

# CREATING THE ILLUSION OF FIRST TIME

As an acting coach, I am often asked what the biggest challenge is for film actors in creating great acting. The answer is—there are many—but let’s look at one of them.

By *Brian Timoney*



Elia Kazan and Marlon Brando

**A** MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR THE ACTOR IS trying to make their words and actions look as if they are happening for the first and last time. It’s called The Illusion of First Time.

It’s an illusion because the actor has rehearsed what they must say and do at length, but making a performance look spontaneous and unrehearsed is one of the keys to great acting.

Henry Fonda once said, “It’s one of the most difficult things for actors, our medium is the spoken word, and it has to come out from inside. Made up at that moment. It must be said for the first time, every time.”

There is one acting technique that has made the biggest contribution to solving this issue. It’s called Method Acting.

The Method, as it’s also known, became famous in the 1950s when actors such as Marlon Brando and James Dean brought the technique to the big screen. They created some fantastic improvised work that, to this day, remain golden cinematic moments.

The Method continues to be used today to great effect by Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Sean Penn, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Daniel Day-Lewis to name a few.

## But the question remains, how does the Method actor create spontaneity?

The main premise of creating improvised Method work is for the actor to “live in the moment” and follow their impulses. This sounds easier than it actually is. Why? Because, by doing this, the actor may feel that they have no control over the results, and may feel uneasy about others’ opinions of their impulsive actions.

Great actors are able to overcome this, and have worked on this specific process to create spontaneous acting.

While filming a scene in *ON THE WATERFRONT* (1954), Eva Marie Saint, the actress Marlon Brando was working with, accidentally dropped her glove—this wasn’t a direction, it was an accident. But instead of stopping, Brando picked up the glove and incorporated it fully into the scene. He felt the impulse to pick up it up, and he took it. This gave us a fantastic film moment.

In *KRAMER VS. KRAMER* (1979), Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep play a husband and wife. Just before they filmed the scene where his wife decides to leave him, Hoffman unexpectedly slapped Streep. Hoffman commented afterwards that he wanted Streep to really detest and resent him, and so he slapped her across the face to help generate the correct emotional content for the scene they were about to film. The scene was electric.

Robert De Niro, while filming with Joe Pesci in *RAGING BULL* (1980), improvised heavily during their scenes, often changing lines to create personal references for himself and Pesci to react off.

Brando took the approach to a whole new level in *THE GODFATHER* (1972), where he deliberately didn’t learn any lines, but had idiot boards containing the lines held up. He wanted the lines to seem very spontaneous. It doesn’t come any more spontaneous than that! In fairness, he is probably one of the few actors, past or present, who a director would allow to do this. It worked though. He won an Oscar® for his performance.

This type of work is helped if the director embraces the approach. For example, Brando and Dean worked with Method director, Elia Kazan, De Niro with Scorsese, Pacino with Francis Ford Coppola—all of whom were happy to work like this to achieve the best results. And who could argue with the results!

But the question remains, how does the Method actor create spontaneity? With hard work, usually. Sometimes we hear that certain actors are born with natural talent, but the reality is usually that they work extremely hard to make their work look spontaneous.

During Method Acting training, the actor works on understanding how he/she feels at given moments and on following impulses. They work on this and other areas relentlessly until they can do it without censoring or preventing themselves from doing it in the split seconds it happens in a scene. It usually takes years of work to develop this ability, but once ingrained in the actor, it becomes automatic and easy. ■