



What are the differences in the acting techniques of Stanislavski and Brecht?

5 Useful interviews and answers:

[Tim Bushell](#), Acting for 2 years, BA in Theatre Studies (minor)

[Updated Apr 24, 2013](#) · Upvoted by [Marcus Geduld](#), Artistic Director, Folding Chair Classical Theatre, NYC (foldingchairtheatre.org)

Stanislavski has greatly influenced the practice of acting and the study of theatre, perhaps more than anyone else. In many ways his legacy was to bring a professionalism to acting that did not exist before him. As well as an approach to acting, Stanislavski also expected actors to arrive on time and work as a group - especially not to seek individual stardom - and to prepare physically - to exercise the voice and body. He wanted actor's to:

... lead a full, interesting, beautiful, varied, exacting and inspiring life
- *Stanislavski, An Actor Prepares (1936)*

In this way, he believed, they would have the life experience required to act.

Brecht was a Marxist who saw theatre as a way to explore and teach that ideology. He was a playwright and an activist.

So broadly speaking we can say that Stanislavski was interested in theatre as an art form; while Brecht was interested in theatre as a tool. Both believed that theatre was art, but Brecht arguably thought it was something else - or perhaps he thought art was something else. He wrote:

If art reflects life it does so with special mirrors.
- *Brecht, A Short Organum for the Theatre (1948)*

Brecht would have called Stanislavski's approach to acting poetic or Aristotelian, from a definition made by Goethe and Schiller in an essay "On Epic and Dramatic Poetry" (1779). Of this Brecht said:

... the epic poet presents the event as totally past, while the dramatic poet presents it as totally present.

Martin Esslin, Brecht: A Choice Of Evils (1959)

Stanislavski is likely to have agreed: He said:

When we are on stage, we are in the here and now.

To Brecht the difference between [Epic theatre](#) and poetic theatre was important because:

The theater-goer in conventional dramatic theater says: Yes, I've felt that way, too. That's the way I am. That's life. That's the way it will always be. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is no escape for him. That's great art--Everything is self-evident. I am made to cry with those who cry, and laugh with those who laugh. But the theater-goer in the epic theater says: I would never have thought that. You can't do that. That's very strange, practically unbelievable. That has to stop.

- *Brecht, "Entertainment or Education?" (1936).*

Brecht did not want the audience to get caught up in the moment and he did not want them to find the action believable - but unbelievable: in the specific sense that he wanted them to protest against the actions of characters; to say "That's very strange."

To hammer home this difference - Stanislavski believed that all actions on stage must have an inner justification, but Brecht was more interested in showing how those very actions were often unjustified in a context of social and political systems. Neither were wrong; they had different goals.

So how did these two different views of theatre change the way the practitioners advised their actors?

The Stanislavski Method

I think one of the reasons the Stanislavski "method" is so popular with actors is because it is more intuitive. To Stanislavski truth was emotional truth. He believed that an actor should be true to the role.

In the language of an actor, to know is synonymous with to feel
- *Stanislavski, Creating a Role (1950)*

Many actors they already assume that their job is to pretend, and Stanislavski's approach to acting - his training - helps the actor do this.

The actor must first bring truthful emotions to the part - merging the internal workings of the character's mind with their own.

If you know your character's thoughts, the proper vocal and bodily expressions will naturally follow.

- *Stanislavski, An Actor Prepares (1936)*

He suggested such techniques as using "emotional memory" - remembering some event that had actually happened in the actor's real life to produce an emotion closely corresponding to the characters. This idea has been taken even further in Strasberg's "Method Acting" system - and many actors from this school will actually ensure they have experienced those emotions - in real life - by recreating them. For instance, Tom Cruise, a known method actor, choose to remain in his wheel chair while on set, to help him get a sense of what it would like to bound to it - playing Kovic in [Born on the Fourth of July \(1989\)](#).

Another well known technique of Stanislavski's is to break down a scene in smaller and smaller "goals". Each actor must find a truthful justification to get from one goal to another.

But it should be noted that Stanislavski was not entirely blind to the difference between reality and the performance:

There is the same difference between artistic and inartistic truth as exists between a painting and a photograph: the latter produces everything, the former only what is essential.

