Transition, Adaptation and Application: A Critical Analysis and Evaluation of the Influence of the Work of Konstantin Stanislavsky on Professional British Actor Training Between 1938 and 2022

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Abstract

This thesis traces the reception and dissemination in British Actor Training of the theories and methods developed by Russian actor, director, teacher, and writer Konstantin Stanislavsky. Bringing together the research emerging from a range of journal articles and book chapters, the research focuses on the following:

- A close historical analysis of the routes by which Stanislavsky's System was initially absorbed into UK actor training methodology.
- A critical analysis of the ways in which British interpretations of Stanislavsky's work have differed to those adopted by various Method practitioners in the USA – Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner, and Uta Hagen.
- A critical and comparative study of how British professional/industry-based applications of Stanislavsky's work have served to enhance our understanding of his training/interpretative methods.
- An examination and critical evaluation of the pedagogical implications when teaching Stanislavsky-based techniques using the new technologies and training environments available in a post-pandemic era.

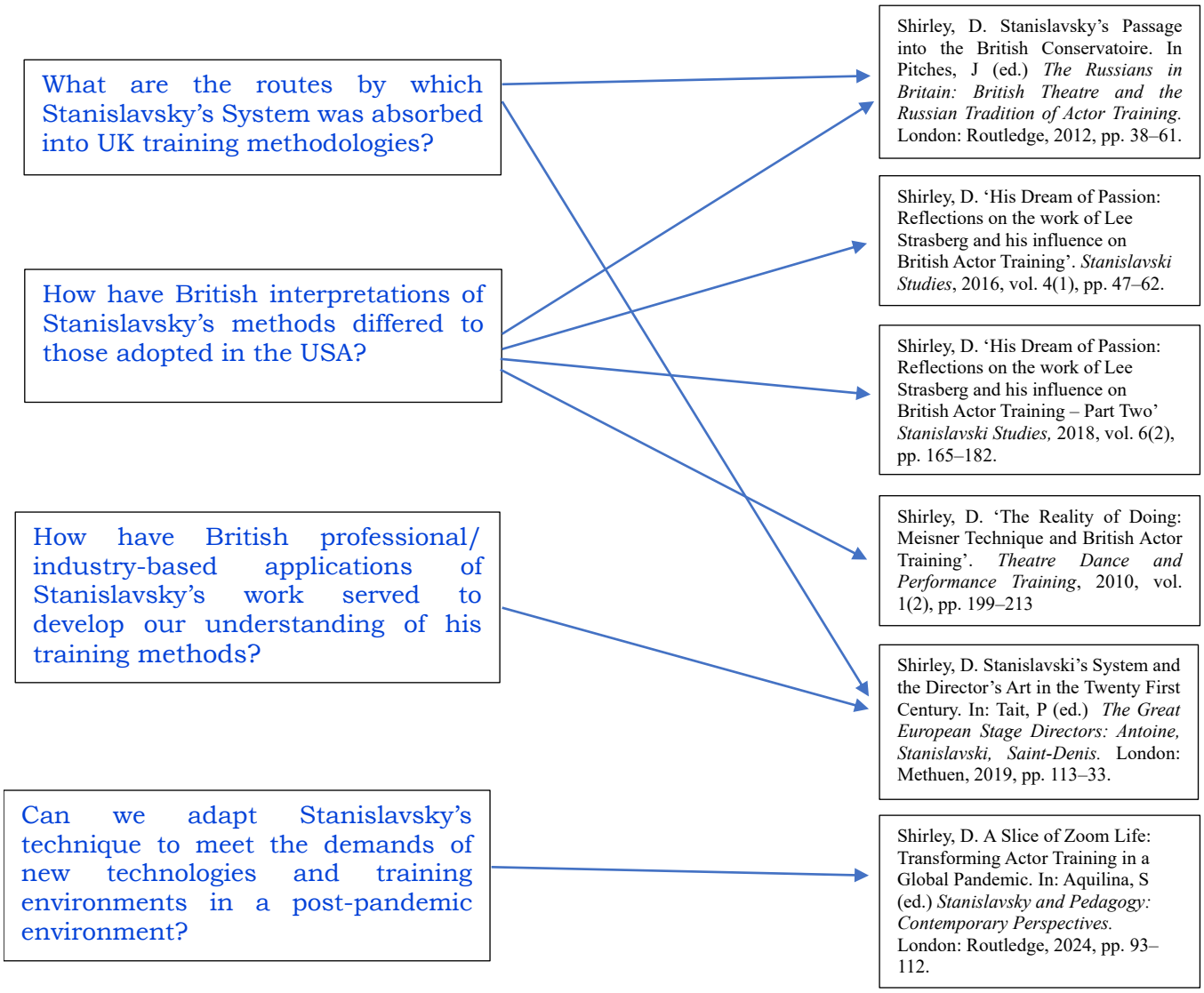
The research methodology adopted blends an ethnographic process of engagement with historical and qualitative analysis. Given my background as a professional actor and director, this affords a space in which to acknowledge the influence of my own embodied knowledge and understanding alongside more explicit forms of data analysis, information gathering, and critical judgement.

Through the analysis of various aspects of Stanislavsky's 'system' of training and the differing ways in which it has been understood and applied, this thesis affords a series of deeply informed, authoritative insights into the development of actor training in the UK between 1938 and 2022. As such, it makes a unique and original contribution to knowledge, especially in relation to the history, adaptation, application, and the ongoing influence of Stanislavsky's work in British actor training throughout a period of almost ninety years.

Figure One – Contribution to Knowledge

Date	Journal Article/Chapter Title	Key Themes	Contribution to Knowledge
Jan 2012	Shirley, D. Stanislavsky's Passage into the British Conservatoire. In Pitches, J (ed.) *The Russians in Britain: British Theatre and the Russian Tradition of Actor Training.* London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 38–61.	**1**. Tracing the development of Stanislavskian Techniques in UK Drama Schools. **2.** Points of Departure from US absorption of this work. **3.** A history of Drama Centre's evolution.	**1.** Charts the passage of Stanislavsky into the British Conservatoire sector and draws distinctions between adoption in US and more piecemeal approach in the UK. **2.** Traces the genesis of Drama Centre and its adoption of the US-inspired application of the system (Hagen). **3.** Includes an assessment of Michel Saint Denis and the balancing of physical skill, technical discipline, and psychological impulse. **4.** Highlights limitations when it comes to Shakespeare and Greek theatre etc. – reinforcing commentary in Meisner article. **5.** Distinction between deep and superficial realism. **6.** Points to alternative forms of realism in the 1950s/60s. **7.** There is a connection with Uta Hagen that opens here, and which is developed in A Slice of Zoom Life 2023. **8.** The chapter highlights the harnessing of Stanislavskian psychological/internal energy to physical/external behaviours and technical virtuosity and skill. **9.** Pinpoints in a *practical* sense the adoption of Stanislavskian training in the UK as distinct from a 'literary' approach. **10.** Articulates the connection to 'style' as a motivational drive rather than 'psychology'.
Mar 2016	Shirley, D. 'His Dream of Passion: Reflections on the work of Lee Strasberg and his influence on British Actor Training'. *Stanislavski Studies*, 2016, vol. 4(1), pp. 47–62.	**1.** Emotion Memory – Close analysis and re-evaluation of this technique and its use in British training.	**1.** Sets up a comparison between US application of Stanislavsky and UK interpretations. **2.** This chapter offers an in-depth discussion of the Emotion Memory technique – often referenced, but rarely looked at in close detail. **3.** The chapter contrasts the approaches of Stanislavsky and Boleslavski. **4.** The chapter assesses the influence of Freud in the emotion memory exercise. **5.** It draws clear distinctions between Strasberg's application of his technique and those of British schools (Drama Centre, BSA, RBC, RCSSD).
July 2018	Shirley, D. 'His Dream of Passion: Reflections on the work of Lee Strasberg and his influence on British Actor Training – Part Two' *Stanislavski Studies,* 2018, vol. 6(2), pp. 165–182.	**1.** Evaluating Strasberg's training across a range of exercises. **2.** Contrasting Strasberg with other Method teachers.	**1.** Offers a much more detailed analysis of the 'Strasbergian' training regime and introduces discussion of the 'instrument'. **2.** Distinguishes between expressivity based in *selfhood* rather than conventional chameleon-like transformation. **3**. Highlights the similarities and differences between Strasberg and Stanislavsky and moves away from generalisation. **4.** Looks at Strasberg's use of emotional response as a 'conditioned' response. **5**. Discusses Strasberg's use of the 'animal' exercise, which is very distinct from other uses of this exercise. **6**. Offers a perspective from which to examine the increased use of Method-based training techniques in the UK.
Sept 2010	Shirley, D. 'The Reality of Doing: Meisner technique and British Actor Training'. *Theatre Dance and Performance Training*, 2010 Vol. 1(2) pp. 199–213.	**1**.Accounting for the growing interest in Meisner/Method training techniques in British schools. **2.** US and UK Acting Traditions.	**1.** The article highlights and foregrounds key differences between Method-based systems of training and UK based approaches in the 1940s, 50s, 60s. **2.** An early uncovering of how Meisner's system has influenced training in Britain. **3.** Draws a clear distinction between Meisner, Adler and Strasberg and unpicks particular branches of the Method. **4.** Traces changing traditions in British actor training; the beginning of a history. **5.** Understanding of Meisner limitations - not self-contained.
Oct 2019	Shirley, D. Stanislavski's System and the Director's Art in the Twenty-First Century. In: Tait, P (ed.) *The Great European Stage Directors: Antoine, Stanislavski, Saint-Denis.* London: Methuen, 2019, pp. 113–33.	**1.** A comparative study of Stanislavsky's influence on contemporary directing practice via reference to three celebrated practitioners.	**1.** This chapter offers a comparative study of three important British directors, all of whom interpret Stanislavskian methodology in different ways. **2.** The chapter traces an important way of absorbing Stanislavskian techniques that still talks about acting in very coherent ways. **3.** The chapter continues the discussions started in earlier works on Meisner and Strasberg **4.** Each of these practitioners talks about their work via reference to discussions about actors in rehearsal/performance. Everything starts and finishes with the actor.
Feb 2024	Shirley, D. A Slice of Zoom Life: Transforming Actor Training in a Global Pandemic. In: Aquilina, S (ed.) *Stanislavsky and Pedagogy: Contemporary Perspectives.* London: Routledge, 2024, pp. 93–112.	**1**. COVID-19 and Pedagogy in Actor Training. **2**. Uta Hagan's Object Exercises. **3**. What contemporary acting students bring to the class.	**1.** This chapter charts the impact of and response to COVID-19 by looking at the efficacy of moving from live, studio-based teaching to online delivery via Zoom. **2.** The delivery online of Uta Hagan's 'object exercises' examines the relationship between notions of actuality and imagination in a way that has not been covered before. **3.** The chapter examines the distinctions between 'theatrical truth' and 'actuality' and explores how the Zoom context shifts this significantly.

Figure Two – Visual Representation Linking the Subsidiary Research Questions to Individual Publications



Chapter One

1.1 Introduction – Mapping the Terrain

Russian actor, director, producer and writer, Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938), is renowned for developing a theoretical and practical means by which to closely examine and develop the technical and interpretative aspects of the actor's craft. Indeed, Stanislavsky's 'System', as it has become known, is one of, if not *the* most well-known and influential modes of theatrical training in the world. Through a unique imbrication of my own experiences accumulated during a period of over forty years – as a *performer*, as a *director*, as an *acting teacher* and as a *researcher* – this thesis affords a series of original insights into Stanislavsky's work as it has journeyed into and been absorbed by British actor training tradition over almost ninety years. The publications included here collectively articulate the emergence and history of British adaptations and applications of Stanislavsky-influenced training practice that have hitherto been overlooked and even, as is evidenced below, ignored. Although a great deal has been written about Stanislavsky's influence on actor training, the overriding tendency through much of the 20th and early 21st centuries has been to focus on American rather than British interpretations of his work and the subsequent emergence of the American *Method* as distinct from Stanislavsky's *System*.[1] Some of the reasons for this are clearly articulated by Jonathan Pitches in his introductory chapter to *Russians in Britain* (2012, pp. 2–3). The further realisation that many of Stanislavsky's students went on to teach his methods in the USA[2] goes some way to explaining this predisposition. Importantly, this thesis sets out to redress the balance and afford new ways of understanding the influence of Stanislavsky's work as it has been applied in British training contexts.

In seeking to trace the circuitous routes by which Stanislavsky's work has served to shape varied approaches to British actor training between the mid-1930s and the present day, theatre historians might be forgiven for concluding that the System he developed was initially

[1] For the purposes of this thesis, Stanislavsky's *System* encompasses a balancing of and exchange between the actor's interior/psychological process and his/her external behaviour/physicality. In contrast, the *Method*, as understood here, privileges an actor's internal impulses – memories, emotions, psychology.
[2] Examples include Richard Boleslavsky (1889–1937), Maria Ouspenskaya (1876–1949), and Leo Bulgakov (1899–1948). In addition, celebrated American acting teacher Stella Adler (1901–92) visited and worked very closely with Stanislavski in Paris in 1934 (see Shirley, 2012, pp.53–4).

transmitted to the UK via the USA, where it was originally enthusiastically embraced, adapted, and prepared for global consumption. Such a view is expressed without equivocation by Stanislavsky scholar, Sharon Carnicke:

> A map that traces the migration of Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavsky's System throughout the world…would show two major points: New York and Moscow. In both cities, actors seized upon Stanislavsky's work as primary and essential. In both, teachers who had studied with the master passed their understanding of his practice on to the next generation of teachers. That generation in turn passed it on to our teachers, and we to our students. (Carnicke, 2009, p. 7)

Without pause to reflect on the possibility of how alternative routes by which Stanislavsky's work and influence may have reached other parts of the world, Carnicke continues:

> Both theatrical centers created tradition-bound approaches to the System that subsequently spanned the globe. From Moscow, Stanislavsky's ideas spread to Eastern Europe and Germany; from New York, they travelled to Western Europe, to Great Britain, to Scandinavia. (Ibid)

Metaphorical cartography of this kind is not uncommon amongst American scholars when it comes to Stanislavsky. Citing the immense success and influence of the 1923–24 Stanislavsky-led tour of America by the Moscow Arts Theatre (MAT),[3] Mel Gordon asserts the view that 'Russian breakthroughs in actor-training successfully migrated westward, leaping over Central and Western Europe' (Gordon, 2010, p. xiv). He further claims that:

> Long after the troupe returned to Europe and Stanislavsky continued to be deferentially referenced, there were also practical attempts to duplicate his work in Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side. *Nowhere outside of Russia did this occur.* (Ibid: p. xiii, emphasis added)

[3] The Moscow Art Theatre performed on Broadway between 1923–4. Led by Konstantin Stanislavsky, the Company performed works by Anton Chekhov (*Three Sisters, Uncle Vanya*, and *The Cherry Orchard*), Maxim Gorky (*The Lower Depths*), and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (*The Brothers Karamazov*).

Whilst it is undoubtedly the case that America has played a central role in helping to promote and disseminate Stanislavskian theory and practice, any suggestion that, outside of Moscow, New York holds a primogeniture authority in relation to the wider transmission of his work is highly problematic since it overlooks important developments taking place simultaneously elsewhere in the world – as is most clearly demonstrated by the first publication included in this thesis (Stanislavsky's Passage into the British Conservatoire – see page 36). Indeed, such an assertion risks obviating the richly complex and highly varied means by which Stanislavsky's work has been received and understood, without recourse to American influence, across different cultures throughout the world.[4]

Nowhere is this more evident than in the highly piecemeal assimilation of Stanislavsky's work into both traditional and contemporary approaches to professional actor training in the British Conservatoire.[5] Unlike in the USA, where the adoption of Stanislavskian theory ran alongside the development of screen performance, British actor training, as a consequence of both the conscious and unconscious connections to the long *theatrical* traditions and *performance* histories from which it has emerged (Medieval, Renaissance, Classical, Restoration etc.) has always been complex and multifaceted. Any attempt, therefore, to dissect and analyse the extent of Stanislavsky's influence on British training practice needs to take account of the different branches and routes through which it arrived. This view is echoed by international theatre practitioner and scholar, Phillip B. Zarrilli (1943–2020):

> Stanislavski's legacy is profoundly diverse. It is like an aging oak tree – each major branch with its own unique twists, turns, knots, etc. – some of which turn in on themselves. (Zarrilli, 2009, p. 14)

Comprised of various single-authored peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapter contributions, this thesis both maps the numerous pathways through which Stanislavsky's work arrived in Britain and examines some of the values and assumptions that have served to shape its development. These works are the product of sustained research across several years and

[4] For an excellent and highly revealing examination of the multifarious ways in which Stanislavsky's System has been transmitted across the world, see Pitches, J. and Aquilina, S. (2017) *Stanislavsky in the World*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

[5] In this context, the term 'conservatoire' refers to the much smaller-scale vocationally focused *drama schools* that provide embodied training and performance practice as distinct from the more academically oriented learning activities more commonly associated with traditional university education courses.

reflect a deep interest in and engagement with both the theories and the methodologies emerging from Stanislavsky's work. In seeking to reveal and trace Stanislavsky's influence on British actor training, several of the works listed here are also reflective of the numerous traditions and values from which earlier pre-Stanislavskian UK-based training practices emerged. In referencing the remarkably distinctive nature of British actor training, these publications highlight the difficulties encountered when seeking to undertake a wholesale application of the key tenets of psychological realism – especially as expressed through the techniques that are frequently applied in Americanised Method-based approaches. For instance, the second publication included in this thesis (His Dream of Passion: Reflections on the work of Lee Strasberg and his influence on British Actor Training – Part One – see page 70) pinpoints how Richard Boleslavsky's (1889–1937) somewhat skewed interpretation of Stanislavsky's emotion memory technique provided the catalyst from which the figure most closely associated with American Method acting, Lee Strasberg (1901–82), developed his work. The emphasis on introspection, emotion memory, the sub-conscious, and Freudian psychoanalysis represents an important point of divergence between British and American interpretations of Stanislavsky's work.

Acutely aware of the undeniable importance of America's influence in disseminating Stanislavsky's work, this thesis also positions an evaluative/critical account of the influence of differing Method-based approaches on British actor training alongside a consideration, on the one hand, of early–mid-20th century European influences, and the more contemporaneous understandings and approaches of three influential British theatre directors on the other. Active interpreters of Stanislavsky, Max Stafford-Clark (*Letters to George*: 1989), Declan Donnellan (*The Actor and the Target*: 2005), and Katie Mitchell (*The Director's Craft*: 2009) have, in their various ways, adapted and applied his methods to meet their own specific needs. Whilst Mitchell makes the point that far from being static or fixed, Stanislavsky's 'methods were always changing because he had to develop and grow in response to concrete problems he encountered in his own working life' (Mitchell, 2009, p. 226), Donnellan reminds us of his single overriding obsession:

> Why does he continue to inspire so many actors and theatre makers, including those who would seem so far from his tradition? Because life is all he wanted. Life is what he struggled to let flow thorough the actors, between the actors, between the actors and the audience. His words are a fascinating and moving account of this struggle. His

> writing is important because it helps us come into contact with his great spirit. (Benedetti, 2009, p. xiii)

By taking account of differing but nonetheless highly influential pathways of Stanislavskian adoption and assimilation, this thesis provides a rich and critically informed understanding of British interpretations of Stanislavsky's work, as well as the contribution it has made to actor training in the UK.

1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

Whilst each of the publications included in this thesis was conceived as a separate and distinctive research output, collectively, they represent a body of work that is motivated by a single overarching concern:

To what degree has the transition and adaptation of the work of Konstantin Stanislavsky served to shape the development of British actor training from within a conservatoire context, and in what ways is this distinctive from American Method-based applications of his methodology?

The reference to the *conservatoire* training environment is important for several reasons. Firstly, aside from the fact that the conservatoire training environment served to nourish my own embodied and practical experience of Stanislavsky – initially as a student and subsequently as an actor, an acting teacher, and researcher[6] – it is this kind of training exposure that affords the space and time to explore the relationship between the physical, emotional, imaginative, and intellectual impulses to which much of Stanislavsky's writings are addressed. A perfect example of this is illustrated in the imaginary training/studio environment, through which Stanislavsky (2008), in the guise of Arkadi Tortsov, delivers his lessons to a group of enthralled students.[7] Secondly, the proliferation of Stanislavsky's work in the UK has made it

[6] My own training as an actor was undertaken at the Arts Educational Schools, London and subsequently at RADA. I was employed as Head of School of Theatre at Rose Bruford College (1996–1999) and Director of Manchester School of Theatre (2004–19). I have worked as an external examiner and consultant advisor to RADA, LAMDA, RCSSD, RCS, BSA, GSA, Arts Educational Schools, Drama Centre, Rose Bruford College, and the Italia Conti School. I was the founding chair of the Research Forum at Conference of Drama Schools (CDS), and a founder and former Chair of the Federation of Drama Schools (FDS).

[7] For an explanation of the use of characters in his work, see Stanislavski, K. (2008) *An Actor's Work,* Benedetti, J. (trans.), London: Routledge. pp. xxi–xxii.

possible to engage with and experience his work at several levels, not all of which are reflective of the holistic approaches he advocated. As Kathy Dacre's 2009[8] study makes clear, Stanislavsky has previously been a feature on the curricular of numerous Diploma, BTEC, A-Level, AS-Level, and HE courses across the UK. Whilst there is no doubt that many of the experiences afforded by such courses will provide valuable exposure to the theory and practice of Stanislavsky's work, the contexts in which they are delivered make it impossible to provide a sustained programme of *actor* training of the kind that is offered from within a conservatoire. Finally, each of the publications that form part of this thesis assume a *professional* application of the techniques under investigation, whether in the context of exercises derived for a classroom/rehearsal setting or an actual performance. In this regard, the analyses and discussions included in this thesis comprise a microstudy of the influence of Stanislavsky's work specifically within the context of British actor training.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on conservatoire training, the overarching research question, as framed above, needs further refinement and clearer definition if we are to arrive at a detailed understanding of the theoretical, interpretative, and pedagogical issues emerging from the subject matter. The subsidiary questions graphically illustrated in Figure Two (see page 7) and listed below serve to focus the research imperatives at key stages of the thesis.

- What are the routes by which Stanislavsky's System was absorbed into UK training methodologies?
- How have British interpretations of Stanislavsky's methods differed to those adopted in the USA?
- How have British professional/industry-based applications of Stanislavsky's work served to develop our understanding of his training methods?
- Can we adapt Stanislavsky's technique to meet the demands of new technologies and training environments in a post-pandemic environment?

In order to fully engage with each of these questions and thereby put forward a nuanced and coherent response to the research enquiry as a whole, the published works included in this

[8] See Dacre, K. (2009), an investigation led by Professor Kathy Dacre at Rose Bruford College into how Stanislavsky has previously been taught to students in the UK, a research project initiated by SCUDD (the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments) in conjunction with PALATINE (the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Dance, Drama and Music) and funded by a PALATINE Development Award.

thesis (see Figure One on page 6) are ordered in such a way as to a) enable an understanding of the historical context against which Stanislavsky's work began to arrive in the UK, b) allow for a consideration of and reflection on the influence of Americanised appropriations/applications of his work in British actor training, c) consider the extent to which UK-based professional practice has served to shape the reception/understanding of his work, and d) examine the extent to which recent technological advances provide the impetus for new pedagogies in actor training. Importantly, although the order in which each journal article/chapter is presented and discussed does not adhere chronologically to the actual publication date, the historical pathways through which Stanislavsky's work has been assimilated into UK actor training is both logical and coherent. Indeed, as presented, this order allows for a highly detailed, multifaceted study of the various streams through which Stanislavsky's work has influenced and shaped British actor training.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 Stanislavsky

The work of Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938) provides the core theoretical background and practice-based framework that has shaped this thesis. Given that Stanislavsky himself did not speak English, it is important to note that the various translations of the extensive texts and notes he produced have frequently been a source of ambiguity and confusion. As Jean Benedetti (2008, p. xviii) makes clear, Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood's English translation of *An Actor Prepares* (1936) was heavily edited to approximately half of the actual length of Stanislavsky's original Russian version and leaves out many of the fictive classroom discussions. Her subsequent abridged translations of *Building a Character* (1950) and *Creating a Role* (1963), as demonstrated by Sharon Carnicke (2009, p. 77), were often a focus of criticism and dissatisfaction amongst academics and theatre historians. Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding her translations, however, Stanislavsky's decision in 1930 to grant Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood power of attorney and full copyright authority over all his writings prohibited the publication of alternative translations of his writings for several generations. Whilst it is true to say that Hapgood did much to publicise Stanislavsky's writings outside of

Russia, her decision to divide Stanislavsky's writings into separate volumes, published several years apart, significantly compromised the overall unity of his work.[9]

Seeking to restore authenticity to Stanislavsky's work – 'I have…attempted to restore the unity of Stanislavski's (sic) teaching concept by creating a single volume as was originally intended' (Benedetti, 2008, p xvi) – Jean Benedetti produced more contemporary translations of Hapgood's earlier versions of Stanislavsky's abovementioned books. The first two he combined in a single publication entitled *An Actor's Work* (2008), and the third was retitled *An Actor's Work on a Role* (2010). The epigraph note that appears on the first page of *An Actor's Work* is explicit in its intention:

> Until now, readers and students have had to contend with inaccurate, misleading and difficult to read English-language versions. Some of the mistranslations have resulted in profound distortions in the way his system has been interpreted and taught. At last, Jean Benedetti has succeeded in translating Stanislavski's huge manual into a lively, fascinating and accurate text in English. (Benedetti, 2009, Epigraph)

Except for the publication included in Appendix Two (which cites the Hapgood editions), all direct quotations by Stanislavsky used in this thesis are drawn from Jean Benedetti's updated versions of the original texts.

1.3.2 Interpretations of Stanislavsky

America's role in processing and disseminating Stanislavsky's writing represents a major component of this thesis, most particularly in relation to the development of what is now universally identified as the *Method*.[10] Key exponents represented here include Lee Strasberg (1901–1982), Sanford Meisner (1905–1997), and Uta Hagen (1914–2004). Each of these practitioners were celebrated teachers[11] and wrote extensively about their work. The extent to

[9] For insightful discussions of the complexities related to Hapgood's English translations of Stanislavsky's work see Carnicke, S. (2009, pp. 76–93) and Benedetti, J. (2008, pp. xv-xxii).
[10] In the context of this thesis, the Method is understood as a representational process by which the actor experiences the emotional life and behaviours of a given character. Such experiences must be real and 'in the moment', rather than indicated or externalised.
[11] Lee Strasberg was the Director of The Actors Studio in New York between 1952 and 1982; Sanford Meisner worked in the Acting Department at the Neighborhood Playhouse Theatre between 1935 and 1990; Uta Hagen taught at New York's HB Studio between 1947 and 2004.

which they acknowledge a shared interpretation and application of Stanislavsky's System is extremely variable, but in each case his influence on their work is irrefutable. Primary sources here include Lee Strasberg's *A Dream of Passion* (Plume: 1988), Sanford Meisner's and Dennis Longwell's *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (Vintage: 1987), and Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* (MacMillan: 1973) and *A Challenge for the Actor* (Scribner: 1991). Interestingly, although each of these practitioners helped to establish the foundations on which Method acting is based, they adopt different perspectives when it comes to formal training. Whereas Strasberg's interpretation privileges the need to develop *emotional expressivity* in the actor, Meisner emphasises the importance of *physical action* – a view that is reinforced in his view that 'The foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (1987, p. 16). Closer in spirit to Meisner's behaviourist[12] approach, Uta Hagen stresses the importance of the *imagination* as the actor's primary creative impulse. In her view, the actor can learn to 'induce specific, imagined stimuli to produce an organically correct behavioral response…to arrive at the essence of experience.' (1991, p. 77). Notwithstanding their different approaches, as this thesis demonstrates, each of these practitioners have, in the last fifteen years, had significant impacts on British actor training.

The fact that there are such divergent approaches to the interpretations of his teachings in America highlights not just the complexity of Stanislavsky's work but also the richly nuanced nature of the actor's craft and its capacity to function as an artistic microcosm of human nature and experience.

Stanislavsky's influence on British theatre directors represents a further important component of the research that has shaped this thesis, not least because many professional directors enjoy strong links with UK drama schools and are often involved directly or otherwise in helping to shape the curricula on which many conservatoire acting courses are based. This is particularly true of Declan Donnellan, who spent much of his early career teaching actors and directing at London's Arts Educational Schools. Donnellan's book, *The Actor and the Target* (2005), together with many of the techniques he has developed, feature prominently in the training regimes of many leading drama schools. Part of the role of director, as Donnellan interprets it, is 'to guide and lead the actor's impulse towards the spiritual, philosophical and political places

[12] In this context of Meisner's work, behaviourism focuses on the actions of the other actors in the scene rather than the dramatic situation per se. The aim is to promote spontaneous responses to actual behaviour.

in which the play takes place' (2016).[13] Like Donnellan, British theatre director Katie Mitchell brings a behaviourist approach to her work with actors and stresses the importance of the actor's physicality as a primary mode of expression. Her Stanislavsky-inspired *The Director's Craft* (2009) offers contemporary readings of Stanislavsky's work that prove remarkably insightful to directors and actors alike. In *Letters to George: A Director's Handbook of Techniques* (1989), Max Stafford-Clark offers a detailed account of his working methods during rehearsals for his 1988 Royal Court Theatre productions of *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar and *Our Country's Good* by Timberlake Wertenbaker. The determined drive for theatrical specificity and representational authenticity, together with the highly rigorous and enormously detailed focus on the text, is a consistent feature of Stafford-Clark's work and one that chimes loudly with Stanislavsky. Importantly, although each of the above-named directors have produced publications describing their rehearsal process, none could be described as strictly Stanislavskian. Rather, they draw from, adapt, and reinvent Stanislavsky's methods as a means of advancing their own creative visions. Indeed, each publication focuses on the creative process of the individual director/author rather than on Stanislavsky per se, as is the case with this thesis.

The insights emerging from the discussion of professional directing practice in this thesis (see Chapter 7) provide a very clear response to research subsidiary question three: *How have British professional/industry-based applications of Stanislavsky's work served to develop our understanding of his training methods?* Whilst each director acknowledges Stanislavsky's influence on their work, the different perspectives through which they view and apply his methods points to the highly malleable nature of his 'System'. This is significant in that it highlights how British conceptions of Stanislavsky's methods – in the profession, as well as the training environment – are continually evolving and developing.

1.3.3 Commentaries on Stanislavsky

Alongside the primary sources on which this research thesis is established are a range of secondary materials. These include critical studies and commentaries, actors' biographies, and theatrical reviews. Sharon Marie Carnicke's *Stanislavsky in Focus* (2009) provides an excellent starting point from which to explore the processes between translation and transmission and

[13] Interview with David Shirley, 26th July 2016.

the impact this may have had on the practical application of Stanislavsky's System. Equally valuable in this regard are the writings of Jonathan Pitches (2005: Routledge) and Rose Whyman (2008: CUP). Both publications offer a range of historical, scientific, philosophical, and practical perspectives on Stanislavsky's work that are informed by the specific Russian context from which his work originated. Pitches' work is especially revealing in that it situates Stanislavsky's work alongside the pioneering developments of figures such as Fredrick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915) and the principles of scientific management, in which observation and the methodological acquisition of skills are foundational. Commentaries and critiques of American applications of Stanislavsky and the development of the Method are numerous and varied and include Foster Hirsch (1984: Da Cappo), Robert H. Hethmon (1991: TCG), David Krasner (2000: Palgrave), Lola Cohen (2010: Routledge), and Mel Gordon (2010: Routledge). Each of these publications is distinctive and offers rewarding perspectives on different aspects of the American Method. Whilst Foster Hirsch's *A Method to Their Madness* (1984) offers a fascinating account of the development of the Actors Studio, his emphasis on Lee Strasberg's (1901–82) contribution to such development privileges psychoanalytical/emotionally based approaches to training and overlooks how Stanislavsky's work has been absorbed by other American traditions. Stella Adler, for example, and Sanford Meisner, both of whom, like Strasberg, were members of New York's Group Theatre (1931–41), veered away from internalised approaches to performance in favour of behaviourist techniques prompted by external stimuli – the surrounding environment, the given circumstances of the play, the other characters involved in the scene etc. David Krasner's *Method Acting Reconsidered* (2000) seeks to 'set the record straight' and 'tie down the variety of meanings of the term "Method Acting"…by clearing up prevailing misrepresentations' (2000, pp. 3–4*).* Whilst the publication does, in part, achieve this, far too much of the narrative is shaped by a 'Strasbergian' interpretation of Stanislavsky's work; indeed, significant parts of the book can be read as a kind of Strasberg apologia, as suggested by Krasner's introductory chapter, entitled *I hate Strasberg: Method Bashing in the Academy* (2000, pp. 3–39*).* Although Lola Cohen's *The Lee Strasberg Notes* (2010) sheds further light on Lee Strasberg's contribution to the development of the Method, Mel Gordon's *Stanislavsky in America: An Actor's Workbook* (2009) offers a much more balanced perspective on the reception and development of Stanislavsky's work in America. Including chapters on the work of Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sandford Meisner, this publication also looks closely at the work of Richard Boleslavsky (1889–1937) and Maria Ouspenskaya (1876–1949), both of whom were trained by Stanislavsky himself. Notwithstanding Gordon's claim that developments in

Stanislavskian training technique bypassed Europe (see page 9), this publication does at least offer a much more balanced perspective from which to gain insights into both the complex nature of Stanislavsky's work as well as its dissemination in America. What is missing is any attempt to locate Stanislavsky's influence in Britain, something that can be traced back to the 1920s (see Shirley, 2012, pp. 38–40).

The recent publication of *Stanislavsky in the World* (2017: Bloomsbury), edited by Jonathan Pitches and Stefan Aquilina, provides an excellent starting point from which to gain a richer and more informed understanding of the transmission of Stanislavsky's methodology across several continents. David Peimer's chapter, for instance, entitled, *A Director's Perspective: Stanislavsky in South Africa* (2017, pp. 309–315) describes how the colonial context in which his recent productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, Buchner's *Danton's Death*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* resulted in the transformed application of basic Stanislavskian concepts such as emotional memory, the magic if, and the use of subtext. By drawing on culturally specific traditions rooted in community and collective memory, precolonial African oral storytelling tradition, and singing and movement, it was possible to apply Stanislavsky's techniques to the performance context in which each work was being staged. The 'personalisation' of each of these techniques was possible when the cultural context and histories of the performers became an acknowledged component of the creative process. In the context of this thesis, this is important for several reasons. Firstly, it problematises any claims to American hegemony in relation to the transmission of Stanislavsky's work. Secondly, in extending the field of research beyond Europe to Asia, Africa, Australasia, and Latin America, the publication prompts important considerations about the malleability of Stanislavsky's work and the ways in which it has been received and absorbed by different cultures across the world. Finally, for a study that has a particular focus on professional actor training, this publication offers a foundation from which to extend future research and begin to explore key *universal* themes and *differences* in the application of Stanislavsky's principles outside of a British training context.

The very recent publication of *Stanislavsky and Pedagogy* (2024: Routledge), edited by Stefan Aquilina, provides a range of perspectives on Stanislavsky's work that are particularly relevant to a contemporary teaching and/or professional practice across a range of contexts, including opera and dance. Aquilina's use of the word *pedagogy* rather than *training* is important insofar as it seeks to resist an essentialist drive towards skill acquisition in favour of a much broader

understanding and application of Stanislavsky's work.[14] The flexibility and permeability of Stanislavskian technique, as expressed through a diverse set of pedagogical approaches – musical, technological, and dance-based – clearly highlights the contemporary relevance of his methodology and strongly resists attempts to fix the work within the confines of purely text-based actor training tradition. In this respect, the work is both liberating and enlightening.

Recent journal publications have also proved informative in complementing some of the works that are included as part of this thesis. In particular, Philippa Strandberg-Long's 2018 article 'Mapping Meisner – how Stanislavski's System Influenced Meisner's Process and Why it Matters to British Drama School Training Today', in *Stanislavski Studies*, 6:1, pp. 11–19, develops the discussion commenced in my own article, The Reality of Doing (2010) (submitted as part of this thesis – see page 113), but focuses in closer detail on influences informing Meisner's development of this technique (the Group Theatre, Stanislavsky etc.) and points to the importance of incorporating Meisner's second-year training regime in any adaptations of the technique within UK drama schools.[15] Inasmuch as this article extends our understanding of how British actor training has begun to absorb American Method-based approaches, it serves to reinforce some of the key arguments included in this thesis. However, whereas Strandberg-Long focuses exclusively on the Meisner technique, this thesis provides a detailed framework through which to assess the impact of Stanislavsky's wider influence on British actor training.

