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Interview with Tom Oppenheim

Getting personal with Tom Oppenheim : On the Stella Adler Studio of Acting, Community, embracing the fluidity of Identity and Nurturing Humanity.

Céline Nogueira



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The Stella Adler Studio of Acting : Website

1 [HYPERLINK "http://www.stellaadler.com/](http://www.stellaadler.com/)

Biography of the Interviewee:

[FIGURE 1]Tom Oppenheim

- 2 Tom Oppenheim is the artistic director and president of the Stella Adler Studio of Acting. He studied acting at the National Shakespeare Conservatory and with his grandmother Stella Adler. Acting credits include the title role in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as well as Michael in Buzz McLaughlin's *Sister Calling My Name*, both with the Harold Clurman Laboratory Theater Company. Jambalaya's productions of *Othello* as Iago, and *Featuring Loretta*; *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Macbeth* at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, *Henry VI, Part I, II, III* at Theater for a New Audience, *Juana Queen of Spain* at EST, *Bound East for Cardiff* at The Provincetown Playhouse, *Romeo and Juliet* at the Mint Theater, *Comparing Books* at the Producer's Club. Film credits include Mike Nichols' *Wolf*, Art Jones' *Going Nomad* and *Dodgeball* and Deborah Kampmeier's *Virgin* and *Hound Dog*. TV credits include Sydney Lumet's TV series, *100 Center Street*. He is the recipient of the 2009 Laurette Taylor Award from Theatre East and a co-editor, with Herbert Kohl, of *The Muses Go to School: Inspiring Stories About the Importance of Arts in Education* (The New Press). He lives in New York City.

The Interview:

Céline Nogueira: Director of the Stella Adler Studio in New York and grandson of Stella Adler, Tom Oppenheim is a pillar and guardian of the internationally known legacy, techniques and philosophy of Stella Adler.

I have known and worked with Tom Oppenheim and the Studio for over 15 years and I have had the great privilege and honor to be named French Ambassador of the Studio. Together we have been developing artistic and pedagogical bridges between France and New York since 2008.

In his office midtown Manhattan, he generously gave us some time to pause and think together. Whether we are talking over existential matters or building projects, one quality always stems from a discussion with Tom: the complexity of the human being. As a fervent

protector of Theatre and Art, Tom does not think within any trivial frame. He does not chit chat and he does not take anything for granted. All matter is universal to him and he treats all my questions as such. As he pays close attention to each word, he allows them to dive into an infinite space - the web of his sensorial and intellectual corporal habitat - that needs a certain amount of time to travel in, and out. The time to think. Deeply think.

Tom lets the questions sink in as if he were receiving the sometimes so often heard questions for the first time. And, far from being blasé, he connects the words and issues at stake with his present preoccupations. At times, he lets the words linger inside his mind - does it meet a souvenir, a thought, or the meanders of intertwined experiences? - until he finds a thread, another word, that gives way to new stimulating perspectives, until it sometimes hit a more intimate chord.

While his main focus is to form the cultural dimension of the Studio or the outreach dimension, Tom Oppenheim appears to be the perfect embodiment of the complexity and yet down-to-earth missions of Stella Adler and the Studio.

C.N.: You have talked at length about the Stella Adler Studio of Acting and Stella Adler. So today, October 2016, is there anything that has not been said yet?

Tom Oppenheim: The Mission of the Studio extends from the insight that growth of as an actor and growth as a human being are synonymous and the mission is to create an environment that nurtures Theatre artists and audiences so that they value Humanity-their own and others' as their first priority while bringing Art and Education to the Community. To me, that is an ongoing and ever unfolding question or experiment in a number of different ways, but it has a number of consequences it seems to me for the Human race: can our Humanity be nurtured in such a way that makes us more peaceful or more considerate, more humane ? On a more institutional level, to what degree can WE, at the Studio, organize ourselves to do that better and better and more effectively to make more people the beneficiaries of it? While I have said a lot, there is much more that remains to be said and to be seen. For example I sometimes wonder whether we should change the word "environment" to "community" - create a community that nurtures Theatre artists and audiences so that they value Humanity- "their own and others". That little phrase has taken on for me much more vivid and focused relevancy in the Unites States with Donald Trump having reason to the heights of being the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party. Watching him behave as he does and say the things he has said - building walls and banning people based on their religions. "Their own and others", I always knew that it was important and it has saved the Mission from becoming the kind of inward looking, narcissistic preoccupation of an Artist to becoming a representative of an art form that focuses on the Other, on Otherness and the Difference. It's the evolution of oneself in relationship to other people. But you know it takes on more meaning: what can we - the Stella Adler Studio and we, Theatre Artists and we, Human beings do to counteract the kind of negativity and xenophobia and militarism. Then there are very real issues: the Studio needs to find a new Home, a new location. How do we balance our idealism and the energy we spend on that with capital campaign and how do we leverage one for the other?

