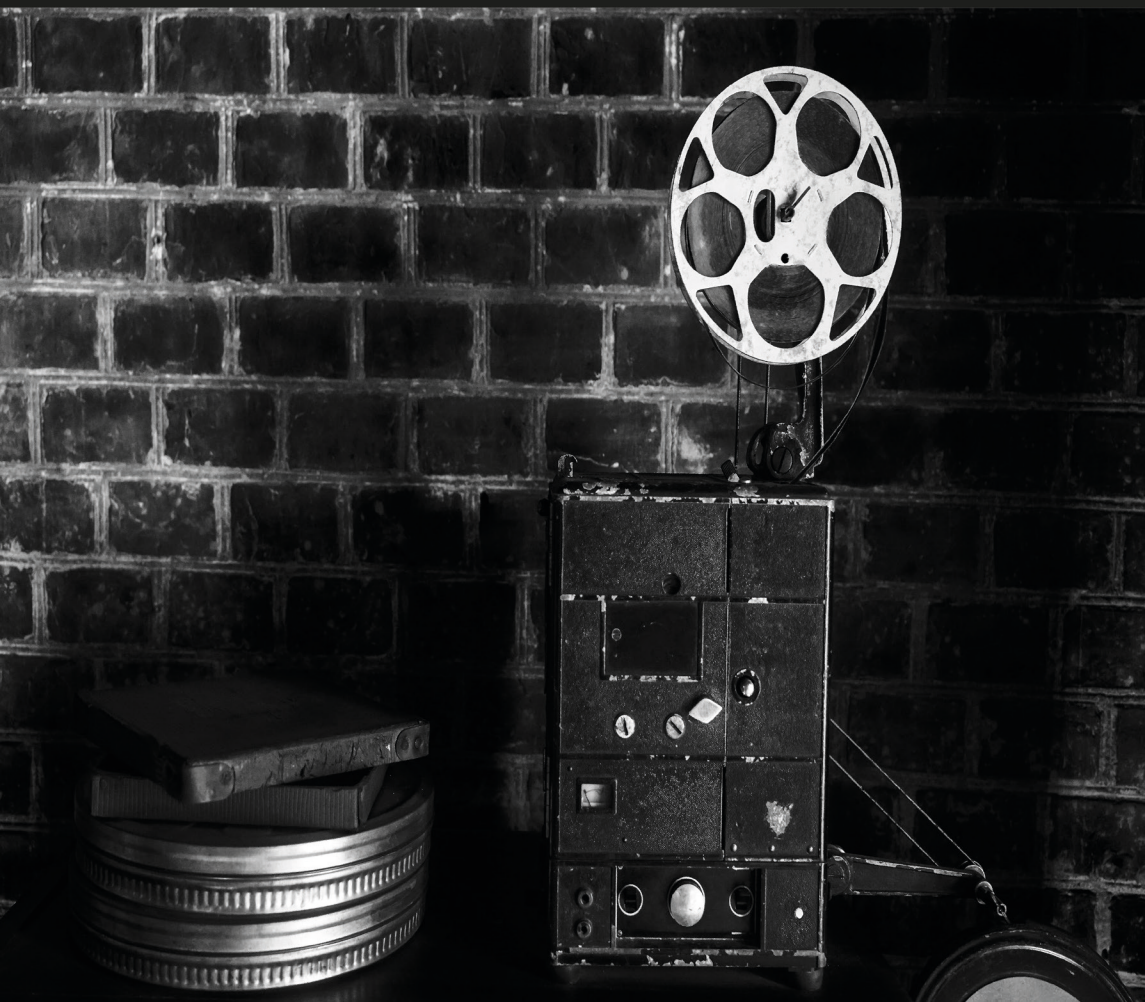


# Women, Method Acting, and the Hollywood Film

Keri Walsh



# WOMEN, METHOD ACTING, AND THE HOLLYWOOD FILM

*Women, Method Acting, and the Hollywood Film* is the first study dedicated to understanding the work of female Method actors on film.

While Method acting on film has typically been associated with the explosive machismo of actors like Marlon Brando and Robert De Niro, this book explores an alternate tradition within the Method—the work that women from the Actors Studio did in Hollywood. Covering the period from the end of the Second World War until the 1970s, this study shows how the women associated with the Actors Studio increasingly used Method acting in ways that were compatible with their burgeoning feminist political commitments and developed a style of feminist Method acting. The book examines the complex intersection of Method acting, sexuality, and gender by analyzing performances such as Kim Hunter's in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Julie Harris's in *The Member of the Wedding*, Shelley Winters's in *The Big Knife*, Geraldine Page's in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and Jane Fonda's in *Coming Home*. Challenging the longstanding assumption that Method acting's approaches were harmful to women and incompatible with feminism, this book argues that some of Hollywood's most interesting female actors, and leading feminists, emerged from the Actors Studio in the period between the 1950s and the 1970s.

