Theatre Basics- Uta Hagen Method

Who was Uta Hagen?

Uta Hagen was an acting teacher and a Broadway actor who developed an acting technique built on Stanislavsky’s System.

At the tender age of 18, Hagen—born in Germany but raised stateside—made her Broadway debut in Anton Chekhov’s “The Seagull.” Her portrayal of Nina had critics raving, and it became clear that the teen would leave a mark on American theater. In 1947 she began teaching at her husband’s acting studio, the Herbert Berghof Studio, which still teaches her techniques today. She was awarded several Tony awards for her acting and a National Medal of Honor for the Arts for her contributions to American theater. She died in 2004.

What is Uta Hagen’s acting technique?

Hagen’s acting techniques encourage actors to avoid over-intellectualizing their processes and instead root themselves in rigorous observation of daily life. The five key elements of Hagen’s technique are substitution, transference, specificity, authenticity, and preparation. We break each one down below:

* Substitution: Hagen’s substitution is a variation of emotional recall. But unlike Strasberg’s Method, which asks actors to mentally recreate the emotional conditions of their lives onstage, Hagen’s technique focuses on pinpointing moments where activities or sensations from an actor's lived experience intersect with the scene at hand. For Hagen, substitution is more about the actor convincingly putting themselves in the circumstances of the performance, rather than importing their own life’s defining moments into their work.
* Transference: The actor’s duty, according to Hagen, is to find their relationship to the character based on their own experience and perspective—a process she terms “transference.” Hagen is also very clear that an actor should never substitute circumstances on stage that they’re uncomfortable talking about or exploring publicly.
* Specificity: Hagen taught that an actor knows what to do and how to behave on stage by interacting with objects that would realistically be in the environment of the scene. Hagen insisted actors rehearse with the specific props that they would use in the final performance and visualize specific objects when looking at blank walls or into the audience.
* Authenticity: In her studio, Hagen pestered students to fully utilize props, costumes, or even architectural features of the venue to motivate authentic action. During scene work, Hagen’s students always had a pile of props and furniture on the stage because it was their relationship to objects that manifested in naturalistic behavior.
* Preparation: Hagen asserted that developing authentic behavior and performing a role fluently requires rehearsal. She believed that a two-minute exercise based on an actor’s life required at least an hour of rehearsal. Hagen created a series of exercises to help actors observe human behavior and recreate it on stage to assist with preparation.

Hagen’s technique is a favorite among actors because it’s a middle ground between internal (representational) and external (presentational) work. These methods are also helpful for actors who wish to be self-sufficient or maintain autonomy in their training process. Before Hagen ever gave critiques to actors, she asked how they felt after their performances and if anything felt unusual or off. This gave the actors a voice in how their performances were interpreted and reinforced skills of self-observation and reflection—which Hagen insisted were paramount to develop for a professional working actor.

Uta Hagen's acting exercises

* Basic Object Exercise: Sometimes called “two minutes of daily life,” this exercise requires the actor to replicate activities from their own daily routine in specific detail (think making breakfast or getting ready to go out). The goal of this exercise is to increase the actor’s awareness of their un-observed behavior.
* Three Entrances: Starting off-stage, the actor enters the environment of the scene. The actor's performance should answer three questions: What did I just do? What am I going to do? What is the first thing I want?
* Immediacy: Hagen asked actors to search for a small object that they need. You can perform the exercise on a set or in your home. As you search, you should observe the behavior and thoughts that arise as you authentically try to find something. The objective is to identify the thoughts, behaviors, and sensations you experience when you genuinely don’t know the outcome, so you can use them on stage.
* Fourth Side: This exercise starts with a phone call to a person you know. You should call them with a specific objective in mind. During the conversation, Hagen wants you to focus on your surroundings and the specific objects that your eyes rest on. The purpose is to help actors observe how they interact with all dimensions of an enclosed physical space so they can recreate the feeling of privacy on stage.
* Endowment: This exercise is designed to help actors apply their observed behaviors to endow props with qualities that they cannot safely have on stage. Hot irons and sharp knives are typical examples. The Endowment exercise asks actors to believably treat objects on stage as though they have the qualities the actor needs in a scene.

Uta Hagen’s exercises are her greatest gift to actors working today. She developed them between Broadway jobs to solve some acting problems that she had never seen anyone tackle to her satisfaction. The result is that Hagen’s exercises give actors a way to observe human behavior and catalog it so they can recall it onstage when it is useful in a role.

Uta Hagen’s 9 questions

1. Who am I? This question’s answer includes all relevant details from name and age to physical traits, education, and beliefs.
2. What time is it? Depending on the scene, the most relevant measure of time can be the era, the season, the day, or even the specific minute.
3. Where am I? This answer covers the country, town, neighborhood, room, or even the specific part of the room.
4. What surrounds me? Characters can be surrounded by anything from weather to furnishings, landscape, or people.
5. What are the given circumstances? Given circumstances include what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen to a character.
6. What are my relationships? Relationships can be with other characters in the play, inanimate objects, or even recent events.
7. What do I want? Wants can be what the character desires in the moment, or in the overall course of the play.
8. What is in my way? This is the actor’s chance to understand the obstacles the character must react to and overcome.
9. What do I do to get what I want? In Hagen’s teaching, “do” means physical action.

Uta Hagen’s revised six steps to building a character are:

1. Who am I?
2. What are the circumstances?
3. What are my relationships?
4. What do I want?
5. What is my obstacle?
6. What do I do to get what I want?