

Stella Adler: You Have NO Expertise on Costume

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Opportunities for exchanges with persons of exceptionally high degrees of expertise and operating principles in their field are rare. This article is a study of Stella Adler. Unbeknownst to me when we first met, since we were in different fields, Stella Adler was the queen of acting teachers in the theater and movie industry, with whom Marlon Brando, Robert De Niro, Cybill Shepherd, Benicio del Toro, James Coburn and so many other legendary actors had studied. The American philosopher John Dewey discusses various types of experiences in his book *Experience and Education*. Most of our experiences are benign – not constructive, not destructive and such experiences are transitory and often not remembered. A few rare experiences are formative and lasting – they deepen our future experiencing. The most transformative type of experience is the formative kind that lives on fruitfully in future experiencing. Stella Adler lives on in some of my analyses of Picasso's works, thirty-five years after her own analysis of Picasso's Bull Series. Thirty-five years! Precious few experiences have that kind of longevity.

I met Stella Adler in 1982 in Los Angeles through Milton Justice who was working on Lee Grant's documentary for HBO entitled "When Women Kill." Lee Grant had selected six women convicted of murder, three of whom were in New York, and three likewise convicted in California. At the time I was teaching a class in a women's prison. That class was one of eight classes I taught each year, two of which were at the prison. The class was part of a special B.A. program for incarcerated women, and was based on a study that found that the rate of recidivism was considerably reduced when inmates completed at least 3 college courses. An inmate in my prison class, referred to as one of the Manson Girls, was one of the women selected by Lee Grant. Milton and I met to prepare for the filming of my prison class. During our discussions, Milton frequently quoted Stella. The quotes were highly interesting positions she took on a wide range of issues.

Milton asked if I would be interested in attending one of Stella's class sessions while she was in Los Angeles. I was intrigued, so I answered, "Yes, I would." The classroom was in an amphitheater. Milton and I sat in one of the upper rows in the back. Stella was seated at a desk with her assistant. The students had each prepared a 15 minute scene. Invariably, Stella stopped each performance within a minute or less, critiquing what the students were doing and giving them instruction. Her critiques were impressive and exceptionally astute. She was a master at her

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work. Some of her criticisms were unnecessarily harsh. A few acting students thought the criticisms were personal attacks and sometimes cruel.

I was not previously familiar with who Stella Adler was. I did not know that she had been an actress and a director in the Group Theater. I did not know she was a legendary acting teacher and that she also infused social criticism and humor into her classes. I did not know she had had numerous adventures throughout her life. Nor did I know anything about her unique persona, her immediacy and that she could be a force of immense proportions.

When class ended, Milton introduced me to Stella and I offered my compliments. Stella invited us for a late supper along with other former students. After some chit-chat from her former acting students about how well she had taught the class, Stella turned to me and asked, "And what do you do, young man?"

Before I could answer, Milton, who had previously been one of Stella's assistants, introduced me, rather theatrically, as a professor who teaches women who've been convicted of murder.

His answer was an exaggeration. Most of the inmates in my class had convictions for other crimes.

What happened next was striking. Stella turned to the person beside her, directly addressing the central issue about the topic that was brought up, which was very characteristic of her, and asked, "Could *you* ever kill?" Then she asked each of the other 10 guests the same question. Her forthrightness was not something to which I was accustomed. It was exhilarating. One dinner guest said, "If it hadn't merely been a shoe that I had thrown at my former husband's head, he'd be dead." The two individuals who declared they could never kill, under any circumstance, were perhaps the two most dangerous people in the room. Not even in self-defense? Not to protect the life of an innocent child from a homicidal maniac?

The next morning I received a phone call from Stella's current assistant, Eddie Weinbaum, who said, "Miss Adler would like to invite you to join her at a party she is having this weekend for distinguished actors, directors, and producers." I was surprised and flattered. The invitations continued. I am a relatively busy person, someone who hadn't the time to attend many social events. But time is made, not found, to be with Stella Adler. Every day when the call to my office came with an invitation, I made the time to join her. I was Stella's companion at dinners, parties, and other social events. She was 82, but she lied about her age. She told me that she was 81. I was 38.

Once, Stella gave a dinner in honor of the writer Christopher Isherwood. As the guest of honor, he was seated to her right. For the first time since I was introduced to her a month earlier, I was seated to Stella's left. Among the guests at the dinner were Isherwood's partner, portrait artist Don Bachardy, and Dr. Ann Reynolds, who was the Chancellor of the California State University. Dr. Reynolds, who governed the University through 19 campus Presidents, had invited Stella to visit Russia with her for a tour she planned to make of universities there. Stella, who was born in Odessa, was tickled by the invitation, but was undecided about whether or not to go on the tour.