Written for students and scholars of Film Studies, Cultural Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies, and Gender Studies, *Women, Method Acting, and the Hollywood Film* reshapes the way we think of a central strain in American screen acting, and in doing so, allows women a new stake in that tradition.

**Keri Walsh** is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Institute of Irish Studies at Fordham University in New York. She is the author of *Mickey Rourke* in the BFI Film Stars Series and editor of *The Letters of Sylvia Beach*. In 2018 she was named an Academy Film Scholar by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.



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# INTRODUCTION

In Otto Preminger's World War II epic *In Harm's Way* (1965), Patricia Neal appears as Naval Lieutenant Maggie Haines, a character whom Bosley Crowther described as a "weary" and "tough" nurse.<sup>1</sup> Lieutenant Haines delivers her life story matter-of-factly: first she divorced her husband, and after that went to nursing school and joined the navy. Throughout the film, she appears in uniform. Her affect is consistently practical and calm. She is as confident directing a large medical ward as she is expressing her sexual desires. As she moves to take John Wayne's Captain Torrey to bed, she maintains steady eye contact as she removes her cap, and the camera pans down to her feet where one by one, she pulls off her orthopedic white nursing shoes. Lieutenant Haines is not a nubile nurse fantasy. Instead, she is a hard-working middle-aged professional with sore feet and desires of her own. Such unflappable, disciplined, mature, and grounded women were Neal's trademark—she had played similar parts in Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) as the radio producer Marcia Jeffries who sabotages a populist demagogue with a hot mic, and in Blake Edwards's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) as Emily Eustace Failenson, who pays for the upkeep of her young lover. Given the niche Neal had carved for herself in Hollywood as the purveyor of midlife cool, it was not surprising that she was the first to be offered the part of Mrs. Robinson in Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967). When she turned it down, her fellow Method actor Anne Bancroft stepped in, giving an iconic performance of her own, one that drew some of its energy and inspiration from Neal's screen persona. Critics have rarely traced such genealogies between women of the Method, but in this book I show that female Method actors were often in dialogue with each other. Just as Robert De Niro's performances speak back to Marlon Brando's, Anne Bancroft's speak to Patricia Neal's, and to those of other women in the tradition that I describe as feminist Method acting.

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One can see what attracted Neal to the role of Lt. Haines in *In Harm's Way*: the chance to play a competent, professional, three-dimensional woman. But in this film, and others that I study in this book, we can also see some of the limitations that actors like Neal faced as they tried to bring the realist values of the Actors Studio to bear on expressing the complexities of women's lives. In a subplot of *In Harm's Way*, Lt. Haines's younger roommate and mentee, Ensign Annalee Dorne, is raped by a superior (played by Kirk Douglas). After learning that she is pregnant, Dorne commits suicide. Neal's Lt. Haines discovers her body and a note. She tries to bring the truth surrounding her roommate's death to light by passing along the note to her naval superiors, but Captain Torrey has a different sense of how the situation should be handled—he thinks that because the crime is shameful, it should be covered up. Dorne's rapist is never brought to justice: instead, he "redeems" himself at the film's end by dying in a sacrificial mission that saves other lives. Lt. Haines's concern to expose the truth is quickly passed over, swallowed up in the imperatives of battle. While Preminger's film could plausibly be read as a criticism of the navy's response to sexual violence (it does, after all, dramatize the cover-up), the fact remains that only Neal's character pushes to tell the truth, and suggests a more accountable way of responding. Only her presence in the film suggests to the audience that the way the navy responds to sexual violence is a problem. She is the feminist witness to Ensign Annalee Dorne's death.<sup>2</sup> This dynamic, in which a female Method actor inhabits and infuses feminist insight and potential into a film that is not necessarily fully hospitable to it, is one I encountered commonly in films made before 1968, when the Production Code (or Hays Code) was converted to a Ratings System that gave filmmakers, and audiences, more freedom to explore social issues in a forthright manner. After 1968, subjects of feminist concern like rape, abortion, and harassment could be addressed explicitly, and, thanks to the rising energy of second-wave feminism, they increasingly were. Before 1968, however, which is the period that is under consideration in the first three chapters of this book, these moments of feminist critique can be seen struggling to assert themselves in conditions either censored, hostile, or indifferent. But they are there. As it turns out, they are a recurring feature of women's performances in the Method tradition.