David Jackson's 2017 article, 'Stanislavski, Emotion and the Future of the UK Conservatoire', in *Stanislavski Studies*, 5:1, pp. 75–83, offers an intriguing exploration of the changing nature of emotional representation in actors' performances.[16] Drawing from the work of Portuguese American neuroscientist, Antonio Damaso, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (London: Vintage, 2000), Jackson points to the possibility of using the actor's physicality and movement as a kind of score from which to generate emotional responses to dramatic situations. Instead of digging deep inside oneself to find the distress needed to play a particularly tragic scene, Jackson proposes creating a physical map and series of carefully chosen gestures and movements that will stimulate the required emotion. The

[14] My own chapter, 'A Slice of Zoom Life: Transforming Actor Training in a Global Pandemic', which forms part of this thesis, is included in this publication.
[15] Strandberg-Long quotes extensively from Shirley, D. (2010) 'The Reality of Doing': Meisner Technique and British Actor training, in *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 1:2, 199–213, DOI: 10.1080/19443927.2010.505005
[16] This article cites Shirley, D. (2012) 'Stanislavsky's Passage into the British Conservatoire', in Pitches, J. (ed.) *The Russians in Britain* London: Routledge, p. 40.

technique has yet to be thoroughly tested and absorbed, but if proved to be effective, then it could offer a powerful alternative to the interiorised techniques commonly associated with the American Method. Importantly, the techniques described by Jackson are strongly reminiscent of Uta Hagen's work, details of which are included in two of the publications included in this thesis.[17] Hagen's Solo Object Exercise, further developed and adapted at Drama Centre London and at RADA by Doreen Cannon,[18] provide the perfect score from which to stimulate emotional responses to external stimuli. Jacksons' article is certainly of value, but it does overlook some of the ground-breaking work that was taking place in British drama schools during the 1960s and 1970s.

1.3.4 Recent PhD Research

James Anthony McLaughlin completed his PhD, entitled *Meisner Across Paradigms: The Phenomenal Dynamic of Sanford Meisner's Technique of Acting and its Resonances with Postmodern Performance* in 2012 at the University of Exeter (available at https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/8066/McLaughlinJ.pdf?sequence=2 [viewed 14 Nov 2023]). Acknowledging that Meisner's work is often regarded as a mainstay of modern, realist theatre practice, this thesis asserts that it also resonates with more experimental forms – most particularly postmodernist modes of performance. At one level, this appears contradictory. How can a representational system designed to ensure cohesion and unity on the one hand sit alongside modes of performance that are designed to rupture and disrupt such unity? McLaughlin's thesis clearly demonstrates the extent to which some of the techniques Meisner advocates resonate in the works of leading American postmodern theatre/film practitioners Richard Foreman, Michael Kirby, and Robert Wilson. What makes this PhD especially appealing is the extent to which it repositions the work of an established Method practitioner so that it aligns with and speaks to highly experimental non-representational modes of performance. Once again, this PhD thesis invites us to consider the techniques developed by Stanislavsky and his interpreters in contexts that reach beyond the

[17] Shirley, D. (2012) 'Stanislavsky's Passage into the British Conservatoire', in Pitches, J. (ed.) *The Russians in Britain* London: Routledge, p. 52 and Shirley, D. (2024) 'A Slice of Zoom Life: Transforming Actor Training in a Global Pandemic' in Aquilina, S (ed.) *Stanislavsky and Pedagogy: Contemporary Perspectives*. London: Routledge, pp. 99–100.
[18] For further discussion of the Hagan/Cannon Solo Object Exercise see Shirley, 2012, pp. 51–2.

limitations imposed by traditionally realist modes of performance.[19] Whereas McLaughlin's thesis and this one extend an understanding of Stanislavsky-inspired practice beyond conventional modes of realism, this thesis maintains a focus on the text-based, representational forms of theatre towards which Stanislavsky directed the bulk of his work.

Philippa Strandberg-Long completed her PhD in December 2019 in the School of Arts at the University of Kent and titled it *Beyond Repetition: Investigating How Sandford Meisner's Training Process Diminishes Self-Consciousness and Enhances Spontaneity in Actors* (available at https://kar.kent.ac.uk/82259/1/278Beyond_Repetition.pdf [viewed 16 Nov 2023]). Strandberg-Long's thesis takes a much closer look at the workings of the Meisner technique to explore strategies for overcoming self-consciousness (as distinct from self-awareness) and the notion of acting as a form of 'reacting' to a scenic partner and to developing increased emotional connection to objects and situations. This is a much more detailed account of the Meisner technique than can be found in 'The Reality of Doing' (Shirley, 2010), but the focus is directed towards a deep understanding of the finer details and mechanics of the Meisner technique rather than its influence on actor training in the British Conservatoire tradition. As with her 2018 journal article, Strandberg-Long references 'The Reality of Doing' (Shirley: 2010) in numerous places throughout her thesis, but she does so in such a way as to develop her own theories and views about Meisner's work.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge Trevor Rawlins' PhD thesis entitled *Studying Acting: An Investigation into Contemporary Approaches to Professional Actor Training in the UK*[20] (2012, University of Reading, available at https://bl.iro.bl.uk/collections/e492dc4b-82d9-4f8c-bb0a-2cdd8a62105d?locale=en [viewed 12 October 2023]).[21] This thesis focuses on the impacts emerging from the increasing alignment between traditional conservatoire drama schools and university drama departments.[22] Arguing the case for the development of a new

[19] McLaughlin quotes extensively from Shirley, D. (2010) "The Reality of Doing': Meisner Technique and British Actor Training', in *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 1:2, pp. 199–213, DOI: 10.1080/19443927.2010.505005.

[20] This PhD thesis cites Shirley, D. (2012) 'Stanislavsky's Passage into the British Conservatoire', in Pitches, J. (ed.) *The Russians in Britain* London: Routledge, p. 56.

[21] In December 2023, the British Library suspended access to the database for PhD theses. This was confirmed in an email to David Shirley from a BL representative on 29th December 2023 and is available on request. BL updates are available at https://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/living-knowledge/.

[22] This thesis is, in part, a response to the increased amalgamation of drama schools and universities that took place between the mid-1990s and 2010. East 15 Acting School, where Rawlins trained, merged with the University of Essex in 2000.

discipline entitled ‘Acting Studies’, Rawlins makes the case for a modernised approach to training that takes account of the changes in the industry in which actors seek employment, as well as a move away from the ‘oral/theatrical’ traditions of the conservatoire towards the wider interests of the university – incorporating film, television, and cultural studies. Although Stanislavsky and American Method practitioners are briefly touched on in the thesis, they do not form a substantial component of the research.

During the last fifteen years, research activity in the field of Stanislavsky studies has been very abundant and extends to many art forms and creative contexts. Despite this, aside from the research outputs listed in this review, there is a dearth of material that encompasses the specific focus and concerns of this PhD submission.

1.4 Research Methodology and Critical Context

The research methodologies on which this thesis is established combine an *autoethnographic* approach on the one hand with more *historical/qualitative* approaches on the other. Whereas the former draws from the realms of tacit knowledge (training, embodied experience, positionality), the latter is based on more traditional modes of research (information gathering, data analysis, argument). It is the integration of each of these methodologies and the extent to which they allow for a combination of what Robin Nelson (2013, p. 37) describes as ‘insider close-up knowledge’ and ‘outsider distant knowledge’ that allows for the original insights and observations that inform each of the publications included in this thesis.

Importantly, however, rather than simply defer to an a-priori authority of the tacit and embodied understandings gleaned from my own practice, the publications included in this thesis are informed by a deep process of reflexivity that has allowed for critical distance, contemplation, and evaluation. Robin Nelson’s work has been particularly helpful in this respect, especially regarding the distinction he draws between the ‘know-how’ of the artists as practitioner, and the ‘know-what’ of the artist as researcher (Nelson, 2013, pp. 41–45). ‘The key method used to develop know-what from know-how is that of critical reflection – pausing, standing back and thinking about what you are doing’ (Ibid: 44). Although ostensibly, Nelson is referring to practice as research (PaR), his distinction is equally valid for researchers who draw from, interrogate, and reflect on knowledge drawn directly from their own embodied practices and experiences.

In this instance, the notion of 'embodied knowledge' refers not just to the foundations of my work and professional practice as an actor/director, but also to the degree to which this has shaped the development of my work as a teacher/researcher. In the case of the latter, it is worth noting, as Marie-Heleen Coetzee (2018) makes clear, that there is a dearth of material when it comes to interpreting 'embodiment' as a pedagogical strategy:

> Relatively few scholarly works on performance theorize the body and modes of embodiment per se as centripetal agents in learning and knowledge creation or demonstrate how the embodied domain (situated in, but differentiated from, the practical or experiential domains) of the performing arts engages, draws upon and stimulates learning. (Coetzee, 2018, p. 2)

The effect of combining *autoethnographic* and *historical/qualitative* research methodologies throughout each of the publications included in this thesis makes it possible to critically engage with and reflect on the materials from a variety of perspectives – historical, theoretical, practical, and comparative. It is this multifaceted aspect of the research that sits both within individual publications, as well as across the collection as a whole, that constitutes its unique contribution to knowledge.

In reflecting on the research methodologies that have helped shape the publications included in this thesis, it is important to acknowledge my own positionality and to examine the degree to which a process of reflexivity has influenced the development of my work as both a teacher and a researcher.

1.4.1 Positionality and Reflexivity

In the context of this study, I understand *positionality* to refer to those aspects of my identity, background, and influences (conscious or otherwise) that may have impacted my approach to the topic under investigation. *Reflexivity* points to an awareness of the processes by which I relate to and interpret research data whilst also acknowledging my own involvement in and connection to the field of study. Positionality and reflexivity are fluid concepts that change over time and in response to the social contexts and environments in which the researcher is situated.

I am a white male who was brought up and educated in the UK. Between 1979 and 1982, I trained as a professional actor at the Arts Educational Schools, London (ArtsEd), and graduated with a Diploma in Acting and Theatre Arts. Alongside daily classes in voice and movement and a range of other skills (mime, stage combat, dance, singing etc.), actor training at Arts Ed was ostensibly drawn from a classical, text-based tradition, which incorporated the acquisition and application of Stanislavsky's methods alongside the interpretative techniques developed by Peter Barkworth in his classes at RADA between the mid-1950s and early 1960s.[23] Upon graduation, I spent many years working as a professional actor throughout the UK.

Between 1991 and 1994, I completed a BA (Hons) Humanities degree (Philosophy, Linguistics, Literature) at the University of London, subsequently undertaking an MA in Text and Performance jointly delivered by the University of London and RADA.

In 1994, I was invited to undertake a part-time role as an acting teacher at London's City Literary Institute. Keen to deploy methodologies that would prove satisfying for mature students interested in both the theoretical as well as the practical dimensions of an actor's craft, I began to experiment with a wide range of Stanislavsky's methods.

In 1996, I was appointed to the role of acting teacher at Rose Bruford College, where the training was established on Stanislavskian pedagogy – something that was reflected in all teaching and assessment practice. Experience in this role deepened my understanding of Stanislavskian technique and provided the chance to test out new exercises, both in my own work as a director/actor as well as that of a teacher.[24]

Between 1999 and 2019, I worked as Subject Leader for Drama in the Department of Contemporary Arts at Manchester Metropolitan University (1999–2004) and as Director of the Manchester School of Theatre, also at Manchester Metropolitan University (2004–2019). Alongside extensive teaching and directing practice, in each of these roles I led a series of curricular reviews and designed various modes of assessment.

[23] Barkworth's approach to acting and the techniques he developed are drawn from a largely repertory-based British theatre tradition. It offers helpful technical tips and advice that relate to different aspects of rehearsal and performance rather than a coherent training philosophy. In this regard, the work bears little resemblance to the work of Stanislavsky. See Barkworth, P (2006) *About Acting* London: Bloomsbury.

[24] For a number of years, I continued to accept engagements as an actor alongside my role as an acting teacher.

In 2019, I accepted the post of Executive Dean at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Australia. A conservatoire school situated inside a traditional university environment, WAAPA is the only school in Australia that provides education and training in all the performing arts disciplines. As Executive Dean, I provide strategic leadership in relation to all the school's activities – including teaching and learning, research, collaboration with industry, nurturing links with the wider community, international recruitment etc. As a subject specialist in acting, I continue to undertake teaching for the Bachelor of Arts Acting and Bachelor of Performing Arts courses.

In each of the above roles, I acknowledge that my own training and education has served to influence the perspectives through which I interact with the professional environment in which I am situated. The notion of the actor as transformational artist and storyteller working from within a classically focussed text-based tradition has greatly informed my work as a performer, teacher, and researcher. Moreover, my own experiences as a professional actor working mainly in theatre has meant that much of my work as a teacher focussed on nurturing live performance skills rather than in other media forms – TV, film, radio, digital etc. This aligned well with most drama schools, many of which, until relatively recently, relied on curricula designed to meet the needs of live theatre rather than other modes of performance. The one exception to this was between 1999 and 2004, when I worked as the Subject Leader for Drama in the Department of Contemporary Arts at Manchester Metropolitan University. Unlike the training experiences offered in British drama schools, the teaching and learning activities in this department encouraged innovation and exploration. Rather than drawing from a canon of classical works, curriculum design was influenced by live arts practice and differing forms of post-dramatic theatre.[25] This stage in my career prompted a period of evaluation and reflection in relation to traditional text-based modes of actor training, resulting in questions about some of the assumptions underpinning my teaching practice. This seemed especially relevant to the importance that is often attached to the notion of 'character' within traditional conservatoire models of actor training:

[25] Examples include the works of Elizabeth LeCompte, Goat Island, Ntozake Shange, Peter Weiss, Heiner Mullër, Forced Entertainment, Richard Foreman, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Kane, and Robert Wilson.

> what about these new and developing forms of theatre in which actors are not required to illustrate the text? Or where there are no characters, no sequence of linear events…where the text does not offer itself as a story? Does the apparent decline of 'character' as a dramatic construct necessitate a redefinition of the role of the actor as we have come to understand it? (Shirley, 2008, p. 178–9)

Deliberations on the above questions and others related to it were disseminated at various conferences in 2006–9[26] and included in a chapter contribution to an edited book entitled *Theatres of Thought (2008)*.[27]

Concerned about the lack of diversity and inclusivity in British drama schools, my first act as the Chair of the Federation of Drama Schools (FDS) was to host a *Diversity and Inclusivity Symposium* at the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre in January 2019.[28] This was attended by representatives from all UK drama schools, various agents, and casting directors, and it included a keynote presentation from Black British playwright, Winsome Pinnock. This event was designed to prompt reflection and debate across the industry and explore ways of actively promoting inclusivity and access in UK drama schools.

More recently, in response to concerns arising from the #MeToo Movement[29] and the prevalence of bullying and abusive behaviours in the performer arts training sector, I produced an article for *The Conversation*[30] which outlined important measures that should be taken to ensure the safety of students and to protect the integrity and probity of the work itself:

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[26] Examples include How to Act, Central School of Speech and Drama, 14–17 February 2007; Creativity and Employability: Developing the Vocational Performing Arts Curriculum LIPA 26–28 March 2008. Reflections on the Importance of 'Character' in British Actor Training, Actor Training Symposium Central School of Speech and Drama, 10th July 2009.

[27] See Shirley, D. (2008), 'Where is My Character? – Acting and Performance in the Unascribed Play', in Watt, D., and Meyer-Dinkgrafë (eds.) *Theatres of Thought: Theatre, Performance and Philosophy* – Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.176–184 (not included in this thesis).

[28] This event took place at the Royal Exchange Theatre on 12th January 2019 and was set up with the full support of The Diversity School Initiative, under the guidance of founder, Steven Kavuma.

[29] Initially founded in 2006 by American activist Tarana Burke to raise social awareness of sexual assault and abuse against women, the MeToo movement went viral as a hashtag on social media in 2017 as #MeToo in the wake of sexual assault and rape allegations against former film producer, Harvey Weinstein.

[30] Shirley, D. 2020 'Friday Essay: Training a New Generation of Performers About Intimacy, Safety and Creativity'. *The Conversation*. Available at https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-training-a-new-generation-of-performers-about-intimacy-safety-and-creativity-132516.

> Ensuring the establishment of clear and unambiguous boundaries between the personal and professional, together with a working environment that respects the rights of the individual can only ever liberate the work. The right to liberty and security of person is a universally declared human right. The right to resist, openly challenge and report inappropriate or abusive behaviour in the workplace is not a favour that is bestowed upon us by tutors or institutions.
>
> A safe space does not exclude the ardours of rigour and tenacity or even the quest for virtuosity and eminence. Moreover, it does not stifle creativity or artistic freedom. How could it? On the contrary, the freedom, security and trust that a genuinely safe space engenders makes the pursuit of performance excellence tangible and achievable. (Shirley, 2020)

Reflexivity and a sensitivity to the need for change have been key features in the development of my past and current work as both a teacher and a researcher. The impacts of this have been most manifest, for example, in developing curriculum design, in research-informed teaching, in assessment practice, in recruitment processes, and in pastoral support. The need to ensure that training we deliver is relevant and forward-looking, that institutions are inclusive and diverse, and that the spaces where we teach are safe and enabling provide clear examples not just of my processes of reflection but also the extent to which I have offered thought leadership as a means of promoting wider change. The final chapter submission included in this thesis, entitled 'A Slice of Zoom Life: Transforming Actor Training in a Global Pandemic' (Shirley in Aquilina, 2024, pp. 93–112), offers an excellent example of a process of reflexivity and research in action. This publication reflects on and critically evaluates the pedagogical implications emerging when moving a live face-to-face teaching and learning experience to a mediated online one via Zoom.

My work as an actor trainer is not separate from my work as a researcher. Indeed, it is the tight imbrication of teaching and research that provides the foundations on which my work has been established. The spaces and occasions in which actor training takes place – including the students, the curricula, the environment, and even the institutions themselves – are in a constant state of flux. Each of the articles submitted as part of this thesis reflect this observation and are designed to enable consideration of Stanislavsky's work from a variety of perspectives – through contemporaneous understandings of Americanised applications of Stanislavsky in the

UK, or through an exploration of Stanislavsky's influence on influential British directors, or as a contemplation on how recent developments in digital technology can serve to drive alternative approaches to Stanislavskian pedagogy.

1.4.2 Embodied Knowledge and Understanding

As previously discussed, I am a professionally trained actor and spent many years working in the industry developing my craft in a variety of settings. Exposure to a regular training regime in movement, voice, and acting that was then cemented through the practice of rehearsal and performance has provided a rich source of embodied experiences and understandings that have proved instrumental in shaping the research methods utilised in each of the publications included in this thesis.

In his journal article entitled 'Principles for embodied learning approaches', Marth Munro (2018) suggests:

> embodied learning is argued to be 'the deliberate use and recognition of multimodal bodymind activities and strategies to facilitate shifts in perspectives, perceptions, paradigms, behaviour and actions.' (Munro, 2018, p. 5)

Despite clear advances in the fields of dance and music, embodied autoethnographic approaches to research in drama are still developing. The work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio[31] and his assault on the notion of Cartesian dualism has proved instrumental in opening new ways of understanding the body as a site of meaning, communication, and research activity – a view which is eloquently expressed by Mary Beth Cancienne and Celeste N. Snowber in their article 'Writing rhythm: Movement as method' [sic] (2003):

> The body is, no doubt, informed and inscribed by many political, social, and cultural discourses, which have legitimized the body in its relationship to knowledge. It has been therefore helpful to understand the body from a variety of perspectives, including performance studies, dance therapy, semiotics, communication theory, and feminist

[31] For further information, see Damasio, A.R. (2005), *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. London: Penguin Books. Discussion of Damasio's work is also included in relation to the work of Katie Mitchell in publication five submitted as part of this thesis – Shirley, D. (2016, pp. 129–30).

> studies. For too long, the polarities rooted in Cartesian dualism posited two distinct and mutually exclusive regions of human experience: mind and body. The evolution of these binary distinctions continues to be challenged, and there is now a wealth of criticism…that contributes to this major epistemological challenge. (Cancienne and Snowber, 2003, pp. 129–30)

In conceptualising and formulating each of the publications included in this thesis, the arguments and views presented are grounded *in* and shaped *by* my practical and embodied experiences as a performer. No less important, however, has been the adoption of the concept of praxis, which allowed for a rich interplay between practical awareness/skill and theoretical framing/understanding. American Educationalist Gail Furman (2012) usefully defines the concept of praxis as follows:

> Praxis involves the continual, dynamic interaction among knowledge acquisition, deep reflection, and action…with the purpose of transformation and liberation. (Furman, G., 2012, p. 203)

Building on Robin Nelson's (2013, pp. 41–45) previously cited distinction between the 'know-how' of my work as an artist and the 'know-what' of my work as a researcher, it is the application of this notion of praxis that allowed for the critical distancing and reflection that prompted a rich interplay and exchange between various modes of understanding and experience.

Of equal importance is the extent to which I have drawn on the contributions and experiences of my students, with whom I have practically explored and tested out many of the exercises and techniques under investigation.

1.4.2 Historiographical and Qualitative Research Methods

Since Stanislavsky first shared his 'System' over a century ago, discussion, commentary, analysis, and investigation in relation to its impact have been extraordinary. Publication of his work and that of his interpreters and critics has been nothing less than abundant. The challenge, therefore, has been that of reading and reflecting on a huge body of work to arrive at a coherent

response to the questions/issues emerging from the overriding thesis. Central to this aim has been the need to deploy both historiographical and qualitative research methods.

In accordance with Berg and Lune, I understand historiographical research to involve:

> the collection of information and the *interpretation* or analysis of data, generally in order to answer a particular research question. Specifically, historical research is conducted for one or more reasons; to uncover the unknown; to answer particular questions; to seek implications or relationships of events from the past and their connections with the present; to assess past activities and accomplishments for individuals, agencies, or institutions; and to generally aid in our understanding of human culture. (Berg and Lune, 2017, p. 159)

In relation to each of the publications submitted as part of this thesis, historical research has taken numerous forms, including gathering various forms of primary and secondary documentation related to Stanislavsky's work and tracing its dissemination in the UK as well as in the USA. This included books, journal articles, transcripts, scripts etc. It is important to note the following:

- A number of the articles included in this thesis have a particularly historical focus. Tracing the routes through which Stanislavsky's methods were transmitted into Britain, for example, required a very specific *historical* lens through which to assess the gathering of information.[32]
- Through an investigation of the hypothetical issues raised by each research question, there was a need to determine the accuracy and authenticity of the materials examined. This necessitated a process of selection in which the historical accounts and perceptions gathered were constantly tested and measured against other forms of data/testimony to draw authoritative and defensible conclusions that form part of writing itself.
- This gathering of and sifting through various forms of data enabled the construction of a series of overarching narratives and arguments that constitute responses to the research questions explored in each publication.

[32] See Shirley, D. (2012), 'Stanislavsky's Passage into the British Conservatoire', in Pitches, J. (ed.) *The Russians in Britain* London: Routledge.

Closely aligned to the concept of historiography is the notion of quality or qualitative research, which Berg and Lune define as follows:

> Quality refers to the what, how, when, where, and why of a thing – its essence and ambience. Qualitative research thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. (Ibid: 12)

The historical method of research focussed on the need to explore the *past* as a means of understanding important key developments, drawing conclusions about the present, and speculating about future possibilities. The qualitative methodology I adopted, however, tended to move across and between different time frames to analyse some of the key arguments/debates that were uncovered in relation to the craft of acting more generally as well as to different perspectives and views on training. Methods used include the following:

- Analysis and discussion of claims/arguments presented by the practitioners whose work is under investigation. This relates both to training practice (Strasberg, Meisner, and Hagen), as well as approaches to directing (Stafford-Clark, Donnellan, Mitchell).
- Exploration of the advantages/challenges afforded by different modes of pedagogy – the live studio environment versus the digital space.
- Comparative discussion and analysis of Stanislavsky's writings/teachings and those of his interpreters.
- Face-to-face interviews with relevant teachers/practitioners, as well as email exchanges and telephone conversations to gather information, test out theories, and draw appropriate conclusions.[33]
- Consideration of different dramatic texts and genres as a means of analysing different application of Stanislavskian methodology.

Whilst it is important to acknowledge that historical research is a form of qualitative research, the above distinction proves useful in highlighting the varied and nuanced research strategies that were undertaken for each of the publications included here.

[33] In all instances where this approach was used, interviewees/respondents were given the opportunity to read and comment on draft articles/chapters prior to publication.

Chapter Two

2.1 Coherence, Originality, and Contribution to Knowledge

Notwithstanding the realisation that each of the publications submitted as part of this thesis were undertaken separately, they represent a coherent and connected body of work that is both original and which makes a unique and significant contribution to knowledge. Framed by an overarching research inquiry that seeks to reveal and examine the varied processes by which Stanislavsky's work has been transmitted, adapted, and applied to professional actor training in the UK, the publications included here offer a range of historical and contemporaneous perspectives through which to critically assess and evaluate the impact and ongoing influence of one of the 20th century's most influential theatre practitioners.

2.2 Coherence

A sharp focus on and investigation into the ongoing impact of Stanislavsky's work within the context of British actor training represents the *thread* which not only links each of the publications included here but which also enfolds a coherent body of work that responds to specific research questions (see 1.2 Research Aims and Objectives, pp. 12–14 and Figure Two, p. 7).

As previously indicated, the ordering of the publications included in this thesis is designed to enhance comprehension of a range of variables that have impacted the UK's absorption of Stanislavsky's training methods. These include *historical considerations*, *American influence*, *professional directorial practice*, and *emerging technologies*. Each of the publications cross-references to themes emerging from earlier ones. For example, discussion of Declan Donnellan's directorial approach highlights his eschewal of Lee Strasberg's methods and suggests an approach that resembles that of Sanford Meisner (see Shirley, 2019, pp. 123–4). Similarly, the work of Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner is cross-referenced in the discussion of Uta Hagen's work in *A Slice of Zoom Life* (Shirley, 2024, pp. 97, 100, 111), as well as in *Stanislavsky's Passage into the British Conservatoire* (Shirley, 2012, pp. 52–4). Cross-indexation of this kind allows for informed reflection and consideration of the nuances and inflections that have shaped British interpretations of Stanislavsky in both the training and

professional working environments. This is a particularly original feature of this thesis that is not available anywhere else. It is important to state that although the most recent publication, 'A Slice of Zoom Life: Transforming Actor Training in a Global Pandemic' (Shirley, 2024), was completed in Australia and involved first-year acting students from the undergraduate programme at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), the Solo Object Exercise, coupled with my own unique interpretation of Hagen's techniques, were developed over a 20-year period in the UK (at the City Literary Institute, Rose Bruford College and the Manchester School of Theatre). Prior to my arrival at WAAPA, and throughout the 40-year history of the BA Honours Acting course, this work had never been delivered during the programme. In this regard, the final publication emerged from the continuation of my work as both an actor trainer and researcher in the UK.[34]

2.3 Originality and Contribution to Knowledge

Each of the articles included in this thesis makes a substantial contribution to knowledge in relation to the history, application, and development of Stanislavsky's work and its influence on UK actor training between 1938 and 2022. As previously stated, there is a wealth of published material related to Stanislavsky's work as a director, teacher, and writer. Virtually none of this work, however, addresses the transition and dissemination of his work in the context of either training or professional practice in Britain. Whilst in recent years there has been a growing interest in this area (e.g. Philippa Strandberg-Long's publications on Sanford Meisner), such work follows in the footsteps of my own research and clearly acknowledges this. In this regard, the works that constitute this thesis are both original and provide a source of new knowledge. Figure One, on page 6, highlights in very specific terms how each of the works included in this thesis have contributed to knowledge and generated new ways of seeing/understanding the subject matter.

Importantly, each of the articles/chapters that constitute this thesis are sole-authored and have been subject to peer-review prior to publication in various academic journals and specialised book publications. The book chapters included have appeared in edited collections that also

[34] The acting programme at WAAPA was established in 1981 by British Voice teacher, Nigel Rideout. Based on the acting course at LAMDA, where Rideout was Vice Principal, he later recruited LAMDA acting teacher Chris Edmond and former Head of the Acting course at Arts Ed Lisle Jones to design and deliver the training. This strongly British influence on the WAAPA's Acting curriculum remains visible to this day.

feature the work of internationally acknowledged Stanislavsky scholars, including Sharon Carnicke,[35] Bella Merlin,[36] Jonathan Pitches,[37] and Rose Whyman.[38]

Finally, the various works submitted as part of this thesis are frequently cited in a variety of academic publications. A full list of these is included in Appendix One.

[35] *The Great Stage Directors: Stanislavski, Antoine, Saint Denis: Volume 1* Edited by Peta Tait Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing 2019.
[36] *The Russians in Britain* Edited by Jonathan Pitches – Routledge – Taylor and Francis January 2012 and *Stanislavsky and Pedagogy: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Stefan Aquilina. Routledge – Taylor and Frances 2024.
[37] 'The Reality of Doing: Meisner Technique and British Actor Training', in *Theatre Dance and Performance Training*. Edited by Murray, S and Pitches, J – Routledge Volume 1/Issue 2 pp. 199–213 and *The Russians in Britain* Edited by Jonathan Pitches – Routledge – Taylor and Francis 2012.
[38] *The Great Stage Directors: Stanislavski, Antoine, Saint Denis: Volume 1*. Edited by Peta Tait Methuen Drama – Bloomsbury Publishing 2019.

Chapter Three

Shirley, D. (2012) ‘Stanislavsky’s Passage into the British Conservatoire’,
in *Russians in Britain*, Pitches, J. (ed), London and New York: Routledge, pp. 38–61

(Published Work 1)

3.1 Introduction

This chapter publication is the first to outline in a detailed way the transition of Stanislavsky's training techniques into the British conservatoire sector. In contrast with the assimilation of Stanislvskian methodologies in the US, their absorption into Britain was much more gradual and somewhat piecemeal. Moreover, unlike the case in the US, British appropriations of Stanislavsky's system reveal a much greater sensitivity towards the demands of *theatrical* performance (style and genre) rather than film.

Commencing with an exploration of Stanislavsky's impact on Michel Saint Denis (1897–1971), especially in relation to his formation of the London Theatre Studio (1935–9) and the Old Vic Theatre School (1947–52), the chapter goes on to track the emergence of London's Drama Centre (1963–2022), an institution that was to prove instrumental in establishing and developing Stanislavskian training technique in Britain.

Whilst Saint Denis witnessed the work of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Arts Theatre first-hand, other teachers discussed in the chapter (Uta Hagen and Doreen Cannon) were exposed to his techniques via the American Method – a theme that is developed across the various publications that are included in this publication.

The chapter also examines how British actor training in this period began to incorporate the actors' internal processes with an awareness of the need for physical expressivity and an acknowledgement of style. For the purposes of this thesis, this is significant because it begins to highlight important ways in which UK drama schools have adapted Stanislavsky and his American interpreters to meet the specific demands of British theatre culture. Significantly, the transition of Stanislavsky's techniques in the UK was strongly influenced by the profession itself – notably the Royal Court Theatre, the Old Vic Theatre Company, and Shakespeare's Memorial Theatre, in Stratford. The theatrical profession's influences on the assimilation of Stanislavsky's work into the UK continue to this day and are discussed in Chapter Seven.

Finally, the chapter references the work of important method teachers, Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner, and Uta Hagen – all of whom are covered in considerable detail in publications that form part of this thesis.

3.2 Chapter Publication

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RUSSIANS IN BRITAIN

From Komisarjevsky in the 1920s, to Cheek by Jowl's Russian 'sister company' almost a century later, Russian actor training has had a unique influence on modern British theatre. *Russians in Britain*, edited by Jonathan Pitches, is the first work of its type to identify a relationship between both countries' theatrical traditions as continuous as it is complex.

Unravelling new strands of transmission and translation linking the great Russian émigré practitioners to the second- and third-generation artists who responded to their ideas, *Russians in Britain* takes in:

- Komisarjevsky and the British theatre establishment
- Stanislavsky in the British conservatoire
- Meyerhold in the academy
- Michael Chekhov in the private studio
- Littlewood's Theatre Workshop and the Northern Stage Ensemble
- Katie Mitchell, Declan Donnellan and Michael Boyd.

Charting a hitherto untold story with historical and contemporary implications, these nine essays present a compelling alternative history of theatrical practice in the UK.

Jonathan Pitches is Professor of Theatre and Performance and Director of Research in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at Leeds University, UK. He is the author of two books on Russian actor training, *Vsevolod Meyerhold* and *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting*. He has taught masterclasses on Russian actor training at the RSC and in Tokyo, Malta and Shanghai, and is the founding co-editor of the Routledge journal *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*.

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'This valuable new collection makes a major contribution to a fascinating, previously under-explored, but significant area of study.'

Dr Paul Fryer,
Associate Director of Research/Head of the Stanislavski Centre
Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, UK

'Well-considered, clear, substantial . . . offers significant new insights into the development of actor-training methodologies in the UK.'

Dr Franc Chamberlain,
Head of Department, Drama and Theatre Studies,
University College Cork, Ireland

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RUSSIANS IN BRITAIN

British Theatre and the Russian Tradition of Actor Training

Edited by Jonathan Pitches

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2

STANISLAVSKY'S PASSAGE INTO THE BRITISH CONSERVATOIRE

David Shirley

As the previous chapter has established, it is evident that Theodore Komisarjevsky's arrival in London in 1919, followed by his landmark productions of Chekhov at the Barnes Theatre during the 1920s and Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon in the 1930s, provides the foundations from which to begin tracing the early influence of Stanislavskian thinking in Britain. The introduction of new ways of thinking about 'character' and alternative approaches to rehearsal enthralled this country's theatre community and clearly had a lasting impact on many of the period's most celebrated actors including Peggy Ashcroft, John Gielgud, Rachel Kempson, Charles Laughton and Michael Redgrave.

Although we know that Komisarjevsky spent some time teaching at RADA (the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) during the mid 1920s – where he first encountered John Gielgud and Charles Laughton – very little is known about the content of his classes or indeed about his approach to teaching, beyond the fact that he taught *commedia* techniques. Did he also begin to articulate and put into practice some of the ideas pioneered by Stanislavsky and, if so, how were they received by the students and staff with whom he worked? Although it would be inappropriately simplistic to claim that Komisarjevsky served as a conduit through which Stanislavsky's theories were initially disseminated in the UK, the realisation that he published *The Actor's Creativity and Stanislavsky's Theory* two years before he emigrated to Britain suggests that he was certainly influenced by Stanislavsky's reputation and work, if only as a spur to his own thinking about acting and authenticity.

Writing about Claude Rains's experience of teaching at RADA in the 1920s during exactly the same period in which Komisarjevsky taught

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there,[1] David Skal offers a telling account of what both men are likely to have encountered:

> When Rains began his association with RADA, it was based in a pair of old houses in London's Gower Street. The school's curriculum was heavily weighted with the disciplines inherited from the era of Tree and Irving – gesture, elocution, fencing, and movement. The more deeply psychological influence of Stanislavski was barely noted by the British theatre establishment. . . . The British theatre had no government subsidies at the time. Because of this, it was a market-driven industry and therefore embraced techniques that were proven commercially.
>
> (Skal 2008: 45)

The idea that RADA's training regime was shaped by commercial rather than artistic-driven imperatives is further reinforced by the discovery that a number of the students seemed anything but motivated:

> Rains was immediately struck, and forever frustrated, by the unevenness of talent, much less professional aspiration . . . 'These young students, what were they there for? Fun, having larks, some of them . . . They'd laugh. I used to get livid'.
>
> (Skal 2008: 46)

In a conventionalised theatre culture where actors' performances tended to be driven by a preoccupation with the external manifestations of 'gesture' and 'manners', the insistence on an 'inner reality' – the source of which springs from the imagination – must have appeared extraordinarily innovative and radical. With the added excitement that ensued as a result of the publication in Britain and the USA of Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art* in 1924,[2] it must have seemed like the beginning of a new era for British actor training – and to a large extent it was. But in what ways did this period serve to generate new ways of thinking about actor training in the UK and how can we begin to track and account for the establishment of Stanislavsky's theories as the mainstay of British conservatoire training?

The attempt to outline a history of the appropriation of Stanislavskian methodologies in British training establishments is fraught with difficulty. Although Komisarjevsky's period at RADA certainly provides a good starting point, the absence of any clear account of his work there makes it difficult to offer anything more than a speculative approach to the construction of this history. Moreover, unlike the situation in the United States, where the work of Richard Boleslavsky together with the much publicised US tours of Stanislavsky himself prompted the emergence of The Group

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Theater (1931–40) and the subsequent development of a series of actors' 'studios' led by the likes of Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman and Sanford Meisner, the passage of Stanislavsky's work into Britain is much more erratic and piecemeal.