An hour of cocktails preceded the dinner. One of the guests arrived late and tried to give an explanation for his tardiness. Stella interrupted him, "Explaining why you are late because of traffic in Los Angeles is not worthy of adult conversation."

Fifteen minutes into the dinner Stella turned to me in a loud enough voice so that all could easily hear, "After these dinner events, Al, do you go home to your wife?"

The entire dinner table immediately lost interest in whatever it was they'd been chatting about.

I answered, "No, Stella, I am not married." She paused for a few seconds.

Stella then asked, "Al, after these evening parties and dinners, do you go home to your girlfriend?"

"No, Stella, I don't have a girlfriend at this time." Stella pondered her next question while everyone else was very quiet.

"Well Al, then what do you do for sex?"

I had never previously been asked that question at a formal dinner. I have never previously been asked that question at an informal dinner either. But I had already learned enough about Stella Adler to know that questions of this sort can arrive at any time, whether expected or not. Her forthrightness was on par with the question, "Could you ever kill?" No question that Stella ever asked was one that could be avoided.

"In those matters," I answered, "I am of the same persuasion as the two philosophers Immanuel Kant and Mae West: "Work is the ultimate satisfaction and sex is the ultimate distraction."

Stella banged her fist into her other hand and said, "I am the very same way! On my bed in New York, instead of a man, I have fifty books."

It took me some time to realize that Stella was not really inquiring about my sex life. She was simply probing my availability.

Stella's marriage to Harold Clurman – director and producer in the Group Theater – had considerable turmoil, in no small part because Stella accepted dinner invitations from other men. Her mother-in-law pulled her aside one evening to educate her about proper marital etiquette. "Stella, when married you are not supposed to date." Stella said, "Really?" But she continued to date.

At the end of her summer of classes in Los Angeles, Stella invited me to join her on vacation in Italy and France, where she planned to visit art museums. I told her I was extremely flattered, but that I couldn't go – I had a university to run. These days, no longer an academic administrator, I am simply the senior member of the petrified faculty at my university.

A week later, after reconsidering her plans, Stella presented a different proposal – if she cancelled her trip to Europe, and if she postponed her nightly early dinner invitations with directors, producers and actors in favor of later suppers, would I tutor her for three hours every evening, from 5 until 8 p.m., on various areas of my studies? I very gladly accepted.

So for the next three weeks I tutored Stella in some of the areas in which I taught, using mostly my course materials on Mark Twain, Picasso, and the Psychology of Adult Moral Development. Stella came to admire Mark Twain as a social critic and as an educator, which is how he understood himself rather than as a humorist. She was particularly impressed with his scathing critique of the Belgian King Leopold II for his colonial policies in the Congo. She was delighted with Mark Twain's description of his meeting with George Bernard Shaw, who was one of Stella's favorite playwrights and social critics. Stella had her own gift and courage of spontaneous humor, but she had not studied humor nor cultivated it into a discipline. She admired and respected power through writing, but she had never previously imagined that Mark Twain's form and style of philosophical humor incorporates enormous power—"Under the assault of humor, nothing can stand."

We didn't cover my course, Moral Psychology in the Dramatic Film, since it paralleled her course on script analysis. My class analyzed *Casablanca*, *The Philadelphia Story*, and *Betrayal*. We both taught about Edward Albee's works. In Stella's classes she covered his plays *The Zoo Story* and *The Death of Bessie Smith*. In my film course I analyzed Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* Because of the overlap of our two courses, Stella once asked me to be her teaching assistant to prepare teaching notes for George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*. Not uttering a word was a novel experience for me as a professor as I sat with her during the class session. I later received a letter from Stella, letter writing for which she was also famous, expressing her appreciation for succinctly condensing *Major Barbara* for instructional purposes. She also humorously expressed her gratitude that she did not have to suffer George Bernard Shaw's excessive wordiness that evening.

How clever of Stella to get a professor to be her teaching assistant. Why didn't I previously think of that for myself? But I am a quick study. The last time I submitted a several hundred thousand dollar research grant proposal to the Templeton Foundation, I asked the President of my university to please review the proposal before signing off for our university. The President found a typo. Presidents, with a Ph.D. degree, are good at this. Actually they are the best. No one can surpass the presidents of universities in locating typos in research grant proposals. And they are deservedly proud and happy when they locate a typo, and have it corrected before the proposal's submission.