Neal's portrayal of Lt. Haines in *In Harm's Way*, like so many of her performances, exemplifies the body of work I bring to light in this book, that of feminist Method acting in Hollywood. For the purposes of this study, by feminism I mean second-wave feminism, the mid-twentieth century explosion of consciousness and activism that emerged alongside other liberation struggles of the time. Whereas feminism's first wave (which lasted from the mid-nineteenth century until the years following World War I) had focused on securing women's right to vote, second-wave feminism fought for a host of social issues related to women's lives, protesting against their status in the household, demanding equal compensation and opportunities in the workplace, and agitating to gain reproductive, sexual, and other rights.<sup>3</sup>

I have opened this study with Patricia Neal because her unflustered style is the last thing that would usually be conjured by the phrase “Method acting,” and yet she was a dedicated Method actor. Whereas the male stars associated with the Method, like Marlon Brando and James Dean, expressed the anarchic energies of youth culture and the troubles of returning World War II veterans, Method women carved different paths. They did not trade in brooding misunderstoodness; they were not sex symbols (at least not of a stereotypical variety); they did not live fast or die young. Instead, they built sustained careers, often performing memorably into old age. While these Method actors inhabited characters of many ages and types, from Eva Marie Saint’s troubled young wife Celia Pope in Fred Zinnemann’s *A Hatful of Rain* to Jo Van Fleet’s raging matriarch Ella Garth in Elia Kazan’s *Wild River*, there was often something decidedly midlife about their collective ethos—an ethos that Crowther’s assessment of Neal as “weary” and “tough”—captures well. But theirs was not the toughness of sweaty undershirts and explosive emotionality. It was instead an attempt realistically to portray women’s domestic and professional lives at the mid-century. These Method actors have rarely been thought of, except by themselves, as participants in second-wave feminism. And yet to look back at their work and their statements about their work is to see that their performances consistently documented and protested against the limitations imposed on women’s lives in the years following World War II. They were determined to change the conventions governing women’s screen performance and the idealizations Hollywood so often applied to women’s lives. To do so, they employed the realist values of the Actors Studio, the New York institution from which the Method emerged, as a counterweight to Hollywood’s default setting of glamor. Method women consistently pushed to allow more of women’s ordinary lives onto the screen, and to make their protests seen and heard.

*Women, Method Acting, and the Hollywood Film* is an inaugural study of the work of this often-overlooked group of Method actors in Hollywood, grounded in close analysis of significant performances by Kim Hunter, Julie Harris, Geraldine Page, Shelley Winters, and Jane Fonda. I hope it will be a step toward a larger revival of interest in their work. Kim Hunter as Stella Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* challenged audiences with the complex portrayal of a veteran’s wife’s attempts to survive an abusive marriage, Julie Harris as Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* played the queer child Frankie Addams who protests against the demands of gender conformity, and Geraldine Page as movie star Alexandra Del Lago in *Sweet Bird of Youth* offered a powerful rebellion against the industry limitations placed upon older female actors.<sup>4</sup> Why are their names so often missing from conversations about the history of Method acting on film? Though they worked alongside Brando, Dean, and Clift at the Actors Studio and in Hollywood, and turned in groundbreaking performances, they have often been elided in accounts of the Method acting canon. In this book I restore them, and their fellow female Method actors, to view. And I argue that it is not enough that we remember them

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individually: we need to consider them as a community of actors who admired each other's work, who often performed together, and whose professional values were shaped by a shared genealogy.<sup>5</sup>

There are four key arguments that I hope the reader of this book will take away: first, that there is a strong tradition of women's Method acting in Hollywood, one that expresses itself in a variety of recognizable ways; second, that the screen performances of female Method actors both challenged and expanded Hollywood's capacities for representing women's lives; third, that these actors used their Hollywood careers to become powerful exponents of second-wave feminism; and fourth, that contrary to a commonly held idea that Method women's work was marred by a subservience to mid-century Freudian ideas, in practice the version of the Method these women enacted was much more concerned with social criticism than with psychoanalysis, and was eminently capable of its own feminist engagements with Freud. In fact, Freudian elements in mid-century films often provide cultural openings and a new language for exploring and expressing women's burgeoning rebellion.