As we will discover, part of the issue here is that many, many acting teachers in the UK who are likely to have taught aspects of the System would not necessarily have acknowledged Stanislavsky or any of his followers as their source. Claude Rains is a perfect example of a teacher who intuitively recognised the value of Stanislavsky's techniques, but who may not have labelled them as such for his students:

> Rains would never have a formal introduction to Stanislavski's 'method', though he would later express considerable appreciation for the technique. In fact, he clearly took a similar approach to building his characters, instinctively grounding them in solid psychological motivation.
>
> (Skal 2008: 45)

The reference to 'instinct' here is important; much of Stanislavsky's methodology developed as a result of the careful observations of the highly accomplished actors with whom he worked. For many experienced practitioners it was not the working methods themselves that proved revelatory, but rather the fact that, for the first time, they had been documented and ordered into a formalised 'system'. Like Rains, various British actor trainers would have relied on their own professional instincts or encouraged a process of learning through 'imitation' as the means through which to guide and instruct their students. John Gielgud, who trained at RADA during the years when Rains taught there, recalls his own efforts to emulate his master's technique:

> I worked as hard as I could and imitated Rains' acting until I became extremely mannered . . . I strained every fibre in my efforts to appear violent and emotional and only succeeded in straining my voice and striking strange attitudes with my body.
>
> (Skal 2008: 47)

Despite the undoubted challenges confronting an attempt to chart the growth of Stanislavskian methodology in this country, it is important to outline the different stages in its progression if we are to begin to acquire a clear understanding of the inter-relationship between professional theatre practice and performer training in twentieth-century British theatre. The evolution of realist/kitchen-sink drama in the 1950s, for instance – most

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notably at the English Stage Company under the directorship of George Devine – marks an important moment in the history of British theatre, the influence of which would later help to fuel the advancement of realist TV and film drama. Aside from being a celebrated actor and director in his own right, Devine was also actively involved in the training of actors at the London Theatre Studio (1935–9) and the Old Vic Theatre School (1947–52). One of the more obvious advantages, therefore, of unearthing the roots of Stanislavsky's work in the UK is that it might reveal new ways of accounting for and reflecting on the growth of social realism in British drama during the 1950s and 1960s.

Beyond elements of what might be called Stanislavskian practice in Komisarjevsky's work at the Barnes Theatre, we have very little information about the development of Stanislavsky's work at other British drama schools. Perhaps the next phase in which to track more precisely the development of Stanislavsky's work in Britain is through the work of Michel Saint-Denis and the two schools he established in London between the 1930s and 1940s. Heavily influenced by the work of his uncle, Jacques Copeau, with whom he trained and worked during the mid to late 1920s in France, Saint-Denis sought to foster an approach to actor training that combined advanced levels of physical skill and expressiveness with an acute sensitivity to the internal impulses that fuel complex and psychologically convincing characterisations. Like Komisarjevsky, Saint-Denis was a gifted director and during the 1930s his frequent visits to London with the Compagnie de Quinze[3] attracted much attention:

> the public's reaction, the tone of the press, the daily visits we received from leading members of the acting profession, made us feel that the impact of our performances was something more than just an ordinary theatrical success. People of all sorts wanted us to know that they were refreshed by our plays and by our way of acting. They found us direct, real, devoid of artificial brilliance.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1982: 42)

Feeling that the British understood his work and having attracted support from admirers that included Peggy Ashcroft, John Gielgud, Alec Guinness, Tyrone Guthrie and Laurence Olivier, Saint-Denis dissolved the Compagnie de Quinze in 1935 and moved to London, where he opened the London Theatre Studio (LTS).

In establishing his new school, Saint-Denis's aims were clear:

> We wanted to equip our young acting students with all the means of expression we used at the Compagnie des Quinze, but we wanted to

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> extend the imaginative, the creative basis of the Quinze's training. It had been a wonderful training but it had, nevertheless, made us specialists of a particular kind. I realised that the L.T.S. had to go beyond that specialization if it wanted to be in a position to face the problems of interpreting classical and modern plays in all their variety. There were problems I had previously hardly touched upon: among them the technical and artistic development of voice and speech, and, especially, imaginative expression through language.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1982: 45–6)

Although Saint-Denis had 'a tremendous suspicion of any "method", whether old or new, which stops questions or discourages change' (Saint-Denis 1982: 80), it is clearly evident from all of his writings that the curriculum he designed at his new London school was greatly inspired by Stanislavsky's work:

> Stanislavsky reached these shores in 1937 through a book called *An Actor Prepares*, and . . . many of us at that time paid great attention to it . . . and we put into practice quite an amount of Stanislavsky in 1937 in a school which was called the London Theatre Studio.
>
> (Brook et al. 1963: 28)

The two men first met each other in Paris in 1922 when the Moscow Arts Theatre Company (MAT) brought a production of *The Cherry Orchard* to the Théâtre des Champs Elysées. Initially cynical about the company's reputation, on that occasion Saint-Denis witnessed a performance that was to leave a profound impression on him:

> This visit of Stanislavsky and his company was of incalculable importance to me. For the first time our classical attitude towards the theatre, our efforts to bring a new reality to acting, a reality transposed from life, were confronted by a superior form of modern realism, the realism of Chekhov.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1960: 42)

Elsewhere in his writings, Saint-Denis pinpoints important aspects of the performance that were to shape his work in the future:

> in the domain of interpretation, the actors of the Moscow Art Theatre Company succeeded in achieving a profound truth. Through his work Stanislavski found a perfect balance between the actors' subjective introspection, their objective study of the characters and their technique

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> of physical action and spoken expression. They arrived at a freedom in acting which I have never seen equalled.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1982: 36)

What became immediately apparent to Saint-Denis was that despite the obvious differences between the physically stylised and highly experimental work he had been exposed to with Copeau and the more psychologically motivated work of Stanislavsky, the strengths of each artist

> grew out of their rejection of all theatrical artifice. The impression of perfect authenticity generated a feeling of great liveness which reached across the footlights to the audience.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1982: 36)

In addition to highlighting his admiration of Stanislavsky and the MAT, Saint-Denis's description of the actors' performances in *The Cherry Orchard* also draws attention to the values he would later subscribe to as a teacher: the fluidity of their inner impulses, the spontaneity and improvisational quality they brought both to the text and to the use of gesture, the sense of a world that existed beyond the immediate life of the stage, their relationships to the objects and furniture around them, and the complexity and variation they brought to the use of emotion.[4]

Although it is evident that Saint-Denis recognised the value of Stanislavsky's theories, he was by no means convinced that they could be applied to all forms of drama – especially the classics. Reflecting on his experience of having seen the MAT production of *The Cherry Orchard,* he later asked:

> would these actors, performing so marvellously the poetic realism of Chekhov, be equally convincing if they were to play the great 'classics' – the Greek, the Spanish, the French, the Elizabethan? What of Shakespeare, that prototype of non-naturalistic dramatists?
>
> (Saint-Denis 1982: 37)

Recalling Stanislavsky's own description in *My Life in Art* of the difficulties he encountered when working on his 1911 production of *Hamlet*, Saint-Denis argued that a preoccupation with naturalistic detail or with the psychological motivations of actors will ultimately prove reductive when applied to Shakespeare and, by implication, most other forms of classical drama. Pointing to the text of *Othello*, he suggested that the world created by Shakespeare is highly poetic and unique and as such calls for a difference of approach. Rather than viewing the play as an imitation of life, he

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contended that its 'essence is expressed by rhythmic images in a musical language with which a realistic performance based on rational details, will come into conflict' (Saint-Denis 1982: 38). Plays of this kind he asserted, do not merely imitate life; instead they are nourished by a reality that they will ultimately move beyond. Such a consideration prompted Saint-Denis to examine the question of how an actor might begin to 'live a part that is beyond the natural world?' (Saint-Denis 1982: 38).

In part, it was the desire to find solutions to the challenges raised by this question that served to shape and inform the philosophical and pedagogical ideas on which Saint-Denis would later base his approach to actor training. Importantly, at the heart of this approach was a very particular understanding of the notion of realism. Distinguishing between 'deep realism, which studies and expresses . . . the meaning of human life' and 'superficial realism . . . that is satisfied with the representation of the external' (Saint-Denis 1960: 51), Saint-Denis believed that training in the classical theatre was of immense importance if the realistic approaches of modern theatre were to avoid the 'danger of becoming sensational, sentimental or merely empty' (Saint-Denis 1960: 52). Of crucial significance here was an unapologetic affirmation of the importance of *style*:

> To have its meaning revealed a classical play must be acted in the reality of its style so far as we can understand and achieve it . . . The deeper modern realism becomes in its expression as well as in its subject matter, the more it is possible to say that a modern actor, if he is brought up in a classical tradition which he has properly understood, will be better equipped to bite on modern forms of theatre.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1960: 51)

Although it is very clear throughout his writings that Saint-Denis was a great admirer of Stanislavsky's work, he did not import the System wholesale into his new school, preferring instead to adapt and re-invent many of the exercises and techniques in accordance with the demands of individual genres and traditions.

> If Stanislavski's system is applied literally, it leads merely to realism, but applied selectively, with discrimination, it can be made 'the grammar of all styles'.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1982: 38)

Interestingly, despite his reservations and the suspicions he harboured in relation to organised 'systems' of training, when he came to write about his work and the schools he founded, there is no mistaking the striking

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similarities between the training techniques deployed by Saint-Denis and those advocated by Stanislavsky. These include the 'representation of actions taken from . . . daily life like waking up, eating a meal . . . dressing and undressing' as well as exercises designed to promote 'the need for concentration and observation . . . the importance of emotional memory . . . the use of space, of rhythm, of the continuity of action' (Saint-Denis 1960: 103). As Jane Baldwin (2010: 88) has indicated and as Saint-Denis himself has acknowledged, the inaugural year of the LTS coincided with the first publication of Elizabeth Hapgood's translation of Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares* in 1936 – a fact which perhaps accounts for the unmistakable similarity between the descriptive terminology used by Saint-Denis and that developed by Stanislavsky.

Although, like Stanislavsky, Saint-Denis was committed to the view that acting is essentially an art of transformation, he remained wary of those approaches to training that are overly dependent on introspection or intense subjective analysis:

> I once saw a naturalistic play where the actors applied strictly the teachings of the 'Method': they were not concerned so much with the presentation of the play, the 'cloth', as with the 'lining'. Their faces, their gestures and words, were far less important to them than their nervous systems, their secret 'stirrings', the meaning behind the words. Though a photograph of life was intended, only the negative was being shown, not the finished print.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1982: 189)

Although the reference to the 'Method'[5] is not a direct attack on Stanislavsky's 'System', it does suggest that Saint-Denis was sceptical about training techniques that foreground interior, psychological or naturalistic approaches to performance. Though fundamentally a realist, Saint-Denis was also profoundly influenced by the highly experimental and theatrical work he had undertaken in the 1920s with Jacques Copeau and later with his own company, the Compagnie des Quinze. Always resistant to the limitations of naturalism – especially those forms which disavowed *theatricality*, *reflexivity* and *playfulness* – he was determined to ensure that the training methods he adopted served to 'enlarge the actor's field of expression' and to 'put each technique that he learned to the service of his acting without falling into the trap of specialisation in any of them' (Saint-Denis 1982: 46).

Of all the training techniques that Saint-Denis introduced to his schools, perhaps the most significant was mask work. Commencing with the need to develop sensitivity to the economies and precision demanded by the use of

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neutral mask, students would eventually progress to character mask work. Whereas the former involved no costume or dialogue of any kind and only the simplest of props (a blank page, for instance, to symbolise a letter) the latter gradually introduced performed scenarios featuring a number of actors aided by the use of costumes, props and sometimes even small-scale sets. Careful to resist the drive to become overly dependent on the use of pure psychology or emotion in the training of his students, Saint-Denis's use of mask provides the perfect illustration of a methodology that (a) nurtured the development of emotional sensitivity from within a profoundly physical, yet depersonalised, form of signification, (b) highlighted the importance of style by providing a framework in which to amplify and moderate the means through which emotional impulses are experienced and communicated by individual actors and (c) provided maximum opportunity for theatrical invention, improvisation and play in the creation of dramatic personas. By allowing for a fluid, two-way exchange between the emotional and physical realms of experience, mask work sessions provided the perfect vehicle through which Saint-Denis could begin to combine the best elements of his work at the Compagnie des Quinze with the techniques developed by Stanislavsky. Revealingly, as Jane Baldwin (2010: 87) makes clear, George Devine also taught mask work at the Studio, a skill he acquired directly from Saint-Denis, who suggested that such work permits the student actor 'to experience, in its most startling form, the chemistry of acting' (Saint-Denis 1960: 170). Devine would subsequently take this work to the Royal Court Theatre, where he introduced it to William Gaskill, John Dexter and Keith Johnstone (see Harrop 1992: 68).

At one level, the techniques developed by Saint-Denis chime with those of Stanislavsky's *Method of Physical Actions*. There is, for instance, a clear acknowledgement of the importance of using physical activity as a means of stimulating inner impulse. Unlike the situation in the USA, where teachers such as Lee Strasberg encouraged acting students to establish a character's 'inner life' before moving to external realities, Saint-Denis's approach developed and adapted Stanislavsky's work in such a way as to enable actors to reach beyond the immediacy of their own subjective experiences to achieve genuinely convincing physical and emotional transformations that were appropriate to the dramatic worlds they were called upon to inhabit. In a very real sense, therefore, it can be argued that Saint-Denis both embraced and extended Stanislavsky's work in a manner that allowed it to be used as a universal 'morphology of acting' rather than as an individual performance style that is most closely associated with naturalism. Indeed, Saint-Denis was convinced that usage of the latter kind was far from what Stanislavsky had intended:

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> I think that Stanislavski would have been the first to hate the idea that his way of working and of training people should be called a system . . . He was a great master of the theatre of his own time and never confined himself to the narrow limits of 'naturalism'.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1960: 52)

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the LTS was forced to close and Saint-Denis returned, for a brief period, to his native France. In 1945, however, he was invited by Laurence Olivier to form the second of his two British drama schools, which was to be based at the Old Vic Theatre. The Old Vic Theatre School, as it became known, was conceived as part of a much larger organisation that included the Old Vic Theatre Company, a small-scale touring company known as the Young Vic and an experimental company to be led by Saint-Denis, George Devine and Glen Byam Shaw.

The formal liaison with an established company that was much acclaimed for both classical and contemporary work was, for Saint-Denis, indispensable to what he would later describe as a 'total school' (Saint-Denis 1982: 51). His absolute commitment to the classics and belief in the importance of style as a springboard from which to enable students to access deeper levels of reality served to refine and extend the teaching methodologies he originally introduced at the LTS. Unfortunately, despite a public outcry, the Old Vic Theatre School was forced to close in 1952 following serious funding problems and various acrimonious exchanges between members of the governing body.[6]

There is no doubt that a close analysis of Saint-Denis's writings about each of the schools he established in Britain reveals that an important aspect of his work as a teacher addressed the need to resolve the apparent conflict between the psychological imperatives informing Stanislavsky's early theories and the stylistic demands of other forms of classical and contemporary realism. In Saint-Denis's view Stanislavsky never actually resolved this problem[7] and, as a consequence, his appropriation of the System was measured and selective:

> if we welcomed Stanislavsky it is because we thought that if we put ourselves at that school we might find a basic way of working which, if we looked at it very carefully, so as not to let it overstep towards realism, or put us in a prison of concentration out of which it would be very difficult to find a sort of freedom which is necessary for big style,[8] that might be good.
>
> (Brook et al. 1963: 28)

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Before moving on to examine the next phase of Stanislavsky's journey into the British conservatoire, it is worth considering the degree to which many of those with whom Saint-Denis worked both at the LTS and at the Old Vic Theatre School would later go on to play very significant roles in helping to shape the ongoing development of British actor training as well as that of British theatre in the 1950s and 1960s. Amongst the many teachers and practitioners that worked alongside him, perhaps the most influential were John Blatchley, Glen Byam Shaw, George Devine, Marius Goring and Litz Pisk. Whereas Glen Byam Shaw went on to become the director of Stratford-upon-Avon's Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, George Devine would play an instrumental role in establishing the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, of which he would also become the first Artistic Director between 1956 and 1965. With a reputation for defining new forms of writing and performance, this company, alongside Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop Group, played a crucial role in helping to redefine the aesthetics of British acting technique. The following, which is taken from the recorded text of a discussion held at the Royal Court Theatre in 1963 between Peter Brook, Kenneth Haigh, Charles Marowitz and Michel Saint-Denis, offers a glimpse into the kinds of concerns that were being raised by some of Company's leading practitioners:

> Before 1956 English acting was mostly genteel and external . . . After 1956 it was proletarian and external. I think that the New Wave acting . . . is of course a terribly important development in the theatre. And . . . this new style of acting, the acting required by these plays came about – was called into being – not by the drama schools but by the writers themselves. They were putting out new kinds of work and the actors had to find the means to express it. And it was the actor grappling with the text and being tutored by the writer, who in a sense discovered the style in which these plays had to be performed. The true drama teachers of this period were people like Osborne, Pinter, Wesker, Behan, Owen and Delaney – these were the people who actually taught the actors.
>
> (Brook et al. 1963: 21–2)

Tempting though it may be, it would, of course, be an exaggeration to suggest that the pioneering work of the Royal Court can be directly attributed to Saint-Denis's influence on Devine when the two worked together at the LTS and the Old Vic Theatre School. This said, the unmistakable reference to the importance of 'style' and the suggestion that it was through 'grappling with the text' that the actors began to find new forms of expression suggests that the long partnership between the two men and Saint-Denis's modified and adapted versions of Stanislavskian methodology were to play a significant

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role in fostering the experimentalism and creativity that proved indispensable in helping to shape the alternative forms of realism that became the hallmark of the English Stage Company. Clearly sensing that the drama schools were not actually enabling actors to meet the demands of this new kind of theatre, Marowitz went on to call for a review of training practices:

> what is needed is (a) new systems of training as a sort of antidote to the drama school education. (b) an awareness of craft problems, which is to say problems apart from those of external technique – where do I move, how do I get there? (c) a new relationship between the actor and the producer which is based on a creative collaboration, not simply a matter of moves and voice production, and (d) *aware* criticism which is essentially aesthetic, theatrically orientated and not merely journalistic.
> (Brook et al. 1963: 23)

Marowitz's lack of faith in the effectiveness of British conservatoire training for actors is echoed in John Elsom's *Post-War British Theatre*:

> After the war – and despite the acclaimed performances of Olivier, Richardson and others . . . English acting was associated with a particular type of elegance, a natural 'upper-classness' which so prevailed that the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art was used as a finishing school when the other finishing schools were closed.
> (Elsom 1976: 24)

Despite the early influence of Theodore Komisarjevsky and the developmental work of Saint-Denis in both of his London schools, the testimonies of both Marowitz and Elsom suggest that by the late 1950s and early 1960s many leading British drama schools were failing to furnish students with the kinds of skill that were being demanded by the profession[9] – a realisation that leads us to the next stage in attempting to trace the progression of Stanislavskian methodology into the British conservatoire.

Although it may well have been the case that a number of drama schools taught unaccredited versions of Stanislavskian methodology, very few, if any, taught acting as a discrete discipline. They preferred instead to build training regimes around the skills of movement and voice and the rehearsal/performance of scene study projects and public productions which, as the earlier commentary from Charles Marowitz implies, were largely concerned with 'external technique'.[10]

In 1960, the British director John Blatchley – who had worked alongside Michel Saint-Denis and George Devine at the Old Vic Theatre School – joined the staff at Central School of Speech and Drama. Following the

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demise of the Old Vic School, Blatchley maintained close links with George Devine, for whom he often deputised at the English Stage Company. Clearly conscious of the inadequacies of actor training at many British drama schools, Blatchley set out to improve the situation. One of his first appointments was that of Harold Lang, a celebrated actor and gifted teacher known for his Stanislavskian work. Before accepting the new appointment, however, Lang insisted that Blatchley appoint Swedish dancer and choreographer, Yat Malmgren, as the School's movement director. Before long Blatchley's new team – which also included Christopher Fettes – established something of a reputation for their radical teaching methods – especially those of Yat Malmgren. Whereas many staff were intrigued and clearly welcomed Blatchley's innovations, a significant number did not, including the then principal of Central School of Speech and Drama, Gwyneth Thorburn. Apparently concerned that his movement work was compromising the vocal training by producing unhelpful 'neck tension' (Fettes 2002), Thorburn dismissed Malmgren. Before long Malmgren's departure was followed by that of Christopher Fettes, John Blatchley and several other tutors – all of whom objected to the, in their view, partisan attitudes of Central's principal. Equally important here is the realisation that members of staff were also joined by a large percentage of second-year students who were about to embark on the final year of their course.

Devoted to their teachers and inspired by the techniques to which they were being introduced, a core group of these students secured the lease of an old Methodist church in nearby Chalk Farm, where they persuaded Blatchley and his team to deliver the final year of their training. This building would later become the permanent premises of the London Drama Centre, a school that was to prove particularly instrumental in helping to ensure the continued development of Stanislavsky's work in Britain.

Until the early 1960s, the transition of Stanislavsky's methods into British theatre and training had been shaped initially by the influences of European practitioners such as Theodore Komisarjevsky and Michel Saint-Denis and subsequently by the publication of Elizabeth Hapgood's English translations of Stanislavsky's works including *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Building a Character* (1949) and *Creating a Role* (1961). Although well established in the United States, the various versions of the American 'Method' system of training had not really managed to gain a foothold in Britain. In part, this may be because of a degree of antipathy on the part of British practitioners towards the advocates of the Method:[11]

> English actors not only felt that they had been better trained in Stanislavski's methods, but also that the Method actors misunderstood them. The Method actors were too introverted in their approach, and

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> confused by the attempt to reconcile Freud, psychoanalysis and group therapy with the business of acting. 'The Method-ists', wrote Tyrone Guthrie . . . 'over-prize the search for truth as opposed to the revelation of Truth'.
>
> (Elsom 1976: 24)

It must have come as something as a surprise, therefore, when having established their new drama school at Chalk Farm, Blatchley, Malmgren and Fettes agreed to invite Method-trained Doreen Cannon, a former pupil of Uta Hagen's, to become the Drama Centre's first Head of Acting. Having trained at New York's HB Studio,[12] Cannon spent a number of years working as a professional actress in the United States before coming to Britain in 1959. In the early days of the English Stage Company, George Devine invited her to give a series of masterclasses at the Royal Court Theatre[13] for actors in company, and it is likely to have been at this point that Blatchley first encountered her. Interestingly, at around the same time Uta Hagen herself came to London to appear as Martha in the West End production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.*[14] Whilst in London she hosted series of acting workshops for British professionals – something that Doreen Cannon would later continue when Hagen returned to the United States.

Although her approach, both as a teacher and as a professional, was essentially derived from the teachings of a series of Method practitioners that included Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman and Sanford Meisner, Hagen was fundamentally a pragmatist and approached both Stanislavsky and the Method with an open mind:

> Today the Method is taught or referred to in . . . schools and universities throughout the country. It seems to be more open to a variety of interpretations and misinterpretations than the Holy Bible. As we know, Stanislavsky's discoveries were based on *his* understanding of how the great realistic actors applied the psychology of human struggles and drives, their response to emotional, physical, and mental stimuli and to their consequent actions. Sticking slavishly to his doctrines is an injustice to Stanislavski himself.
>
> (Hagen 1991:46)

Alongside a remarkable career on stage and in film, in which she worked with Marlon Brando, Jose Ferrer, Laurence Olivier, Anthony Quinn and Paul Robeson, Hagen also maintained a close association with the HB Studio in New York, where she taught with her husband, Herbert Berghof. Possibly the most acclaimed actor of all of the period's Method teachers,

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Hagen in her approach to training seemed acutely aware of the realities of the profession itself:

> There was a balance in her approach, which was method acting, but not taken to the self-immolating extremes of some of its practitioners. Though she demanded respect, she eschewed pretension. 'I teach acting as I approach it – from the human and technical problems I have experienced through living and practice,' she said.
>
> (Stearns 2004)

Given her work with Blatchley and his colleagues at the Royal Court, who, as we have seen, were keen to establish a new approach to actor training, together with her association with Uta Hagen, who won a Tony Award in 1963 for her performance in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Cannon must have seemed the perfect teacher for a school that was determined to break the mould of British actor training.

Hagen's approach to training is well documented in her two books *Respect for Acting* (Hagen 1973) and *A Challenge for the Actor* (Hagen 1991). Although neither book had been published when Doreen Cannon arrived in Britain, it is from the experiences of having been taught the exercises and techniques described in these works by Hagen herself that Cannon developed her teaching practice at the Drama Centre in the 1960s and 1970s and at RADA in the 1980s and 1990s.

Although it is unnecessary to record the Hagen/Cannon approach in full detail here, it is worth noting those aspects of the methodology which are directly influenced by the Stanislavsky 'System'. Importantly, like Saint-Denis before them, both of these teachers sought to adapt Stanislavsky's work in such a way as to harness the psychological/inner impulses of the actor to the physical/external stimuli that result from environmental factors. Unlike earlier versions of the Method, this approach acknowledges the importance of emotional *and* physical transformation and stresses the need for technical virtuosity and skill (Hagen 1991: 37–41). Distilling the main tenets of Stanislavsky's work into a series of 'Object Exercises', the training begins with a rigorous process of self-observation that is conducted through various solitary and small group scenarios designed to stimulate and enhance sensitivity to environment, objects, inner and outer impulses, personality traits, relationships and given circumstances. Each scenario is carefully monitored by the tutor, and students – who are discouraged from playing 'characters' – are required to undertake extremely detailed preparation prior to each presentation. The actor and writer Simon Callow, who trained at the Drama Centre in the early 1970s, neatly summarises the initial stages of the training:

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> The early work, in every class, was simplicity itself. Stanislavsky is based squarely on the concept of Action: that everything in a play is done *in order* to achieve a want of some kind. This resolves into the formula: OBJECTIVE (What do I want?); ACTION (What do I do to get it?); OBSTACLE (What stands in my way?). The ACTION subdivides into ACTIVITIES, the separate means that I use to get what I want. There are INNER ACTIONS (which I use on myself) and OUTER ACTIONS (on other people), INNER OBSTACLES (my problems) and OUTER OBSTACLES (the problem of other people). The whole sequence of actions in a play adds up to the character's SUPER OBJECTIVE (their whole thrust in the world of the play).
>
> (Callow 1984: 33)

The search for artistic integrity and emotional truthfulness in this work is of paramount importance, and many students, including Callow, initially resisted the possibility of appearing vulnerable. As a way of encouraging students to work more freely with emotion, Cannon also used the Emotion Memory Exercise – a Method-based technique through which the tutor leads a student to re-experience intense and often traumatising events from the past. Admitting that it did not work for him, Callow nevertheless recalls some of the remarkable results he witnessed in fellow students:

> Girls with tiny Minnie Mouse voices suddenly bellow like oxen; stoics weep hysterically; po-faced people laugh till the tears run down their faces. My own flat-mate reconstructed his expulsion from monastery school. As the memory took hold, he fell out of his chair on to the floor, dragging himself along the ground with his bare hands, his fingernails digging into the floorboards, emitting a terrifying growl from the pit of his stomach. He crawled behind the piano, panting, eyes flashing. The teacher was visibly rattled, and so were we all. It was hot stuff.
>
> (Callow 1984: 34)

What makes this interpretation of Stanislavskian theory especially interesting is the extent to which it combines an emphasis on emotional expressiveness with an understanding of the demands of classical text. Alive to accusations that early Method approaches tended to fetishise emotional engagement at the expense of stylistic considerations, Hagen developed a whole series of exercises that focused on the need for actors to develop what she referred to as a 'Historical Imagination':

> We must find our way into a playwright's particular world by exploring its content and meaning, by looking for identification with the human

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> struggles in that world. When we succeed in doing so, we may shamelessly accept a critical judgment that we have arrived at a perfect style for the play. If, on the other hand, in a mistaken hunt for reality or for lack of skill, we fail to identify with the dramatist's vision of reality, or if we wilfully ignore it or simply bend it to suit our limited vision of reality, we may be rightly accused by the viewer of having no style.
>
> (Hagen 1991: 214)

The emphasis on 'skill' and 'style' in this extract recalls similar concerns that were expressed by Michel Saint-Denis. The thing that all of these teachers – including Doreen Cannon – appear to have had in common was a desire to find ways of adapting Stanislavskian technique in a way that enabled it to respond to different forms of realism across a variety of dramatic genres and theatrical styles. Indeed, one of the most distinguishing features of the Drama Centre's provision – which continues to be the case today – is its emphasis on a classical training across a wide range of British and European texts. Although the school may well have adopted a Method-based approach to the training of actors, the application of such methods was very much concerned with addressing not just the importance of working truthfully with emotion, but also the interpretative demands of an extremely diverse repertoire.

The influence of Yat Malgren's work at the Drama Centre is also of considerable importance when considering the development of Stanislavskian methodology in British actor training. Prior to his involvement with Central School of Speech and Drama and later the London Drama Centre, Malmgren, like Doreen Cannon, had also taught at the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre. Having worked very closely with the German movement specialist Rudolf Laban in the 1950s, Malmgren went on to develop a system that has now become known as Movement Psychology. Combining C. G. Jung's theories of *Character Psychology*, Rudolf's Laban's *Movement Analysis* and Stanislavsky's *Method of Physical Actions*, this approach to actor training strives for the embodiment of inner impulses in the physical actions and gestures of a dramatic character. An understanding of the role of *sensation* is of primary importance to this work, as Simon Callow makes clear:

> It can't be demonstrated and imitated, like dancing, because its essence is experience. One learns what a sensation *is*, not what it looks like; and sensation is at the heart of acting. Emotional, intuitive, physical, and intellectual sensation; quick sensations and sustained ones; direct and flexible, bound and free, strong and light.
>
> (Callow 1984: 39)

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Elsewhere in his writings, Callow is unequivocal about the connections between Malmgren's work and that of Stanislavsky:

> Yat was particularly enthusiastic about Stanislavsky's work because he valued logic so strongly and he co-opted Stanislavsky's theory of actions – the idea that everything said or done in a play has a specific objective which governs the characters – as the underpinnings of his own work on physical expression.
>
> (Callow 2010: 91)

Complementing Malmgren's movement work and Cannon's interpretative classes, Callow also acknowledges the Drama Centre's 'intensely theoretical' (Callow 2010: 91) approach to the training – especially in relation to Christopher Fettes's classes in 'Analysis' from which he acquired 'a rigorous account of the Stanislavsky work' (Callow 1984: 31). Interestingly, it is also worth noting that mask work at the school was taught by John Blatchley, who, like George Devine, had worked with Michel Saint-Denis at the Old Vic School in developing an approach to mask which, as has previously been stated, sought to promote a dynamic interaction between a performer's inner impulses and their outward expression.

In common with both of the schools founded by Michel Saint-Denis, the establishment of the London Drama Centre sought to develop an approach to teaching that embraced Stanislavsky's methods without compromising the interpretative demands of a wide range of classical and contemporary texts. Whereas Doreen Cannon's work and its focus on psychological motivation provided a perfect platform from which to consider the inner dimensions of character development, the highly physical work of teachers such as Yat Malmgren and John Blatchley helped to ensure that the focus of such training did not become unduly dependent on what Charles Marowitz described as a 'a manic insistence on psychological reality' (Brook et al. 1963: 22). Although it is impossible to deny the influence of the American Method in the formation of the school's work, the emphasis on the need to train students for a richly varied classical repertoire coupled with intensive exposure to the techniques of classical ballet, Laban and Mask helped to ensure a continued focus on the importance of physical expressiveness and the use of gesture.

In an interview with Professor Kathy Dacre in *Teaching Stanislavski* Dee Cannon, an acting teacher at RADA and the daughter of the late Doreen Cannon, suggests that 'it wasn't until Drama Centre was formed in 1963 that the influence of Stanislavski really began to take hold'. Prior to this moment, she argues, the teaching in British drama schools tended to adopt a 'literary approach' to training in which 'the teaching had been based principally on

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rehearsal and the performance results sometimes lacked veracity and depth' (Dacre 2009: 64–5). A possible explanation for the relatively late adoption of Stanislavsky's work in British training institutions can be garnered from the following comment by John Gielgud that was included in his review of *An Actor Prepares* for *Theatre Arts Monthly*:

> In Russia and on the continent the theatre is taken seriously as an art. In Anglo-Saxon countries it is, if you generalise, a business. Alas the modern commercial theatre is bound to be a bitter disappointment to those trained in Stanislavsky's theories. But it is our theatre which is wrong, and not the training.
>
> (Croall 2001: 250)

Although there are records at Rose Bruford College indicating that, when the college was first established in the 1950s, there were classes that focussed specifically on Stanislavsky's methods, very little is known about what these classes actually entailed (Dacre 2009: 7). By the mid 1980s, however, when a graduate of the Drama Centre was appointed to lead the acting curriculum, the training evolved in such a way as to incorporate Doreen Cannon's work and the use of 'Object Exercises'.

Although it is impossible to deny the fact that many acting teachers were influenced by Stanislavsky's techniques, there is no doubt that the establishment of the London Drama Centre marks a very important stage in the evolution of his work in British conservatoire institutions. Since 1963, the Drama Centre's appropriation of Stanislavskian methodology – especially as reflected in the work of Doreen Cannon – has, through the influence of former staff and graduating students, migrated to many, many British drama schools including the Arts Educational Schools (where John Blatchley also taught), Central School of Speech and Drama, East 15, Italia Conti, Guildford School of Acting, LAMDA (the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art), the Manchester Metropolitan University School of Theatre, Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, RADA, Rose Bruford College and the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland). Whereas the training at each of these institutions varies in accordance with the philosophy and aims of each course, the interpretation of Stanislavskian methodology remains strikingly similar.

Revealingly, as RADA's improvisation tutor Chris Heimann's comparison between modern British and Russian interpretations of Stanislavskian methodology makes clear, one of the distinguishing features of British interpretations of Stanislavskian methodology has, until very recently, been a tendency to prioritise the text over the importance of physical behaviour

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(Dacre 2009: 66). Although, in part, this may well be a legacy of the 'literary' approaches referred to earlier, there is clear evidence to suggest that many schools continue to adapt and reshape Stanislavsky's work in accordance with different training contexts. At Rose Bruford College, for instance, the influence of Gardzienice and an emphasis on musicality are combined in the training to encourage enhanced degrees of fusion between the body, the voice and the text. By circumventing solely intellectual responses to text, this approach seeks to foster stronger connections to inner impulses (accessed through the use of music and rhythm based exercises) and thereby to the subconscious.

At RADA, Brigid Panet has increased physical awareness and expressiveness in her students by developing a fusion between the work of the nineteenth-century American psychologist William James and the Hungarian dancer Rudolf Laban. Though somewhat different in emphasis from the work of the Drama Centre's Yat Malmgren, the result offers an alternative psychophysical approach to performance that is designed to redirect the student actor's 'entire attention from the truth of daily life to the truth of imagination' (Dacre 2009: 66). By contrast, the work of Dee Cannon, also at RADA, utilises animal-based exercises in order to move students 'beyond normalisation towards something exciting and visceral' (Dacre 2009: 69).

A preoccupation with the need to move beyond literary or text-based approaches to training is also reflected in the enthusiasm with which the work of the American Method practitioner Sanford Meisner has been incorporated into the training regimes of many British conservatoires. Developed more than sixty years ago in New York's Neighbourhood Playhouse School, the Meisner Technique stresses the importance of physical *behaviour* as a means of accessing the emotional life of a given character. By encouraging sensitivity and responsiveness to the 'liveness' of each dramatic moment, this approach fosters increased spontaneity and interpretative freedom. In recent years Meisner's work has been adopted at variety of schools including Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, Central School of Speech and Drama, Italia Conti, Mountview, RADA and Rose Bruford College.

It is important to recognise at this point that, despite recent developments in how British drama schools have begun to reshape and re-apply Stanislavsky's work, the importance of physical training was central to the ethos informing the development of each of the London schools established by Michel Saint-Denis. Moreover, Stanislavsky's own writings and his development of the Method of Physical Actions bear testimony to the view that the need for physical expressiveness is a key tenet of his entire System. Given this observation, any residual tendency to revert to a methodology

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that prioritises literary qualities over the physical ones possibly reveals more about antique British attitudes to performance training than it does about Stanislavsky's.

In tracing the emergence of Stanislavsky's work in the British conservatoire tradition there are a number of important considerations that seem especially relevant. First, there is the discovery that at each stage of its transition there have been extremely strong links between developments at individual drama schools and the actual profession itself. Komisarjevky's work at RADA, for instance, was closely linked with his work at the Barnes Theatre and at Stratford's Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; Michel Saint-Denis's work at the LTS and the Old Vic Theatre School ran parallel to his involvement initially in his own company the Compagnie des Quinze and subsequently with London's Old Vic Theatre Company; and the emergence of the London Drama Centre owes much to the development of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre in the 1950s, where John Blatchley assisted George Devine, and Yat Malmgren and Doreen Cannon are known to have run workshops for the professional company. In direct contrast to the establishment of the Method in the United States, the progression of Stanislavskian teaching methodology in Britain has largely been shaped by the desire to respond to the interpretative demands of live *theatrical* performance as opposed to those of the *screen*.

Second, rather than focus almost exclusively on the need to nurture psychological motivation, British interpretations of Stanislavsky's methods have tended to stress the importance of 'style' as a means of connecting with and inhabiting alternative forms of realism to those which are most commonly associated with naturalism. Although it is true that Stanislavsky's development of the Method of Physical Actions contradicts the claim that his System privileges psychological rather than physical impulses, the emphasis on language, style, movement, gesture and rhythm at each of the schools we have considered has helped to refine and particularise Stanislavskian technique to enable the integration of realism with a classical performance tradition. The aim was to ensure that actors trained in this way were as adept at responding to the interpretative demands of Greek, Jacobean and Restoration drama as they were to those of classic naturalism and the experimental theatres of Brecht, Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter.