- *Stanislavski, On Being Truthful in Acting (essay)*

There is a lot of information about Stanislavski's approach to acting, not only from his three books on the subject, but also from Strasberg's interpretation and numerous other books on the subject. His approach is popular with actors - particularly film actors. I think that's because film acting creates an intimacy with the audience via the camera in a way that is not possible in the theatre - and so is suitable to an internalised acting method.

And of course [Marcus Geduld](#) has already written about it in his [answer](#) - so I'm not going to add any more here - but will now discuss the Brechtian approach. Rather presumptuously I hope to answer the question left by the gap in Marcus' excellent answer; at the point he says "They either have to pretend they are their characters or they have to ... what?"

Acting for the Epic Theatre - Brecht's "Method"

"What?", indeed. There is less advice to actors on how to act in a Brechtian fashion - but I believe that's because people mistakenly imagine his techniques are useful for all styles of performance. But Brecht, as detailed above, was only interested in one type of theatre: Epic Theatre.

So many of the differences in technique are actually differences between kinds of text.

As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed.

- *Brecht, A Short Organum for the Theatre (1948)*

For instance, Brecht would have characters come onto stage and announce their names to the audience, rather than reveal them through exposition in dialogue. His performances included musical numbers.

He saw theatre as an entertainment event, not a way for the audience to escape reality. Brecht often compared theatrical performances with sport. For instance, when talking about his "alienation" effect - ways of ensuring audience did not surrender themselves to empathy - he said:

Nobody would expect the spotlights over a boxing ring to be hidden

- *Brecht, "Die Sichtbarkeit der Lichtquellen", 1940, Schriften zum Theater*

*** *An interesting modern analogy - that I think he would have liked - can be found in the theatre of the [World Wrestling Federation](#). There is, in the pantomimed narrative of good over evil which gets played out in costumed wrestling, rumbles and violent high drama, an interesting analogue to be found. Of course there is no Marxist message to be found in these events. But the actors come out and present themselves. In a few well rehearsed gestures and poses they convey what "type" of character they are (from the limited array of possible variations). Then the performance begins. ****

Brecht's main goal was to prevent the audience from empathising with the characters. He wanted them to see the character objectively, not subjectively.

In order to produce A-effects the actor has to discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays.

- *Brecht, A Short Organum for the Theatre (1948)*

In contrast with Stanislavski's idea where the actor's and character's emotional inner workings should merge, Brecht says of the epic theatre actor:

The verdict: 'he didn't act Lear, he was Lear' would be an annihilating blow to him. He has just to show the character, or rather he has to do more than just get into it; this does not mean that if he is playing passionate parts he must himself remain cold. It is only that his feelings must not at bottom be those of the character, so that the audience's may not at bottom be those of the character either.

- *Brecht, A Short Organum for the Theatre (1948)*

So the actor in Epic Theatre has to keep him or herself apart from the character. Martin Esslin described it in the following way:

The Brechtian style of acting is acting in quotation marks.
Martin Esslin, Brecht: A Choice Of Evils (1959)

Brecht himself described it like this:

To achieve a character rather than a caricature, the actor looks at people as though they were playing him their actions, in other words as though they were advising him to give their actions careful consideration.

- *Brecht, A Short Organum for the Theatre (1948)*

He also compared a performance in Epic Theatre with a performance of a person showing the police what happened at the scene of an accident. In such an act the actions are a visual story of events. The "actor" is not intending to hide themselves from this performance - they are simply saying "this is what happened here" and "then over here this went on". The mindset of an "actor" in such a performance was what Brecht wanted from his actors. They were presenting a character, not playing one.

Another good exercise for acting in Epic Theatre would be to play more than one character in a scene - switching roles and positions on stage to do it. In such an exercise the actor must show the audience that they have changed character - are speaking as someone else. They must find a way to signal "now I'm playing the part of ...". So a Brechtian performance is likely to be more physical, and less emotional.

A Physical Actor

And on that statement, and in closing, I thought it would be interesting to briefly look at the work of a favourite actor of mine.