Consider Joanne Woodward's performance in Nunnally Johnson's *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957). Woodward plays a character with dissociative identity disorder, a role that effectively requires her to play three different parts: Eve White, a depressed housewife, Eve Black, her sexually confident and socially rebellious alter ego, and Jane, a moderate woman who emerges as the integration of the two. The film begins with a documentary-style narrator informing the audience that Eve's story is based on an actual case study. The plot follows Eve as she undergoes psychiatric treatment and is eventually able to heal, guided by her doctor (played by Woodward's fellow Method actor Lee J. Cobb). Standard readings of women and the Method might argue that the film's presentation of a male doctor/female patient power dynamic is troubling or worry that the film promotes a view of women as fundamentally unstable or hysterical. But looked at from a different angle, *The Three Faces of Eve* suggests that the limits and demands placed on women as housewives and mothers are literally driving them crazy, and that their own rebellious subconscious selves might save them.<sup>6</sup> *The Three Faces of Eve* suggests that inside each docile and downtrodden housewife lurks a force struggling to get free, and that women's identities are actually much bolder and more various than the roles of domesticity they have been shoehorned into. Providing an uninhibited display of what American housewives might say, if they felt free to speak their minds, Eve's alter ego says of her husband that she would never marry "a jerk like that" and "I ain't gonna go through the rest of my life with that creep." It is she who tells the doctor about Eve White's suicide attempt, and who encourages her to "leave Ralph, take Bonnie and run away." In one scene, Eve's bolder self gets dressed seductively and shows her husband a sexually forward side of her personality of which he disapproves, and then informs him "There's a lot of things you've never seen me do." By the end of the film, Eve has gotten divorced from her husband and found a new one, having gained more assertiveness, control, and

happiness. The film provides a bravura, Oscar-winning role for Woodward: Bosley Crowther noted that she gives a performance of “superlative flexibility and emotional power.”<sup>7</sup> When she shifts from one personality to another, Woodward’s body language changes entirely: she leaves behind her tense, hunched posture and leans back relaxed, smiling, and taking up space.

Even though Woodward and her contemporaries often generated such compelling and memorable screen performances, the women of the Method have often been left behind in both popular and academic memory. Noticing this absence, Karen Hollinger has raised the question of why the title of “Method actor” has so seldom stuck to female performers, and why their tradition has become so submerged both in cultural memory and scholarly accounts of screen acting.<sup>8</sup> Hollinger points out that there were plenty of “notable female Method performers” during the period of Method acting’s ascendance in Hollywood after World War II, yet somehow, she notes with perplexity, in the popular imagination all of the “exemplars of Method acting were men” (14). Hollinger points out that the unwritten history of female Method actors remained a missing chapter in screen acting that made her own study of later performers (even those not from the Method tradition) including Meryl Streep and Angela Bassett more difficult to undertake.

In offering some of this missing history, I seek to provide a greater understanding of what women have contributed to Hollywood cinema as Method actors. One reason we have not recognized their work is that it often looks so different from that of their male peers. To include them in our critical accounts, we need to learn to see the Method in broader ways, and not just in the images of Brando, Clift, Dean, De Niro, or successive waves of male actors who traffic in the angst-to-explosion arc. When I started writing this book, a Google search for the phrase “women Method actors” yielded a list of eight male actors. Now, thanks to feminist critics taking a new interest in this topic, it yields several articles querying why there has been a dearth of attention to female Method actors in Hollywood.<sup>9</sup>

Given their low profile now, it might come as something of a surprise to learn that in the golden age of Method acting (from the 1950s to the 1970s), the work of female Method actors was in fact recognized in Hollywood, even if it was not recognized as Method acting per se. While the images of Brando, Clift, Dean, Newman and others became synonymous with the idea of the “Method actor” as a new disruptive and exciting star type, women of the Method were equally celebrated for their work in awards season. Brando received an Academy Award nomination for his performance as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), but he did not win; Kim Hunter, however, did win the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her performance as Stella Kowalski. Other Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress winners who honed their craft at the Actors Studio in this period include Joanne Woodward for *The Three Faces of Eve* (1958), Anne Bancroft for *The Miracle Worker* (1963), Patricia Neal for *Hud* (1964), Eva Marie Saint for *On the Waterfront* (1955), Jo Van Fleet for *East of Eden* (1956), Shelley Winters

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for *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1960) and *A Patch of Blue* (1966), Jane Fonda for *Klute* (1971) and *Coming Home* (1978), Sandy Dennis for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1967), Estelle Parsons for *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968), and Ellen Burstyn for *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975).<sup>10</sup> These performances have rarely been considered collectively or studied in relation to the influence of the institution where they originated.