Finally, each of the schools we have examined developed training regimes in which the actor's art was defined essentially in terms that stressed the need for a transformation – physical, psychological and emotional – from the persona of the performer to that of the dramatic character. Authenticity in performances was directed not so much towards the real-life experiences of the actor as to the *imagined* personality of a fictitious character. In this way, Stanislavskian teaching practice in British drama schools tended to

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limit a propensity towards the psychological subjectivism that was often a feature of early Method-based approaches to interpretation.

Rather than absorb Stanislavsky's principles wholesale, it seems that British actor trainers have consistently sought new ways of adapting and applying his techniques to a diverse range teaching and rehearsal situations. Moreover, instead of allowing the aesthetics of naturalism to dilute the richness of its own theatrical traditions, early British drama schools pioneered an approach to training that adopted Stanislavsky's System not merely as a workable lexicon for an individual performance style, but rather as a kind of 'grammar of all styles', which, according to Michel Saint-Denis, is actually what 'it aspires to be' (Saint-Denis 1982: 38).

These days Stanislavsky's methods feature prominently in the curricula of most British drama schools and there is no doubt that his influence of his work has helped to shape contemporary performance practice. This said, it is also important to acknowledge that, just as Komisarjevsky, Saint-Denis, Devine, Blatchley and others refused to approach Stanislavsky's work as a closed system, neither do many of the teachers and practitioners working in drama schools today. The emergence of new forms of writing coupled with the growing influence of mediatised and live-art performance practice – both of which frequently challenge stable and knowable conceptions of selfhood – pose very particular challenges for a training system that is heavily dependent on coherence and unity for its effect. Whether or not Stanislavsky's System continues to exert its current influence in the future remains to be seen, but perhaps one thing is certain:

> even if the system is . . . surpassed, Stanislavski remains a sure master. He will provide the young with a point of departure towards new discoveries.
>
> (Saint-Denis 1959: 29)

Notes

1 John Gielgud enrolled as a student at RADA in 1923 and Charles Laughton enrolled in 1925. Both actors were taught by Komisarjevsky and Rains during their time there.
2 Michael Billington's 1988 biography of Peggy Ashcroft offers a clear sense of the enormous influence of *My Life in Art*. The publication quickly became Peggy's 'bible' (Billington 1988: 19).
3 Saint-Denis formed the Compagnie de Quinze in 1930. Many of the original performers in this troupe had previously been members of the Copiaus, Copeau's own company, which was based in Burgundy and disbanded in 1929.
4 For detailed accounts of Saint-Denis's responses to this production of *The Cherry Orchard* see Saint-Denis (1982: 35–7) and Saint-Denis (1960: 41–2).

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5 For a clear example of how Saint-Denis distinguished between the American 'Method' and Stanislavsky's 'System' see 'Who Alienated Konstantin Stanislavski?', a discussion at the Royal Court Theatre on the state of English acting between Peter Brook, Kenneth Haigh, Charles Marowitz and Michel Saint-Denis (Brook et al. 1963).
6 A detailed account of the events leading up to the closure of the Old Vic Theatre Centre can be found in Philip Roberts (1999: 1–5).
7 A very clear statement about what Saint-Denis believed to be the shortcomings of Stanislavsky's 'System' can be found in Saint-Denis (1959).
8 The reference to 'big style' in this context can be taken to mean 'the written styles of old theatre like Shakespeare or even like Restoration comedy' (Roberts 1999: 3)
9 Additional evidence pointing to deficiencies in the training offered at leading institutions can be found in biographical accounts of the early careers of figures such as Joan Littlewood, Harold Pinter and Joe Orton – all of whom trained at RADA.
10 Further evidence to support this view can be found in Dacre (2009: 64).
11 Further evidence to support the view that the Method was resisted in Britain can be seen in Charles Marowitz's attack on Lee Strasberg (Brook et al. 1963: 20–3).
12 The HB Studio, founded by Hagen's husband, Herbert Berghof, where she taught for many years, was founded in accordance with the same principles as the Actor's Studio, of which Berghof was a charter member (see Hagen 1991: 18).
13 Confirmed in personal communication to the author by Dee Cannon dated 16 August 2010.
14 Revealingly, Hagen spent some time training at RADA in 1936 and would later write 'It didn't matter that the training wasn't great. I learned much more about living like a "cosmopolitan"' (Hagen 1983: 82). Elsewhere she suggests that RADA's training was 'At best academic, stressing the training of voice, speech and movement, but I knew there was something wrong with being lined up against the barre to recite the speeches of Rosalind or Gertrude in unison with twenty others, with the same inflections and gestures' (Hagen 1991: xviii–xix) Her opinion of RADA's training corresponds with similar views expressed by Claude Rains and John Elsom.

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3.3 Summary

In the context of this thesis, this chapter is important in that it provides the foundations on which the discussions/analyses that take place in the publications that follow are established. Alongside an exploration and examination of the initial transition, adaptation, and application of Stanislavsky's work in the UK, the chapter also introduces important themes which are also developed further in subsequent publications, including:

- The influence of Americanised interpretations of Stanislavsky's work on British actor training, as well as important points of departure.
- Preoccupations in British theatre training with the importance of *genre*, *style*, and *physical action* – considerations that at the time seemed less important in the US. It also suggests that early applications of Stanislavsky's work in British training practice resisted the American Method's initial tendency to fetishise the importance of psychological subjectivism.
- It points to the important ways in which the theatrical profession itself has maintained strong links with training institutions – something which continues in the present day.

Although not intended at the time of writing, there is another research value that has attached itself to this chapter. In 2022, the Drama Centre closed, and it is no longer in existence. Throughout its almost 60-year history, this school distinguished itself by developing and adapting Stanislavsky's work to meet the needs of an ever-changing industry. Testimony to the quality of the training it offered is borne out by the school's impressive list of alumni, which includes Pierce Brosnan, Simon Callow, Ann-Marie Duff, Michael Fassbinder, Colin Firth, Tara Fitzgerald, Helen McCrory, Adrian Noble, and Penelope Wilton, amongst many others.

The sections pertaining to the establishment of the Drama Centre and its application of Stanislavsky's methods will prove a valuable resource to future researchers and historians interested in examining the impact of this drama school and those who worked or trained there.

Chapter Four

Shirley, D. (2016) 'His Dream of Passion: Reflections on the work of Lee Strasberg and his influence on British Actor Training' Part One

in *Stanislavski Studies* Fryer, P. (ed) – Routledge Taylor and Francis
Volume 4/Issue 1 pp. 47–62

(Published Work 2)

4.1 Introduction

Whereas the first publication included in this thesis traces the genesis of Stanislavsky's influence and development in the UK, this publication commences with an overview of the extent to which the work of Russian émigrés Richard Boleslavsky (1889–1937) and Maria Ouspenskaya (1876–1949) laid the foundations for what was to become known as American Method acting. Although they were both former students of Stanislavsky, Boleslasvky, in particular, promoted the use of Stanislavsky's affective memory technique. One of their students for whom this work proved particularly compelling was Lee Strasberg (1901–82).

The previous publication highlighted Saint Denis' aim to 'avoid the danger of becoming sensational, sentimental or merely empty' (see Shirley 2012, p. 44) and stressed his unflinching commitment to the importance of style in an actor's work. Concerns of this kind were in part a response to the controversies surrounding the work of Lee Strasberg and his use of what had become known as the emotion memory exercise.

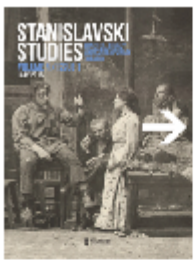
This article takes a very in-depth look at Strasberg's use of the emotion memory technique and some of the controversies surrounding it, with particular emphasis on the following:

- The relationship between this exercise and Stanislavsky's affective memory technique, including the nuances/modifications that Richard Boleslavsky brought to this work.
- The extent to which Lee Strasberg, influenced by Freud, brought a psychoanalytical perspective to the exercise, often at the expense of the development of the dramatic character or the situations represented in the actual text.
- The chapter also examines the use of a Strasberg version of the exercise at the Drama Centre, London, which pioneered the development of Stanislavsky's work in the UK.
- The chapter traces Strasberg's influence in several UK drama schools, including Rose Bruford College, the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and Birmingham School of Acting.

The inclusion of this article at this point in the thesis is important in that it provides a clear context in which to appreciate why British actor training sought to resist the more introspective aspects of Strasberg's application of Stanislavsky's methods. It is worth noting that Michel Saint Denis (1897–1971), Glen Byam Shaw (1904–1986), and George Devine (1910–1966)

were all contemporaries of Strasberg and would have been very aware both of his work and his reputation.

4.2 Journal Article



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His dream of passion: *reflections on the work of Lee Strasberg and his influence on British actor training*

David Shirley

ABSTRACT
The first of two 'companion' articles examining the work of Lee Strasberg, this discussion begins with an exploration of Lee Strasberg's interpretation and adaptation of Stanislavski's 'Emotion Memory' exercise before proceeding to examine the efficacy of his version of the technique and consider the extent to which some of the persistent criticisms surrounding his approach are tenable. Has his work been misjudged and misrepresented in recent years or are some of the concerns that have arisen justified? The discussion will then move on offer a brief outline of some of Strasberg's other techniques and consider the degree to which his approach may have influenced actor-training environments in British schools and colleges.

KEYWORDS
Lee Strasberg; Stanislavski; emotion memory; actors studio and method acting

Lee Strasberg's influence on the development of actor training in the 20th Century cannot be over-estimated. His interpretation of Stanislavski's work and the exercises and techniques he developed at the Actor's Studio, in New York City were to have a profound influence on many of the world's most acclaimed actors including Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Paul Newman, Anne Bancroft, Ellen Burstyn, Al Pacino, Sally Field, Robert De Niro, Harvey Keitel and many more. Notwithstanding his high profile, however, and the extraordinary impact of his work, Strasberg's approach to actor training and many of the methods he adopted have frequently been maligned and dismissed – often by some of his closest associates. Sanford Meisner, for instance, who worked alongside Strasberg at the now famous Group Theatre in the 1930s, took great exception to his 'introspective' approach:

> 'I told Lee when he was alive. I said to him, "You introvert the already introverted. All actors", I said, "like all artists, are introverted because they live on what's going on in their instincts, and to attempt to make that conscious is to confuse the actor". Needless to say, he didn't pay any attention to me …'
>
> (Meisner and Longwell 1987: 59)

Stella Adler, another Group Theatre colleague and highly acclaimed acting teacher, was equally as critical of Strasberg's work:

> '"… we don't need your emotion; we need the text," she tells a student, with a wicked smile. "Don't bring it down to the level of the street"; "don't bring it down to your own small selves," she repeats, over and over, deploring the kind of casualness and intimacy that is often in evidence

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> in Studio work. "The intimate tone is the tone you use in life; it's boring, disgusting, like seeing a couple of dogs playing; you think if you're being intimate, you're democratic, which is useless for art, and boring without end. That low tone is for the mice.'"
>
> (Foster Hirsch 1984: 214)

Similarly, whilst David Mamet, in his book *True and False* (1997) attacks the Method *per se*, his frequent allusions to the use of Emotional Memory appear to implicate Strasberg's work in particular:

> '"Emotional Memory", "sense memory", and the tenets of the Method back to and including Stanislavsky's trilogy are a lot of hogwash. This "method" does not work; it cannot be practiced; it is, in theory, design, and supposed execution supererogatory – it is as useless as teaching pilots to flap their arms while in the cockpit in order to increase the lift of the plane.'
>
> (David Mamet 1998: 12)

Or even more directly:

> 'The addition of "emotion" to a situation which does not organically create it is a lie. First of all, it is not emotion. It is a counterfeit of emotion, and it is cheap.'
>
> (Ibid: 78)

In recent years, Strasberg's work has also attracted criticism from scholars including John Harrop (1992), Richard Hornby (1992), Jonathan Pitches (2006) and Rosemary Malague (2012). Whilst, in each case, we are offered different perspectives on Strasberg's work, all of the abovementioned academics highlight significant flaws in relation to some of the assumptions on which his work was based and the teaching practices he adopted.[1]

Yet, despite wide-ranging criticism from a variety of parties, Strasberg's work continues to be extremely popular amongst actors – both in the UK and in the USA. The Actors' Studio, of which Strasberg was the Artistic Director between 1951 and 1982 continues to thrive – in large part due to his legacy – and the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute, founded in in 1969, and credited with training Angelina Jolie, Scarlett Johansson, Matt Dillon and Alec Baldwin - is now well established both in New York and in Hollywood. In London, Sam Rumbelow's Method Acting Studio, with a specific focus on Strasberg's techniques, attracts students from all over Europe and a number of teachers working at drama schools in the UK continue to use the techniques he developed.

So that we can begin to evaluate the effectiveness of Strasberg's approach to acting and thereby begin to understand his lasting appeal, it is worth taking some time to look at the roots from which his practice developed and the key ideas that shaped his approach to Emotional Memory work.

The arrival of the Moscow Art Theatre on Broadway in 1923 was to prove a formative moment for the young Lee Strasberg. Led by the actor/director, Konstantin Stanislavski, the Company performed works by Anton Chekhov (*Three Sisters, Uncle Vanya and The Cherry Orchard*), Maxim Gorky (*The Lower Depths*) and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (*The Brothers Karamazov*). Although, by this stage, Strasberg had already developed an intense fascination with theatre, the impact of seeing Stanislavski and the MAT perform was to prove decisive in determining his future:

> 'In the Moscow Art Theatre, we saw for the first time the possibility of that greatness being shared by talents that were not necessarily on the same level, yet were capable of the same intensity, reality, belief and truth. These experiences were a major factor in the stimulus toward further advances in American theatre and were directly responsible not only for my own

> development, but for the creation of the Group Theatre…In 1924, as a result to a large extent of the visit of the Moscow Art Theatre, I finally decided to become a professional actor.'
>
> (Lee Strasberg 1988: 40–41)

When the performances on Broadway came to an end and MAT actors, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya remained in New York and established the American Laboratory Theatre, in order to train actors and promote Stanislavski's teachings in the USA, Strasberg, together with Harold Clurman, Stella Adler and Francis Ferguson were amongst some of the earliest students to enrol.

Importantly, both Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya had worked in close collaboration with Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre, where they appeared in some of the company's most celebrated productions. In addition, they were both early members of the First Studio of the Moscow Arts Theatre, established by Stanislavski in 1911, with the aim of training actors in the new techniques he was developing. Indeed, Richard Boleslavsky also directed the School's debut production - Herman Heijermans 1901 play *The Good Hope*. Over a decade later, when the MAT visited New York 1923/4 to perform on Broadway, Boleslavsky – who had left Russia some years earlier – rejoined the Company to work both as an assistant director and as an actor – notably alternating with Stanislavski in the role of Satin in Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that each of these practitioners was well equipped to begin the process of transmitting Stanislavskian techniques to fledging American practitioners.

Emulating the values of the MAT, the American Laboratory Theatre eschewed an emphasis on the individual in favour of an ethos that stressed collaboration and absolute dedication to the interests of the ensemble. For Boleslavsky, the notion of theatre as a collective 'team' effort was paramount, as is evidenced by Foster Hirsch's citation of his entry to the 1924–25 edition of the American Laboratory Theatre Bulletin, in which Boleslavsky applauds the achievements of the first group of students on becoming:

> "…an organic group, similar to the Guild of medieval times, which, in the collective practice of it's craft, has become a living theatre – that is to say, a theatre in which each actor strives to act his part, however humble, as if it were a major part in the play but harmonized toward a perfect ensemble." (Foster Hirsch 1984: 60)

Broadly speaking there were three elements that made up the curriculum that Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya created for their newly formed school. The first related to what Boleslavsky has referred to as the 'external' aspects of an actor's work and included movement training (ballet, eurythmics, mime), voice, stage combat and make-up classes. The second element was designed to stimulate the 'inner' realms of experience and expression and included exercises aimed at fostering the imagination, concentration, relaxation, sense memory and activities aimed at promoting emotional recall. Finally, the third element of the training regime sought to enhance the intellectual, political and cultural awareness of students and develop sensitivity to the environments in which they practice their art. Like Stanislavski, Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya valued a 'holistic' approach to training so that different aspects of the curriculum were carefully integrated and framed by visits from guest speakers (e.g. Jacques Copeau) and regular lectures from Boleslavsky himself.[2]

At this point it is important to note that whilst there is no real evidence to suggest that either Boleslavsky or Ouspenskaya strayed from the principles informing Stanislavski's

core training regime, the emphasis on his early work at the MAT and Boleslavsky's very particular interpretation of Emotion Memory – helped sow the seeds for some of the more polarized positions that fueled the often heated arguments, misunderstandings, and confusion that characterized American transmissions of Stanislavski's work for much of the rest of the 20th Century.

Stanislavski's most detailed discussion of Emotion Memory appears in Chapter Nine of An Actor's Work.[3] Whilst it is very clear from the examples given and exercises cited, that he places great emphasis on the ability to draw from the emotional experiences and feelings stored in our memories, he also resists any attempt to give the impression that we can control the means by which we access such feelings:

> 'They are direct, strong, vivid but they don't occur onstage in the way you imagine, that is for long periods, or for an entire act. They burst through, here and there, but only as discrete moments…One word of warning. We aren't masters of spur-of-the moment experiences, they master us. And so all we can do is leave it to nature, and say to ourselves, if spontaneous feelings do arise, then let them appear when they are needed, lest they run counter to the play and the role'.
>
> (Konstantin Stanislavski 2008: 208)

We will return to the importance of the 'play' and the 'role' in due course, but for the moment, it is worth pausing to reflect a moment on some of the content of this chapter. Clearly recognizing the extent to which sensitivity to stored memories can enrich the actor's craft, Stanislavski stops short of actually prescribing tasks or exercises designed to control or manipulate such memories. Instead, through the persona of Kostya (the imaginary student) he narrates the experience of witnessing a tragic accident involving the death of an old beggar. Over time the memory of this event becomes more intense and varied, prompting various responses and feelings in Kostya that are usually shaped by contexts of his own actual lived experience. These range from feelings of depression immediately after witnessing the incident; to fitfulness and terror during the sleeping hours that followed it; to feelings of frustration and indignation at the futility and 'cruelty of life' (2008: 204) a couple of days later; to something more akin to the poetic, even 'celebratory' (Ibid) a week or so after the event took place. As more time elapses, the memory of the accident stimulates other seemingly separate feelings – in this case an incident involving a grieving Serb and his dying monkey (Ibid: 205).

When Kostya shares his experiences of the incident with Tortsov (the imaginary acting teacher), the latter's response is telling:

> 'What happened to you…illustrates very well the process of crystallization which takes place in our Emotion Memory. Everybody, in their time sees not one but many tragic accidents. They are stored in the memory but not every detail, only the features that have made the most impact…This is a synthesis of all like feelings. It is related not to the small, individual parts of the incident but to all similar cases. This is memory on a grand scale. It is clearer, deeper, denser, richer in content and sharper than reality itself.'
>
> (Konstantin Stanislavski 2008: 206)

The suggestion here is that Emotional Memory affords a rich, complex, but necessarily *general* landscape that can be drawn from in order to stimulate and nourish feelings and responses in the actor that are 'similar to the role' (Ibid: 209) represented in the play. Indeed, it can be clearly argued that Stanislavski cautions against any attempt to unpick the minutiae of stored memories:

> '…give up the idea of hunting old beads – they are beyond recall, like yesterday, like childhood joys, like first love. Try to let each day bring forth new, fresher inspiration in you, one sufficient unto the day.'
>
> (Ibid: 207)

For Stanislavski, Emotion Memory represents a source of inspiration and motivation for the actor; a repository that can be used creatively to bring '*a logical, truthful…genuine… physically embodied*' (Ibid: 196) approach to a dramatic character.

Aside from some experiments with lighting and sound effects, or furniture and props as a means of exploring how to foster different emotional responses in the audience as well as the performer, there are no practical exercises included in this section of the book that focus on the psychological makeup of the students. On the contrary, Tortsov suggests the opposite:

> '…the things around us influence the way we feel. And that happens not only in real life but on the stage too…In the hands of a talented director, all the production values, the theatrical effects…become a work of art. When they relate to the inner feelings of the character, they become much more meaningful than in real life. The mood they evoke, if it matches the play, focuses attention marvelously on a character's inner life, and influences the actor's mind and feeling. So, the externals of the setting and the mood they create is a stimulus for us.
>
> (Ibid: 212)

In the context of the present discussion Stanislavski's focus on 'external' modes of representation highlights an important consideration when evaluating the transmission of his work to the USA, as is clearly demonstrated in Richard Boleslavsky's articulation of Emotional Memory.

Although in broad terms, Boleslasky's interpretation of Emotion Memory is similar to that of Stanislavski's in that it emerges from the work of French psychologist, Théodule Ribot, his focus on the need to unpick the specific details of individual memories represents an important point of departure. Whereas Stanislavski cautions against 'hunting old beads' (see above), Boleslavsky advises the opposite, as the following comparison suggests:

> 'Don't imagine you can return to yesterday's memory, be content with today's. Learn to accept memories that have come to life afresh.'
>
> (Konstantin Stanislavski 2008: 206)
>
> 'The point is to bring yourself back as you were then, to command your own ego, go where you want to go, and then when you are there, to stay where you went.'
>
> (Richard Boleslavsky 2003: 33)

Whereas for Stanislavski, the 'slippery' nature of emotion memory prompts him to recommend an approach based in intuition and adaptation, Boleslavsky places much more emphasis on the ability to manage, control and manipulate such stimuli. This difference in emphasis provides the key to understanding the driving force behind Strasberg's interpretation and development of the Emotion Memory technique.

In his book *Science and the Stanislavski Tradition of Acting* (2006: 105), Jonathan Pitches sheds further light on some of the key differences between Boleslavsky's approach to the teaching of Emotion Memory and that of Stanislavski. These include the following:

- The 'accidental' nature of Kostya's recounting of the street accident for Tortsov is set in contrast to the intentionality of Boleslavsky's prompting of the Creature's memory in his Second Lesson.[4]

- Unlike the incident Kostya describes – which has no connection to his personal history, Boleslavsky encourages the Creature to recall an incident involving a close family member.
- Whereas Kostya's recollections are revealed in front of the class, the Creature's are recalled privately in a context reminiscent of the processes adopted in psychoanalysis.

Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that the work on Emotion Memory was the most important feature of Boleslavsky's work at the American Laboratory Theatre, it is perhaps not unjust to suggest that it was this feature of the training that proved the most compelling to Lee Strasberg, as is confirmed by the following observation by Foster Hirsch:

> 'Strasberg's attendance at the Lab had been irregular and confined for the most part to 1923 and 1924, when Boleslavsky's emphasis on affective memory was more pronounced than it was to be at any later period. Along with Boleslavsky, most of his listeners at the Lab grew disenchanted with the technique – but not Strasberg, who was drawn to it because it confirmed his readings in Freud and because he felt it led to the kind of truthful acting style he was interested in… His interpretation of Stanislavski, as filtered through his partial understanding of Boleslavsky's talks, comprised a minority of one; and in the face of often belligerent opposition, Strasberg continued to use affective memory as a cornerstone of his method.'
>
> (Foster Hirsch 1984: 75)

That Strasberg was heavily influenced by Freud's writings is evidenced in his own book, *A Dream of Passion* (1988); in Robert H. Hethmon's *Strasberg at the Actors Studio: Tape Recorded Sessions* (1991); and in *The Lee Strasberg Notes* edited by Lola Cohen. Various examples of Strasberg's 'psychoanalytical' approach to actor training can be found in his chapter entitled "The Voyage Continues II" in *A Dream of Passion* (1988:94–122). The sequence, for instance, where Strasberg recalls the actress diagnosed with arthritis in the neck, and who as a result of his 'guidance' discovers that this discomfort was due to childhood conditioning as a result of tension caused when sharing a bed with her sister - who had threatened to 'kill her if she didn't lie still' (Ibid: 97). In a later sequence involving the use of a relaxation technique, we learn of an actress displaying tension and taking up an 'oppositional' stance when this was pointed out to her. Assuming a manner similar to that of a 'psychoanalyst', Strasberg subsequently elicits from the actress concerned that she had been physically punished as a child - something to which he attributes 'the rigidity of her neck and back muscles' (Ibid: 98). Later still, during an Emotional Memory exercise as preparation for a scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where an actress '…seemed to be in conflict or in contradiction with what she was trying to will herself to do' (Ibid: 99–100), we learn that her difficulties stemmed from her father's conviction that actresses are 'all tramps' and his insistence that she '…at least sit ladylike' (Ibid). For Strasberg it was this '…strong primary conditioning' (Ibid: 100) that was the cause of tension in her body – especially, and 'unusually', according to Strasberg in her legs and feet.

One of the clearest examples demonstrating the extent to which the language of Strasberg's teaching practice was closely aligned to that used in psychoanalysis can be found in Lola Cohen's edited notes taken from his classes:

> 'Often when you re-live an emotional memory and use it in your work, it's one that has been sublimated, in the Freudian sense. When the emotion is released, the feelings remain, but the block is eliminated. It's freed. You feel as if you've been absolved. The therapeutic value in art is the living out of emotions that made you feel guilty, for example, or have been otherwise stifled'. (Lola Cohen 2010: 28)

Concepts and ideas associated with notions of 'regression', 'blockage', 'substitution' 'sublimation', 'release', 'guilt', 'fear', 'therapy' are a common feature of much of Strasberg's writings as well as the recorded transcripts of his classes. If the language used is suggestive of that used by the probing analyst, then his actual behavior helped to reinforce such an impression - as the following testimony from a former student at the Actors Studio confirms:

> 'He…brought in Freud in his sessions with actors in what he called 'Affective Memory'. That is, instead of lying on a couch, the actor sat in a chair (straight backed), relaxed as fully as possible, eyes closed, while a teacher (Strasberg) led him in a kind of dream-like sensory journey into an incident in the actor's past experience…to bring the actor in vital touch with something traumatic, or joyful, or ecstatic in his past and which led him in his acting to be more aware and active (responsive) to his own qualities'.
>
> (Letter from Richard Durham to Jonathan Pitches. Cited in Pitches 2006: 116)

The view of himself as a kind of 'medic' tending his patients is underlined by the discovery that Strasberg frequently came into physical contact with his students. In the case involving the actress who believed she suffered from arthritis, for instance, he 'supported her neck and encouraged her to rest it in [his] hand'; (1988: 97) for the actress who had been punished as a child he initially 'lifted her arm' before he 'lightly hit' it (Ibid: 98).

The combination of the 'probing analyst' and the benevolent but nonetheless 'paternalistic medic', appear to have transformed Strasberg's classroom activities beyond the merely pedagogical to something more akin to a psychoanalyst's consultancy, where patients (actors) sought freedom from the emotional blockages they had accumulated through their lives.

Reaction to this approach was often extremely hostile and we can trace the origins of such hostility back to the early days of the Group Theatre, of which Strasberg together with Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford was a co-founder. Forged from a desire to address 'the truest preoccupations of an intelligent American audience' (Sharon M. Carnicke: 1998:45), the Group Theatre emulated the ensemble and creative ethos of the Moscow Art Theatre. Like the American Laboratory Theatre, it sought to advance the work of Stanislavski through the presentation of often gritty, realistic dramas that were reflective of contemporary American culture and society. With the demise of the American Laboratory Theatre in 1931, and given Strasberg's intense passion for acting, it seemed natural for him to take charge of the actor training aspects of the Group's work. An early indication of Strasberg's impact in this area is signaled in Sharon Helen Chinoy's observation that Group Theatre audiences were left 'flabbergasted' by the presentation of 'truthful emotions' and that watching a performance was 'like witnessing a real accident' (Ibid: 50).

Focusing mainly on improvisation and emotional memory exercises, Strasberg's methods were often treated with skepticism. Fellow company member Phoebe Brand, for instance recalls getting to the point where 'I couldn't stomach the affective memory' and that 'it makes for a moody, personal, self-indulgent acting style'. Moreover, she argues that 'Lee crippled a lot of people' (Foster Hirsch 1984: 77).

Another Group Theatre actor, Margaret Barker, recalls that 'He had me going over and over a painful experience - my roommate had been killed the year before – until I thought I was going to crack…On one of the late rehearsals, I flung my purse in Strasberg's face. He had me doing an emotional memory, and I felt I wasn't playing the play.' (Ibid)

Strasberg's emphasis on personal psychology – often at the expense of work on the 'play' and the actual 'role' itself - was a source of tension amongst many Group Theatre actors – something that was further exacerbated when Stella Adler – also a Group Theatre

actor – following five weeks of intensive training with Stanislavski himself, returned from Paris is 1934. Her subsequent proclamation that, according to Stanislavski, the Group's approach to acting was incorrect in that it neglected the importance of the actual play – the given circumstances, the role, the physical environment and the text itself - resonates with Stanislavski's own writings and his caution against the temptation to be drawn by those 'spur-of-the-moment experiences' that may 'run counter to the play and the role' (see earlier quotation). Adler's announcement was to prompt a derisory rebuttal from Strasberg when he declared 'Stanislavski doesn't know. I know.' (Ibid: 79).[5]

As is well documented, the ensuing conflict that arose between those who subscribed to Adler's version of Stanislavski's work and those who advocated Strasberg's was to last for many decades. Without wishing to rehearse the rights or wrongs of each side of the argument here, it is worth highlighting the point that, unlike Strasberg – who at an early stage in his career appears to have arrived at a fixed methodology from which he seems never to have strayed, Stanislavski's work was constantly evolving and changing – even at the time of his death. The move from the initial focus on the inner life of the actor to an increased emphasis on external expressiveness and the physical environment in which the action is situated represents an important watershed in Stanislavski's work. His belief in the need for balance and exchange between internal and external realms of expression, which subsequent teachers appear to have embraced – notably Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner and Robert Lewis – appears to have been largely ignored by Strasberg.

Later on in his career, during his time at the Actors' Studio, Strasberg's work was also a subject of heated debate. Although many of the techniques he developed – especially those involving relaxation, sense memory, the private moment, song and dance, and exercises for movement and voice often produced startling results, the Emotional Memory Exercise continued to form the cornerstone on which his version of the Method was established. It was also an ongoing source of controversy.

Aside from the concern that this exercise involved an uncomfortable degree of intrusion into formative events in the actual past life of the actor, the technique also fostered an approach to acting that encouraged patterns of behavior and expression that were reflective of the actual personality traits of the 'performer' rather than the imagined behavior of a dramatic character. Indeed, the very essence of the exercise - at least as taught by Strasberg - resisted the aesthetics of 'physical or vocal transformation' in favour of an appearance that seemed, by comparison, to be much more spontaneous, unpredictable and lifelike. For many who studied at The Actors' Studio, there is no doubt that this approach proved highly effective (for example, in performances by Jon Voight, Dustin Hoffman and Sally Field), but one of the consequences of this approach was to narrow the frame of artistic and imaginative expression so that it was often unclear as to which persona was being presented – that of the actor or the character. Foster Hirsch expresses the point eloquently:

> 'I was sometimes bothered that the distance between the actor and the character – the inevitable gap between simply being and giving a performance – was not clarified, as if to be yourself in a believable way was enough.'
>
> (Foster Hirsch 1984:221)

Revealingly, given that one of the core principles of the Group Theatre was to establish an ensemble-based, collaborative ethos, it seems ironic that one of its co-founders went on to develop and promote an introspective and highly idiosyncratic style of performance – often at the expense of the play and the other actors working in it:

> 'Under Strasberg, Method acting became more confessional than communal. Such an emphasis on the actor in isolation undermined the ensemble-oriented aspects of Stanislavsky's system, producing actors like James Dean, whose on-screen aura of alienation from those around him was enhanced by a solipsistic acting technique that could lead him to step on the speeches of his fellow performers with line readings of his own that were often inaudible.'[6]
>
> (Virginia Wright-Wexman in Pamela Robertson Wojcik (ed) 2004:131)

The accusation of 'solipsism' in part, at least, can be attributed to the work with Emotional Memory, but it would be inaccurate to claim that all those who encountered the exercise had negative experiences. For many actors who trained with Strasberg, the results proved highly enabling. Academy award-winning actress Estelle Parsons, who studied with Strasberg in the 1950s and 60s feels that his '…gift was to inspire people to function at their highest level' (Hirsch: 167) and that his teaching taught her 'more and more to be self-aware… to be as aware of yourself and your behaviour as you can possibly be'[7]. Of the Emotion Memory Exercise, Parsons observes that 'Every human being has a rich inner life, and the inner technique teaches you to train the emotional life, making it accessible' (Hirsch: 211)

Salem Ludwig, also a regular at the Actors' Studio and who played Ferapont in Strasberg's 1963 production of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, needed no persuasion as to the value of the emotion memory technique asserting that 'Actors who don't use this technique are faking it…Teachers who reject it are afraid of it…' (Ibid).

Strasberg himself, aware of the controversy surrounding this aspect of his work, defined it as follows:

> 'Affective memory is not mere memory. It is memory that involves the actor personally, so that deeply rooted emotional experiences begin to respond. His instrument awakens and he becomes capable of the kind of living on the stage which is essentially reliving. The original emotional experience can be happy or frightening or fearsome. It can be concerned with jealousy or hate or love. It can be illness or accident. It can be anything that your mind immediately goes to when you ask yourself "Has anything strange, unusual, or exciting happened to me?"'
>
> (Robert H. Hethmon 1965:109)

Interestingly, the above statement makes no mention of the dramatic character or of the processes by which an emotional memory can translate from the *actual* personal life of the performer to the imagined persona of a *fictional* character. Instead there is a clear emphasis on the actor 'reliving' 'deeply rooted emotional experiences'. Although later on in *Tape-Recorded Sessions*, Strasberg goes on to say that an actor '…must fuse his personal emotion with the character and event he is portraying.' (Ibid: 111) the requirement 'that he listens and answers naturally', when responding to another actor's text, whilst simultaneously concentrating 'on the objects of his own event and thus to fuse his material with the author's.' (Ibid) goes some way toward justifying Wright-Wexman's observations about the Strasbergian actor's tendency towards 'solipsism'.

Although – as we have seen - it may well be the case that, for many actors, Strasberg's use of Emotion Memory techniques have proved instructive and empowering, the concerns that have repeatedly plagued his application of the exercise have served to generate suspicion and skepticism not just about the exercise itself, but about Strasberg's work more generally. Some of the most compelling concerns – which Strasberg failed to adequately address – include criticisms related to (a) a tendency to allow the exercise to detract from the textual demands of the play itself; (b) a propensity towards overly indulgent and introspective performances; (c) the preference for the 'relived' emotional experiences of the performer

in place of an 'imaginary' creation of the fictional experiences of the character; (d) echoing anxieties expressed by Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, a conviction that the technique ignores Stanislavski's call for a balance between the inner and outer realms of experience.

Inevitably, one of the consequences of focusing on a single aspect of Strasberg's work is the danger that it can lead to a skewed understanding of his methodology. Whilst it may well be the case that the some of the controversy surrounding the Emotion Memory Exercise is justified, it is also important to at least acknowledge other aspects of his work – especially given that many of the exercises he developed continue to be used consciously and often unconsciously by acting teachers today. Before considering his impact on British actor training, therefore, it is important to offer a brief overview of some of the other important techniques Strasberg developed in his work.

Relaxation

As a pre-curser to entering an emotional memory exercise, Strasberg strongly emphasised the need for relaxation. 'Remembered emotion', which has continuity and logic, he argued '… is the only emotion that can be the basis of art'. Citing William Wordsworth's famous phrase 'emotion remembered in tranquility',[8] Strasberg advocated sitting in a chair as a device for achieving the appropriate kind of relaxation needed for concentration. The control of energy rather than comfort is the primary aim of this work. Once seated areas of tension in the face, neck, throat shoulders, body are eradicated. 'Emotions' he advises, can be lodged in your body like bones. Psychologists and psychiatrists tell us that an emotional trauma can get tied up in the muscles, and until you release those muscles, you cannot release the emotion'. (Cohen 2010: 10). For Strasberg relaxation techniques were an essential part of his training practice.

Sense memory

As an accompaniment to the Emotion Memory exercises, Strasberg also used a range of Sense Memory techniques designed to test concentration and responsiveness and develop the imagination. Starting at home with real objects – breakfast drinks, mirrors, hairbrushes etc. that are then replaced in the classroom with imaginary equivalents, the exercises gradually become more complex involving tastes and smells, extremes of cold or heat, surrounding environments, personal objects and old acquaintances.

Animal work

Having begun to develop the actor's capacity for concentration and control, Strasberg moved onto Animal Exercises designed to stimulate powers of observation and imitation. These exercises demand not just external imitation and muscle work to capture 'physical' characteristics, but also an exploration of the chosen animal's emotional life. Through careful observation, exploration and experimentation, the animal's characteristics assume the human form of the character and provide a basis for transformational work.