C.N.: Let us go back to your great example with Trump. He represents the contrary of the spirit that we find here at the Stella Adler Studio which is based on a non-judgmental attitude, open-mindedness, the quest for understanding oneself and the others. Would you say that the technique provides a political posture towards the world?

Tom Oppenheim: Yes! I guess I would say that in the way that Theatre does invariably whether it is political theatre or whether it isn't, whether its primary intention is being an Art Theatre. The fact is that it is always offering protection for ambiguity. Things are

neither this nor that. Theatre itself is the domain of the embracing of Otherness, of differences. It seems to me that growing as human being inevitable means growing beyond, embracing the fluidity of Identity. When you begin to embrace the fluidity of Identity you have to embrace it all the way and so doing that drives you into positions that have profound political implications. You can't kill the name of it.

C.N.: Starting to embrace the fluidity or even the understanding, or the curiosity towards that fluidity of Identity is huge commitment because it demands a constant alertness of what we are doing and what the surroundings are doing...

Tom Oppenheim: Right.

C.N.: This, we get it at the Stella Adler Studio. How about an actor who is trained somewhere else? Do you feel that this question of Humanity and growth as a human being is a specificity at the Stella Adler Studio in comparison with other schools or methods or approaches?

Tom Oppenheim: I just don't know the answer. I know there are actors that I have met, and have studied with us, who are deeply in doubt with this understanding. There are also Institutions that claim, by virtue of their Mission Statement, to be primarily focused on producing or nurturing professional actors, that is the emphasis, which would mean careerism. There is no such reference in the Mission of the Stella Adler Studio. It doesn't say anything about being a professional actor or nurturing the next generation of working actors. It says « to create an environment that nurtures Theatre artists, and audience so that they value Humanity. » For me it is absolutely central to Stella's understanding. While we take real time to give our full-time students tools to convert their education into ways of making money, making a living, it would be unthinkable to make that the central focus because she didn't. She really was focusing on the primordial purpose of Theatre in Existence, in the world, and she took it for granted that if you did that you would be able to leverage that for work and to make a living but I think what she primarily expected her students to do was to create a fascinating important life. Not meaning life of international fame and fortune but a life where you brought highly cultivated focus to or everywhere - whether you're walking down the street or visiting a prison or the subway or at the museum ... you are compelled as a student of Stella's to understand yourself as an actor who is part of the family of all artists and therefore it was your business to go to museums, to read poems, novels, the paper.

Is it unique to us? I don't think it is but I do know there are institutions that focus on careerism « if you come here you are more likely to get a job » - that was not why Stella said « come here ». She said « come here because if you come here you will understand your life in the most profound way and the world in the most profound way and the institution of Theatre and the Art form of Theatre ». We honor that by having crafted a Mission that we feel demands that sense of focus.

[FIGURE 2]Stella Adler

C.N.: And the mission is intimately linked with a strong emphasis on work. I will always remember how you would tell us « if you think you have talent, you are wrong. Talent is work ». So the Mission is very linked with very specific techniques and daily hard work.

Tom Oppenheim: Yes. Absolutely. That's right. Hard work and self transformation. In an interview, Stella talks about how if you look at photos of great artists when they were young and then when they are old, she says that the shape of their head changes. My father (Dave Oppenheim) was a great classical musician so I have his example: when you learn how to play an instrument, you develop calluses and your body changes in relationship, it really grows around the instrument the way a tree would grow around the fence and the fence and the tree become one. Same work for an actor. It's less clear because if it is a clarinet, you have a callus here and here, your fingers can do things that most people's fingers can't do, your ability to breathe and focus with the breath over the read in a specific way is highly developed, it is externally clear whereas for actors you just don't see it in the same way but it is absolutely the same. But the instrument would be like Hamlet, the character, and all the lines and all of the arranging of your inner self so that that energy can flow through you.

C.N.: You are talking about the physical effects on the musician's body, could the effects on actors be either the diction, their energy, the light in their eyes, their posture and groundedness, maybe a sense of a lightness...?