Whilst studying Brecht at university I was lucky enough to watch [Antony Sher](#) play the lead role in the UK National Theatre's 1991 production of [The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui](#). The play, written by Bertolt Brecht, is a parody of Hitler's rise to power - showing Arturo Ui as a brutish, ignorant gangster whose success was simply allowed rather than determined by himself - the accidental leader. This was a production clearly intended to be in the fashion of Epic Theatre and included all the aspects of Brecht's approach - including film projections of Hitler's own rise to power to make sure audience recognised the allegory - and showing the audience set changes, with actors, in character, making their way across stage, even ducking to avoid moving platforms, to prepare for the next scene.

Sher's acting technique is not in the style of Stanislavski. Sher prefers an "outward in" approach, altering his physical appearance first and using this as a kind of mask to create character. In the Arturo Ui character - a gangster controlling the trade in cauliflowers - Sher wore an huge prosthetic nose. It was obviously a prosthetic organ, and prominent. It

Hartismere School Drama Department
What are the differences in the acting techniques of Stanislavski and Brecht?

J Davy

gave his character even more presence, but at the same time reminded us that this was a performance. It was clever alienation device - both a sign of character and a sign this *was* a character.

Antony Sher as Richard III

In one of his most famous roles Sher, as Richard III, first drew the character on paper, imagining him as a spider at the centre of a web of political intrigue. He pictured a man hunched over by disability, but overcoming that by walking with crutches. Despite the deformity this meant that Sher could move his character around the stage with speed - a visual metaphor of power and mental agility.

So we can see that acting does not always have to be internalised. Sher takes the internal workings of a character's mind, and reconstruct them visually. We are shown what the character is like, not invited to feel it.

So, in summary, that's the key difference in acting techniques between Stanislavski and Brecht; the difference between the statements "look at what I am doing" and "I'm doing".

Here's a final humorous quote from Sher, which seems pertinent to this answer, even if he was not himself addressing this issue:

Why is an actor's unintentional giggling called a 'corpse'? It seems to me quite the opposite. It proves that he's very much alive, and can still tell how silly this all is: him dressed up as someone else speaking words written by a third party.

- *Antony Sher, Year of the King: An Actor's Diary and Sketchbook*

17.4k Views · [39 Upvotes](#)

Promoted by Headout

Marcus Geduld, Artistic Director, Folding Chair Classical Theatre, NYC

(foldingchairtheatre.org)

[Answered Apr 22, 2013](#) · Upvoted by [Zach Davidson](#), Creative Mastermind/Idiot

This is a difficult question to answer for a couple of reasons, one being that Brecht was somewhat vague about what he wanted actors to do. Also, I am not convinced that Brechtian acting is necessarily at odds with Stanislavskian acting.

Let's forget about Stanislavsky for a moment and compare Brecht's aesthetics with those of naturalistic theatre. There's a tradition, going back at least to Aristotle, in which the purpose of theatre is to induce "sorrow and pity" and, also, presumably "laughter and delight." In other words, the whole point is *sensuality*: putting the audience in an emotional state. And this is best done by, as much as possible, convincing them that the actors *aren't* pretending. You're going to feel much more frightened of a monster if believe its real and much less frightened if you're constantly aware it's a guy in a monster costume.

In this tradition, you also want sets and costumes to look as realistic as possible, because the more the audience *believes*, the more emotional they'll get.

Brecht was committed to *didactic* theatre. He wanted his plays to *teach*. And he feared that if audiences were deeply scared, turned on, having a fit of giggles, or in any other emotional state, they would be distracted from *thinking* about the play's didactic message or argument.

Hartismere School Drama Department
What are the differences in the acting techniques of Stanislavski and Brecht?

J Davy

So his goal was to always remind the audience that they were watching a play. (This idea is often called "*alienation*," meaning that you're supposed to be standing apart from the story, thinking about it coolly, rather than getting so emotionally wrapped up in it you confuse the protagonist with yourself and get scared by whatever is scaring him or fall in love with the girl he's in love with.)