Private moment

Designed to respond to Stanislavski's articulation of the problems associated with self-consciousness in front of an audience – this exercise is Strasberg's version of a 'private in public'

exercise. The exercise should be taken from the reality of our daily lives and involve selecting *'something that you would never do in front of anyone'*. (Cohen 2010: 25). Importantly, it isn't the deed itself that is private, but rather it's significance to the individual.

Song and dance exercises

The aim of these exercises is to stimulate both external and internal responses in the actor. Assuming a neutral position in front of the tutor and establishing eye contact with the rest of the class, the exercise begins with singing aloud on a single breath from the lungs, a single syllable of a well-known song until the breath is fully expired. This is followed by an inhalation of more breath before moving to the next syllable. Whilst, externally, attention is focused on breathing, voice control and physical relaxation, the inner energy tunes into the actors' impulses, feelings and responses to the situation – which can involve laughter, crying, anger, embarrassment etc. The important thing is for the actor to begin to become aware of these impulses and make contact with them. As the exercise develops, repetitive movement is added and the vocal pattern is changed. By working in this way Strasberg believed that actors became more aware of their own natural rhythms and patterns of expression and in so doing can begin to understand how the fusion between inner and outer realms of expression can be shaped and adapted when working on a character. For Strasberg there '…was a definite correlation between what the actor was asked to accomplish in the song-and-dance exercise, and the results it led to in dealing with the problem of expression.' (Strasberg 1988:158).

There are, of course, many other exercises that Strasberg deployed, but the techniques listed above represent the foundations on which much of his practice both as a teacher and as a director were established. A fuller discussion of these and other aspects of Strasberg's work will appear in a companion article to be published in a future edition of this journal.

As we have discovered, Strasberg's work is often marked by the controversy that surrounds it, but this has not prevented it from enjoying universal appeal in drama schools and universities. Perhaps not surprisingly, his work continues to thrive in the USA – not just at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute, but also in many university departments and performing arts colleges. But what about Strasberg's influence in the UK? Interestingly, like other teachers of the Method, Strasberg wasn't especially impressed with the 'English' (for which read British) acting tradition:

'The attitude of resting on one's laurels is a chain around the neck of the English Theatre'

> '…the English theatre represents an outdated style. There is an English tradition in acting, but the English theatre now only holds onto the externals of that tradition. What is now created on the English stage is not humanity, not people, not reality, not even conviction. It is acting. It offers the best that acting has and therefore also the worst.'
>
> (Robert H. Hethmon 1965:378–9)

Harsh criticism indeed, but to what degree has actor training in the UK absorbed the values reflected in Strasberg's approach to training?

One of the first schools to adopt his approach was Drama Centre, – now part of the University of the Arts London. In 1983, Reuven Adiv – who trained with Strasberg at the Actors Studio in the 1950s – was invited by the then Principal, Christopher Fettes, to assume the role of Head of Acting at the School. Clearly an admirer of Strasberg's approach, Adiv

appears to have readily adopted most of the Strasbergian techniques he encountered at the Actors' Studio:

> 'I teach what I learned from Lee with the difference that I always keep the students focused on why we do exercises. Lee did not stress this in detail…Method exercises sharpen our awareness and help us to reevaluate ourselves as individuals so we can come to know the things that affect us.'
>
> (Eva Mekler 1989: 80)

Although in the interview with Eva Mekler, Adiv makes it clear that he used Emotion Memory exercises (he adopts the phrase 'Affective Memory'), when subsequently asked directly by Mekler if he uses Strasberg's Emotional Exercises, he adds something of a caveat:

> 'We do not talk about emotion at all. Emotions are a by-product of, or response to, something that you want from the other characters in the play. Very often a student falls into the trap of working to express anger or frustration, rather than focusing on why, as the character, he has come into a specific situation, what problem he has to solve there, and what means his character will use to get what he wants and stick to his choices.'
>
> (Ibid: 84)

What makes this observation interesting is that whereas Strasberg's use of Emotion Memory work often led him away from the demands of the text (see earlier commentary by Margaret Barker), Adiv's application of it maintained a strong focus on the needs of the character and the dramatic situation. As a consequence, the tendency towards introspection and self-indulgence was greatly reduced. Vladimir Mirodan, who was Principal of the School between 2001 and 2011, recalls that Adiv was an 'excellent teacher',[9] whose work, at that time, was at the very core of the training. Indeed in 2002, when the NCDT[10] (now Drama UK), undertook a re-accreditation visit to the School, Mirodan recalls that some initial concerns as a result of witnessing a student becoming highly emotional in Adiv's acting class, were quickly allayed when an hour later the same student was seen in another class completely calm and in control.

Although, as a result Adiv's influence, Strasberg's work represented an important component of the training at Drama Centre for over twenty years, more recently such influence has subsided so that currently Strasberg's techniques are no longer as significant a component of the training curriculum as they once were. This said, Annie Tyson, a teacher at the School and former Head of the Acting course, continues to teach what she too refers to as the Affective Memory Exercise. Having developed and refined it, she restricts the use of the technique to third year actors. 'This is important', she asserts, 'because by this time in the training they have developed a strong sense of the ensemble and work with high levels of trust and sensitivity'. Ensuring that the work is undertaken in a 'non-sensational atmosphere', Tyson makes it clear that each exercise is carefully managed and rigorously de-briefed so that all students learn from the exercise. Far from adopting an 'introspective' approach to the exercise, Tyson ensures that it is fully expressed to all of the observers that are present in the classroom. 'This is a simple technique', she argues, 'one of many, to be used in the service of the requirements of the dramatic text'. In Tyson's view, when used with care, sensitivity, and absolute professionalism, this exercise represents an important tool for exploring and learning from the 'inner landscape of the human being'.[11]

In common with many other key practitioners, it may occasionally be the case that acting teachers deploy Strasberg's methods without consciously identifying them or labeling them

as such. Thomasina Unsworth, for example, who teaches acting at Rose Bruford College, uses a range of sensory exercises involving taste, smell, touch, sound etc. as a means of stimulating the imaginations of her students and increasing their sensitivity. Acutely aware of some of the 'myths' surrounding his work, she feels that these sometimes obscure the obvious benefits of the techniques he developed. Through the adaptation of some of Strasberg's exercises related to daydreaming, visualization and free associations she 'fine tunes' the work of classes and rehearsals so that actors understand the importance of specificity and detail.

Another Rose Bruford College tutor, Julian Jones, who teaches both Acting and Contextual Studies at the School, believes that Strasberg's work is self-evidently reflective of an actor's actual work. He suggests that, "Many students arrive at the School with negative impressions of Strasberg and have a view that Method Acting is bad for you'. Speculating that such impressions tend to arise as a result of poor provision on 'A' level and/or BTEC courses, he feels it is important in the context of his classes to foster a more balanced view of Strasberg's work.

As far as Emotion Memory work is concerned, neither Unsworth nor Jones offered strong opinions either way. Indeed, both practitioners acknowledge the immense importance of emotion in an actor's work which, Jones argues, is 'central to human experience and anything that can be done to aid the actor in reaching his goal – including recalling previous experiences – is to be valued.'[12]

Although teaching staff at Rose Bruford College may not actually identify the exercises they use as Strasbergian, there is no doubt that his legacy serves to influence and shape the training experiences offered at the College.

One of the most enthusiastic and committed teachers of Strasberg's techniques currently working in a British drama school is Peter McAllister, who has been teaching acting at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama for over fifteen years.

During the 1970s and 80s, McAllister attended classes at both the Actors' Studio and the Lee Strasberg Institute, where he observed Strasberg at work and studied with a number of Strasberg teachers including Lola Cohen and David Gideon. Firmly convinced that 'Strasberg's legacy has…been overshadowed by the negative and inaccurate comments made by his detractors…' McAllister believes that there has been too much emphasis placed on the emotional memory exercise. In his view, this work was 'not taught as part of the basic training sequence, but as a technical tool for solving a specific problem of extreme emotion'. In this respect, McAllister's views echo those expressed by Annie Tyson at Drama Centre.

Totally convinced of the efficacy of Strasberg's techniques, McAllister incorporates the full sequence of inner and outer sensation exercises, the song and dance exercise and improvisation into the training regime he has developed for his students at *RCSSD*. Certainly not wary of undertaking Emotion Memory work, he makes it clear that he never expects students to re-visit traumatic experiences preferring instead that they select something that they can work with.

Resisting what he refers to as 'the old shibboleths' relating to accusations about excessive introspection and internalisation in Strasberg's work, McAllister urges a different approach:

> 'I believe there is a genuine value in this work as part of an actor's training as it liberates the sensory imagination and enables a fullness of physical, vocal and emotional expression. I personally view the work as *physiological*[13] rather than psychological as it manifests itself in the actor's body rather than in the actor's mind.'[14]

Interestingly, acting tutor, David Jackson, who also shares an interest in Strasberg's work, has invited McAllister to run master classes in Sense Memory for his undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Birmingham School of Acting. Like McAllister, Jackson feels that Strasberg's work has been misrepresented in the past and is keen to rehabilitate his reputation.

Alongside a presence in full time training within Drama UK accredited drama schools, Strasberg's work is also taught in privately run schools and colleges. One of the most notable of these is Sam Rumbelow's Method School, based in Whitechapel in Central London. Aimed largely at part-time students or those seeking intensive four-week training experience, the courses here incorporate all of the basic Strasbergian techniques including exercises in *sense memory, private moment, song and dance* and *emotion memory.* Trained in the Method by former Strasberg student Tony Greco, and fully aware of some of the controversies that have arisen in relation to Strasberg's approach, Rumbelow, like Peter McAllister, is of the view that Strasberg's detractors often misunderstand the 'internal dynamics' of the process. In his view the work offers an excellent 'simple and repetitive mechanism through which actors can enable the work of the sub-conscious to inform the interpretation of a dramatic character and of the text itself.'[15]

Notwithstanding some of the concerns that we have examined in relation to Strasberg's methodology – especially with regard to his interpretation of the Emotion Memory exercise – it appears that there is good evidence to suggest that the influence of his work and the techniques he developed continue in a very positive way to shape the training experiences of a new generation of British actors – both within the accredited training sector as well as privately funded part-time institutions.

Somewhat revealingly, it appears that there is also something of a gap between the views of recent academics and theorists who have written about Strasberg's training techniques and those in the training sector who work with and apply such techniques practically. In one respect, this isn't perhaps surprising. Our understanding of the complexity of human emotion is constantly shifting and evolving and actor trainers, who are accustomed to working with the 'liveness' of expressed emotion, are more likely to experience first-hand what Sam Rumbelow refers to as the *internal dynamics* of Strasberg's methods and how actors respond to them. This isn't to suggest that the views of theorists should be resisted – indeed the reverse is true if we are to fully understand the various levels on which new techniques operate – but rather to highlight the possibility that the live interaction and exchange between the teacher and the actor within a training environment is an important factor that needs to be taken into full consideration. It is noteworthy, that despite some of the concerns previously highlighted in this discussion in relation to Emotion Memory work, British actor trainers working in high profile institutions continue to use the technique, albeit in a slightly modified and controlled way.

The willingness to take risks, to experiment, and to appear vulnerable in an actor training environment is often contingent on the extent to which we place trust in and feel inspired by the tutors we encounter. Whatever conclusions we may ultimately draw about the personality of Lee Strasberg or about his work, it is very evident that he inspired and enabled the work of a whole generation of actors – many of whom went on to enjoy illustrious careers. The controversies surrounding the work are, of course, worthy of in-depth scrutiny and reflection, but such processes should not overlook the insights and enduring enthusiasm for his work from those who continue to feel inspired as a result of teaching and practicing the techniques he developed.

In Part Two of this discussion, we will take a much closer look at various other techniques that Strasberg developed and assess the degree to which the 'internal dynamics' of his methodology represent a coherent system that remains of value and benefit to actors working in a 21st Century context.

Notes

1. See Harrop, John (1992) *Acting* pp. 39–4; Hornby, Richard (1992) *The End of Acting* pp. 173–186; Counsell, Colin (1996) *Signs of Performance* pp. 56–59; Pitches (2006) *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting* pp. 109–125; Malague, Rosemary (2012) *An Actress Prepares* pp. 30–71.
2. A number of the lectures Boleslavsky's gave at the American Laboratory Theatre are included in Rhonda Blair's excellent edition of Richard Boleslavsky's *Acting: The First Six Lessons* (2010: 123–179).
3. For the purposes of this discussion, all references to Stanislavski's texts are drawn from Jean Benedetti's translation of *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character.* The chapter on Emotion Memory appears on pages195–228.
4. See Boleslavsky, Richard 1949 *Acting: The First Six Lessons* pp. 21–43.
5. Foster Hirsch in his book *A Method To Their Madness* (1984:67–95) offers various examples of how Strasberg's approach to rehearsal differed to other Method practitioners. Strasberg's emphasis on improvisations, animal exercises and emotion memory work distinguished his approach from more text/character based approaches.
6. Wright-Wexman, Virginia 2004 Masculinity in Crisis: Method Acting in Hollywood reprinted in Robertson Wojcik, Pamela (ed) *Movie Acting: The Film Reader* pp. 127–144.
7. Quoted from *In Conversation: Estelle Parsons* Influences Recorded on 24th June 2010 and available at http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/videos/?id=A71865.
8. A phrase originating from Wordsworth definition of poetry as '*the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility*' Published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1805) by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
9. Observations and commentary on Reuven Adiv's work by Vladimir Mirodan taken from personal correspondence with the author 2nd August 2015.
10. The National Council of Drama Training (now known ad Drama UK) is an organisation that provides formal accreditation to schools whose training meets the standards identified in a rigorous programme of quality assurance.
11. From personal communication between Annie Tyson and the author 16th August 2015.
12. From personal communication between Thomasina Unsworth, Julian Jones and the author 23rd July 2015.
13. My emphasis.
14. From personal communication between Peter McAllister and the author 2nd July 2015.
15. From personal communication between Sam Rumbelow and the author 12th August 2015.

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4.3 Summary

As stated in the article itself, the work of Lee Strasberg and the techniques he developed have often attracted misunderstanding and controversy. To arrive at a convincingly impartial and balanced assessment of his work and the extent to which it has influenced British training practices, it was necessary to take a forensic look at his development and application of the emotion memory exercise. This exercise, more than any other, has attracted the kinds of sensationalism that Drama Centre teacher Annie Tyson seeks to resist (Shirley, 2016, p. 58). To fully understand the extent to which Americanised interpretations of Stanislavsky's work have shaped training in the UK, it is important to see beyond the mythologies surrounding Strasberg's work and focus on the benefits of the exercises he developed. Testimony from teachers at all the British schools surveyed suggests that Strasberg's influence in contemporary British training is considerable. This represents an important development in UK training between British perceptions of Lee Strasberg's work during the 1950s/60s and those of 2016, when this article was written.

Interestingly, the research undertaken reveals a potential schism between the work of academics undertaking theoretical evaluations of Strasberg's work and the efforts of actor trainers involved in the practical application of his techniques. As indicated in the article, this isn't necessarily a negative observation, but it is worth noting – especially given the observations from actor trainer Julian Jones, of Rose Bruford College, that 'many students arrive at the School with negative impressions of Strasberg and have a view that Method Acting is bad for you' (Shirley, 2016, p. 59), a view which Jones attributes to poor teaching at A Level and/or BTEC courses. Given the more balanced assessment of Strasberg's work that this article makes available, it may well be the case that the students Jones has encountered have been exposed to outmoded syllabi rather than poor teaching.

Chapter Five

Shirley, D. (2018) 'His Dream of Passion: Reflections on the work of Lee Strasberg and his influence on British Actor Training' – Part Two

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5.1 Introduction

A companion piece to the previous article included in this thesis, this publication reaches further into Strasberg's work to examine the range of exercises and techniques he developed. Until this point, most discussions in Britain about Strasberg's work tended to be overshadowed by the sensationalism and controversy surrounding the emotion memory exercise. Much of this comes from those who experienced it first-hand under Strasberg's guidance at New York's Group Theatre (1931–41), including Stella Adler (1901–92), Margaret Barker (1902–92), and Morris Carnovsky (1897–1992).[39] What follows is a fuller evaluation of the totality of Strasberg's training techniques to include the following:

- Strasberg's work on *relaxation*, *concentration*, and *sense memory*, which is much indebted to the techniques developed by Stanislavsky – something that he clearly acknowledges.
- His development of other exercises – *Private Moment* and *Song and Dance* – are unique interpretations/developments of Stanislavsky's work and as such mark Strasberg's distinctive contribution to the Method.
- Strasberg's adoption of the *Animal* exercise, introduced to him by Maria Ouspenskaya, problematises the views of those critics who argue that his techniques were purely psychological and introverted.
- Strasberg's stress on the significance on the actor's processes of imagination – how to develop and nurture it without recourse to objects – are strikingly different to the approach taken by Uta Hagen, who prefers to use real objects and a process of endowment.
- The article distinguishes between the transformational skills of the classically trained actor and a form of creative expressivity that is based on *selfhood*. This is important because it begins to a) distinguish between British and American acting traditions and b) to put forward an explanation for the increasing appeal of Method-based techniques in British training establishments.

[39] For Adler's views of this technique, see Balcerzak, S. (2018), *Beyond Method: Stella Adler and the Male Actor*, USA: Wayne State University Press, p. 49. For those of Barker and Carnovsky, see Hirsch, Foster, (1984) *A Method to Their Madness: The History of the Actors Studio*, USA: Da Cappo Press pp. 76–7.

During the last fifteen to twenty years, the demise of traditional repertory theatre and the growing popularity of devised and verbatim theatre, drama-documentary, reality tv, true crime drama, and fantasy etc. have prompted different audience expectations as well as shifting understandings of authenticity in performance. Of equal importance here is the growing impact of identity politics, particularly in relation to representation and performance, and the increasing visibility of marginalised people's stories.[40]

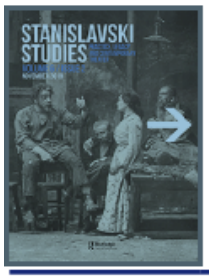
In the context of the article that follows, therefore, it is important to clarify the use of the term 'selfhood' and how it can be understood in relation to contemporary approaches to actor training. Whereas more traditional/classical modes of training encourage both physical and emotional transformation as a means through which to efface the identity of the performer in preference for that of the character, an emphasis on 'selfhood' opens a space in which the performer can allow his/her/their identity and personal experiences to influence interpretative choice. The first approach, often referred to as 'transformational' acting, involves the incorporation of a series of externalised gestures and personality traits that are subsequently embodied by the performer to build the notional personality of a dramatic character. In contrast, working from an acknowledgement of selfhood involves a process whereby specific personal experiences of the performer are interwoven with those of the character. For many actors, this 'blending' process imparts increased levels of authenticity and credibility to the artistic endeavour. Rather than effacing the presence of the performer, this approach gives expression to his/her/their lived experience and thereby has the potential to fuel a keen sense of contemporaneous relevance for both the performers and the audience. Moreover, this approach to interpretation can often feel more inclusive and empowering in that acknowledging the individual identity of the performer (gender, ethnicity, sexuality etc.) allows for a 'sharing' of experience which can often result in increased degrees of empathy and involvement on the part of the spectator.

Finally, it should be noted that in the case of text-based drama, working from an enhanced degree of selfhood is not necessarily a reductive process. Rather than limit character development to reflect the personality of the performer, the creative process involves selecting,

[40] For an excellent insight into work that reflects contemporary social politics, see Luke Lewin Davies' article in *The Conversation*: '17 of the best political Edinburgh Fringe shows to watch this year, tackling issues from gender to climate change', August 16, 2023, https://theconversation.com/17-of-the-best-political-edinburgh-fringe-shows-to-watch-this-year-tackling-issues-from-gender-to-climate-change-211581

refining, and developing a range of experiences that feel analogous to those of the character and the dramatic situations depicted. This approach involves a high degree of imaginative engagement, and whilst it remains entirely Stanislavskian, it is closer in spirit to the American Method-based technique than the earlier British interpretative tradition – a view that is echoed in Sam Rumbelow's comments included in this article.

5.2 Journal Article



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His dream of passion: *reflections on the work of Lee Strasberg and his influence on British actor training – part two*

David Shirley

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ARTICLE

Check for updates

His dream of passion: *reflections on the work of Lee Strasberg and his influence on British actor training – part two*

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ABSTRACT

A previous article for Stanislavski Studies (Vol. 4, No 1, 47–62) explored and examined the impact of Lee Strasberg's *Emotion Memory* technique and assessed its influence on contemporary approaches to British actor training. This second "companion" article reflects on a much broader range of Strasbergian training techniques, initially, to examine their efficacy and to highlight the extent to which they have been absorbed and adapted by acting teachers working in a British training context. Often viewed as a controversial figure – both in the UK and in the USA – Strasberg's approach has frequently been vilified and dismissed. This is particularly true of his interpretation of Stanislavski's *Emotion Memory* technique. Whereas the earlier article sought to arrive at an informed and balanced view of his deployment of this technique, what follows is an attempt to review other aspects of Strasberg's work so as to evaluate the coherence and credibility of the assumptions on which his approach was based and to test whether his work remains appropriate and viable in British training environments today. His work on *Relaxation, Concentration* and *Sense Memory* will be examined alongside his development of the *Private Moment, Song and Dance* and *Animal* exercises. What, if anything, can we learn from Strasberg's Method-based approach to actor training and how might we begin to consider the impact and unity of his work as a whole as opposed to focusing almost exclusively on his early work on Emotion Memory?

KEYWORDS

Lee Strasberg; Stanislavski; emotion memory; actors studio and method acting

Irrespective of whether or not those involved in actor training today subscribe to any of the teaching techniques that are now commonly associated with the method-based approaches developed in the USA during the 1940s and 1950s, the immensely significant impact of Lee Strasberg's work cannot be overstated. More than any other figure associated with this kind of approach (including Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner and Uta Hagen),[1] Strasberg must surely stand out as the most acclaimed and influential American acting teacher of the twentieth century. Famously identified with the Actor's Studio in New York – where he was the Artistic Director for over 30 years (1951–82), the founder of the Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute, based in New York and West Hollywood (1969-present) as well as being credited with enabling the careers of actors such as James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, Al Pacino and Anne Bancroft, his legacy has had a far-reaching impact not just in

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the USA, but also in Europe and beyond. Despite such influence, however, Strasberg remains a highly controversial and often polarizing figure whose work, both during his lifetime and subsequently, has been revered and vilified in equal measure.

Much of the disapprobation surrounding Strasberg's teaching practice is directed at his adaptation and interpretation of Stanislavski's work on Emotion Memory. A variety of concerns relating to this exercise and the nuances and complexities emerging from it have been discussed in a companion article to this, published two years ago (Vol. 4, No 1, 47–62). One of the dangers, however, in focusing almost exclusively on a single feature of his methodology is that it can lead to a skewed understanding of Strasberg's approach to teaching more generally. The following commentary by John Harrop, for instance, is fairly typical of the frequently negative evaluations of Strasberg's work:

> Emotion memory is essentially second-hand. It uses emotion that is stimulated by a circumstance other than that of the play's immediate action. It introduces an emotional *non sequitur* into a performance. It can produce irrelevance – the actor is involved with a past situation of his or her own, rather than responding to the action of the present – and thus may transmute the part into the structure of the actor's own, possibly different emotional needs and dynamics. (Harrop 1992: 40–41)

Even more damning is the following observation by Richard Hornby: "Strasberg's emotion memory. . .can be seen partly as a cause, but even more as a result, of the decline of the American theatre." (Hornby 1992: 184)

To arrive at a fuller and more informed understanding of Strasberg's teaching methods and thereby begin to assess the extent of his influence in Britain, it is necessary to take a closer look at some of the other techniques and exercises he developed. Revealingly, the highly "integrated" nature of Strasberg's version of the method, in which different elements overlap and complement each other, suggests that while the Emotion Memory technique represents an important aspect of his practice, it is by no means his primary focus. American acting teacher and former Strasberg student Ned Manderino confirms this view:

> My own experience with this issue is based on six years of student with Strasberg in his private workshop and at the Actors Studio. Contrary to what is frequently proclaimed, I cannot honestly conclude that Strasberg's teaching was overloaded with the use of the affective memory exercise. Although Strasberg may have emphasized the affective memory exercise during the fifties, this was no longer the case by the time I studied with him in the 1960's. During this period, I saw it done only twice and both times, Strasberg was very much in control of the emotion that surfaced. While I studied with him, Strasberg was primarily concerned with the sensory technique exercises, which nearly all Method acting teachers deem essential to an actor's development. Strasberg taught a means of making the acting instrument come alive with a basis of organic truth. (Manderino 1985: IX)

Manderino's reference in the final sentence to the "acting instrument" chimes with the more contemporary observations of Sam Rumbelow, Director of London's Method Acting School (MAS), based in Central London. For him, it is this emphasis on the *instrument* that is at once the most important, yet also the most misunderstood aspect of Strasberg's craft. "Strasberg's approach to training stresses the need to develop the *instrument*. His process is varied and multi-layered and is concerned with enabling the actor's relationship to his/her instrument in order to free the ability to relate to the task of the actor."[2]

Rather than address the demands of style or the expectations of a particular genre or tradition in acting, Strasberg's emphasis on the actor's instrument takes immediate account of the individual needs of each actor. Of course, most serious actor training courses – especially within a conservatoire tradition – claim to do the same. As Rumbelow makes clear, one of the things that make Strasberg's approach unique is its commitment to the notion of developing expressivity based in *selfhood* as distinct from the transformative performance skills that are commonly associated with the classically trained virtuoso/chameleon like actor. "For Strasberg, acting is defined by the ability to have truthful thoughts and impulses by means of a primary flow of the self."[3]

The starting point from which all of Strasberg's work proceeds is his emphasis on the need for relaxation. Recognizing that physical tension impedes gestural and emotional expressiveness and blocks the free flow of thought, Strasberg, like Stanislavski, also drew a contrast between the obvious forms of tension of which we are aware (vocal tightness and fixed muscularity) and more habitual, unconscious forms of tension (repeated mannerisms, personal anxieties/worries, etc.). Strasberg believed that unless actors find a way of overcoming the disabling problems presented by tension, even their best efforts would remain thwarted:

> Without relaxation a lot of things an actor may rightly want to do will be deformed as they enter his instrument, because the instrument itself sets up resistance through tension. When that happens, the actor cannot achieve a real relation between what he is thinking and the expression which should be part of that thought or experience. The expression becomes contaminated. (Robert H. Hethmon 1965: 89)

Believing that the "...basic habitual behavior of human beings leads to the habitual behavior of the actor" (Cohen 2010:6), the relaxation techniques developed by Strasberg are designed to enable the following:

- The removal of both physical and mental forms of tension.
- The promotion of enhanced emotional freedom and an uninhibited flow of thoughts.
- Increased levels of physical ease and gestural expressivity.
- The ability to recognize and be aware of the presence of tension and how to eradicate it.

In many ways, Strasberg's relaxation techniques bear a close resemblance to those recommended by Stanislavski. By finding a position – either sitting or standing – in which to relax physically (without falling asleep) and focusing on and working with individual muscle areas, it is possible to experience a sense of physical relaxation. Gradually, overtime and with practice, it becomes possible to reach such a state quickly and with relative ease. Interestingly, however, Strasberg takes relaxation a stage further by advocating a series of exercises designed to release mental forms of tension – which, he suggests, are often unconsciously present in our use of gesture (hands, fingers, etc.) or facial expressions (eyebrows, mouth, etc.). While he certainly acknowledges that physical tension is much easier to observe than mental tension, Strasberg moves on to identify various areas of the body that he describes as "indicators of mental tension." An assertion, he claims, that does "...not stem from theory or scientific observation but purely from practice" (Hethmon 1965: 91). The areas in question are first, the temples, where "lots of nerves and blood vessels feed into the brain"; second, the area leading from the bridge of the nose into the eyelids, where the automatic defence mechanism

for the eyes is so active "that a great deal of tension builds up"; third, the area round the mouth, where thoughts "are immediately reduced to words" and where, as we grow older, "there are a lot of things you feel like saying but don't say". Finally, the fourth and "central area of mental and physical tension" is located in the muscles joining the shoulders, the back of the neck and the cranium, where there can be "a severe bottleneck of tension that is very difficult to deal with" (Strasberg :128).[4]

Like Stanislavski, Strasberg believed that all forms of tension inhibit freedom of expression and the ability to convey emotion. By extending the principles of Stanislavski's work and advocating a system for dealing with mental tension, Strasberg seems to have arrived at a way of tackling the habitual, unconscious modes of behaviour that can block creativity:

> Neuromuscular tension makes it difficult for thoughts, sensations and emotions to be transmitted and properly experienced. Often an actor is experiencing the emotion he is working for but is unable to express it because of tension. I remember an actor who delivered a speech from a Shakespeare play which seemed external and mechanical. When he explained what he had attempted to do, it seemed impossible to believe him because we had seen none of it in performance. When we made him relax properly, and then while maintaining the relaxation deliver the same speech, suddenly is was alive and convincing. (Strasberg : 126)

What makes this sequence particularly interesting is the gap it opens up between what the actor may think is being communicated – a physical and vocal sense of ease, a convincing emotional connection and a credible characterization – and what is actually being conveyed. Merely because an actor experiences a particular emotion, it does not necessarily follow that this is visible to the spectator. Most actor trainers will recognize those situations in which following an unsuccessful attempt at a given exercise or scene, an actor will protest that s/he really was crying or feeling elated. It is as if the feelings that are actually being experienced remain trapped behind a wall of tension. For Strasberg, the removal of this wall produces startling results:

> Sometimes the talent of the actor reveals itself for the first time so fully and so unexpectedly as to be startling. The actor becomes completely responsive. His instrument gives forth a new depth of resonance. Emotion that has been habitually held back suddenly rushes forth. The actor becomes real – not merely simple or natural. . .He unveils totally unexpected aspects and elements of himself, but with such a degree of ease and authority that he seems literally to have taken off a mask, to have emerged from a disguise that previously had smothered and concealed his true personality. Yet all he did was relax. (Robert H. Hethmon 1965: 93)

Relaxation represents the starting point for Strasberg's methodology. While Sam Rumbelow suggests that ". . .it represents the core around which the rest of his work is built and removes the fear of failure or the need for validation,"[5] Peter McAllister, an actor trainer based at London's Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD), emphasizes the importance of relaxation in helping "to remove fear and promote freedom from self-consciousness."[6]

If relaxation establishes the foundations on which to begin Strasberg's work, then *concentration*, he argues ". . .releases the actor's creative spirit" (Hethmon 1965:95). For Strasberg, as with Stanislavski, concentration is defined by an actor's ability to focus the mind either on an individual object or collection of them. While an object can be something material – such as a picture or an ornament – it can also be a recollection of something immaterial such as a feeling or sensation. An object can even be imagined – a pain, for instance, or a sense of longing or melancholy. Whereas Stanislavski, via his Circles of

Attention, extends the work on concentration to enable actors to overcome a fear of the "black hole" that is the audience (Stanislavski 2008: 93), Strasberg's work in this area focuses almost exclusively on the development of an actor's *sense memory* – something to which we will return later. In part, this may be a result of the different contexts in which each teacher was operating. Stanislavski's methods were largely developed for theatrical performance practice, whereas Strasberg, though very experienced in theater, established an illustrious reputation for training highly successful screen actors. Though intense concentration is required of actors in both mediums, the specific demands of the screen are less preoccupied with the physical presence of an audience.

In his book, *A* Strasberg (: 131), Strasberg offers a very clear definition of what he expects from a process of concentration:

> To concentrate, one must have an object of concentration; one cannot concentrate abstractly. The simple presence of an object will not induce concentration. If you look at a chair and try to concentrate, nothing will happen. If you start asking yourself simple questions – How wide is the chair? How tall is it? What is it made of? And so on – simple concentration will take place. But that, actually, is more a process of observation. The kind of concentration necessary for acting demands the ability to recreate something which is not there. It leads not only to the workings of the imagination, but also to the presence of that kind of belief or faith which has often been characterized as the essential element of acting'. (Strasberg : 131)

Interestingly, despite the criticisms of many, who have argued that Strasberg's teaching methods frequently veered away from Stanislavski's vision, there is a clear sense of continuity between the two men when it comes to concentration, as is evidenced in the following observation by Stanislavski:

> As far as technique is concerned you have to first find, recognize, study and learn to master it. For the moment use things you have already experimented with. . .I am talking about ways of giving the imagination a jolt. . .
>
> . . .ask yourself questions and answer them honestly, sincerely: the *who, what, when, where, why* and *wherefore* of what you observe happening. Define in words what you find beautiful, typical in the room, in the things which interest you. . .Define the purpose of the room, the articles in it. Ask yourself and answer, why is the furniture arranged this way and not some other way.' (Stanislavski 2008: 116)

As is the case with Strasberg, Stanislavski points to the need for concentration as a way of stimulating the creative and imaginative processes alive in the actor:

> The genuine actor is set on fire by what is happening around him, he is carried away by life, which then becomes the object of his study and his passion. He greedily devours everything he sees and tries to record what he has registered, not like a statistician, but like an artist. . .In a word, in art you cannot use a cold approach. We need a certain degree of inner fire, we need sensory concentration'. (Ibid: 115)

For Strasberg, Relaxation and Concentration represent the "heads and tails" of what Lola Cohen has referred to as "the coin of acting" (Cohen 2010: 5). These are the primary building blocks on which all of his subsequent work is established. In many respects, this part of Strasberg's methodology bears a striking resemblance to Stanislavski's. Indeed, even his reference to the challenges faced when attempting to concentrate at times of physical strain are almost a carbon copy of Stanislavski's work – as can be seen from the following extracts:

> Can I persuade you that physical tension paralyses our whole capacity for action, our dynamism. . .Let's do an experiment. Up onstage there's a piano, try and lift it. . .Multiply 37 by 9 quickly, while holding up the piano. . .You can't? Well then remember all the shops in our street from the corner of the lane onwards. You can't do that either?. . .Doesn't this demonstrate how muscular tension impedes our thinking, and the process of experiencing even more?' (Stanislavski 2008: 121)

It is easy to experience tension by trying a simple experiment. Try lifting something heavy, such as edge of a piano or a heavy table. At the same time try to solve a simple mental problem, such as multiplying 75 by 6. . .You will discover that it is nearly impossible to do so while lifting a heavy object. . .If you attempt to recite a poem or sing a song or remember something, you will find it an insurmountable task. . . Neuromuscular tension makes it difficult for thoughts, sensations, and emotions to be transmitted and properly experienced.' (Strasberg :125)

At a first glance at these extracts, it might be tempting to conclude that Strasberg's version of the Method is a slavish re-packaging of Stanislavski's System, but it is important to bear in mind two considerations. The first, as we shall discover, is that while Strasberg wholeheartedly subscribes to the spirit of Stanislavski's work, the nuances and interpretations he brings to it are very much the product of his own experiences and research:

> The work which I present can now legitimately be called the Method. It is based not only on the procedures of Stanislavski's work, but also on the further clarification and stimulus provided by Vakhtangov.[7] I have also added my own interpretation and procedures. (Strasberg :84)

Second, some critics have argued that Strasberg's work is a betrayal of Stanislavski's, [8] but as can be seen here, Strasberg clearly acknowledges the extent of Stanislavski's influence: "Everything we deal with in these exercises – relaxation, concentration, sense memory, emotional memory – was defined by Stanislavski." (Ibid:124)

Some of the distinctions between Stanislavski's work and Strasberg's begin to emerge in the latter's work on *sense memory* and the *private moment* exercise.

Sense memory work is common to most actor training regimes, and Strasberg's version of the Method is no exception. Designed to enable the actor to ". . .recreate and re-live. . .the desired experience called for in the performance" (Cohen 2010: 14), these exercises are arranged in a coherent sequence that starts with fairly basic tasks that involve recalling the sensations associated with material objects before moving through to more intense exercises that involve recalling a number of sensations simultaneously. These can be drawn from physical materials and feelings, past memories or even fantasies. What is particularly striking about Strasberg's approach – as distinct from other Method practitioners, notably Uta Hagen, for instance[9] – is his emphasis on the imagination as the primary tool for developing and awareness and sensitivity.

> Prop kettles and other literal objects not only stop the actor's training by blocking real imagination, but make him revert to ordinary, literal habits of behavior. In life those habits do not matter too much. . .On stage there are no real objects – except these literal stage properties – and thus there is no strong and real continuity outside the actor to bring him alive. If we rely only on these literal objects, we tend unconsciously to use literal habits of expression. The very thing we are trying to create dies, because after all it is not actually real.' (Robert H. Hethmon 1965: 101)

As Peter McAllister notes, unlike other sense-based exercises, Strasberg's activities emphasize the importance of imagination rather than endowment. While the latter approach might attribute a particular imagined quality to an object – rarity, fragility, beauty, etc. – the requirement to imaginatively reconstruct the object itself before subsequently layering it with additional sensory experiences – touch, taste, smell, sound, etc. – serves to really develop, focus and sharpen an actor's imagination. American Strasberg teacher, Lorrie Hull emphasizes the point:

> When an actor creates an imaginary object, he gets more than that object. He gets his response to the object, so that he has in effect created a particular aspect of himself. When the actor creates the object's reality, he knows he has succeeded if he is visualizing the object and feeling the sensations. The body will perceive the object as real because the person gets the same sensations from the physical object. In acting, the source is imaginary, but the responses are real. That is what creates a belief of sense of truth in the actor.' (S. Loraine Hull 1985: 43)

It is important to point out that these activities are not "mime" exercises. Instead of simply imitating a given activity – brushing hair or drinking coffee – the aim is to recall and recreate in as much detail as possible the stimuli associated with the chosen task (textures, tastes, smells, sounds), as well as the muscular movements accompanying it (the feel of the brush and movement of the head or the pursing of the lips for a hot drink).