Tom Oppenheim: Yes, absolutely.

C.N.: With these physical effects in mind, what is your personal definition of an Artist?

Tom Oppenheim: I think of people I know ... it's a good question, I have to think about it

...

C.N.: You have just mentioned your father. Because of your background, because of the legacy, because of the Studio, because you have always been surrounded with great spirits, I believe you took a lot from it. What is it that you took the most? And was it at any point a kind of burden?

Tom Oppenheim : ... Was it a burden? ... Yes, I think it's a burden. I think it is.

C.N.: How so?

Tom Oppenheim: Because you want to live your life where you respect yourself. There are examples of people that live next to you and that you have enormous respect for, so it's hard not to measure yourself against that. That can be a burden sometimes.

C.N.: So how would you cope with that?

Tom Oppenheim: Well... I try my best. Try my best to hear the voices inside and allow them to move through me in a way that seems exciting and relevant. And they're not only family voices. Maybe the most impactful voice that got me going in life was the voice of Martin Luther King when I was 9 or 8 years old, he was assassinated and I went from being a kid that watched cartoons to suddenly being aware of who he was and said and what civil rights was about and what that whole movement was about and became deeply moved by it, raised money, asked friends of my family for money and gave the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. So that's another one. Feeling that a human being could do that and always wanting Art to be able to do something synonymous with that, something similar. And I realized it did when I would watch documentaries and see Marlon Brando marching along with King - there are several examples of that, be present at his funeral.

But also, I was a drug addict from the age of fifteen until the age twenty-nine when I ended up on heroin. This is not something I am trying to hide from the world. What was really threatening to me was living death, not living alive. So what I am more motivated by than living up to my ancestors is making sure that I make my life count for something and not wanting to destroy it and not wanting to live creatively and contribute against that background of years of disintegration in drugs.

I used drugs very destructively for a number of years. I studied acting prior to the worst of that. I had time with Stella and I had two years of training at the National Shakespeare Conservatory which was kind of Stella without Stella. Jimmy (James Tripp) was there and Mario Siletti, Alice Winston, Joannie Evans. So I had those two years of solid training and then I spiraled down and down. While I was using heroine I got arrested and I spent a night in jail then I got clean. But from the moment I got clean I began to gather myself and feel like I needed to utilize my training and the Studio presented itself as the place where I could start studying again which I did and eventually started teaching.

C.N.: Would you say that now the directing, the acting, the teaching are giving you the high that you were looking for at the time?

Tom Oppenheim: Yes, probably. It produces enormous energy and it makes you feel connected and alive.

C.N.: When you see young people coming in at the Studio, do you see a difference in their state of mind through the years?

Tom Oppenheim: I think there's a difference between young people now and young people twenty years ago and there are certainly differences in the world. Stella would be sued in the world that we live in right now. Much faster.

C.N.: Because she was... more ferocious?

Tom Oppenheim: Yes. there's something different in the world. I think we tried to uphold high standards but we have to deal also with the world such as it is. Maybe there are great advantages, positive aspects. People are more sensitive. I worry that people guard against vulnerability. For example in the United States, I don't know if this is happening in Europe, there is a mandate that we have to provide trigger-warnings. So if there is a play in which a rape, or any violence, takes place in the play, you have to announce that in case anybody would be upset by it. This is a new phenomenon. I worry that there are mechanisms that are protecting people against Theatre's capacity and inclination to open up vulnerability and address people in such a way where they will encounter their own wounds as a community and in a place that's safe but not sanitized. I worry about that. The President of a School in Chicago wrote a letter to the students announcing that school is a place of open discussion and discourse and they will not engage in trigger-warnings or any kind of censorship of speech. That's what School is about and I think that's true of the Theatre too.

C.N.: It also ruins the suspense of the play...

Tom Oppenheim: Yes. If they let you know that something very disturbing happens for the audience, so if you're sensitive you leave now or close your eyes... it just feels like that you may be subverting the purpose of Art and the purpose of Theatre.

C.N.: You have mentioned many times how you do not want the Studio to be dogmatic or create a myth of Stella Adler herself. Stella Adler had a huge impact on me, also because she was a woman. Do you see how Stella Adler can be considered as a role model for young women, a feminine figure they one can look up to?

Tom Oppenheim: I imagine yes. I think she is a great role model. That is something we should celebrate more. My sister (Sarah Oppenheim) is very aware of it. Stella is a great role model for any young actor, particularly for young women. I have heard people say that Stella's technique is more favorable to or has feminist qualities as opposed to Strasberg for example. What would be the powerful feminine quality...