Stella overcame her objection to what she had previously, and mistakenly, referred to as Picasso's "abstract art." She understood Picasso as a vehicle for better understanding the aesthetic universe. In a parallel way, Stella taught script analysis as a vehicle for understanding the human condition. We discussed Picasso's Pink Period paintings, particularly *Woman Ironing (1904)* for its depiction of the state of resignation. We discussed *The Blind Man's Meal (1903)* and several other Blue Period paintings as well. We analyzed Picasso's *Weeping Woman (1937)* for its depiction of the intensity of distress and unavailing grief. The emotional issues in these Picasso paintings were ones addressed by the playwrights about whom she taught.

Stella Adler, who was the master teacher to many prominent actors, suddenly was my student. She was obviously the brightest student I have ever taught.

Stella invited me to visit her in New York, to her apartment on the Upper East Side, and also to her house in Southampton, where she said I would have my own room to do my research writing. During my visit to New York City, she invited Lee Grant and Michael Moriarty to a dinner party, along with other guests as well. After the dinner, Michael asked Stella's permission to rehearse a scene from the *Caine Mutiny* – in which he had the starring role on Broadway – for her opinion and critique of his interpretation. It was impressive to listen to Stella's astute, critical review of his performance and to listen to her generous opinions about how Moriarty could improve his interpretation. I was enthralled by his honest and sincere request and by Stella's thought provoking response.

After Stella and Michael had completed their work, while everyone was chatting, Stella boomed, "Well, Al, everyone in New York wants to know, do we or don't we sleep in the same bedroom? What should I say?"

"I hope you have answered, 'Yes,'" I said, "because I don't know any instance in history that saying 'No' makes any difference in what people think." Stella and the others smiled.

Once, on our way to Southampton, Stella instructed me to turn right at a fork in a particular intersection. I turned left instead. Stella said others would have turned right because they loved her. I replied that her acting students, whom she employed to chauffeur her, would have turned right not because they loved her, but because she refused to acknowledge that slavery was against the law. She grinned. I then informed Stella that a road sign at that particular intersection had instructed drivers to turn left to get to Southampton.

Back in Los Angeles, Stella and I once attended "Zorba the Greek, the Musical" with Anthony Quinn, one of her former students, starring in the lead role. We were seated in the house seats – ones that Anthony Quinn had personally provided at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Shortly after the performance began, Stella suddenly wanted to walk out. Stella had undoubtedly been influenced by her father Jacob Adler, king of Yiddish theater, who lived by the principle that the playwright, and the director, decide on the moral content of what was presented. Her father told audiences that if he did what *he* thought he should do *they* would then learn about Yiddish theater, but if he did what the *audience* wanted him to do, it would lead them both straight to the whorehouse. So that night, while watching *Zorba the Greek*, Stella saw that Anthony Quinn was pandering to the audience's desires. And she wanted no part of it. Stella stood up in her seat to exit, but I told her that we could not leave the theater just yet. She said, "Of course." She understood that the issue was one of public decorum. The spectacle of Stella Adler leaving her front-center seat before an audience of several thousand would have been scandalous. She and I suffered more of the musical, but only until the intermission. Then we emancipated ourselves.

Stella, who had once been on the teaching faculty at Yale University and the New School for Social Research wanted to meet my former mentor, Professor Lawrence Kohlberg, with whom I studied while at Harvard University. I said it was not a good time to meet him, that he was

terribly depressed. Stella immediately wanted to know why he was depressed. I said, "He is the world's leading expert on moral development, his books have just come out, and the critics have been harsh." "That's normal," said Stella. "What else?"

"He is in the middle of a bitter divorce and says his wife is suing him into poverty." "That's normal," said Stella, "What else?"

"He is not on speaking terms with either of his sons." "That's also normal," said Stella. We never managed to make the trip so she could meet my professor.

Stella and I visited the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena one day. Stella wanted to only view the French and Italian painting exhibits. As we entered the museum, however, I fortuitously happened to spot Picasso's Bull Series. I asked if she would mind giving me her opinion about whether the series of bulls was beautiful or not, since I teach about that sequence. She said, "Yes, I *would* mind." Her analysis of Picasso's Bull Series was superb, despite her protestation that she had no interest in "abstract art." I found her analysis more interesting than either of the only two published analyses, one of which is by a former Curator of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. I told her that Picasso denied he ever painted any abstract art, declaring that everything he painted came from reality. Stella's analysis of the Picasso Bull Series had an influence on my own analysis, and more recently, 35 years later, on a research study that involves the analysis of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d' Avignon*.