Broadly speaking, Strasberg's series of sense memory exercises can be divided into three categories:

1. Physical exercises involving muscular movement

These exercises tend not to involve emotional engagement, focusing instead on mundane daily tasks like consuming hot/cold drinks; grooming activities such as applying make-up/shaving; or dressing and undressing. Although at one level, the exercises feel fairly basic, the ability to recall and recreate the experience of drinking a hot cup of morning coffee or having a shave involves the need to engage all five senses simultaneously. This requires considerable perseverance and dedication.

2. Exercises exploring physical sensations

These exercises develop the skill of recalling physical sensations such as heat and cold, sharp tastes and smells, or the experience of pain. Importantly, the sensation arising from recalling these experiences should not be taken to extremes. Wherever possible, emotional responses should be avoided in favor of simply capturing, in as much detail as possible, the experience of the sensation itself.

3. Exercises involving multiple activities/senses and exploring the use of emotion

These exercises bring complexity to the work and require the actor to balance several activities – physical, sensory and emotional – simultaneously. They really stretch the imagination and prepare the way for the development of dramatic character and improvisation/scene work.

Although Stanislavski also used a range of sense-based exercises, Strasberg's extremely detailed approach to this work was designed to stimulate *real* responses to *imagined* realities. For instance, an actor might actually shiver in response to an imagined sense of extreme cold or experience genuine embarrassment as a result of his/her imagined nakedness before stepping into an imaginary shower. Promoting enhanced powers of concentration and focus as well as the ability to work in extreme detail for sustained periods, these exercises helped establish the foundations for the psychological depth that became one of the hallmarks of the method.

It is interesting to note at this point, that while Strasberg's approach to actor training is heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud,[10] his conviction that imagined circumstances can generate *real* experiences is strongly Pavlovian in character. The shivering an actor might experience when recalling a sense of extreme cold feels strongly reminiscent of Pavlov's food associative experiments in which dogs salivated at the sound of a particular chime. Unlike animals, however, actors seek to consciously stimulate responsive processes in themselves. Revealingly, it is this feature of Strasberg's work that enables us to arrive at a fuller understanding of his development of the emotional memory technique:

> Sense memory is not returning to the past to remember your dead pet so you can cry in a scene. This is a misunderstanding of the work. Based on Dr. Ivan Pavlov's turn-of-the century experiments in Russia, sense memory is a technique that helps actors believe a reality that in fact doesn't exist in the present. This conditioned response helps actors achieve real sensory experiences that are, in fact, non-existent.' (Doug Moston "Standards and Practices" in Krasner 2000: 137)

Strasberg's himself makes the point clearly: "Emotional response is conditioned response. It can be evoked by concentration on the factors associated with the particular conditioning process." (Robert H. Hethmon 1965: 113)

The various sensory exercises Strasberg developed and his emphatic insistence on the primacy of the imagination in applying them, represent a fundamental feature of the *conditioning* process that he believes is essential to "truthful" acting. In this context, the notion of "truth" is defined by the actual presence of the feelings evoked by a particular sensory experience rather than a projected imitation of them. Understanding this principle in relation to Strasberg's work is important if we are to arrive at a more informed awareness of the *emotional memo*ry technique and how it sits within Strasberg's practice more generally. As Doug Moston clearly indicates, sense memory is not simply a case of delving into past experiences to capture a particular emotion or feeling – such a supposition is simplistic and reductive.

Although, in general terms, method-based acting techniques tend to stress the importance of psychological/behavioural realism, Strasberg's early exercises are refreshingly free and non-literal. Peter McAllister offers an excellent example of this in his combined use of "overall sensations" and "personal object" exercises. In his acting classes at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, students may find themselves having an imaginary shower while reading an important letter or nursing an injured pet – a cat, for example. Rather than allowing students to become trapped or overly fixated by what is or is not logically possible/coherent, McAllister's approach – which draws directly from Strasberg's own – is designed to free the creative spirit and stretch the

imagination. "Sensory work is never literal and never copied, it must always be highly imaginative. There is absolutely no need to get caught up in realist questions. This work enables access to the imagination through the senses".[11]

While the sequence in which the exercises are presented suggests a chronological order, Strasberg's own teaching practice, remained highly responsive to the individual needs of his students. If a particular exercise did not work for an actor, then he selected another that might achieve a similar result.

> The continuity and sequence of the exercises is not hard and fast and can't be done by rote. There's an individual approach for each actor, and a general sequence of the exercises which the teacher adjusts to each individual...The teacher only changes the sequence, however, if there is something the actor can't do. It may include deliberate diversions using other procedures if there is a particular problem to deal with...Some people go quicker, and then the teacher moves them ahead, but the teacher shouldn't challenge the actor.' (Lola A Cohen 2010:16–17)

Complaining that "...too many teachers push the actor to accomplish immediate results without permitting him to exercise his faculties, to get in shape." (Strasberg : 135), Strasberg urged a flexible and dynamic application of exercises that enable recognition and differentiation between muscular and sensory work. In some instances, actors who experience difficulty with complex exercises are taken back to earlier activities as a means of building sensitivity and promoting confidence. What is especially striking in the work of both Peter McAllister at RCSSD and Sam Rumbelow at MAS is their insistence on the need to remain responsive to the needs of individual students rather than deliver a chronologically ordered programme of exercises. As McAllister makes clear, this work is about "...imparting tools, not rules, that are designed to connect the actor's impulse to varying means of expression."[12]

Notwithstanding the intended developmental nature of these exercises, there can be instances when even the most proficient actors experience genuine difficulties when attempting to work with sense memory and the imagination. Often this may be a result of natural inhibitions, feelings of tension or of what Strasberg refers to as "locked-up sensations" (Ibid: 139). For actors faced with problems of this kind, Strasberg developed the *Private Moment* exercise. Emerging from Stanislavski's discussion of "public solitude,"[13] this exercise is designed to allow for enhanced degrees of concentration that will open-up new areas of expression and self-discovery. "Part of the function of the private moment..." Strasberg states "...is to permit the actor to...give himself fully and unself-consciously to the experience that is being created." (Ibid: 145)

The use of the word *private* in the context of this exercise has a very particular meaning for Strasberg:

> Privacy is not to be confused with being alone. One can be alone and not in private...A private moment is not characterized by the nature of what takes place, but by the particular sense of privacy which it possesses for the actor who expresses it...The actor chooses a certain behavior in his life which he does only in private, and at no other time. He feels so special about this behavior that he stops it if he is interrupted by the appearance of another person. If he is questioned about it, he will deny that anything unusual has taken place. (Ibid: 145)

Although the tasks chosen for this exercise should be those that would normally take place in private, they should not be extraordinary or beyond the bounds of good taste. Typical examples might include dressing/undressing, gazing in the mirror, joyously singing or dancing without inhibition, thinking about a problem, praying, meditating, cutting toenails or shaving body hair. In the event of a situation where an actor appeared likely to stray beyond the boundaries of good taste, Strasberg required him/her to "... complete that part off stage and then come back" (Robert H. Hethmon 1965: 119). The important thing is to aim to get as close as possible to the moment of privacy.

Unlike other exercises in the sequence, actors are permitted to use small objects and possessions in this exercise. Such items may include photographs, books, items of clothing, etc., that help to recreate the actual *environment* in which the private moment is located as well as serving to sharpen the concentration. Larger items of furniture are recreated through the use of imagination and sense – memory – sight, sound, smell etc.

According to Strasberg, this exercise produces startling results:

> We started to do this exercise and two things happened. The exercise produced wonderful results in the actor's belief in what he was doing, and it led to a releasing of emotion and a degree of theatrical energy I had not previously seen in these particular actors. Somehow the objects of the exercise, drawn as they were from the individual's peculiar activity, were strong enough to incite this kind of concentration. At the same time the improvisational nature of the exercise left them free to follow through what they were impelled to do. (1965: 116).

Aside from making a decision about what the private moment should involve and selecting small possessions to help re-create the space, this exercise should not be rehearsed. The improvisational approach is designed to enable the actor to make genuine discoveries in the live moment. Students are encouraged not to avoid any activity that may cause embarrassment or self-consciousness. Feelings of this kind arise as a result of an awareness of the audience, which should give way to complete concentration and absorption. If an actor undertaking the activity is aware of those watching, then the purpose of the exercise is defeated.

Gradually, as proficiency and confidence with this exercise develop other Strasbergian techniques can be introduced, so that it is possible to combine a private moment exercise with single sense memory activities, overall sensations, song and dance work or even soliloquies and speeches.

> I had always thought that regardless of any degree of reality, soliloquies were only a theatrical device...It was my shock and surprise to discover how much people soliloquized in real life; how much they engage in imaginary confrontation with other people with a fullness and vividness which they could not summon in public under the actual conditions. Therefore, in addition to whatever value this exercise possesses for the actor, it is of enormous benefit in helping him to play precise scenes involving soliloquies – not only in Shakespeare and the classics, but also in Chekhov, where there are many moments which are the equivalent of soliloquies. (Strasberg : 146)

When effective, the private moment exercise can begin to release actors who experience difficulty as a result of an inability to relax or feelings of self-consciousness. When concentration is enhanced and focused in the way the exercise demands, it can lead to self-discovery, sharpened levels of physical and vocal expressiveness, and a greater sense of freedom. Moreover, as Strasberg's observations about the soliloquy imply, the

exercise is highly adaptable and can be used as a springboard into many interpretative situations – both in rehearsal and in performance.

The need for expressive freedom and the ability to work truthfully and without tension or inhibition represent core principles on which Strasberg's teaching practice was established. For some actors, it may be the case that *unconscious* habitual tendencies or *fixed* physical rhythms limit the scope for genuine creative freedom. In such situations, Strasberg introduced the *Song and Dance* exercise. Following a teaching assignment at Carnegie Hall, where he found himself instructing singers and dancers, he was struck by the degree to which the tempi of the musical rhythms they had previously learned and embodied served to snare them in unconscious and restricted modes of expression. In developing this exercise, Strasberg sought to find the means by which to free previously conditioned impulses and thereby further enhance physical, vocal and emotional expressivity. His aim was to highlight the extent to which unconscious habits and behaviour interfere with an actor's ability to communicate with an audience:

> An actor often does not do everything he wants to do. His intentions are deflected by habits of which he is unaware most of the time. Instead, he often does things of which he is equally unaware because they are mannerisms – automatic and unconscious behavior. The essential part of the actor's training tries to make him aware of what he is doing at the time a thing is happening. Otherwise, he doesn't know whether to do it more or to do it less. That's the difference between acting and life. . .for the actor it is absolutely essential that he knows all the time "what I'm doing while I'm doing it."' (1965: 116).

Designed to stimulate increased degrees of self-awareness and limit unwanted interference from involuntary behavioural patterns, the exercise involves three phases:

The first requires the actor to stand in a relaxed and open position in front of the tutor and the class. Posing should be resisted and eye contact should not be avoided or forced. Once in this position, attention is drawn to what the actor is feeling emotionally. Self-questioning is encouraged – "What is this? What kind of sensation is this? What kind of experience is this? What is it really? Is this one kind of reaction or another kind? Is it fear or embarrassment? Or is it shyness or anger? What am I angry about?" (Hethmon: 1965:164). In this part of the exercise, the actor's attention is drawn to the ways in which emotional energy can influence physical expression.

In stage two, the actor chooses a simple song which is then broken down into single elongated syllables which are sung resonantly – from the lungs rather than the throat – in equal breaths. In this phase, it is important to resist the temptation to speed up the tempo or to join syllables together – the aim is to break expected/habitual rhythms and afford the actor control over what is being expressed.

The third and final stage of this exercise introduces movement – usually involving the whole body. Once the rhythm of this is established the song is reintroduced only this time with more of a staccato rhythm. The combination is then regularly altered so as to create contrasting energies between the rhythms of the body and the energy of the voice. In this phase, the importance of the actor's will-power is highlighted as a primary means of controlling and varying patterns of physical and vocal energy.

Due to the fact that this task is designed to forge a much stronger connection between an impulse and its expression, the exercise often gives rise to unexpected emotions –

laughter, tears, anger, etc. – which for Strasberg, demonstrated that "...standing before the public would start many things going on in the actor, even when he was called upon to perform a seemingly simple task" (Strasberg :155). What makes this observation particularly interesting is the realization that, for Strasberg, the process of freeing an actor's impulse to enhance expressivity, may often involve the release of other kinds of repressed or controlled emotional responses – which also appear to emerge involuntarily. Such feelings are entirely admissible, and part of the process requires the actor to "...let the emotion go into the sound of the song." (Ibid). For Strasberg, it seems that one of the defining features of effective training and ultimately of "good" acting is the willingness on the part of the tutor and the actor to risk exposing feelings and instincts that might otherwise remain repressed. In developing the Song and Dance exercise, Strasberg believed he had found the perfect tool for managing such behaviours:

> ...through this exercise we were able to see farther inside than we had ever seen before. Actually, these rather simple exercises turned out to be an X-ray into the problem of will and the relation of will to consummation, that is, to the ability on the part of will to carry through what the actor is trying to perform. (Hethmon: 1965:163)

The exercises and techniques discussed above tend to focus on developing the psychological dimensions of an actor's work – through concentration, the senses, impulse work and the emotions. However, Strasberg also stressed the need to develop the ability to shift physical energy and inhabit different personality traits. In group work, for instance, he often set-up improvisations where individual actors were asked to play out specific physical characteristics – eg aggression, illness or suspiciousness – or, alternatively, to represent personalities with different kinds of professional background – farmers, students, medics, etc.[14] Rather than settle for generalized impressions in this work, improvisations were carefully designed so as to facilitate new discoveries about the play, the characters or the dramatic situation that was under investigation.

Perhaps the best illustration of Strasberg's work on developing the actor's ability to transform physically as well as emotionally is the *Animal Exercise*. Initially introduced to this work at the American Laboratory Theater by Russian émigré Maria Ouspenskaya, Strasberg considered it as an essential component of his training regime:

> This exercise trains the actor by forcing him to deal with the character's behavior rather than relying on his own feelings. Sometimes with individuals who have a strong subjective streak, and whose emotions lead to static behavior, we use this at an earlier stage to get them away from their own subjective feelings and to strengthen their mental and physical attributes. (Strasberg : 147)

Having identified a particular character trait that the actor wishes to explore in a role, she/he then chooses an animal that in some way physically embodies such a trait – eg a tiger for aggression or a bear for strength. Rather than merely imitate the animal, the aim is to capture a sense of how the animal's weight, posture, tempo, etc., shape patterns of movement. This involves close observation of the differences between the actor's own physical life and that of the animal and the sense of alienation that results focuses attention on the importance of detail. When the physical energy of the animal is absorbed, the work moves into an emotional sphere involving representations of how the animal might be "feeling" through particular gestures or segments of dialogue. At this

stage of the exercises, the actor has resumed human form, but retains the personality of the animal and allows it to influence his/her physical, vocal and emotional behaviour.

Rather than use the "humanness" of a given role as a starting point for interpretation ("I am a young woman and so is the character"), this exercise opens up other ways of conceiving of and physically inhabiting character:

> Because he has to choose definite elements in order to create the animal, he finds that the exercise becomes an entrance into the problem of physical characterization. He varies his normal being, takes on characteristics he does not normally have – in walk or rhythm or behavior or attitude. The exercise thus gives the actor elements he would have difficulty finding as vividly with in the human sphere...' (Hethmon: 1965:104)

An ideal exercise for affording an opportunity for actors to discover different kinds of physical energy and emotional expressiveness, this exercise enables the actor to achieve a convincing transformation into character without dependence on purely externalized mannerisms or behavioural traits. At the very core of this task is the need to observe behaviour, connect with the imagination and anchor expressiveness to impulses that are defined by the needs of the character and the given circumstances of the scene/play. While it may be true that the representation of an animal's *feelings* or *mood* can only ever be metaphorical in nature, the very fact that such a process prompts engagement with the imagination moves interpretation beyond the everyday, literalness of the world inhabited by the actor.

During the course of this discussion, the primary focus has been on Strasberg's *training techniques* as distinct from his approach to working on text or the methodology he used in rehearsal – both of which represent extremely important aspects of his teaching methodology. Notwithstanding this realization, however, it is evident, from the range of exercises covered and the flexible nature in which they can be applied, that his work embodies a highly integrated and coherent approach to actor training. While it is true that – in common with all Method teachers – his approach is heavily indebted to Stanislavski, it is also very clear that Strasberg sought to refine and adapt his own approach to meet very particular aims. This is especially true, for instance, of his multifaceted approach to sensory work, or his development of the *Private Moment* or *Song and Dance* exercises.

Perhaps the thing that stands out most distinctly in Strasberg's approach is his focus on an actor's need to find a truthful and open connection to *selfhood* as a basis for expression. At times, it seems that this can appear uncomfortable or intrusive. The intense and highly personal nature of the *Private Moment* exercise, for instance, or the emotional release that actors sometimes experience during *Song and Dance* exercise. Equally important in this regard was Strasberg's tendency to adopt the manner of a psychoanalyst in his classes – something that was discussed in fuller detail in the companion article to this (Vol. 4, No 1, 52–3). However, once we separate any speculation about Strasberg's personality as a teacher from a consideration based purely on the exercises themselves, the coherence and clarity of his approach are striking.

The Stanislavskian techniques he adapted as well as those he devised provide a systemized approach to training, which is cognizant not only of the professional contexts in which actors work but also of the developmental needs of each individual student. His techniques for mental and physical relaxation, for instance, foster an ability to direct and focus energy and attention; his integration of various approaches to sensory work serve to

stimulate and stretch the imagination and enable work with real or imagined objects and connection to the actor's impulse; the release of self-consciousness, which often serves to paralyse an actor's creativity, is tackled through the Private Moment exercise, which also prompts self-revelation and discovery; the Song and Dance exercises helps to increase self-awareness, break habitual rhythms and thereby promote a greater sense of interpretative choice and control. Finally, the Animal Exercise, by emphasizing the importance of intense observation as well as outer and inner incorporation, fosters a penetrating approach to character transformation.

Importantly, the highly flexible manner in which Strasberg applied his working methods ensured that his focus was always on the individual actor's needs rather than on the efficacy of the exercises themselves. Each of the major publications that describe his work[15] clearly testifies to the adaptability of his approach and his unwavering focus on the very particular needs of each student.

It is true, of course, that the ability to work truthfully and expressively with emotion is one of the defining features of Strasberg's Method, but none of the exercises discussed above require the actor to delve into uncomfortable areas of the psyche or to resurrect troubled events in his/her past life. On the contrary, as the discussion of the Sensory exercises makes evident, Strasberg concentrated on the need to find ways of enabling actors to work with *conditioned* emotional responses that could be developed and utilized in the service of the imagination. To undertake such a task, it is important for actors to avoid the temptation to "block" the flow of emotion as a result of physical or mental tension, of self-consciousness/embarrassment or as a result of a weak imagination.

Given the above observations, what new thoughts, if any, emerge in relation to the Emotion Memory exercise? S Loraine Hull's citation of American Psychologist Michael Schulman's scientific insights into the technique offers an interesting perspective:

> In a more complex exercise called affective memory, the actor re-creates the stimuli that were present during an emotional experience in his own life. This form of emotional memory, like hypnotic age regression, involves response to imaginary stimuli. The actor tries to re-experience the specific stimuli of the past event instead of simply recalling the event or remembering the emotion. He seeks to recapture the specific sights, smells, sounds, and tactual sensations that provoked the emotion he wishes to express. The actor uses affective memory to evoke the most powerful emotions. . .There is evidence that the internal work produces corresponding physiological changes in addition to affecting the actor's subjective experience.

(Michael Schulman, from "Backstage Behaviorism" in *Psychology Today*, June 1973, pp.51–54 88. Cited by Loraine S. Hull 1985:83)

What makes this observation particularly revealing in the context of the present discussion is the suggestion that, like other Strasbergian sense-based exercises, Emotion Memory work is aimed at recapturing the *stimuli* surrounding a particular event rather than simply reproducing a raw *emotion*. In this regard, it seems an entirely logical progression from earlier sense-memory based exercises – which aim to develop the actor's ability to recreate *imagined* sensory experiences as a means of generating *real* emotional responses.

It has often been suggested that the controversy surrounding the Emotion Memory exercise is based on a series of misunderstandings. These include accusations about the highly "subjective" and "intrusive" nature of the technique; Strasberg's "pseudo-psychoanalytical" approach to the teaching of the exercise; or the tendency for the technique to encourage actors to restrict character interpretation to the confines of their own

personalities.[16] When considered in isolation, such criticisms feel very persuasive. However, when viewed as a single element in a systemized and progressive training regime, the exercise feels much less problematic.

It is important at this point to note that in many respects the *raison d'être* informing Strasberg's work on emotional expressivity was the desire to avoid the mannered, externalized imitations of emotions that he felt were prevalent in more conventional styles of acting – notably those of the English acting tradition.[17] When considered in the context of his work as a whole, the Emotion Memory exercise provides the means by which both the actor and the audience can experience emotion as an authentic, internal experience rather than externalized, imitated behaviour. The crucial element that needs to be understood, it seems, is the actor's role in actively stimulating and creatively adapting such emotion by means of the imagination, rather than simply aiming simply to re-experience past experiences.

Ultimately, whatever our feelings about the Emotion Memory technique, it seems important to view this aspect of Strasberg's work as part of an integrated system of training in which the component parts have been designed to meet the varied needs of the individual actors seeking to foster a stronger sense of integrity and authenticity in relation to their craft.

As we discovered in the previous article, despite the controversy that often surrounds his work, Strasberg's techniques continue to be used in various drama schools and colleges in the UK. Examples include Rose Bruford College, where acting tutors Thomasina Unsworth and Julian Jones work with sense memory exercises; the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, where Peter McAllister utilizes all of the techniques and exercises that Strasberg developed; the Drama Centre, London, where Annie Tyson works with Emotion Memory and where David Jackson deploys some of the other techniques Strasberg developed. Other notable examples include Sam Rumbelow's Central London-based, Method Acting School, where the training is heavily influenced by Strasberg's approach, and the Soho-based Giles Foreman Centre for Acting, which offers Strasberg-based acting courses inspired by Reuven Adiv's work at the Drama Centre. Other Strasberg-related courses are available at the Brian Timoney Actors' Studio, which offers intensive training courses in Central London and the Glasgow-based UK Screen Acting Academy, which offers Strasberg inspired part-time acting classes at the University of Strathclyde.

Even from this necessarily brief overview of UK-based training opportunities, it is evident that Strasberg's work continues to prove attractive to a new generation of actors. Indeed, during the last few years, the influence of Method-based training in the UK has steadily grown and includes not just the work of Lee Strasberg, but also that of Sanford Meisner[18] – who, alongside Strasberg, was one of the original members of New York's Group Theater in the 1930s. What is it that accounts for this fairly recent surge in interest and the growing popularity of Method-based training, both within subsidized FE/HE actor training provision as well as privately funded schools?

Arguing that many of the most popular drama schools were established to serve a repertory theater tradition that no longer exists, Sam Rumbelow asserts that Method-based approaches allow for an expression of selfhood and personalization that is much more in tune with the diverse, multi-cultural environments from which many of today's acting students come. "The world in which Stanislavski worked does not prevail in today's working environment."[19] As was indicated earlier, for Rumbelow, Lee Strasberg's

Method – which he concedes has emerged from Stanislavski's System – allows actors the opportunity to develop their craft via "...the primary flow of the self" (Ibid). Whereas in the past, British training technique focused on the need to train actors capable of transforming physically – in accordance with the demands of repertory programmes that were staged in large theater spaces – more contemporary approaches have become increasingly sensitive to the changing context in which actors now work. During the last 25 years or so, the collapse of British Repertory theater; the massive expansion of TV broadcasting – via cable, satellite and internet provision; the ever-increasing influence and aesthetics of so-called "Reality TV" and the cult of the celebrity; the increased levels of hybridity between different genres and traditions; as well as the influence of various sociopolitical changes that have taken place across British society more generally (increased social liberalism, a growth in immigration, changes in gender politics, and rising secularism,) have brought about a shift in how we engage with and "receive" different modes of performance – whether live or recorded – as well as the role and function of the "performer." Is the drama we are watching fictitious, real, verbatim, a documentary, a fantasy, live action, an animation, etc.? In such a landscape, the growth of acting methodologies that seek authenticity through an enhanced understanding of selfhood is perhaps hardly surprising.

Finally, and perhaps somewhat ironically, while there may well be a great deal of truth in Rumbelow's contention that the world in which Stanislavski operated no longer prevails today, it remains compelling to discover that the guidance he offers actors prior to commencing work on a role seems every bit as important now as it ever was:

Every idea you have must be precisely substantiated and strictly determined. The questions – *who, when, where, why, for what reason, how* – which we asked so as to stir our imagination, helped us create a picture of our imaginary, illusory life with greater and greater definition...imagining "in general" without a well-defined, solidly based theme, is fruitless.' (Stanislavski 2008: 83)

Notes

1. Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner were both members of the Group Theatre in New York, formed by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg in 1931. Uta Hagen was a celebrated actress and highly influential acting teacher, who based herself at the HB Studio in Greenwich Village, New York.
2. From personal communication between Sam Rumbelow and the author 11th August 2017.
3. Ibid.
4. In *Strasberg at the Actors Studio: The Tape-Recorded Sessions* compiled by Robert H. Hethmon (210: 91), Strasberg identifies just the first three areas of tension. However, in his book, *A Dream of Passion* 1988: 127–8, he references four areas of tension and even mentions a fifth – that of the lower and upper back area, which he suggests "retain the impression of strong emotional experiences" (Strasberg: 129). In the Lee Strasberg Notes, however, edited by Lola Cohen (Cohen 2010: 9), Cohen identifies only the four included here.
5. See note 2 above.
6. From personal communication with Peter MCAllister and the author 24th July 2017.
7. The work of Russian actor and director, Yevgeny Vakhtangov (1983–1922), was a significant influence on the development of Strasberg's methodology. A more detailed evaluation of the distinctions between Stanislavski and Vakhtangov is available in Hull (1985: 228–232).

8. Excellent examples of this are articulated by David Krasner in his chapter entitled *I HATE STRASBERG: Method Bashing in the Academy* in Krasner (2000) Method Acting Reconsidered pp.28–34.
9. Uta Hagen, also a Method teacher, developed a series of "object exercises" that have a similar aims to those of Strasberg. For these exercises, however, a much greater emphasis is placed on the importance of using real items of furniture etc. and, where necessary, of endowing such items with the particular values associated with the original items in the actor's life.
10. A more detailed reference to Freud's influence on Strasberg can be found in the companion article to this published in Stanislavski Studies Vol 4 Issue 1 pp. 52–3.
11. See note 6 above.
12. Ibid.
13. Stanislavski's discussion of the notion of *public solitude* can be found in Stanislavski (2008) An Actor's Work London: Routledge Chapter 5 – pp.86–118.
14. For further discussion of this aspect of Strasberg's work see Hull, Loraine S. 2012Hull (1985) Strasberg's Method – As Taught by Lorrie Hull USA: Hull-Smithers pp.131–147 and Hethmon, Robert H. *Strasberg at the Actors Studio – Tape Recorded Sessions* 1985 [1965] USA: TCG pp. 102–104.
15. See Strasberg's own *A Dream of Passion* (1988), Robert Hethmon's *Strasberg at the Actors Studio* (1965), Lola Cohen's *The Lee Strasberg Notes* (2010) and S Loraine Hull's *Strasberg's Method* (1985).
16. For an excellent discussion of criticisms of this work see *I HATE STRASBERG: Method Bashing in the Academy* in Krasner, David (2000) *Method Acting Reconsidered* pp. 28–34.
17. For a fuller discussion of Strasberg's criticisms of the acting styles in English theatre see Hethmon Robert H (1965: 378–81).
18. For a discussion of Sanford Meisner's influence on British actor training see Shirley, D "The Reality of Doing": Meisner Technique and British Actor Training in Theatre, Dance and Performance Training Vol. 1 Issue 2 2010 pp. 199–213 Routledge.
19. See note 2 above.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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5.3 Summary

By providing a much more comprehensive and detailed examination of Lee Strasberg's techniques, this article re-evaluates his work and examines his unique and lasting contribution to the field of actor training. Importantly, the article contextualises Strasberg's use of the emotion memory exercise by situating it within the much broader training programme that he developed.

Particularly revealing for the work of this thesis is the suggestion that more contemporary approaches to actor training in the UK are less concerned with developing the physical transformational skills of earlier generations of actors, in preference for more expressive forms of training that value selfhood and personal experience. Such a view is reinforced in this article via reference to various changes that have taken place in British society, innovative developments in drama and performance, and different understandings and interpretations of the notion of authenticity.

It is important to consider that this article antecedes the concerns that have more recently been raised by the Black Lives Matter (BLM)[41] movement – especially in relation to some of the alleged practices deployed at numerous British drama schools. The concluding section of this article anticipates the suggestion that, at the time of publication, many British actor training establishments were somehow out of touch with the real-world experiences of the students they were recruiting.

[41] Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an international social activist movement that began in the USA in 2013. Aimed at highlighting racism, combating racially motivated violence, and eradicating white supremacy, the movement has prompted reviews across many institutions worldwide, including UK drama schools. In recent years, it has resulted in calls for a decolonisation of training curricula, greater inclusivity, and much more accountability.

Chapter Six

Shirley, D. (2010) The Reality of Doing: Meisner Technique and British Actor Training

in *Theatre Dance and Performance Training* Murray, S and Pitches, J (eds)

Routledge Volume 1/Issue 2 pp. 199–213

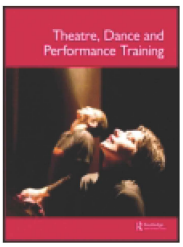
(Published Work 4)

6.1 Introduction

Published in 2010, this journal article proved a major stimulus for the range of research outputs that constitute this thesis. At the time of writing, the Meisner technique was becoming an increasingly popular feature of actor training programmes across the UK. Indeed, the influence of practitioner and teacher Sanford Meisner's work has continued to grow between the time of publication and the present day. Aimed at understanding this phenomenon and the implications it may have for the future development of actor training in the UK, the article makes the following contribution to knowledge:

- It locates Meisner's work as part of the Method school but draws clear distinctions between Strasberg's work and that of Stella Adler. The article also highlights the degree to which Stanislavsky's *Method of Physical Actions* provides an important starting point for the Meisner technique.
- The article analyses and discusses the aims and intentions behind various Meisner exercises and considers the importance of *imagination* and the need for *particularisation*. It also examines the ways in which Meisner's technique fuses emotional drives/needs with physical action – thereby echoing the work of Stanislavsky.
- The discussion challenges Meisner's assumptions about the efficacy of British actor training and his suggestion that it is declamatory in nature. This part of the discussion traces the routes of British acting tradition and the importance of genre and style, something that was later discussed in the *Russians in Britain* chapter contribution (see Publication One). The article also critiques Meisner's views about notions of 'truthfulness' and British acting tradition.
- The article examines the influence of the Meisner technique in different British drama schools and provides an explanation for its increased popularity.

6.2 Journal Article



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'The Reality of Doing': Meisner Technique and British Actor training

David Shirley

Starting with an exploration of the key exercises underpinning the Meisner Technique, this article goes on to examine some of the principles and creative values that helped shape Sanford Meisner's artistic vision and his approach to actor training. Alongside a discussion of the extent to which the methods he adopted take account of interpretative factors related to theatrical convention, performance style and dramatic genre, the discussion also assesses the growing impact of Meisner's work in various British drama schools. What are the tensions between the American Method-based system, from which Meisner's techniques emerged, and the traditions on which British training regimes are (or have been) based and how are these resolved? Finally, the discussion attempts to gauge the extent to which the increasing fascination with Meisner's work signals a shift in our understanding of the role of the professional actor in modern theatre and screen performance.

Keywords: Sanford Meisner, Meisner Technique, repetition exercise, method acting, actor training

Given his remarkable contribution to the development of acting technique in the USA and his undoubted influence on some of the world's most celebrated performers, directors and writers, it is somewhat surprising to discover that, until relatively recently, the work of Sanford Meisner remained virtually unheard of in Britain.

A founding member of New York's much acclaimed Group Theatre (1931–1940), as well as a highly respected performer and teacher, Meisner, together with Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, is credited with having shaped and advanced the American version of Stanislavsky's System – often referred to as the Method.[1] Although since the late 1940s the training and performance techniques associated with the Method have proved a source of both fascination and controversy amongst practitioners and theorists alike, Meisner's contribution to the movement's development has often been under-stated. Unlike Strasberg and Adler – both of whom enjoyed a degree of guru-like celebrity – Meisner seems to have been a much more elusive

1. The use of the 'Method' here echoes Steve Vineberg's (1991, p. xii) use of the term to denote more general conceptions of actor training that foreground 'interior, psychological, naturalistic' approaches to performance rather than the distinctively introspective techniques developed by Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio in New York.

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figure who, apart from a short spell in Hollywood, remained tirelessly dedicated to his work at the Neighbourhood Playhouse School of Theatre where he taught for over 50 years.[2] Indeed, it was not really until the mid-1980s, following the completion of Nick Doob's now famous TV documentary, *Sanford Meisner: The American Theatre's Best Kept Secret* (1985), that Meisner's work began to enjoy increased prominence and recognition.

Whilst the 'Meisner Technique' is now a well established feature of many American actor-training programmes, it is only in the last 10 to 15 years that his work has begun to have any significant impact in the UK. What makes such a realisation especially revealing – and somewhat paradoxical – is a discernable antipathy on Meisner's part for some of the traditions on which English acting technique is, or has been, established – something that is clearly evident in his 1987 book *On Acting* (Meisner and Longwell 1987). What follows, therefore, is both an assessment of the growing influence of Meisner's work in British training institutions, as well as an attempt to gauge the validity of his underlying critique of the English acting tradition. Is Meisner's suggested distinction (ibid., p. 136) between the *emotional creativity* of American acting styles and the intellectually driven *verbal indication* of English performance technique sustainable? If not, how might we unpick and begin to problematise some of the assumptions on which his convictions are based? In order to evaluate meaningfully Meisner's views, it is initially important to establish a clear understanding both of the aims of his work as well as a sense of his teaching methodology.

In common with Adler and Strasberg, Meisner was driven by the need to enable his students to approach their work with absolute emotional truth and genuine psychological depth. Rather than 'indicate' or 'demonstrate' the sentiments and feelings of a dramatic character, the Method requires its practitioners to 'inhabit' and 'experience' the emotions that are actually reflected in the action of the drama.[3] By emphasising the importance of emotional truthfulness, each teacher sought to encourage greater spontaneity and responsiveness during performance. In this approach to acting the text becomes the outward manifestation of a meaningful and highly complex inner life and it is the job of the actor to explore and define this inner life in such a way as to *motivate* the scenic action and imbue the text with emotional truth, resonance and spontaneity.

In an effort to elicit truthful and compelling performances from his students Strasberg famously advocated the use of 'affective memory' – sometimes referred to as 'emotion memory' – a technique through which the performer recalls and utilises personal and often traumatic emotional experiences from the past as a means of stimulating the real emotions that exist in the present of the dramatic character.[4] Though equally determined in his efforts to ensure truthful performance, Meisner remained sceptical about the merits of Strasberg's methods arguing that they risk:

> Introvert(ing) the already introverted. All actors ... like all artists, are introverted because they live on what's going on in their instincts, and to attempt to make that conscious is to confuse the actor. (Meisner and Longwell 1987, p. 59)

2. In 1959 Meisner left the Neighbourhood Playhouse Theatre to take up a post as Head of the Talent Division at 20th Century Fox. He returned to his former role in 1961.

3. For detailed comparative discussion of the distinctions between Strasberg's, Adler's and Meisner's approaches to actor training, as well as that of Robert Lewis, another member of the Group Theatre, see Krasner (2000) and Pitches (2006, pp. 109–125).

4. For a revealing description of the Emotion Memory exercise see Counsell (1996, pp. 56–59). Much has been written about Strasberg's interpretation of this aspect of Stanislavsky's System. An insightful critique of this interpretation as well as Strasberg's own teaching methods can be found in Pitches (2006, pp. 109–117).