Now, if you think about it, it's really, really easy to constantly remind the audience they're watching a play -- if that's all you want to do. For instance, you could just have someone scream "It's a play!" every ten seconds. Or you could have all the actors perform so badly that no one ever believes their characters are real. In fact, this sort of thing is often used as an excuse by students in drama schools who are trying to put on Brecht-style plays: "Don't tell me the acting is bad. I *know* it's bad. It's bad on *purpose*! My goal is to alienate the audience." And this can make Brechtianism an excuse for anything and so make the production impervious to criticism.

But Brecht didn't *just* want to alienate. He wanted to alienate the audience from being emotionally overcome so that they could focus on some very specific idea -- and that idea would differ from play to play.

So, for instance, if the audience is thinking, "Man, this is terrible acting!" *they are not alienated in the right way*. Brecht neither wants the audience to be emotionally overcome *nor* focused on the bad acting (or the silly-looking monster costume that can't possibly be real). He wants the audience to focus on an idea. Anything that distracts from that is bad, even if the distraction is a bit of alienation.

Actors have to do *something*. They either have to pretend they are their characters or they have to ... what? What else could they do that wouldn't just be bad acting: that wouldn't just look like they were pretending in an unconvincing or absurd way?

Because this is a problem that's pretty unsolvable, Brecht's main focus wasn't on acting. He tended to alienate the audience in other ways, for instance through design -- e.g. by having actors wear strange (often symbolic) costumes while moving through a strange (often symbolic) set. Or he would keep the lights full up during the entire show, so the audience members were just as illuminated as the actors. Or he would write scripts in which actors frequently broke the fourth wall, or in which they played multiple roles, changing costumes in full view of the audience. Etc.

(I should note that there's nothing anti-Stanislavskian about breaking the fourth wall or having one actor play multiple roles. I'll explain Stanislavsky's ideas, below.)

Like I said, Brecht's notes about actors are confusing, but I suspect what he mostly wanted from them was simplicity, which is something Stanislavsky liked, too. He, Brecht, also wanted them to, at times, make symbolic large, dance-like gestures, e.g. "screaming" with a huge open mouth, without making any noise, or miming being trapped in an invisible box. This is not naturalistic acting, but (a) Brecht's plays don't call for his actors to work this way all the time, and (b) it's not at odds with Stanislavsky's ideas. It just wasn't Stanislavsky's main focus, as the plays he directed tended to be more naturalistic.

Okay, here's the heart of Stanislavsky's system: He, like Brecht, didn't want actors to wallow in emotion. But unlike Brecht, his reaction against that wasn't based on an interest in didacticism. Rather, Stanislavsky believed that, for instance, trying to act sad was too generalized. It would lead an actor towards cartoonish behavior that wasn't convincing.

His focus was on *goals*. (Some actors call goals "intentions.") At each moment in a play, he believed an actor should be trying to achieve some goal, e.g. *to catch* another actor who is running away, *to convince* another actor to sell him a cow, *to get another actor to*

Hartismere School Drama Department
What are the differences in the acting techniques of Stanislavski and Brecht?

J Davy

kiss him, etc.

That's the meat of Stanislavsky's system. There's more to it, but it's all based around goals and the *actions* we take to achieve them. Stanislavsky-trained directors will often tell their Stanislavsky-trained actors to stop emoting and play their actions. ("What are you trying to achieve? Okay, well then what action would best help you achieve that? Okay, well do *that*.")

As a director, I find goals and actions so simple and useful, I would urge actors towards them whether I was working on a Brechtian production or a more naturalistic one.

I'd have to depart from them* during one of Brecht's calls for the actor to make a symbolic gesture. Obviously, the the goal is to scare the bad guy away, screaming at him silently won't achieve that -- or wouldn't in real life, where real world physics comes into play and people can't hear "silent noise." But, again, Brecht's plays don't generally call for actors to be constantly making these gestures. They just happen in special moments. If you read his plays, you find that most of the time, they are traditional stories.

(* Or would I? I might still talk to the actor in terms of goals: I might say, "Your goal is to make the bad guy leave. Play it as if you can achieve that goal by opening your mouth so wide, you turn into a shark and scare him away with your rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth." All acting traditions are based in imagination.)

