear you because people were staring and I was pushing a shopping cart and holding a lamp and I couldn't breathe.</p>
<p>If it's going to happen, the solution to it all, the survival of mankind, it will happen in our lifetime. It has to. And we'll be alive to witness it.</p>	<p>Broke a cup at work. Threw it into the sink. Cracked it. Didn't know I was going to do it. Just did it. Then I bawled my eyes out. Felt fantastic.</p>

Open Scene for Exercises 4-6

A: You do not hate poetry.

B: I really do.

A: How do you hate poetry?

B: With verve.

A: *Well this is a poetry project. About poetry.* And this poem is actually, fundamentally awesome if you stop hating on it for no reason—ugh—I can't believe I signed up for this--just--whatever--I'll do it myself, ok? Just--excuse me for interrupting your verve.

B: *Wait.* What does "sign up" mean?

A: What does what? I never know what you're talking about.

B: You said: "I signed up for this." Just a second ago.

A: No I didn't.

B: Yes you did--what is "this"? Is "this" me? Did you sign up for me?

A: Stop making me sound creepy when I'm not.

B: Then tell me what you signed up for. Is this Key Club, extra credit, what?

A: It's not Key Club.

B: *Then what did you sign up for?!*

A: *I just asked if we could be partners.* I volunteered. I asked. Whatever.

B: You asked.

A: Yes.

B: For me.

A: Well that makes it sound weird.

B: It's kinda weird.

A: No it's not.

B: Why did you ask?

A: I don't know.

B: But it's not extra credit?

A: No.

B: Charity for sicko?

A: No.

B: THEN WHY.

A: I DON'T KNOW I JUST WANTED TO...You're just this mystery at school, and I thought you'd get it, and I was...curious...about you.

Student Name: _____

Step 1: Factual Information in the Text	Step 2: Assumptions that are Justified by the Text	Step 3: Justified Actions
What do the characters have to say about where they are?	Where does this scene take place?	How would these characters behave in this place?
What does the characters' dialogue state about the characters' ages?	How old are these characters?	How do the characters' ages influence their actions?
What do the characters' dialogue state about the relationship between these characters? What kind of speech do they use with each other?	What is the relationship between these characters?	What does each character want from the other?

<p>What do the characters reveal about themselves?</p>	<p>What is the background of these characters (hobbies, interests, fears, etc.)?</p>	<p>How does the background of the character affect their behavior?</p>
<p>Describe the speech patterns of the characters.</p>	<p>What kinds of personality traits do these speech patterns support?</p>	<p>How is the behavior of the character influenced by their personality?</p>