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Head of the Class

A veteran acting teacher spreads the Method using Strasberg's own words

By Christopher Zara



Methodology Lola Cohen holds a copy of her book *The Strasberg Notes*.

Lola Cohen has been a teacher of Lee Strasberg's Method for more than two decades. For her new book, *The Lee Strasberg Notes* (Routledge), Cohen compiled several years of unpublished transcripts from Strasberg's classroom, hoping to share the legendary teacher's philosophies with a new generation of actors, directors and film and theater lovers.

Cohen, who currently teaches at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute's New York campus, spoke with *Show Business* for her first interview about this revealing new book.

Show Business: I know you're a teacher first, but do you still do any acting?

Lola Cohen: I do a little bit of acting. I was in a film last year called "Inside a Change." I did a cameo role as a judge. But basically for the past 23 years, I've been teaching Lee's work.

SB: In terms of acting, do you consider yourself more of a theater teacher?

LC: Well, at the institute, we don't differentiate. We use the same training for film as we do for theater.

SB: And you studied with Lee Strasberg himself?

LC: Yes, from 1977 until he passed away in 1982. From day one, I was mesmerized by his work, and I realized that I had to study it.

SB: How did the idea of the book come about?

LC: I was always a voracious note-taker. And I was always concerned, as Lee was, that the work be passed on. When I moved back to the East Coast from Los Angeles in '95, I decided that there needed to be a cohesive document that laid down Lee's philosophies and ideas.

SB: And these notes are straight out of Strasberg's mouth?

LC: Oh, yes. This is primary source material. Before Lee died, Anna [Strasberg's wife] set up a camera, and for the last six or seven years of his life, everything was video taped — every single class. There are literally hundreds and hundreds of video tapes of Lee teaching. So you have him interacting with the students, critiquing scenes, directing scenes, and everything. I knew these tapes were disintegrating. There was no digital video then, and there wasn't a way for them to be preserved. I took it upon myself — never thinking it was going to be a book, by the way — just to preserve them and systemize them. It was really just for my own edification at first, a labor of love.

SB: At what point did you realize you had a book on your hands?

LC: In 2003, I had so much material, and I started to organize it, and the book just wrote itself. This is what I think is beautiful about this book: It allows Lee to be Lee. These aren't my words. They're his words, edited by me.

SB: I really love the historical photographs in this book, like the old playbills and photo of Chekhov and whatnot. How were you able to get those?

LC: Lee Strasberg's archives would leave you breathless. Can you imagine the field day I had, having access to those? These are personal family photographs that would have never seen the light of day. But Anna has really been the most wonderful mentor on this project. She really opened up the doors to me.

SB: What do you hope young actors who might be just starting out will get from this book?

LC: I hope they can decide, from an informed point of view, if they can apply the Method to their own work.

SB: Do you find that young actors who come into your class are interested in the history of acting? Do they know about the history?

LC: They know nothing. They're interested, but they just don't know. They've never heard of Eleonora Duse. They don't know who John Barrymore was. They just don't have a history of it. In fact, the last part of the book is all about great world figures in theater and film. Also, part of my assignments are making them go to museums. I make them look at art. I make them read. I want them to read not just Long Day's Journey but everything Eugene O'Neill wrote. And they do. We have a phenomenal student body at the institute.

SB: Why do you think Lee Strasberg's work is still relevant to actors today?

LC: Strasberg stood on the shoulders of Stanislavski, and the Method works. It gets results.

SB: I think a lot of people still see the Method as an esoteric concept, despite its enduring popularity as a teaching technique. Can you describe, in your own words, what you think the Method is?

LC: Building on the system of Konstantin Stanislavski, Lee Strasberg's Method is an approach to acting that emphasizes the internal approach as opposed to the external. The Method trains actors to use their own personal experiences, feelings, emotions and truths, fusing them together with the inner psychological life of the character. This enables them to live on the stage and respond truthfully to the imaginary circumstances created by the playwright.

Visit www.strasberg.com for more info on The Strasberg Notes.