The only comprehensive history of the Actors Studio, Forster Hirsch's *A Method to Their Madness* (1984), holds that Hollywood served Method women poorly. Beginning with an acknowledgment of the ways in which the path to stardom was more uphill for female actors who embraced the intensity and realism of Method acting, Hirsch's account ultimately lapses into the pejorative critical paradigm that he had initially seemed prepared to question:

Unwilling (or perhaps unable) to play the sexy image that American movies often force on women, these actresses have either returned to stage work whenever they could or else been cast in supporting roles as an assortment of oddballs and weirdos. Dressed in fright wigs and camouflaged with garish makeup, they have sometimes been cast unflatteringly, their individuality mocked rather than protected by the romantic aura that cradled Montgomery Clift and James Dean.<sup>11</sup>

Hirsch is right when he proposes that Method women were unwilling to conform to Hollywood's norms governing femininity. Their quest to depict female characters who were less compliant, less available to the gaze, and less normative in a variety of ways, was simply more challenging than male Method actors' presentation of masculinity in a more troubled, erotic, and counter-cultural image. Hirsch dismisses Method women's work on screen as "too batty," "too quirky," and "a sideshow," rather than reading their performances sympathetically to see what they might have been trying to say with such convention-breaking work.<sup>12</sup>

Despite Hirsch's account, not only did the Method did serve women well in Hollywood, but female Method actors' challenges in turn served Hollywood well. The award statistics suggest that their performances were both relevant and exciting to critics, audiences, and the industry. Drawing on the processes and values they developed at the Actors Studio helped them to develop careers as acclaimed actors operating successfully in the years marked by the dissolution of the Hollywood star system. In fact, Method women often worked to upend terms like those of Hirsch's critique that were used to describe women (batty, quirky, sideshows) along with adjacent pejorative terms used to dismiss non-conforming women: spinster, frigid, hysterical, offbeat, plain, frumpy, ugly. It was often through their conscious engagement with such pejoratives that women Method actors began to carve out new and resistant domains for female performance on screen, and to seek out strategies to flip, resist, and reframe such dismissals.

One of their best allies in this campaign was Tennessee Williams, the playwright deeply associated with the Method whose queering of American theatre provided many resources for thinking about gender and sexuality, resources that female Method actors drew on and adapted. Williams placed great emphasis on female characters who resisted normative identities. As Blanche Dubois asks in *A Streetcar Named Desire*: “Straight? What’s ‘straight’? A line can be straight, or a street. But the heart of a human being?” Williams’s resistance to norms provided an inspiration to deviate for many Method women’s performances. Like Williams as a playwright, female Method actors were realists in many regards, but were more than capable of irony, camp, comedy, and various forms of disidentification. Similar encouragement to express feminist and queer perspectives came from their appearances in adaptations of works by women writers such as Carson McCullers, Lillian Hellman, and Shirley Jackson.

Off-screen, the politics of Method women were typically liberal and/or left, and many became involved with political campaigns and causes, including the civil rights movement, the peace movement, the anti-nuclear movement, campaigns for reproductive freedom, activism against the death penalty, movements for economic justice, and feminist campaigns against harassment and inequality and in favor of more equitable media representation. This was not surprising, given that the Actors Studio descended from the group of directors and actors involved with the legendary leftist 1930s theatre collective, The Group. For many years the politics of the Actors Studio have been suspect because of the notorious actions of one of its founders, Elia Kazan, who named names of Communist Party members to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in order to protect his burgeoning film career (an act that Arthur Miller, whose attitudes captured those of many of Kazan’s fellow theatre workers, referred to as a “moral defection” and a decision that “disserved both himself and the cause of freedom.”)<sup>13</sup> But Kazan’s action was notorious precisely because it represented such a dramatic departure from the politics embraced by most members of the Actors Studio and the Group Theatre before them. For instance, Milly S. Barranger’s *Unfriendly Witnesses: Gender, Theater and Film in the McCarthy Era* dedicates a chapter to Kim Hunter’s principled stand against McCarthyism, one that barred her from working in Hollywood in the years following her Oscar win for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (by her own account, Hunter was never a member of the Communist party, but she contributed to various progressive causes, including peace and civil rights, and she raised funds for the defense of the Hollywood Ten, the group of writers and directors accused of having Communist sympathies). Hunter stood up to the HUAC-supporting blackmailers who offered her “clearance” from Communist suspicions, and in 1962 she testified before the New York Supreme Court to expose them. Geraldine Page, meanwhile, was blacklisted after her Oscar win for *Hondo* (1953)—she thought it was because she had studied with another Stanislavsky-based teacher based in New York, Uta Hagen, who was also a suspected Communist. Page did not work on film again until *Summer and Smoke* (1961).<sup>14</sup> But even though their appearances