I invited Stella to my class in prison once so that she could present her analysis of the Bull Series. Stella told the inmates that Professor Erdynast had "forced" her to analyze the Picasso lithographs with the question, "What do you think?" A question that, according to Stella, "no self-respecting intellectual can ever avoid!"

Stella told the inmates that her expertise in the discipline of script analysis was related to the discipline of art analysis. She also told them that twice she'd come close to finding herself at risk of being sent to prison. During World War II, Stella illegally tried to take displaced persons on a train to freedom described in detail in Sheana Ochoa's excellent book "Stella!!!" She was also a member and a gun-runner for the Irgun, a militant Jewish underground organization in Israel. Stella told the inmates that one of the Irgun's leaders was Menachem Begin, a friend of hers who eventually became the Prime Minister of Israel. Stella additionally talked about having once been caught arriving in London with two different passports.

Stella made an indelible impression on the inmates and the "free-world" Antioch University Los Angeles students who had come to the prison for the day. Making an indelible impression was a common feat for Stella in all settings. Stella was an intellectual magnet who attracted the interest of exceptionally talented and highly motivated actors as well as that of beginning acting students. She was a true genius. And true genius does not limit itself exclusively to a single field; it manifests and extends itself pervasively.

One of the inmates in the class, who was featured in Lee Grant's documentary, made a particularly good impression on Stella. Stella said she would like to take her shopping one

weekend. I had to educate Stella that an indeterminate life sentence does not come with weekend shopping privileges.

Stella's third husband, Mitchel Wilson, was the most popular Western scientific writer and novelist in the Soviet Union. He had been a research scientist assisting Enrico Fermi and had taught physics in universities. Science, invention, and the ethical problems of modern atomic physics were topics he routinely addressed. One day, while he was reading a book in their living room, Stella came up behind him, looked over his shoulder as he was reading and asked, "That looks terribly complicated. Can you understand all of those formulas?" Mitchell answered, "Yes, Stella. I wrote this book." She once told me to stop playing tennis, that it was unbecoming for an intellectual to be chasing a tennis ball.

On one occasion we had cocktails with Harold Williams who was the president and chief executive officer of the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Getty Trust. During the conversation Harold Williams said that the Trust had let it be known in art circles that it had so much money it could offer \$1 more than any other bidder, outbidding any and all rivals. Stella boomed out at him, "There is no museum art for sale." Several years ago, Italy sued the Getty Museum to return its illegally procured art. In my course on Picasso, I take students on several field trips – to the Norton Simon Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Weitzman Museum in Holmby Hills. I announce to the students that I could also take them to the Getty Museum, but won't, to show them where some Italian art used to hang.

In Palm Springs one weekend, one of her former students, Misty Rowe, came to visit. Misty had a lead role in the television series *Hee-Haw*. After dinner, Stella wanted to go into the swimming pool, but she didn't have a personal assistant along to help her get into a bathing suit. She asked if it was ok with me if she went skinny dipping. I said, "Of course." And the three of us went for a swim. Had I not been so agreeable, I could easily have come into criticism for having what Stella referred to as "middle-class Puritan attitudes and values."

It was almost always Stella who invited me to her social events. Occasionally, I invited her to one of mine. As the Director of the B.A. Program at Antioch University Los Angeles, I once had to give a short graduation speech at the California Institution for Women, the state prison where Antioch's Bachelor of Arts for inmates was being provided. I invited Stella.

It was a delicate speech to deliver. Most of the women in the program were there for a single – but major – crime in their life. They were ashamed that their paths had taken them to prison. The inmates' families were present as the graduating women received their diplomas. The parents and husbands were ashamed that their daughters, or wives, were in prison. The inmates' young children were bewildered by their mothers' circumstances. My short speech addressed the inmates' achievement in pursuing their formal education while they were "doing time" and not "letting time do them." Shame was temporarily suspended and substituted with pride of accomplishment.

On the drive back from the prison, Stella, who was renowned for her course on script analysis, retraced the sequence of points I'd made in my speech. I should have expected it. We talked about the particular influence of violent, imperious men in the lives of the inmates that had led

some of those women to prison sentences. Some were serving 15 to 25 years. Some were there for indeterminate life sentences.