C.N.: ... well as I grew up as an artist and as a woman, becoming a mother, I realized the difficulty of being a working artist as a woman when you see for example how opportunities in terms of responsibilities are more easily given to men. Stella Adler stands out as a pioneer.

Tom Oppenheim: Yes and at the time Stella Adler did what she did, it was worse then when she was doing it than it is now. You mentioned dogmatism, one of the great things about Stella Adler I think is that she had unending curiosity and capacity to absorb and to be a student, receive and open herself up. There is enormous emphasis in her work for the world outside of you and taking things from outside into yourself and then giving them back. Those maybe exemplary feminine strengths.

C.N.: The nurturing aspects...

Tom Oppenheim: Yes nurturing. Yes. Nurturing. There are very interesting things to unearth in that idea.

C.N.: I see an analogy in being a Mother and being a Teacher. There is an act of Transmission. The act of transmitting by caring about the Others. Listening. Trying and understanding from the other's perspective. I once heard Brando say that Stella Adler helped him find, recognize, his own process. Being able to help someone find their own

process is to me one of the major element in being a « good » teacher. Are there any other things, according to you that make a « good » teacher?

Tom Oppenheim: The greatness of Stella Adler's teaching resided in her ability to celebrate and to be excited by life, by ideas, and for that sense of excitement to manifest in her passing to inspire. She produced a logical sequence of exercises that stand up as a foundational technique as a way of working. She then produced a way of reading text that's related to these foundational exercises- the interpretation class. And then this other class - Character - that goes to big, historical and archetypal levels of History and the Human psyche. Those are three specific things that were always given by someone who was deeply and profoundly alive. There are more quiet teachers who are great teachers. For example, Michael Howard whom I know as a friend, is more quiet but I think he opens up space, I think he provides space where people come alive theatrically. My father, great classical clarinetist, once said that a conductor is a person before whom one has a musical response and I think Michael is that way, he is a person who gives permission and provides space for people to grow.

...

I have to think of a definition of an Artist... It must include Mastery of an art form but there is more to it than that.

C.N.: With the American Theatre Project in Toulouse, we focused on Realism in terms of artistic, social and political commitment or implications. What's left ? Does the word « Method » make any sense today?

Tom Oppenheim: I think so. It's a great question. There is a play right now in Broadway that's called « The Humans », directed by Joe Mantello. I highly recommend it, brilliantly acted I thought. Right out of this tradition. That play matters. It's very funny. And it would seem like light comedy and suddenly something very big, dark, happens but it keeps rolling along- it's like a Chekhov play- and then by the end of it you feel like it's suggesting perhaps that human civilization is finished. And you walk out, it seemed to me, wanting for it not to be. It's not a negative, but there is no effort in the play to offer any hope. And it may be true.

When you worked with Philip Seymour Hoffman at the Studio, he talked about actions and sense memory and those are the two things he used. Although he is not alive any more, he is very much alive and valid artistically. I saw him on stage and on film.

What's left? I am friends with Mark Rylance who studied at RADA but he really absorbed Brando and that whole scene through films. He has a whole, rich, full, very important artistic response to all that acting and all that acting in relationship to what he saw on the British stage. I consider him to be one of the few greatest actors of our time.

What's left ? I think a lot. It's still resounding and echoing.

C.N.: Do you see a difference between Realism, post-modernism, avant-garde and is there one that addresses issues that the other cannot ?

Tom Oppenheim: I wouldn't want to live in a world with no avant-garde Theatre. It seems to me it probably carves out areas of human existence different from Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller... Recently we brought the Grotowski Group to Rikers Island. They did an hour-long piece that they created. A kind of creation myth elevating the women and describing creation, existence as its relationship to the feminine. It was

some of the most extraordinary acting I have ever seen and on so many levels. It was the first time they performed in public for 9 adult women in Rikers and 4-5 Arts administrators in a Gym with correction officers walking around. It's Grotowski receiving the last phase of Stanislavski and mainly his method of physical action. For example they take this ancient, folk song and then they will explore the song vocally and allow the exploration to become both vocal and physical but they will find through the form of the song which is external to them, they plummet into level of human existence that are deep, rich and profound. I think Stella intended actors to explore the playwrights world in the same way. They do it in an unbelievable way where suddenly different voices come up and out and they are totally committed. You sit in front of what would be seen as avant-garde theatre but it's deeply ancient. It's twenty-thousand years old.