And actors are used to stepping in and out of naturalism. For instance, I'm currently working on a production of "Hamlet" that's pretty squarely in the tradition of naturalism. However, when the actors do stage-combat scenes, even if the action seems real to the audience, it has to be highly choreographed, for reasons of safety and clarity. It's more like dance than acting. The actors can't just pursue their goals. They *must* make specific movements at specific times.

Contemporary theatre steals a lot from both techniques, merging Stanislavsky with Brecht and many other traditions. There's nothing strange, nowadays, about watching actors playing multiple characters (using Stanislavsky goal-based technique to play each one) and, at times, breaking the fourth wall while wearing symbolic sets and costumes.

Truthfully, this mutli-pronged style is very old, going back at least to Shakespeare, who had his actors play multiple roles and who mixed naturalistic scenes with highly stylized ones: alternations between verse and prose, actors stepping out of scenes and making asides, etc. So there's no clear dichotomy and there never has been.

12k Views · [28 Upvotes](#)

Corey Fischer, Actor, playwright and director (professional since 1962); co-founder, Traveling Jewish Theatre, 1978-2012
[Answered Jun 27, 2013](#)

This is an historical addendum to the previous, highly informative answers.

In 2011, I directed my own play, "In the Maze of Our Own Lives" about the best years of The Group Theater (1931 - 1939, though Harold Clurman kept producing under The Group's name till '41). I'm sure most of you know some of that amazing history. The origins of the Group, who, IMHO, created the first real American ensemble theatre, can be traced to the Moscow Art Theatre's 1929 tour of the US which Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg were blown away by. They were inspired to more or less emulate the MAT in the US. Strasberg took the role of teacher and guardian of the Stanislavskian flame. He and other early GT members (notably Stella Adler, who had started acting in her father's celebrated Yiddish theatre at age 2) had studied with two members of the MAT who stayed in NYC - Richard Boleslavski and Maria Ouspenskaya (both can be seen in a few old films of the 1930s). Later, Stella had a famous encounter with Stanislavski himself, in

Hartismere School Drama Department
What are the differences in the acting techniques of Stanislavski and Brecht?

J Davy

Paris, 1935. She complained that his "system" and, particularly, "affective memory" (related to, but not quite the same as "sense memory") had robbed all the joy from her acting and, basically ruined her. S was terribly distraught by her story and insisted that the fault must have been with how his views had been translated/transmitted (I.e. it was Strasberg's fault!) and not with the principles of his approach. He offered to work with her, privately, while he was hanging out in Paris for health reasons. She took him up on his offer and they spent several weeks working on the last play she'd done under Strasberg's direction with The Group. When she and Clurman returned to NY and to the Group, she gave a talk to the company about what she had learned from the Master, claiming that Strasberg was still working from ideas that Stanislavski had long since revised. Strasberg was furious, and the war between the two began. Though ego, control and power, no doubt, had a lot to do with the decades-long debate, the core acting issue was over the degree to which an actor should attempt to use her own specific memories of intense emotion in the service of the role (Strasberg) versus a more imaginative, less literally personal approach (Adler) In my understanding of Stanislavsky, both approaches were suggested, with varying emphases, in different parts of his writings. Both Adler and Strasberg were brilliant, outside, theatre-legends whose later lives were both dedicated to teaching. They weren't the only Group members who had an enormous influence, as teachers, on several generations of actors, directors and playwrights. Sanford Meisner (Neighborhood Playhouse), Robert Lewis (Yale, Actors Studio), Elia Kazan, (Actors Studio) Harold Clurman (as a director and critic) being the best known. They all started with Stanislavsky, but all grew in their own, equally valid ways. Though the Group was best known for its productions of plays by member Clifford Odets, who brought immigrant and working class characters to the U.S. stage for the time, not all their work was based in the "gritty" naturalism of his work. They also worked with German émigrés Erwin Piscator (influenced by Brecht) and, later, composer Kurt Weill (Brecht's best known collaborator).