Closer in spirit to Stella Adler, Meisner sought to develop the means by which emotional expressiveness occurs as a result of a series of *external* impulses. Whereas Adler's approach encompassed the importance of 'a play's given circumstances, the actor's imagination and physical actions' (Krasner 2000, p. 139), Meisner focused on the need to explore the dynamics of scenic action – as revealed through the imaginary circumstances, the dramatic relationships, the reality of each individual moment and the *actual* behaviour of the characters themselves. Famously declaring that 'an Ounce of BEHAVIOUR is Worth a Pound of WORDS' (Meisner and Longwell 1987, p. 4), Meisner believed that it is only through the 'reality of doing' (ibid., 16) that the emotional life of the character can be revealed: 'I wanted to eliminate all that "head" work, to take away all the mental manipulation and get to where the impulses come from' (Meisner and Longwell 1987, p. 59). This shift in emphasis away from emotional interiority and intellectual introspection chimes with Stanislavsky's own deliberations on the 'System' and his subsequent development of what became known as *The Method of Physical Actions* – a technique designed to offer a reliable means of ensuring that all forms of emotional expression are spontaneous and organically connected to the dramatic circumstances represented in the play.

The effectiveness of this approach is illustrated in *An Actor's Work* (Stanislavsky 2008, pp. 160–173) during a sequence in which Tortsov invites one of his students to mime a series of actions leading up to a particularly tragic moment in a carefully selected improvisation. Having first identified a score of physical activities, the student then reproduces these through a series of *silent etudes* (Carnicke 2000, p. 26) paying particularly close attention to even the smallest, seemingly imperceptible 'external' detail. For the student, the results prove something of a revelation: 'As soon as I felt the truth of physical action I felt at home on stage' (Stanislavsky 2008, p. 161). In addition to promoting a greater sense of relaxation and ease on the stage, this approach also encouraged the actor to adopt a much more improvisational and organic connection to the work. By ensuring that all of his actions were highly detailed and carefully justified, the student was able to experience greater spontaneity and artistic freedom and as a result the performance appeared much more truthful and 'lifelike'.

Less interested in the notion of 'character' *per se* than in the need to establish credible and dynamic scenic 'relationships' and the ability to live truthfully in the 'imaginary circumstances', Meisner developed a series of exercises aimed at fostering increased powers of observation, communication, responsiveness and spontaneity.

The first of these, known as the *Repetition Exercise*, modifies the natural tendency for actors to focus on the self in preference for a technique that re-directs the individual's attention towards their onstage partner. By setting up a simple dialogue in which each actor repeats a single piece of observed factual information such as 'you are wearing spectacles'/' I am wearing spectacles', the aim is to encourage each participant to pay close attention to behavioural changes occurring in their partner. Following prolonged sequences in which the same phrase is repeated, the exercise develops so that even the smallest shifts in behaviour are observed and noted in such a way as to change the nature of the engagement from that of making superficial observations (e.g. about wearing spectacles) to offering more

profound insights that relate to the impulses/feelings that are reflected beneath what is being said. Hence after prolonged repetition 'You are wearing spectacles'/'I am wearing spectacles' might develop into 'You are irritated'/'I am irritated'.

Meisner was committed to the idea that repetition leads to internal 'impulses' that become manifest in physical gestures and actions. He therefore encouraged his students to develop the ability to tune into and read human behaviour in such a way as to maximise the potential for 'instinctive'[5] (Meisner and Longwell 1987, p. 29) responses to what is being communicated. The outward expression of the inner impulse may actually be very small or even hesitant, but in switching the focus of attention away from the self to that of one's partner, the repetition exercise promotes intense observation and acute sensitivity to even the smallest shifts in physical demeanour.

5. Scott Williams refines Meisner's use of the notion of 'instinct' into something more akin to that of 'essence'. Hence the exercise is articulated as one of identifying the 'essence' of what is being communicated (see Williams 2000).

As sensitivity and responsiveness increase the exercise develops into improvised exchanges between two actors, the first of whom should be engaged in an absorbing activity that must be urgent, truthful and difficult to complete. Referred to as the *Knock on the Door*, this exercise introduces conflict into a scenario by requiring the second actor to work for an objective that problematises that of the first. Importantly, Meisner discourages any attempt to discuss or pre-plan the exercise, preferring instead that each actor should respond organically and spontaneously to the *observed* behaviour of his/her partner. Rather than relying on improvised dialogue as a means of discovering the scenic relationship and the given circumstances, each actor deploys the repetition exercise as a means of uncovering the sub-textual *impulses* that inform his/her partner's behaviour and emotional needs. As always with Meisner, the focus of attention is never on the self but on the actions and behaviour of your partner. 'What you do doesn't depend on you it depends on the other fellow' (Meisner and Longwell 1987, p. 34). Through the integration of both physical activity and emotional need, this exercise echoes Stanislavsky's own conviction that 'In every physical action there is something psychological, and in the psychological, something physical' (Stanislavsky, 2000, pp. 16–17).

Having developed in his students the ability to listen and respond truthfully without imposing or indicating feelings and emotions, Meisner carefully and gradually introduced text work to his classes. Comparing the script to a

Figure 1 Scott Williams (centre), of the Impulse Company in London, working with professional actors on Meisner's Repetition Exercise. Photo James Albrecht, July 2009.

libretto, Meisner suggests that the actor's function is similar to that of the composer who 'adds music in an opera' (Meisner and Longwell 1987, p. 179). Always anxious to ensure that scenic relationships remained spontaneous and *alive*, he encouraged his students to develop strong personal connections to the text:

> The first thing you have to do when you read a text is to find yourself – really find yourself. First you find yourself, then you find a way of doing the part which strikes you as being in character. Then, based on that reality, you have the nucleus of the role. (ibid., p.178)

For Meisner, the actor's use of emotion – like the composer's use of music – serves to enliven the dramatic text and animate the relationships that are reflected in it. Indeed it was in the attempt to encourage performers to access and work sensitively and expressively with human emotion that much of his work as a teacher was addressed.

In common with Strasberg, Meisner believed that in order to inhabit truthfully a given role it is necessary to stimulate emotions in the performer that are akin to those of the dramatic character. Unlike Strasberg[6], however, Meisner rejected the idea that truthful emotion could only be drawn from the reality of lived experience. For him, the imagination was entirely capable of filling the gaps between the interpretative demands presented by the text and the reality of the performer's own life:

6. See Carnicke (2009: 152) for an example of the degree to which Meisner and Strasberg came into conflict about the use of emotion.

> What I am saying is that what you are looking for is not necessarily confined to the reality of your own life. It can be in your imagination. If you allow it freedom – with no inhibitions, no properties ... your imagination is, in all likelihood, deeper and more persuasive than the real experience. (Meisner and Longwell 1987, p. 79)

By tapping into the realms of fantasy and encouraging a kind daydreaming process as a means of achieving inner transformation, Meisner found an alternative route to the emotional resources available in the performer. Recognising that actors often feel distanced from or alienated by a character's given circumstances, Meisner encouraged the use of a technique referred to as 'particularisation' (ibid., p. 138). Closely related to Stanislavsky's *magic if*, this approach encourages performers to imagine situations in their own lives that might produce similar feelings and emotions to those experienced by the character. Providing such a process is prompted by the demands of the given circumstances shaping a scene, the performer is entirely free to explore the possibilities afforded by the imagination.

At this point it is important to note that Meisner intended this technique to be used as a *preparation* for a scene – to get the actor going – rather than a means by which to determine how it should be played. Once the scene is established Meisner emphasises the importance of 'living truthfully under the given circumstances' (ibid., p. 87).

For Meisner a script functions as a kind of framework that provides the actor with the starting point for the development of a detailed and complex inner life and to which, with sensitivity and insight, it will eventually become subject:

> The text is like a canoe, and the river on which it sits is the emotion. The text floats on the river. If the water on the river is turbulent, the words will come out like a canoe on a rough river. It all depends on the flow of the river which is your emotion. The text takes on the character of your emotion. (ibid., p. 115)

What makes such an observation interesting is that in suggesting that the text should be regarded as the outer manifestation of a complex inner life, Meisner apparently reveals a preference for a form of psychological realism that draws a great deal from Freud. Yet, despite the reference in *On Acting* to his 'considerable expertise in psychoanalysis' (ibid., p. 5) and his frequent allusions to Freud himself (ibid., pp. 81, 85, 96, 119, 134), Meisner's absolute insistence on the need for actors to observe and remain acutely responsive to *external* rather than *internal* impulses highlights a possible point of departure from Freud - something clearly illustrated by Jonathan Pitches in *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition of Acting*:

> Where the psychoanalytical bias of ... Strasberg encourages his actors to focus inward – on their own neurotic past - the behaviourism of Meisner trains the actor constantly to concentrate on the external signs of performance. (Pitches 2006, p. 123)

Notwithstanding the apparent simplicity and persuasiveness of Meisner's 'canoe' metaphor, the assumptions on which it is based – as will become increasingly apparent – prove more than a little problematic.

Like both Strasberg and Adler, Meisner evolved and refined his approach to actor training during the period between the 1940s and the 1960s. Yet despite the remarkable impact of the techniques developed by each teacher – as evidenced in many American films produced during their lifetimes and subsequently – the lack of cohesion in relation to the proliferation of Stanislavsky's work in the US has, as Sharon Marie Carnicke (2009, p. 11) makes clear, given rise to considerable confusion and controversy: 'In the theatre world, obsession with his System has led to seemingly endless hostility among warring camps, each proclaiming themselves his only true disciples, like religious fanatics, turning dynamic ideas into rigid dogma.' Whilst in part this may be due to Stella Adler's 1934 encounter with Stanislavsky himself and her subsequent advancement of the importance of *action* as opposed to *feeling*, the often 'misleading and inaccurate' (Pitches 2006, p. 111) interpretations that Strasberg brought to bear on Stanislavsky's work should not be overlooked when reflecting on the evolution of the Method.[7]

Notwithstanding a degree of confusion and uncertainty, the emphasis on truthful interaction coupled with an intense focus on naturalistic, spontaneous behaviour, makes it easy to understand why Meisner's work has been readily applied to the intimate and often exposing demands of the camera frame. In the United States, where the skills of screen acting were pioneered, the Meisner Technique is much revered and the principles on which it is established are a recognised feature of many actor training programmes.

But what accounts for his growing popularity in Britain? Why, despite the fact that his work began in the USA over 60 years ago, are UK-based training

7. For a revealing glimpse into Meisner's own rivalry with Strasberg and scorn for his work see Meisner and Longwell (1987, pp. 182–184).

establishments only now beginning to explore the interpretative impact of Meisner's work? Even more importantly, what does the experimentation with this approach reveal about British acting traditions?

Interestingly, throughout his work, Meisner reveals a marked distaste for the conventions on which English acting traditions are based. 'The trouble with English actors', he declares, 'is their use of energy. It's got to be there, but they think of it as stage energy, with no emotional backbone, no support' (Meisner and Longwell 1987, p. 147). In Meisner's view British acting is essentially declamatory and as such tends to sidestep the emotional dynamism that he believed was essential to the modern art form:

> Acting in my terms, in all our terms except for the English – the Americans, the Russians, the Germans – is an emotional creation. It has an inner content. Unlike the English, who know intellectually what the character should be feeling and indicate this through the way they verbally handle the text, we work from living truthfully under imaginary circumstances. (ibid., p. 136)

Although the above statement appears to imply that technical virtuosity potentially undermines the demands of psychological realism, it is, as Jean Benedetti (2005, p. 35) has suggested, in the effort to balance technical control and psychological credibility that the roots of the English acting tradition can be traced. Revealingly, Benedetti's citation of an account by poet Richard Flecknoe (c. 1600–1678?), of Burbage's portrayal of Shakespeare's Proteus foregrounds some of the key principles on which English acting technique has arguably been established:

> [He so wholly transformed] himself into his part, and putting off himself with his clothes as he never … assumed himself until the play was done, there being as much difference betwixt him and our common actors as between a ballad-singer who only mouths it and an excellent singer who knows all his graces and can artfully modulate his voice, even to know how much breath he is to give every syllable. He had all the parts of an excellent orator, animating his words with speaking, and speech with acting [gesture]. (Benedetti 2005, p. 35)

As the extract suggests a chameleon-like ability to transform, the sensitive and precise use of gesture, a skilful use of vocal modulation and breath control as well as a capacity for oratorical excellence soon established the benchmarks against which many of Britain's most celebrated actors were measured.[8] Given the absence of any commentary on the quality of Burbage's emotional engagement with the role, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that it is not so much the case that complex emotion is absent from British performance tradition, but rather it has not been afforded the prominence that Meisner and other Method practitioners tend to attach to it. Moreover, as Colin Counsell (1996, p. 62) suggests, the Method's privileging of a character's inner life and emotional psyche perhaps reveals as much about American conceptions of selfhood as it does about a particular approach to acting: 'This conception of the psyche – an inner essence stifled by the outer, its impulses repressed by social conditioning – has little in common with Stanislavsky's, but is one that has long held a privileged place in American Culture.'

8. For the complete extract of Flecknoe's account of Burbage's performance see Benedetti (2005, p. 35).

Whilst for the modern spectator Meisner's criticisms of English actors might appear justified, it is important to acknowledge the literary and stylistic conventions from which British theatre has evolved. The uses of poetry, rhetoric and epigrammatic dialogue as well as stock characters, disguise, elaboration, spectacle and social ritual have provided the background against which British performance convention has emerged. Indeed the hallmarks of such a theatrical heritage are evident in the works of some of the UK's most admired modern dramatists including Bond, Edgar, Ayckbourn, Churchill, Brenton, Stoppard, Crimp and Kane. Given the multi-faceted nature of British performance practice and the complex lineages from which it draws, it is perhaps hardly surprising that Meisner questioned the truthfulness of some of its most acclaimed practitioners. Notwithstanding his convictions, however, it is important to give consideration to the view that it is not the case that British actors do not value 'truthfulness' in their work, but rather they have not always defined it in accordance with Meisner's interpretation. Jean Benedetti's differentiation between 'theatrical truth' and 'actuality' proves especially instructive when seeking to distinguish between the truth values associated with British acting tradition and those of the Method:

> The verisimilitude of the School of Representation doesn't create the belief we know in life, body and soul. It is merely trust in an actor's work, a coming to terms with theatrical lies and conventions, successful deceit, clever technique, the actor's own success … In other words it does not create real, genuine truth but true-seeming stage emotions and our belief in them. (Benedetti 2005, p. 117)

Interestingly, although all of the scenes that Meisner introduces to his students in the final section of *On Acting* (Meisner and Longwell 1987, pp. 193–247) are taken from plays rather than film scripts, the situations and relationships featured are driven by intense emotional encounters. Whilst stylistically there are striking differences between the works of Frank Wedekind, Anton Chekhov, Clifford Odets, Meade Roberts and Tennessee Williams, the content of each of the chosen scenes foregrounds the importance of the sub-textual lives of the characters and how this becomes manifest in behavioural terms. In this regard the selected material provides the perfect illustration of Meisner's 'canoe' metaphor. In these extracts it is not so much the *style* of the play that is of importance as the *emotional content* of the scenes themselves.

Meisner's reference to the way in which English actors use energy belies the importance they often attach to style. The ornate sophistication and decorative behaviourism that is featured in plays by Oscar Wilde or Noel Coward, for instance, would be utterly undermined if actors overloaded the relationships with intense use of sub-text. Similarly, the demands of Shakespeare's language render it impossible to separate thoughts from words without destroying the verse structure. For the Shakespearean actor, both thought and word live in the moment of utterance. In a theatre culture that has its roots in various stylistic, literary, thematic and social conventions, ideas about what constitutes a 'truthful' performance can often prove highly complex. To attempt, therefore, to label one mode of performance as more truthful than another without taking account of such considerations is to

overlook the essentially constructed nature of theatre art. This observation is reinforced by the realisation that, for many contemporary audiences, early examples of acclaimed screen performances by renowned Method actors such as Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift and James Dean now appear somewhat mannered and conventionalised. The absence of a meaningful discussion about the ways in which the demands of different performance styles/conventions and dramatic genres might influence or shape how 'emotional energy' is reflected in performance and the degree to which such considerations potentially undermine the clarity of Meisner's 'canoe metaphor' represents a significant gap in his theory of acting.

Notwithstanding some of the above observations in relation to Meisner's views on British acting tradition, it is important to begin to try and ascertain why his techniques are becoming a source of increasing fascination for UK teachers and practitioners alike. Aside from becoming a permanent feature of long-established courses at institutions such as Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, Central School of Speech and Drama, and Rose Bruford College, recent years have witnessed the emergence of training academies specifically devoted to the advancement of what has become known as the Meisner Technique.[9] Notable examples include the Impulse Company, based in Chalk Farm and led by American Scott Williams and the Actors Temple based in London's Warren Street. Alongside these, classes in the Meisner Technique are a regular feature at the Actors Centre, the City Literary Institute and countless other well established FE and HE institutions offering practical courses in acting.

To begin to find an explanation for the growing interest in Meisner's work, it is worth taking a necessarily cursory glance at what a typical training curriculum might look like in many British conservatoire schools. Traditionally, actor trainers in the UK have tended to favour a broad-based approach to teaching in which considerations about genre and style have gone hand in hand with the need to work with interpretative credibility and emotional freedom and expressiveness. Whilst a majority of courses favour a holistic approach to training practice – in which voice, speech and movement as well as other essential skills are considered integral – the need to expose students to a variety of performance conventions is considered of paramount importance. Hence, in addition to training students to work in front of the camera or the microphone, most training regimes also seek to develop the skills associated with the 'live' performance of Greek theatre, Shakespeare and the Renaissance, comedy, naturalism, Brecht's epic theatre, experimental and avant-garde theatre forms and contemporary theatre.[10] Although the work of Stanislavsky is often regarded as an essential component of such courses, especially in the formative stages of the training, such input – aside from a few exceptions – has tended to be drawn from Stanislavsky's own writings or that of his close interpreters – e.g. Jean Benedetti. Whilst it would be foolhardy to deny the influence of the Method on UK-based training practice, such influence has tended to be shaped and adapted in order to meet the demands of British performance traditions rather than replace them entirely.

At one level, the inclusion of different dramatic genres and performance traditions in the curricula of many training academies underlines the importance of convention and highlights the need for actors to be able to

9. Research undertaken by the author indicates that the Meisner Technique has been introduced to over half of the actor training programmes available at those institutions recognised by the CDS (Conference of Drama Schools) that are validated by the NCDT (National Council of Drama Training).

10. Inevitably, the course curriculum at each conservatoire school will vary in accordance with the specific aims and objectives of individual programmes. The purpose here is to highlight examples of areas of training that are considered important rather than to imply that all courses are uniform.

recognise and respond to the stylistic demands of a range of theatre forms. At this point it is worth recognising that formalised actor training programmes in Britain developed as a response to the expectations of a repertory system in which performers were required to adapt with efficiency and speed to the demands of a staggeringly broad range of plays. Indeed it is only in the last 20 years or so, as a consequence of falling subsidies and dwindling audiences, that the British repertory system has all but disintegrated. Aside from major national companies like the RSC or the National Theatre, repertory performance in the UK has become a thing of the past.

Bearing this consideration in mind, one way of accounting for the growing popularity of Meisner's work in Britain is to point to changes that are taking place within the industry. Despite the fact that much conservatoire training tends to focus primarily on the demands of live theatre, the reality is that the majority of actors will tend to find work in TV or Film – both of which place much greater emphasis on the importance of working with minute detail and intimacy. This view is echoed by Nick Moseley, who leads the Acting for Stage and Screen strand of the BA (Hons) Acting programme at Central School of Speech and Drama:

> British acting in the first half of the 20th Century ultimately had to fade away as TV and film became the dominant media. The work is often still crafted and resonant but it has to be also minutely responsive because it is hard to fake a reaction when the camera is on you. (Nick Moseley, personal communication, 4 June 2009)

Moseley's suggestion that the shift from theatre to screen performance produces a need for greater intimacy/responsiveness reinforces the idea that definitions about what constitutes 'truthful' performance in one medium are not necessarily applicable to another.

The desire to increase responsiveness and inhibit superficiality in trainee actors has also motivated acting tutor Thomasina Unsworth at Rose Bruford College to introduce Meisner's work to her first year acting students:

> When students arrive they have a tendency to demonstrate, to perform, to try to be interesting. This technique frees them from the burden of all that. It frees them, too, from wondering about what to do with their arms etc as it lifts the focus from the actor onto those they are performing with. It takes them away from the attention to the self. It also ensures that they are really listening and responsive. (Thomasina Unsworth, personal communication, 5 June 2009)

Scott Williams, who, through his work with the Actors Centre in 1996, is credited with introducing the Meisner Technique to the UK, points to the growth of digitised film and recorded media performance as one possible explanation for the increasing popularity of the technique. Alongside this, Williams also suggests that the longevity of modern TV shows and theatre productions intensifies the need for actors to develop interpretative strategies that will empower spontaneous and truthful performances:[11]

11. References taken from statements made by Williams during the course of a personal interview with the author on 3 June 2009.

> The 21st Century actor faces two challenges no previous generation has: specifically, the contract to appear on stage in a role week in and week out for a year or more, and the appearance of digitized film technology, which makes possible multiple takes or more 'casual' shooting arrangements. In both cases, new demands are made on the actor. Traditional 'Method' approaches which require practitioners to re-live past and often painful experiences in order to bring a sense of truthfulness to the present are found wanting, because in reality an actor cannot be 'Method' in the thirteenth month of their run, or on the 94th take before the camera. (Scott Williams, interview with the author, 3 June 2009)

The expansion in satellite and digital broadcasting in the UK has certainly greatly increased the opportunities for actors to find regular employment in a variety of popular TV dramas and soaps. Where once appearing in a TV soap might have been frowned at in certain quarters of the profession, declining opportunities in theatre have prompted a shift in prevailing attitudes. So much so that, for many young actors, working in the theatre becomes an option only when they are unable to find work on screen.

If one of the effects of the dominance of the television and screen industries in the UK has resulted in changes to *where* actors work, then another has witnessed alterations in *how* they work. Where the art of the actor was once located in the ability to 'transform' – both physically and emotionally – the aesthetics of the screen and the camera's resistance to 'theatricalised' modes of performance is slowly beginning to prompt a

Figure 2 Scott Williams discussing the Meisner Technique with a group of professional actors at the Impulse Company in London. Photo James Albrecht, July 2009.

re-evaluation of the nature and function of an actor's craft. This idea is also resonant in post-modern performance practice, much of which seeks to expose the 'artificial' nature of the acting process in preference for less contrived modes of performance that foreground the presence of the 'real' self of the performer rather than 'unreal' one of the character. Indeed it is perhaps this seemingly insatiable appetite for 'actuality' as opposed to 'fiction' that has helped spawn the huge popularity of 'reality television'.

In a populist cultural environment where so-called 'reality' and 'ordinariness' are valued for their 'authenticity' and 'truthfulness', the transformative and representational skills of the actor as *story-teller* can often appear both artificial and anachronistic. With its rejection of the 'superficial' or the 'imposed' in preference for a profound emphasis on 'spontaneity' and 'truthfulness', it is easy to see why new generations of actors are drawn to Meisner's work.

Whatever theories might be offered as a means of explaining the increasing popularity of the Meisner Technique in Britain, it is interesting to note that amongst those that have adopted his teaching methods, agreement about how they should be taught is far from unanimous. Despite a realisation that the system he developed is derived from the work of Stanislavsky, the extent to which Meisner believed it should sit alongside other elements of the Stanislavskian methodology is not always clear. Scott Williams, of the Impulse Company, for instance, prefers to focus almost exclusively on Meisner's own exercises and teaching methods, arguing that the approach is so self-contained that the need for actors to identify objectives/super-objectives etc. becomes redundant (Scott Williams, personal interview with the author, 3 June 2009). Whilst he stops short of attempting to argue that this was a view shared by Meisner himself, it is worth noting that very little space is given over to this aspect of Stanislavsky's work in Meisner's own book.

Interestingly, in direct contrast to some of the convictions held by Meisner himself, Williams finds that the British emphasis on technical training for actors can be a real advantage when seeking to introduce them to Meisner's work:

> One of the reasons I enjoy working with British actors is their innate respect for craft and discipline. With their highly developed skills in voice and movement it's fascinating to watch them approach my work in a manner that harnesses their technical virtuosity to spontaneity and truthfulness in performance. In short, I teach a technique for truthfulness that seems to suit the modern British actor. (Scott Williams, interview with the author, 3 June 2009)

That there may well be an officially approved way of teaching the Meisner Technique is suggested by Tom Radcliffe's biographical entry on the Website for the Actors Temple, of which he is both a co-director and teacher: 'Tom is one of only three Sanford Meisner acting students in the world to be granted permission by Meisner himself to teach the Meisner Technique independently.'[12]

Notwithstanding the current fascination with his methodology, the implications of such a statement suggest that Meisner was clearly keen to

12. Information about *The Actors Temple* Available from: http://www.actorstemple.com/about/tom_radcliffe [Accessed 26 June 2009].

safeguard the principles and practices on which his work is based. The suggestion that a 'purist' Meisner approach tends to underplay the importance of playing Stanislavskian styled objectives is also echoed in the reported experience of British actor and teacher Kim Durham:

> I value greatly its encouragement of spontaneity and focusing away from oneself onto the other; on the other hand, in my own practicing of the technique as an actor I couldn't get past what seemed to be a suppression of playing one's objective ('use it to bring you to the door and then leave it'). (Kim Durham, personal communication, 20 June 2009)

Alive to the concerns to which Durham is pointing, Nick Moseley of Central School of Speech and Drama and author of the Meisner-inspired *Acting and Reacting* (2005) has developed an approach to the Meisner Technique that incorporates a recognition of the importance of Stanislavskian 'objectives' without allowing these to detract from the immediacy of the dramatic moment. Importantly, he believes that the technique is most effective when actors have already established a secure working process:

> Meisner, I believe, should kick in at the beginning of the second year [of a conservatoire actor training programme], when vocal/breath technique is becoming more secure and when students already have a clear process in place, so that they see it as being in addition to Stanislavsky not instead of . . . .I remind students that there are still objectives and given circumstances present which are influencing the action, but that these are contained or generated within the exercise itself rather than outside it. (Nick Moseley, personal communication, 4 June 2009)

Like Moseley, Thomasina Unsworth at Rose Bruford College also integrates Meisner's work with that of Stanislavsky. Interestingly, however, she does not appear to share Durham's anxiety about the suppression of the use of objectives:

> I use a lot of Meisner when I teach; it sits alongside Stanislavsky. I have changed how certain [Stanislavskian] exercises are explored by incorporating Meisner into them. We still cover the basic actors questions, objectives, actions etc but these are at the heart of the Meisner technique anyway. (Thomasina Unsworth, personal communication, 5 June 2009)

Unsworth's suggestion that the Meisner Technique implicitly embraces Stanislavskian methodology highlights the permeability of the approach and the extent to which, depending on the context in which it is taught, it is open to interpretation and adaptation. In Britain, at least, many acting teachers appear entirely at ease with applying and adapting the technique in accordance with their own needs as well as those of the student actor. This is most apparent when it comes to working with text. Although, in the case of psychological realism, there is probably very little requirement to augment Meisner's key principles, it is generally acknowledged that in most other plays there is a need to take account of the importance of considerations relating to genre, style, language and dramatic structure.

That said, in common with Moseley, Unsworth is keen to point out that the application of Meisner's work to even the most tightly structured plays proves invaluable in helping to generate a sense of liveness and spontaneity in performance that might otherwise prove elusive:

> I don't think with certain texts you would be wholly successful approaching them only through the Meisner Technique. However, without it I find that performance can be quite empty. Always it helps the actor hear the text and observe what is around him/her. I have found that the Meisner Technique really ignites an actor; it encourages the imagination and it gets rid of superficiality. (Thomasina Unsworth, personal communication, 5 June 2009)

Despite its initial obscurity, the growing popularity and influence of the Meisner Technique during the past 10 to 15 years has proved something of a British phenomenon. In the face of a rapidly changing profession where the demand for authenticity and realism is constantly increasing and always evolving it is perhaps hardly surprising that performance practitioners should begin to look at new ways of thinking about and approaching their work. Indeed, one of the most compelling features of Meisner's methods is the extent to which – through the liberation of the imagination – he forces a fuller investigation of what it means for a performer to remain vulnerable, observant, receptive, emotionally engaged and fully committed to the spontaneity of live relationships; the very same qualities for which, incidentally, 'reality entertainment' is frequently applauded.

The extent, however, to which Meisner's techniques represent a self-contained training regime is perhaps much more problematic. Whilst the importance of accessing and working with emotion is certainly a distinctive and central feature of his approach to training, the degree to which such methods can be applied to the aesthetic and stylistic demands of different genres and mediums remains largely untested. If we accept the view that one of the functions of a text – as actors have previously understood it – is to stimulate a range of interpretative character choices that are both emotional *and* physical then it is impossible to overlook the absence of a serious attempt on Meisner's behalf to grapple with those aspects of an actor's craft that are essentially physical in nature – as exemplified in the verbal word-play of comic text for instance, or the obsessive machinations of farce, or in the rhetorical structures of much Elizabethan drama.

No less important is the need to interrogate and unpick Meisner's definition of what constitutes 'truth' in performance; a concept which, for him, is defined and shaped by the demands of an intense, partly Freudian version of psychological realism, but which he nevertheless attempts to apply to acting in general. The realisation that what might previously have been regarded as a 'truthful' performances by Edward Alleyn or David Garrick or Sarah Bernhardt would not necessarily be considered so today highlights the conviction that truth values are constantly shifting in response to numerous cultural, artistic, social and political variables. This is not to imply that it is impossible to locate universal truths in relation to an actor's craft, but to highlight the very particular way in which Meisner chose to apply the concept.

That said, it is important to recognise that the development of Meisner's work in the UK offers a potentially invaluable opportunity to experiment with and re-shape an understanding of an actor's craft in a way that demands engagement with the particularities of today's industry and the challenges it presents. It is not simply a case of choosing to reject the 'fictitious' in preference for the 'real' or of dispensing with one mode of performance in favour of another but rather one of seizing an opportunity to reflect on the role of the modern actor and to discover new ways of communicating in a meaningful way with today's audiences.

It would, of course, be hopelessly foolish to suggest that the Meisner Technique holds a key to solving the various difficulties facing modern theatre and film – dwindling audiences, the demise of narrative fiction, the growth of internet and interactive media entertainment, the cult of the 'celebrity' etc. – but inasmuch as it insists that 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (Meisner and Longwell 1987, p. 16), it represents an important stage in beginning the process of re-evaluating the role of the actor, the aesthetics of narrative drama and the purpose of training. Whatever we may ultimately feel about the efficacy of the Meisner Technique, it is impossible to deny the artistic integrity on which it is based and the compelling nature of the results it can produce. Given this consideration it is hardly surprising to discover that it continues to attract the interest and fascination of both actors and teachers alike.

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6.3 Summary

A significant part of this article is the distinction it draws between American versions of Method acting and British acting tradition. Meisner's suggestion that British acting technique ignores the need for truth and/or authenticity is not borne out in his writings and completely ignores the histories and stylistic conventions that have served to shape our understanding of the actor's craft. Notwithstanding this consideration, the ongoing appeal of the Meisner technique in British training is undeniable.[42]

The article marks a moment when some of the values that have hitherto shaped actor training in the UK were beginning to be questioned. The emphasis, for instance, on the need for physical transformation, or the heightened use of vocal technique, were being replaced by demands for more recognisable versions of selfhood and greater authenticity – both of which chimed with changes that were taking pace in the industry itself, such as the demise of the UK repertory system,[43] for instance, or the growing fascination with the unscripted, real-life situations that regularly feature in 'reality' TV shows. Depictions of the ordinariness of the everyday existence seemed at odds with the training on offer in most UK drama schools. Interestingly, it is the representation of the *ordinariness* of everyday life that a significant part of Stanislavsky's system was designed to capture in performance. Given this consideration, it is easy to understand Meisner's appeal.

Aside from proving a catalyst for my own research, this article has also proved a valuable source of research for other academics working in the field – notably Philippa Strandberg-Long (2018) and James Mclaughlin (2012), both of whom have cited this article at various points in their PhD dissertations on the work of Sanford Meisner.

In recent years it has been cited by Bester and Munro (2013), Davidson (2023), Heim (2013), Strandberg-Long (2018, 2021), and Schaeffler, Parry, Beck, Rees, Schaeffler, and Whittaker (2023). As of March 2024, it is the sixth most read article in the journal's history.

[42] UK drama schools that now incorporate Meisner's work into the curriculum include Rose Bruford College (RBC), Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD), Italia Conti Theatre School, London Academy of Music and Drama (LAMDA), Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, and Guildford School of Acting (GSA).

[43] The UK's regional repertory system was established in the early 1900s and afforded opportunities for actors to become attached to particular companies and play a range of parts across a particular season. This tradition of theatre was extremely popular between the mid-1940s and the 1980s and helped to nurture the careers of Vanessa Redgrave, Judi Dench, and Ian McKellen, amongst many others.

Chapter Seven

Shirley, D. (2019) Stanislavski's System and the Director's Art in the Twenty First Century

in *The Great Stage Directors: Stanislavski, Antoine, Saint Denis: Volume 1*

Peta Tait (ed.) Methuen Drama – Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 113–133

(Published Work 5)

7.1 Introduction

Although the primary focus for this thesis is concerned with the influence of Stanislavsky's work on British actor training, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which professional practice has served to influence such training. This was clearly acknowledged in the first publication included in this thesis, as well as the introductory commentary that accompanies it.

This chapter examines the work of three of the UK's most influential directors and explores the degree to which their work is influenced by Stanislavsky's methods and his understanding of the actor's craft. What makes this chapter particularly important is the extent to which each director adapts Stanislavsky's methods to meet the unique creative contexts in which they are working – in documentary/verbatim theatre (Max Stafford-Clark), in contemporary approaches to classical texts (Declan Donnellan), and in the context of 'live cinema' (Katie Mitchell).

The positioning of this publication immediately after the journal article on Sanford Meisner is designed to prompt reflection in relation to the ongoing relevance of Stanislavsky's work despite some of the changes that have been taking place in the professional theatre. Mitchell's work on what she refers to as the 'physiology of emotions' (Shirley, 2019, p. 130) affords new ways of understanding and engaging with Stanislavsky's work in the context of contemporary theatre practice. Of equal interest in this chapter is Declan Donnellan's emphasis on the need for actors to 'recognize and respond to the energy present in the surrounding environment' (Ibid: 124), an approach that is strongly reminiscent of Meisner's. Finally, the new forms of realism that Stafford-Clark has nurtured (verbatim and documentary theatre) open a space from which to respond to the challenge posed in the previous publication, namely that of discovering 'new ways communicating in a meaningful way with today's audiences' (Shirley, 2010, p. 213).

In including this chapter as part of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge that following its completion, Max Stafford-Clark, Co-Founder and Artistic Director of *Out of Joint Theatre,* was forced to leave the company in 2017 following accusations of sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour towards several female company members. Although Stafford-Clarke

did not face criminal proceedings and has apologised for his conduct, the company, now known as *The Stockroom*, has severed all ties with him.[44]

[44] For further information see Topping, A (2017) 'Theatre Director Max Stafford-Clark was ousted over inappropriate behaviour' *The Guardian* October 21st, 2017*;* and Allfree, C (2021) 'Max Stafford-Clark's MeToo mea culpa: how a giant of British theatre was brought crashing to earth' *The Telegraph* November 30th, 2021.

7.2 Chapter Publication

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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5

Stanislavski and Contemporary Directing Practice

David Shirley

Konstantin Stanislavski is described by Bella Merlin as 'the father of contemporary acting practice'.[1] This is especially true of the conventions and aesthetics that are associated with theatrical Realism. A staple feature on the curricula of drama and performance-related courses at schools, universities, colleges and drama schools throughout the world, Stanislavski's system of acting (the System) and the techniques associated with it provide the foundations on which most Westernized approaches to actor training are established. Indeed, his very name has become synonymous with the actor's craft.

But what of the director's craft? To what extent is it possible to trace the influence of Stanislavski's methods on contemporary directing practice? Although much has been written about his own work as a director,[2] there is surprisingly little coverage of the ways in which Stanislavski's work has helped to shape the artistic practice of contemporary professional theatre directors.

This chapter will examine how different approaches to and interpretations/derivations of Stanislavski's approach have influenced the creative techniques of three particularly influential British directors working into the early part of the twenty-first century: Max Stafford-Clark, Declan Donnellan and Katie Mitchell. To achieve this, it will investigate their production histories, rehearsal practice and interpretative techniques. In the case of each director, the interpretative approach highlights a particular

aspect of Stanislavski's approach: Stafford-Clark focuses on the importance of an ensemble-based approach to realist productions, Donnellan has developed a series of experiential rehearsal techniques in his interpretation of the classics and Mitchell's highly exploratory approach foregrounds the importance of rethinking the physical connection to emotions.