I don't see that as separate from Stella and I think that we, at the Studio, ought to begin to allow ourselves to be in the conversation that the Grotowski folks are in. I think Stella would.

I remember when I was a little boy that my sister Sarah went to Stella in California when she was in her teen. My father and I picked Sarah and Ron (Burrus) at the airport and drove everyone out to the Long island and I remember Sarah saying Stella, who was probably eighty, was trying to get someone to act mad and that she got on the ground and started rolling around. This makes me feel that she lived very close to the Grotowski people.

I was reading Lorca's « The House of Bernarda Alba », and there is a wonderful essay which talks about how he, as a modernist, what was modern about him - and same as Picasso- was the plumbing the depths of the art of Andalusia, of Southern Spain, going back to the beginning and bringing that up and presenting it to the modern world so it's seen as avant-garde but it's actually ancient.

C.N.: I cannot but think about « The Rites of Duende » that I directed at Adler and how we worked on the roots because you are describing a very organic process of acting by identifying the inner movement, but you are also talking about truthfulness, the sending out of energy. And you identified this acting as overwhelming. Would that be the definition of a good actor?

Tom Oppenheim: Yes I think so.

C.N.: You mentioned Stanislavski. There is much confusion with the first phase and second phase of his work and also with the translations of his work. What's your take on that?

Tom Oppenheim: Stanislavski probably used sensory work in his latter years and explored improvisation much earlier. He's holistic, and the myth that we tell in America is that he discarded affective memory and sense memory in favor of the imagination. I think that is not true.

Sense memory is the evocation of senses - smells, tastes, - affective memory is using the technique of sense memory to bring yourself back to a traumatic place. In America we have relied on a heavily psychological idea. Benedetti's publishing of « An Actor Prepares » feels very holistic. In the diagram, there is a branch of sense memory.

C.N.: No matter the technique, as long as you find a strong and positive tool that helps you reach the organic, truthful acting, is it relevant?

Tom Oppenheim: I agree with that.

C.N.: In France the Actors Studio is often subject to negative a priori because of "guru" who were doing therapy instead.

Tom Oppenheim: There is odd legacy in relationship to Marilyn Monroe and some uncomfortable things. I think that what Stella contributed in a unique way is the uplifting of the human being and also of the idea that you raise yourself up to a material. That can be confusing. I was just listening to Oskar Eustis (Artistic Director of The Public Theatre) last night in a documentary on *Hamilton* he was saying - and I don't quite find myself in agreement with it - that *Hamilton* was the greatest example since Shakespeare - and to me, there is a difference in what actors do in *Hamilton* and in what they are able to do in Shakespeare - but what he said though that I do agree with is that both Shakespeare and Lin-Manuel Miranda (Author of *Hamilton*) listen to the language of the women and the men on the street and then elevated Humanity. I think that's what Stella was after and what her techniques - plural - offer, and that there is a purpose of Art in that. I think that some Theatre in America pulls in the opposite way, it deifies what is habitual in ourselves rather than elevate. You see it in young people and you see it in films. And we have deified in America to the point where the Kardashians are. You see it in television where the arrows are all posting down, that there is a degradation of Humanity.

C.N.: is there a particular philosopher who influenced you most?

Tom Oppenheim: James P. Carse with whom I studied Religion at the New York University years ago. One of his great books *Finite and Infinite Games* but also *The Religious Case Against Belief*. But through Carse I read many other philosophers. My favorites were Kierkegaard or Sartre.

C.N.: Why Sartre ?

Tom Oppenheim: What is most vivid to me, as I understood it, is the idea of "in itself" and "for itself". He analyzed Human existence in relationship to consciousness, saying that Existence breaks up into those two categories. The "in itself" which are objects that you see, that you perceive, solid things, and then the "for itself" which would be consciousness. The "for itself" is always trying to turn itself into the "in itself" always trying to become an object and escape its own nothingness. He wrote "Being and Nothingness". That's useful to me in relationship to « growth as an actor and growth as a human being" which sounds fun, sounds like a platitude but it is actually full of pain and difficulty. If you embrace your humanity, you embrace your own "nothingness". But in that nothingness is freedom.

C.N.: This is Richard II's soliloquy "but whate'er I be, Nor I nor any man that but man is, With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased with being nothing"!

Tom Oppenheim: Yes exactly! And it's rich. And you could read that basic insight in all the Existentialists. In Nietzsche and Heidegger. It's very rich in Kierkegaard who quotes Shakespeare a great deal.