Interestingly, at one point, after another trip abroad, both Clurman and Strasberg became fascinated with the work of Myerhold, perhaps the most famous of the post-Stanislavski Russian directors. Though he came up in the MAT, Myerhold was known for his radically non-psychological, rigorously physical approach known as "bio-mechanics." Strasberg speculated that the Group was in a unique position to fuse the best of Myerhold's intense theatricality with Stanislavski's deep psychological understanding of the actor's process. Unfortunately, they were never able to try it. Lack of funds and internal conflicts pulled The Group apart just as WW2 was ramping up. Their last summer of work as a functioning ensemble ended within days of Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939. But in only 8 years of active existence, they changed American theatre forever. For more about my work, including "In the Maze of Our Own Lives" see my blog, <http://storypassage.com>.

2.5k Views · [2 Upvotes](#)

David Durham, I did a lot of stage acting in my younger days.

[Answered Apr 24, 2013](#) · Upvoted by [Marcus Geduld](#), Artistic Director, Folding Chair Classical Theatre, NYC (foldingchairtheatre.org)

Marcus and Tim have covered it here pretty dang well. I'll add an experience from my acting career that illustrates the dynamic expressed in the question. In the early '80's I was cast in a production of Brecht's *Mother Courage* at the now highly regarded theatre company Seven Stages in Atlanta. This production was one of Seven Stages early hits, and it was a big hit. I was cast in five different roles. It was one of the best acting experiences I ever had. At the time I didn't know much about Brecht, but became a big fan through this production. The director, Del Hamilton (now an Atlanta theatre icon), went very Brechtian. The backstage area was not hidden from the audience so they could see our costume changes. The stage itself was almost empty with only minimal sets that suggested images in an almost surreal way. The costumes mixed 15th century garb with modern accents. But *Mother Courage's* wagon was built to look quite real as though it was the only thing in a crazy world with substance.

Hartismere School Drama Department
What are the differences in the acting techniques of Stanislavski and Brecht?

J Davy

One of the actors cast was what I would call 'Heavy Method'. He worshipped Stanislavski. Now I come from the Uta Hagen school of acting which sort of adapts real life to stage and kind of teaches you how to pretend convincingly. It worked for me. For us Hagenites (if you will), method actors could be tiresome. I often found myself thinking, "C'mon, the playwright's intent is obvious here, let's just get on with it." But hey, if you're good, I'll deal with whatever approach works for you. And this particular method actor was good. But he had a hard time at first dealing with the Brechtian nuances Del was going for. Del was, and is, a rather cunning director. He had an agenda for this actor. What he wanted was a wink at the audience in some moments, and deep connection with the character in other instances. So the challenge he presented to this actor was to go with the 'Heavy Method' stuff here, and the 'breaking of the plane' there. It was a bringing together of the approaches of both Brecht and Stanislavski in a single performance. And it worked! Once the actor got it, he ran with it and delivered a multilayered performance that makes me smile to this day.

Del Hamilton's approach here was to make the audience aware that they were watching a play from the get go. But, in cunning fashion, he'd sneak up on the audience with his actors and hit 'em hard with moments that touched you to the bone. Brecht and Stanislavski had marked differences when you look at the surface of things. But if you go deeper than the surface you find that their 'methods' could exist in harmony within a two hour play, a ten minute scene or a single moment.

2.5k Views · [7 Upvotes](#)

[Hari Krishnan](#), :)
[Answered May 14, 2013](#)

If it is a Brecht play:

(An emotional situation in the play . Actors name John Mc Clair the landlord is played by Henry and Steve the farmer is played by Tom. All the dialogues and scenes are happening in the stage in front of audience)

John: you are the culprit.. I am gonna kill you bastard. (john aiming his gun towards Steve)

Steve: Oh lord, Please don't punish me. I did not steal anything from your farm.

John: you liar... you should die..

(a gun shot can be heard at any moment , in between..)

Henry : Dude, i am feeling so thirsty , lemme drink some water and come. Will continue after that.

Tom: Do it fast , next play is gonna start within 30 minutes. I have to dress up as the Soldier after you killing me here...

(This is brecht play, this will make the audience feel that they are seeing a play.. Brecht employed the use of techniques that remind the audience that the play is a representation of reality and not reality itself.)

Stanislavsky focused on the development of artistic truth. In his plays actors live the part. Stanislavski made the actors study and experience subjective emotions and feelings and show that by physical and vocal means in order to convey reality onstage.

1.6k Views