Stella had worn a black blouse and a black corset underneath to the prison graduation event. At this time in her life, at least while in Los Angeles, she usually wore only a thick black or red ankle-length slip that her personal assistant, Eddie, had thoughtfully arranged to be made for her at *Trashy Lingerie*. The slips, which she wore as dresses for teaching her classes, were comfortable, convenient, and eminently practical. After a hip replacement surgery Stella no longer had her previous physical flexibility. With those thick slips, worn with a jacket, she didn't have to put on a cumbersome bra underneath. A couple of times I teased that I would publically let it be known that her entire wardrobe had been obtained not at *Saks*, but at *Trashy Lingerie*. The preposterousness of the possibility, and her confidence that I would never execute that threat, made Stella grin with abandon.

It was an extremely hot day at the prison on the day of the graduation and there was no air conditioning. I don't ever complain about excess heat. I could in fact be called "an optimist who hasn't quite arrived." I look on the positive side of things. I think of excessive heat as preparatory for my eventual destiny. Stella didn't complain about the heat either. But on the long ride home she was visibly uncomfortable in her ensemble and asked if it was okay if she could make herself more comfortable by unbuttoning her blouse. I said, "Of course." I was not bothered at all. Had I objected I could again easily have come into criticism for "middle-class Puritan values and attitudes."

When we arrived back in L.A. after the long drive, I offered to take Stella out for coffee at the *Farmers Market*. She said she would like that very much. But Stella's blouse was still unbuttoned—all the way. I asked if she would mind re-buttoning her blouse. I thought of it merely as a matter of public decorum. The moment I made that request I immediately knew there was going to be trouble. Stella was rarely at a loss for words. Her temporary silence confirmed that trouble was being prepared. The queen of acting teachers, with whom so many legendary actors had studied, only *gave* instructions. The queen of acting teachers *took* instructions from no one. Throughout her personal history, in any situation with rival interests, Stella almost always prevailed. And she could be fierce when necessary. Stella answered that she "would *indeed* mind" re-buttoning her blouse.

I had to decide whether she was serious or not serious. Stella had previously forewarned me with, "Always remember, Al, that I am an 'actrissa' (her affected aggrandization of the word 'actress') and that an actrissa is *always* acting except when she is on the stage." After brooding for a bit, she complained that the previous week I had voiced no similar objections when we had gone to the fashionable restaurant *The Ivy* with Misty Rowe, where Misty Rowe wore a camisole top. She then thundered: "You have NO expertise on costume!"

Her indictment was compelling and dispositive. Not previously, nor since, have I been told in such a straight-forward, dignified and civilized way, in the heat of intense anger, and without character attack, to mind my own business. Not only was I no professor on costume, in my entire life I had never impressed anyone serious about style in dress in any way that would even qualify me as being a worthy student in that field.

Stella was undressed in only a most minor way. It was I who was exposed – I had been caught with my credentials down. I had taken a position on an issue with no expertise on it whatsoever. Mine was the conventional point of view. Stella challenged my request, in a realm where she had considerable authority and I had none at all.

The defense had no rebuttal.

The impasse in the parking lot was a private spectacle – the queen of acting teachers who objected to a simple request and a professor at a loss for words. For a considerable length of time Stella and I continued to sit in silence in the parked car. I had been rendered completely and utterly speechless – a fine predicament for a professor who taught courses in five different disciplines, with not a helpful word arriving from any of them. Stella was reverberating from the infernal presumptuousness of a blandly attired professor, wearing an innocuous button-down shirt and tie, a sport coat, and grey slacks, who had given her – Stella Adler – an instruction on dress!

The tension had to do with decisions about matters of attire. Unbeknown to me, Stella had intense views about professional and public attire. The A&E documentary on Stella Adler, which is part of its *American Masters* series, illustrates this intensity. Stella is visibly enraged by a young student who dressed for his own comfort when he performs a scene from Shakespeare. Stella interrupts him and criticizes him severely, telling him that wearing a casual robe is incongruous with Shakespearian period costume. And she states that she refuses to be subjected to self-indulgence, which she abhors. She mentors him – affirming his considerable talent but adds that if he doesn't select his wardrobe to suit whatever role he is portraying that he will professionally undermine himself.

The young student whom she berates in the documentary is Mark Ruffalo.

Stella swore she would make me pay for my insistence about re-buttoning her blouse. When we eventually came out of the car, Stella was fully buttoned, and behaved in a manner fitting a famous acting teacher, greeting all those who recognized her and rushed to meet her. But they would have greeted her equally well if she had been unbuttoned because she had considerable poise, presence and carriage no matter how she was dressed. Stella was born to parents who were royalty in the Yiddish Theater and, in her adulthood, she certainly became an intellectual aristocrat in her own right.

No experience with Stella was ever benign. Experiences with Stella Adler always resulted in more profound experiencing.

It was her graciousness that prevailed. She never did carry out that threat.

Of course!