C.N.: one of the tools we learn here is to do it all the time as if it were the first time. I believe that to be able to do that one needs to cultivate a sense of Innocence. You do have that. How do you cultivate that Innocence?

Tom Oppenheim: Oh Jeez... I don't know how to answer that...

Vulnerability and belief and love. If you do a play say *The House of Bernarda Alba*, you have to embrace the idea that this play is like medicine that the world desperately needs and the world would be anyone that comes to see it. And in a way the play is like

a prayer. I don't know what renews that. I just don't know the answer. It's a great question. You know when you go into jail, you work with a bunch of young people for example who have been told their whole life that they are worthless, that they have no voice, that society does not care about who they are at all, that they have nothing to say and then you say "ok here is the exercise, we are going to watch you" and everything they do begins to matter. You can see them waking up. To me that is an ancient technology of Theatre and it is intertwined with love. There is love of Humanity...

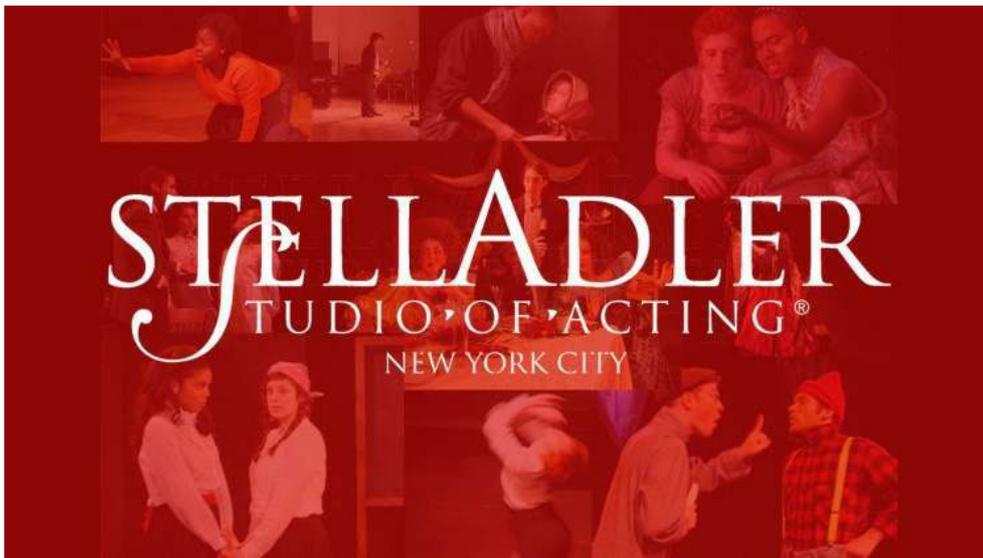
C.N.: ... Compassion?

Tom Oppenheim: Yes. I see you. You matter. You have value. That describes it for me.

C.N.: Would the worst wound in society be the lack of compassion?

Tom Oppenheim: Yes, the lack of compassion. Or willingness to make garbage out of people, to waste people, to see people as waste. If you walk out the door- and we are doing this at a rapid rate - you walk through, you are beautiful so some guy would look at you and you probably have to close down and then closing down he robbed you of your humanity and then you have to rob him of his humanity. We do that all the time. We do that at an alarming rate and if you do the opposite, this is it, this is my life, this is our life, it seems to me that is what Theatre is for. And that what Art is for. So I would say that Artists are people that allow themselves to do that, to see and be seen. And in seeing they give people permission to be seen. Carse measures Art by virtue of its ability not to impose a voice but to elicit a voice, get other people talking.

[FIGURE 3]



[Stella Adler Studio of Acting](#)

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C.N.: Thank you Tom Oppenheim for such a rich discussion which contributed in unearthing pieces of the human complexity in Acting, Theatre and Art, and find the

definition - the substance? - of the Artist. I am for ever grateful and indebted to you for your trust and inspiration.

ABSTRACTS

Entretien avec Tom Oppenheim, Directeur du Stella Adler Studio Of Acting de New York. L'entretien, réalisé en Octobre 2016, a consisté en une libre discussion dans son bureau du Studio New Yorkais.

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Mots-clés: théâtre américain, Stella Adler, Tom Oppenheim, Ron Burrus, James Tripp, Arts, Artiste, technique, méthode Stanislavski, Grotowski, American Theatre Project, interprétation, direction d'acteur

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