This choice of directors reflects a desire to focus on traditional as well as innovative approaches to theatre directing in both classical and contemporary work. Whereas Stafford-Clark, for instance, has devoted much of his career to developing and staging new plays by writers such as Caryl Churchill, David Hare, Howard Brenton and Andrea Dunbar, Donnellan has established an international reputation for the innovative freshness with which he has approached the staging and reinterpretation of a wide range of classical texts including works by Shakespeare, Racine, Corneille and Sophocles. In contrast to both of her contemporaries, Mitchell's work often embraces new technologies and a variety of media as a means of prompting new ways of experiencing innovative material by writers such as Sarah Kane, Martin Crimp and Simon Stephens, as well as forging ingenious ways of engaging with canonical works by Chekhov and Strindberg. While each director fully acknowledges the importance of Stanislavski, the degree to which his influence is traceable in their work is variable.

Ensembles and Realism

It goes almost without saying that one of the key tenets of Stanislavski's vision for a new kind of theatre was his emphasis on the need to establish an acting ensemble with a shared ethos. As Vasily Osipovich Toporkov summarizes: 'Our art is an ensemble art. Brilliant individual actors in a show are not enough. We have to think of a performance as a harmonious union of all elements into a single artistic creation.'[3] Rather than focus on individual actors or stars, Stanislavski advanced a more cohesive and collaborative approach to theatre in which the company sought to find truthful and meaningful connections to the situations and environments presented by the playwright. While many aspects of Stanislavski's early approach to theatre evolved and changed as he matured, this commitment to the notion of an ensemble remained constant throughout his life.

Stafford-Clark's own interpretative and directorial techniques have developed and expanded Stanislavski's ideas on the importance of the ensemble. He began his directing career at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in 1966. Following his appointment to the role of artistic director of the company in 1968, and having led the Traverse Theatre Workshop for five years, he co-founded the Joint Stock Theatre Group with fellow director Bill Gaskill, producer David Aukin and playwright David Hare. Primarily concerned with the staging of new plays, this company adopted a highly experimental, workshop/research-driven approach to rehearsals in which

director, writer and actors collaborated in the generation and production of original scripted material – often from new and unknown writers. Bill Gaskill explains: 'A dream we all had, this wonderful thing of a great permanent company, long rehearsal periods [...] If you want to rehearse a play three or four months, you ought to be able to, and not be under pressure to do one every six or seven weeks [...] To create new work you need a different nursery.'[4]

The plays directed by Stafford-Clark during this period include politically inflected works such as *Fanshen* by David Hare in 1975, *Epsom Downs* by Howard Brenton in 1977, and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* in 1976 and *Cloud Nine* in 1979, both by Caryl Churchill. In 1979, Stafford-Clark was appointed to the role of artistic director of London's Royal Court Theatre, where he remained for fourteen years. Once again, his commitment to new writing and a collaborative approach to rehearsal led to some of the ground-breaking productions of the 1980s and 1990s, including two further major plays by Churchill, *Top Girls* in 1982 and *Serious Money* in 1987.[5]

Although each of the contemporary directors in this study acknowledges the benefits of working within an ensemble system, Stafford-Clark, throughout his career, has sought, uniquely, to develop an approach that encompasses both Stanislavski's emphasis on unity and detail and Brecht's ideological perspectives. Indeed, it is possibly his interest in the latter that has fuelled his long-standing commitment to new writing.[6] Noted for his careful nurturing of original works by socially aware and often politically motivated writers, Stafford-Clark is also mindful of the need for methodological specificity: 'The first lesson I learnt from the Court [was] that the "standard" of the "work" was the important criterion and that this led to the meticulous examination of every detail of the production.'[7]

Upon leaving the Royal Court in 1993, he collaborated with theatrical producer Sonia Freedman to establish Out of Joint Theatre Company, which continued Stafford-Clark's approach in both Joint Stock and his Royal Court work, seen in his 1997 staging of *The Positive Hour* by April De Angelis and the verbatim-inspired *Talking to Terrorists* by Robin Soans in 2005 (Figure 5.1).[8]

Although the prevailing economic conditions in which British theatre operates have prevented him from establishing a permanent company along lines similar to those of either the Moscow Arts Theatre (MAT) or the Berliner Ensemble,[9] Stafford-Clark remains committed to the value of company work:

> On the few occasions when I have been able to work with a more permanent ensemble of actors and when, either by accident or by design, there has been a genuine effort to share power and responsibility, it has created the best working conditions I've known. And this in turn has led to the best work. Theatre is a collaborative act and, when the conditions for true collaboration can be created, theatre hits its most thrilling potential.[10]

The clearest, most detailed account of his working methods can be found in *Letters to George: A Director's Handbook of Techniques* (1989), a collection of letters that he produced during 1988 rehearsals for *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar and *Our Country's Good* by Timberlake Wertenbaker. Here it is clear that, alongside his commitment to an ensemble, his work with actors is strikingly derivative of Stanislavski's System. Following prolonged periods of work 'round a rehearsal room table',[11] where the company identify and agree 'objectives' and 'actions',[12] scenes are read, tested and retested in order to piece together a framework to understand the structure of the play as a whole. Nigel Terry explains:

> You break the whole thing into sections, and you use transitive verbs on every single act and action. [...] And this would go on for quite a while. Max doesn't get you on your feet until you've gone through that process, reading it, saying the actions, changing them. It's a flexible thing, but it gives you the framework, the structure which is malleable.[13]

Rather than adopt an autocratic approach to rehearsal, Stafford-Clark provides plenty of opportunities for creative input and insight from actors, who are invited to undertake research into the background to the play, the characters, and the political and social milieu in which the action is situated. Wary of assuming an overly 'scholastic' approach to rehearsals, in which theoretical analysis is divorced from dramatic action, the cast members are encouraged to embody their findings through hot-seating exercises, improvisations and interactive games to build relationships and free the imagination. In this way, Stafford-Clark enables the collaborative ethos he favours and encourages a shared ownership of the aforementioned 'power and responsibility' involved in production. Importantly, for Stafford-Clark, the writer is often at the centre of this process, which can start with a workshop period before formal rehearsals begin.

Although Stafford-Clark makes it clear that each play brings different demands and, therefore, requires different responses from the director, the use of an initial workshop period at the commencement of rehearsals has become fairly standard. Designed to provide the launch pad from which the company's work will develop, this aspect of the work has been defined by Stafford-Clark as follows: 'A workshop isn't actually a rehearsal, nor is it a journalistic investigation, nor is it academic research and yet it contains elements of all three of these. Part of the function is to familiarize and brief the actors, who are together for the first time.'[14] With new writing so much a part of his oeuvre as a director, the workshop also provides a stimulus for the playwright.[15]

Importantly, Stafford-Clark makes extensive use of factual materials – for example historical texts and eye-witness testimonies – as vehicles to enter the world depicted in the play.[16] He insists that information thus gathered is embodied by and absorbed into the behaviour of the actors.

FIGURE 5.1 Talking to Terrorists *by Robin Soans, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. An Out of Joint and Royal Court production at The Royal Court Theatre opened on 14 July 2005. Left to right: in the background, Lloyd Hutchinson, Alexander Hanson, Christopher Ettridge and Jonathan Cullen, and Chipo Chung in the foreground. Photographer: Geraint Lewis. Copyright: Geraint Lewis.*

For instance, having read and studied Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) as part of the workshop process for *Our Country's Good*, cast member Mark Lambert translated his findings into physical action and could explain and demonstrate a lock-picking burglary in detail.[17]

Like Stanislavski, Stafford-Clark uses terms such as 'actions' and 'objectives' to identify character motivations and impulses at different stages of the drama. An excellent example is in his directorial notes of the encounter between Silvia and Kite in Act 3, Scene 2 (lines 196–222) of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*. The list of transitive verbs added to each line of text gives a fascinating insight to the adversarial relationship that is played out between Sergeant Kite and the daughter of the local justice, Silvia, who is actually disguised as a man:

Kite	Befriends
Silvia	Distances
Kite	Pleases
Silvia	Amuses
Kite	Intrigues
Silvia	Fears

Kite	Flatters, Pressures
Silvia	Discourages
Kite	Binds
Silvia	Mollifies
Kite	Praises, Encourages, Reassures, Binds
Silvia	Cheers
Kite	Alerts, Warns, Focuses
Silvia	Diverts[18]

Even without Farquhar's dialogue, the sense of responsiveness captured in the pattern of transitive verbs helps to promote a Stanislavskian sense of communion between each of the actors involved. For Stanislavski, the actor must always be in contact with the other actor, not an imagined character. As Stanislavski writes: 'It is agony to play opposite actors who look at you and see someone else and adapt to him, not you. A wall separates them from those with whom they should be in direct communication [...] Beware of this, it is dangerous, murderous and crippling.'[19]

Clearly aware of the dangers of imposition or of being overly prescriptive, Stafford-Clark remains constantly alert to the need to shift and change interpretation in accordance with how the actors actually play the scene:

> Having road-tested the actions, we were then in a position to amend and correct them. Obviously it's no good saying 'Kite charms Wilful' if, in fact, his instincts take him in another direction as soon as he acts it [...] Working with agreed actions means that each actor knows and subscribes to a particular shape to the scene. It [...] shouldn't be treated as a rigid working method, but it does establish a common language.[20]

He encourages actors to go out and meet real people who have experiences that are either analogous or equivalent to those of the characters in the play. During the workshop period for *Our Country's Good*, cast members Alphonsia Emmanuel and Linda Bassett met with Rosie, a former inmate of Holloway Prison, to try to understand more fully the pathway to criminality. When it came to sharing this research, the results proved invaluable to the entire company, including Timberlake Wertenbaker, who was working on the script:

> They sat facing a semi-circle of the rest of us and re-enacted their interview. [...] Thus their research was fed to Timberlake [...] it was very successful. Both actresses hit on the same personality: perky, London, sharp and bright and, in the course of an hour-long improvisation, came up with an astonishing amount of detail.[21]

The 'round a rehearsal room table' approach to the workshop elements of Stafford-Clark's methodology – in which research, observation and

embodiment serve to nourish a sense of authenticity in the work – is strongly reminiscent of Vasili Toporkov's experience of playing Vanechka, a bank cashier, in Stanislavski's 1928 production of Valentin Kataev's play *The Embezzlers*.[22] Somewhat frustrated with Toporkov's tendency to focus almost exclusively on how best to deliver each line, Stanislavski took the text away from him and forced him to focus on action as a means of deepening his understanding of the character.[23]

Throughout his career, Stafford-Clark, like Stanislavski, has been noted for the levels of rigour and detail that he brings to the rehearsal room. In recent years, this has been further evidenced by his involvement with verbatim theatre. Notable examples include *The Permanent Way* by David Hare in 2003 and *Talking to Terrorists* by Robin Soans in 2005. Unlike other forms of verbatim theatre, which often record and reproduce the live testimonies of those interviewed, in both of these instances Stafford-Clark adopted a more flexible approach that allowed for greater degrees of creative freedom for the actors, the writer and the director. Instead of functioning simply as reporters, the performers in each of these productions assumed the roles of actor-researchers or 'hunter-gatherers', as Hare[24] liked to refer to them, undertaking interviews, collecting information and then presenting their findings to the company.

Like Stafford-Clark's new writing projects at the Royal Court and Out of Joint, the format through which actors fed back to the rest of the company was usually that of a hot-seat exercise, in which the actors *inhabited* the personas of those with whom they conducted interviews. Importantly, though, as Merlin makes clear, mere physical characterization was not the primary goal of these sessions: 'It is important to note that Stafford-Clark's requisite for the feeding back of interviews [...] was not that the actors should *impersonate* their subjects. Rather they were to "embody the spirit" of the interviewees.'[25] For Bella Merlin, who undertook the role of the Bereaved Mother in *The Permanent Way*, which was based on her interviews with actual people involved in the tragedy, this entailed not just reflecting 'physical, gestural vocabulary' but also 'accessing the counterpoint between physical containment and psychological anger.'[26]

While it has been argued that Stanislavski's approach does not entirely fit with the aims of presenting the behaviours and thoughts of the real people represented in verbatim plays as opposed to dramatic characters of fictional drama,[27] there are two things that are particularly noteworthy in Merlin's description of drawing on an interview. The first is the extent to which she begins to incorporate into her own psyche the atmosphere she encounters in the room with the grieving mother. The second is her sensitivity to what Stanislavski describes as the 'given circumstances'.

Perhaps the nearest that Stanislavski ever comes to talking about representing real people rather than imagined characters is in *An Actor's Work on a Role*, when he itemizes the kind of preparation that needs to be done if an actor is to undertake the role of Antonio Salieri in Alexander

Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri* (1831). He writes that 'the imagination sketches out the character's entire life that creates the atmosphere that shapes (forms and develops) the heart of the role'.[28] The resemblance between the levels of detail that Stanislavski outlines in this section and Stafford-Clark's approach is evident – particularly in relation to Merlin's emphasis on the importance of the 'given circumstances', which provides the perfect illustration of Stanislavskian technique in action.

The fact that the event itself and the person Merlin interviews are real rather than imagined does not undermine the force of Stanislavski's approach; if anything, it can serve to sharpen the effect. As it can be seen from Torstov's response to an irritated Grisha, in *An Actor's Work*, when he suggests that an overdependence on the 'given circumstances' and 'what ifs' leaves the actor with 'trifles'.

> 'What do you mean trifles?' Torstov turned on him. 'To believe in another person's thoughts and genuinely live them – you call that a trifle? Don't you know that creating on someone else's idea is infinitely more difficult than making up a story of your own? [...] We establish our relationships to people and the circumstances of their lives [...] We become bound to it, we live in it psychologically and physically. We produce "the truth of the passions" in ourselves.'[29]

In the context of Stafford-Clark's work, Richard Eyre's comments in response to *The Permanent Way*, and to documentary/verbatim theatre more generally, also prove revealing:

> The desire to make that experience of simulated reality more 'real', more like life as it is rather than how it's supposed to be, is the motor of modern theatre. [...] The obligation of actors playing real people to honour their subjects leads to a naturalness and transparency that has the effect of making performances in plays not based on real events seem insincere. Given a rise in the currency of documentary theatre, a new gauge of naturalness will be set.[30]

Whether staging classical material, working with new writers or developing verbatim pieces, Stafford-Clark, through his careful attention to detail, has consistently sought a high degree of theatrical specificity and representational authenticity in his work. His methodology as a director – the emphasis on an ensemble ethos, the intense table-work, the use of actions and objectives, the improvisatory approach and the physical/spiritual approach to embodied representations by actor-researchers, whether consciously or otherwise – has been heavily influenced by many of Stanislavski's key principles. Taken together, the commitment to a new form of Realism and the rigorous approach to workshops and rehearsals locate Stafford-Clarke as a leading proponent of what he himself has described as the *Méthode Stanislavskoise*.[31]

An experiential approach to the classics

If the foundations of Stanislavski's principles are clearly traceable in many of the methodologies adopted by Max Stafford-Clark, the same is not true of the work of Declan Donnellan. Together with Nick Ormerod, his theatre designer partner, Donnellan founded the internationally acclaimed Cheek by Jowl in 1981. Initially conceived as a touring ensemble, the company gained an international reputation for presenting innovative, stylish and highly intelligent classical productions including works by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Webster, Racine and Chekhov. An associate director of the National Theatre between 1989 and 1998, Donnellan also directed for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC).[32]

In 1997, he directed a Russian translation of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* at the Maly Theatre in St Petersburg, and in 2000 he was invited to direct Alexander Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* at the Moscow Art Theatre. In 1999, Donnellan and Ormerod accepted an invitation from the Russian Theatre Confederation to form a permanent company of Russian actors. Described as the 'sister company' of Cheek by Jowl, this group, based in Moscow, undertakes both national and international tours of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*.

Acknowledging the profound influence of Peter Brook [**see Volume 5**], whose work, he believes, 'encompasses the poles of the spiritual and the vulgar',[33] Donnellan also recalls regular visits, as a teenager, to performances at the RSC and the Royal Court. Comparing his role as a director to that of a 'coach', for whom the actor 'is the athlete', Donnellan is nevertheless wary of finding himself encumbered by 'rules'.[34]

> The notion that a director creates 'rules' is notoriously problematic, but clearly I impose rules, though what I impose I see emerging from the grass-roots, from the actors themselves [...] whenever we seem to be faced with a choice between telling the truth or obeying the rule, we should always choose to break the rule.[35]

While he fully acknowledges the immense importance of Stanislavski's legacy, he stops short of discussing his work in terms of the efficacy or otherwise of prescribed methodologies, in preference for a freer and more philosophical understanding.

> I think people are touched by Stanislavski's extraordinary struggle to help life flow on stage. Very often people are much more inspired, I have to tell you, by *My Life in Art* which is completely exercise free! It's more to do with the spirit [...] It's the spirit of Stanislavski: that's what's so important about him as far as I am concerned.[36]

Donnellan suggests that there is an 'invisible quality', a kind of 'collision' of experiences that occurs, through which we encounter Stanislavski's vision.[37] For Donnellan, the 'context and space' in which our work is situated is most important – as was the case for Stanislavski. 'Words', he argues, 'don't work' when it comes to attempts to describe, theorize or fix Stanislavski's methods. Mindful of the fact that Stanislavski frequently changed his mind, Donnellan is suspicious of what he describes as 'Stanislavskian fundamentalism', preferring to use his 'own lights' as the means to connect with the latter's work. 'It is Stanislavski's spirit that has influenced me, not the facts.'[38]

Donnellan's focus as a director is aimed at watching and reacting to the spontaneous behaviour of actors in rehearsal and during the moment of performance (Figure 5.2). Indeed, it is the determination 'to recreate the living experience as opposed to blocking it' or to 'organize the conditions under which life might be more likely to arise'[39] that forms part of Donnellan's *raison d'être* as a director. In this context, his reference to the 'living experience' can be viewed as a resistance to more conventionalized approaches to staging – such as blocking or choreographing the movement of a scene or making decisions about the emotional content of the scene in advance of rehearsing it.

Closely aligned to this notion of liveness and spontaneity in his work is his commitment to an ensemble ethos – something he shares with both Stanislavski and Stafford-Clark. Donnellan explains: 'The sense of belonging, or of wanting to belong, is fundamental to my understanding of live performance; playmaking is essentially a shared experience [...] There is something both beautiful and healing about the collective creative process of theatre, and nothing is more crushing than watching a play which has been stifled of life.'[40] Actors feel valued and empowered in their work. 'Those in the smallest roles are as important as those in the biggest', Donnellan suggests, 'in a way it is romantically Socialist – everybody is respected.'[41]

While Donnellan clearly values the importance of research as a means of freeing the creative imagination and empowering rehearsals, in sharp contrast to Stanislavski and Stafford-Clark, he stops short of extended periods of 'table-work'.[42] It is very much this concentration on an actor-centred approach addressed to the 'recognition of life through the operation of spontaneity' that serves to distinguish Donnellan from many of his contemporaries, including the other directors discussed in this chapter. The search for 'behavioural spontaneity', emerging from the actor's impulse rather than being carefully researched in advance, is of paramount importance in his rehearsal room. Part of his role as a director, he believes, is 'to guide and lead the actor's impulse towards the spiritual, philosophical and political places in which the play takes place'.[43] He is aware that, for various reasons, actors often find that their creativity becomes blocked – as a result of anxiety or nerves, as a consequence of the fixed application of prescribed working methodologies or simply as a result of external factors related to the environment of the rehearsal space itself.

FIGURE 5.2 Cymbeline *in rehearsal (2007). Left to right: Mark Holgate, David Collings, Declan Donnellan and Lola Peploe. Produced by Cheek by Jowl in a co-production with barbicanbite07; Les Gémeaux/Sceaux/Scène Nationale; Grand Théâtre de Luxembourg. Photographer: Keith Pattison.*

These issues are examined in some detail in Donnellan's own book, *The Actor and the Target*, originally published in Russian in 2000. At one level, the book is a clear articulation of Donnellan's actor-centred approach to directing in which he sets out to identify and find solutions to the various hazards that can 'block' creative freedom and spontaneity. At another, it can be read as an account of the more 'defined' and 'detailed' work he has encountered during his experiences of observing and working extensively with Russian actors. Donnellan explains: 'I've always been fascinated by watching actors play scenes. I loathe mannered acting, and love Russian actors for the definition of their performance. Russian companies take the tradition of acting even more seriously than the British.'[44]

Donnellan puts forward a theory of acting in *The Actor and the Target* that stresses the need for the actor to focus attention and energy towards a specific 'target' that is always outside of the self. He explains: 'The target can be real or imaginary, concrete or abstract [...] but at all times and without exception there must be a target.'[45]

Although, in many respects, the book rejects the introspective approaches to acting that are commonly associated with Lee Strasberg, Donnellan's emphasis on behaviourism and the need to recognize and respond to the

energy present in the surrounding environment is not dissimilar to the work of Sanford Meisner. Like Meisner, Donnellan emphasizes the importance of spontaneity in rehearsal and performance, and as a result he formulates alternative approaches to our understanding of character. For Donnellan, attempts to transform are futile, and he explains:

> A crucial thing to remember about character is the simplest: the actor cannot actually transform. This seems more obvious than it is. Sometimes actors punish themselves because they have not achieved a 'transformation'. But the quest for transformation is as vain as the quest for perfection. It is important to knock the idea of transformation square on the head. We cannot change ourselves and we cannot transform ourselves. We are still, only the target moves.[46]

At this point it is worth pausing to note the sharp distinction between this approach to an actor's craft and that advocated by Stanislavski, who asserted that 'all actors, without exception, create characters and transform themselves physically'.[47]

Does Donnellan's resistance to transformation and his contention that there 'is no such thing as a character' bring him into direct conflict with Stanislavski, who states unequivocally that there 'are no non-character parts'?[48] Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to consider the extent to which both the evolution and dissemination of Stanislavski's work in Europe and the United States have led to different approaches and interpretations, which, though not mutually exclusive, are far from homogeneous. In part, this is a reflection of Stanislavski's constant need to adapt and refine his theories, on the basis of the new insights and discoveries emerging through his practice as an actor, director and teacher. Jean Benedetti expresses the point succinctly: 'A notion of a fixed, once-for-all text is entirely alien to [his] spirit of enquiry and research.'[49] In many respects, the highly piecemeal transmission of Stanislavski's principles, outside of the context from which they emerged, has been subject to the vicissitudes and nuances of the various social, cultural and artistic environments that have absorbed them.[50]

Perhaps one way of reconciling the apparent difference between Donnellan's approach and that of Stanislavski is to consider how different interpretations of the latter's work have produced multifarious approaches to the interpretation of character. Vladimir Mirodan outlines three possible approaches to Stanislavskian characterization:

- An emphasis on the effectiveness of *action breakdown* into objectives or tasks (*zadachi* in Russian).
- A rejection of the emphasis on analysis and cerebral dissection and reliance on moment-by-moment *experiencing through intuition* to create the effect of randomness.

- A third approach, which requires certain decisions to be made *a priori*, through inferences from the data of the play [to achieve transformation].[51]

Although Mirodan contextualizes these approaches in accordance with his overriding thesis, which seeks to demonstrate that 'full embodiment transcends questions of individual behavior and motivation and acknowledges the "typical" dimensions of character', his articulation of the different conceptualizations of a Stanislavskian approach proves invaluable when seeking to reconcile the seemingly contradictory nature of Donnellan's views. Whereas the first approach helps to define the model adopted by practitioners such as Max Stafford-Clark, the second is much closer in spirit to that of Donnellan. The disavowal of notions of 'character transformation' – which informs much of his writing – as well as his resistance to the largely cerebral activities associated with 'table-work' are set in contrast to a preference for the intuitive and spontaneous responsiveness which his book advocates. Interestingly, the third approach is highly reflective of Michel Saint-Denis's approach to actor training in which character transformation is grounded in a psycho-physical interpretation of Stanislavski's legacy and is closely aligned to the 'Method of Physical Actions' (see Chapter 4 in this volume).

While Donnellan's resistance to the notion of character transformation may well be rooted in a desire to avoid 'mannered acting'[52] or his conviction that 'when we concentrate on changing ourselves, we end up merely demonstrating',[53] it is important to note that such concerns were shared by Stanislavski, who also loathed cliché and demonstration. This is apparent in his three hierarchical categories of acting, which he identified as 'craftsmanship', 'representation' and 'experiencing'. Although the second of Stanislavski's categories, 'representation', earns more approval from him than 'craftsmanship', its tendency to fixate on the personality of the actor rather than the actual play and the abandonment, during performance, of the discoveries of the imagination in rehearsal also limit the effectiveness of this approach.

When it comes to 'experiencing', however, the third and most favoured of Stanislavski's categories, the similarities with Donnellan's approach become very visible. For instance, when discussing the difference in register between text and action, Donnellan highlights the importance of a third register when he describes the rehearsal process as 'nothing more nor nothing less than the chase for the living moment'.[54]

If we situate this observation alongside Stanislavski's belief that, through a process of experiencing, actors capture 'the life of the human spirit of the role',[55] we can begin to see the extent of Stanislavski's influence on Donnellan's practice.[56] Donnellan writes of the imagination: 'It is only the imagination that can connect us to reality', and 'the actor's senses and imagination open a lens upon an endless universe.'[57] His insistence on spontaneity – 'the

performance that seems unspontaneous seems dead'[58] – serves to echo many of Stanislavski's key tenets, an idea that is further reinforced by his comments relating to the importance of the senses.[59] This awareness of the importance of sensory detail in his work recalls Stanislavski's conviction that 'sensory concentration' is particularly necessary and particularly valuable to us when enlivening the role.[60]

So where does this leave us when it comes to understanding Donnellan's seemingly un-Stanislavskian position on the notion of character transformation? A potential clue may be found in Donnellan's reference to those forms of theatre in which a dependence on technique need not be a barrier to the levels of spontaneity and liveness that he seeks in rehearsal and performance:

> The Noh actor in Japan may take decades to perfect a single gesture, as the ballerina will sweat years developing feats of muscular control. But all the Noh master's virtuosity will go for little if his ornate technique reveals nothing but ornate technique. This highly controlled art must appear, is some way, spontaneous [...] in the surge of life that makes that technique seem invisible.[61]

If we accept the logic of this statement and concede that developed technique, providing it is invisible, need not be an obstacle to spontaneity or 'the surge of life', then it becomes possible to reassess Donnellan's reservations about transformation and view them as a response to the failure of technique alone, rather than a deficiency in Stanislavski's System. Indeed, like Donnellan, Stanislavski baulked at the notion of character transformation that is not rooted in the personality of the actor.[62] For example, Torstov's irritated feedback to one of his students following an attempt to characterize an old man: 'That kind of physical characterizing doesn't transform you, it's a complete giveaway and provides a pretext for posturing.'[63]

The interplay between the inner and outer realms of experience, between the conscious and the unconscious, between the text and the subtext, helps to define Stanislavski's notion of character. Although the terminology may differ, Donnellan's use of binary concepts – the *visible/invisible* processes of rehearsal, research and performance – and the dynamism of his *identity/un-identity* model of interpretation seem similar. These are exemplified in his analysis of Shakespeare's Othello or Chekhov's Arkadina, as well as his discussion of the interpretative power of mask-work – all highlighting clear similarities between his own approach and that of Stanislavski.[64]

Indeed, it is Donnellan's reference to the use of mask that brings him closest to a Stanislavskian understanding of character. Consider, for instance, Donnellan's description of mask-work: 'What probably happens is that the mask acts as a trigger to a partially hidden or entirely unknown part of the actor.'[65] The similarity to Stanislavski's description is noteworthy: 'Characterization is the *mask*, which hides the actor-human being. When

we are masked we can reveal the most intimate and spicy details about ourselves.'[66]

Donnellan has found ways of absorbing and adapting those aspects of Stanislavski's work that he feels are of most benefit to the actor. His focus on the importance of truth, the imagination, the senses, the need for spontaneity and the life of the spirit, as well as his disavowal of cliché and any form of mannered acting, all resonate very strongly with the principles on which Stanislavski's life work was based. Donnellan's tacit acknowledgement of the importance of embodied, but invisible, technique in other theatre forms and his recognition of the transformative power of mask-work suggest that it may not be character transformation per se that he resists, but rather the reductive ideas and externalized techniques that ultimately stifle genuine spontaneity. These prohibit any opportunity for the actor to achieve the 'miraculous but realisable task of seeing and moving through the space'.[67]

Emotions and experimentation

While, in the cases of both Declan Donnellan and Max Stafford-Clark, the influence of Stanislavski, though always inherent, tends to be somewhat understated, the reverse is true of Katie Mitchell. Renowned for her rigorous application of a Stanislavskian approach, which she has applied to classical Greek drama as well as to more contemporary post-dramatic texts, Mitchell is unequivocal in her endorsement of and commitment to the methods he developed and explains:

> You can use Stanislavsky's techniques regardless of the style or genre of play or project you are working on. I have used them when working on Greek plays like *Iphigenia at Aulis*, new plays like Kevin Elyot's *Forty Winks*, abstract plays such as Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* or Samuel Beckett's *Footfalls*, and even operas.[68]

Notwithstanding her advocacy of the techniques Stanislavski developed, it is important to state at the outset that there is no sense in which Mitchell could be described as a Stanislavskian fundamentalist. Indeed, rather than simply replicate his approach, she has consistently sought to refine and adapt his work in accordance with the demands of different genres and dramatic traditions. 'I think its advantage is that it gives an initial shared language to the actors and the directors and provides a place to start from. Then, as rehearsals continue, you can develop a more individualised system or method of work.'[69]

Starting her professional theatrical career in a clerical role at Islington's celebrated 'pub theatre', the King's Head, Mitchell quickly progressed to the role of assistant director, initially with Pip Broughton at Paines Plough and later at the RSC. In 1990, Mitchell established her own theatre company,

Classics on a Shoestring, where her productions included *Arden of Faversham* in 1990, *Women of Troy* in 1991 and John Arden's *Live Like Pigs* in 1993. The previous year she had travelled to Eastern Europe to observe and study directing in Poland, Russia, Georgia and Lithuania. During this period, Mitchell was introduced 'to the almost scientific discipline of Stanislavsky's legacy'.[70] Her teachers included Lev Dodin, Director of the St Petersburg State Theatre Arts Academy and later Artistic Director of the Maly Drama Theatre; Anatoli Vassiliev, Director of the Moscow's Russian Academy of Theatre Arts (GITIS); as well as acting teachers Tatiana Olear and Elen Bowman. Vassiliev and Bowman can claim a third-generation connection to Stanislavski himself via his student, Maria Knebel. The sense of lineage is important to Mitchell, in that it 'made her feel part of a chain of practitioners, each sharpening tried-and-tested tools against their culture and time'.[71]

In common with both Stafford-Clark and Donnellan, Mitchell has a particular passion for text-based drama, which she has described as 'freedom within form'.

> If I wasn't involved in theatre I would be an archaeologist or an anthropologist. I love the idea of starting with a text that I know very shallowly and spending hours and hours digging deeper and deeper into it, opening lots of doors into its possible meanings. I love that process intellectually and emotionally. I love the preparation and I love the work with the actors.[72]

This fascination with the text and the preparatory work that informs it is one of the defining features of her work as a director. Like Stafford-Clark, Mitchell devotes considerable amounts of time to 'table-work', both by herself and with the actors, exploring and analysing the text. This kind of work is designed to explore the 'deep structures underneath the text', the moment-by-moment 'events' and changes that take place in the play, as well as the thematic content. Importantly, Mitchell's emphasis on text work stops short of becoming an overly cerebral form of literary criticism. Indeed, it was actually her sensitivity to this possibility that, in part, prompted her to undertake her European study tours. Dan Rebellato quotes Mitchell's observations about Dodin and his company: 'They didn't see performance as being about text; they saw it as being about *behaviour*. And that emphasis was so profoundly different from the tradition here.'[73]

Mitchell, like Donnellan, adopts a behaviourist approach to directing in which the textual and subtextual impulses and objectives are embodied and communicated between actors: 'It is the exchange of something living between characters on stage that produces the most interesting theatre.'[74] In contrast to Donnellan – who is resistant to the notion of 'rules', preferring a much freer, intuitive approach to rehearsal – however, Mitchell adopts a rigorous methodology that is strongly influenced by the continuity of the lineages and traditions that she has encountered during her European study trips. She

explains: 'Bit by bit, it's like I homed in and refined my own practice in response to what people who have direct contact with Russian practice were teaching me and then I constructed my own efficient way of doing it that suited me.'[75]

Alongside close analysis of the text, Mitchell also examines dramatic structure, character history and the socio-political dynamics of the world in which the action is set. Such activity involves actors undertaking specific research tasks and gathering relevant information that will later serve to inform rehearsals. Information of this kind is shared among the company, so ensemble knowledge and a common understanding are established early on.

Like Stafford-Clark, Mitchell spends considerable amounts of time allowing the actors to improvise and explore ideas emerging from the world of the play. In the early stages, this will tend to involve 'slice of life' presentations in which actors work collaboratively to dramatize and present details from their own lives that are analogous to events taken from the play. Aside from nurturing an ensemble ethos, work of this kind is designed to facilitate a meaningful and personalized relationship to the characters in the play. Mitchell's close observation of the connections between the actors' physical exchanges and the words/phrases that are used in communication helps her to learn from and guide the performers as rehearsals develop.

Indeed, much of her early work in rehearsal, prior to commencing work on character, sets out to explore the dynamic relationship between the emotions and the body. Wary of the tendency to get caught up in psychological analysis, she prefers to focus on the physical behaviour of the actors she is observing. For Mitchell, 'the body is one of the main means by which the audience "read" emotions – and understand what is going on inside a person'.[76]

Mitchell's emphasis on the importance of the actor's physicality as a primary means of expression owes much to Stanislavski's 'Method of Physical Actions'. During a research project that she undertook in 2003, funded by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, Mitchell read William James's 1884 essay 'What Is an Emotion?', which is known to have influenced the phase of Stanislavski's work from which his 'Method of Physical Actions' emerged. Importantly, James suggests that when faced with extreme situations, our initial reaction is physical rather than intellectual. James explains: 'My thesis on the contrary is that *the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion*.'[77]

Drawn to the idea that emotions are physical responses rather than intellectual processes, Mitchell went on to explore the work of Portuguese neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, who also posits the idea that 'an emotion consists primarily of a visible change in the body'.[78] His work suggests that there is a gap of approximately half a second between the physical response to an extreme situation and the conscious realization of what is happening. That is to say, by the time we have become conscious of some physical danger, for instance, we have already started running away.

Mitchell's explorations of new ways of working have drawn on Damasio's hypothesis and applied his theories to her rehearsal process. Paying extremely close attention to external behaviours such as facial expressions, posture, bodily gestures and vocal tone, Mitchell strives to ensure that actors physicalize as accurately as possible the emotions generated by the world of the play and the characters represented. Sensitive to the realization that a part of the function of the brain is designed to read and respond to emotions that are expressed through the physical behaviours of others, she has become extremely conscious of how the audience engages with her work: 'As a result of these discoveries my relationship to the audience radically changed. It was no longer essential for the actors to feel the emotions [...] What was essential was that the actors replicated them precisely with their bodies. The physiology of emotions replaced psychology as my key point of reference for talking about – and working on – acting.'[79] The impact of this approach to her work is often evidenced by the harshly realistic expressions of intense emotion that typify many of her productions.

Mitchell's book, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre*, is essentially a practical manual that gathers together and describes the various techniques and exercises that she has either observed or developed during the course of her career. In common with descriptions by Stafford-Clark and Donnellan, her writing is focused on working with actors and the journey from rehearsal to performance, but she also extends her focus to include discussion of elements such as set and costume design as well as lighting, sound and music effects.

Highly detailed, the book offers a step-by-step guide to the director's craft. Stanislavski's influence on her work is immediately detectable in the sections relating to the importance of research, the back history of the play, character biographies, visualization, character tempo and improvisations. She is an unapologetic proponent of Stanislavskian technique: 'His work remains relevant whenever you find yourself directing a play containing characters who are members of the human race.'[80] Crucially, Mitchell has consistently sought to refine and adapt the System in order to meet the contemporary contexts in which her own work is situated: 'Liberating yourself from a notion of Stanislavsky's work as a fixed, immovable system will help you use what he has to offer more effectively.'[81] Her work on behaviourism and emotion, which she describes as the 'biology of emotions', is an excellent example of this flexible yet scientifically based adaptation of Stanislavski's work.

During the last decade or so, Mitchell has begun to experiment with and include various forms of technology in her stage productions. A notable example of this kind of approach is her adaptation of Virginia Woolf's highly poetic novel, *The Waves*, staged at the National Theatre in 2006. By incorporating and blending vivid on-stage projections, simultaneous filming and playback technology, dance performance, live and recorded musical accompaniment, and a cacophony of sound effects, Mitchell sought new

ways to invigorate and animate the experience of theatrical performance for a contemporary audience. She recalls:

> We started using video like this when we did Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and we were trying to find a form, actually, which could communicate a novel which was entirely made up of internal monologues, which are just thoughts inside people's heads. So we realised we couldn't do that as spoken word, we'd have to use some other tool; so we looked to video, close-ups and the voice-over. And from that we evolved a way of shooting and combining that shooting with live performance.[82]

Experiments with mediatized and digital technology – the displaced imagery, the reflexive narratives, the shifting energies and tones – have fostered the emergence in Mitchell's work of a range of visual and aural motifs that are well suited to the representation of fractured, multiple notions of self-hood that are a common feature of post-dramatic theatre. Her 2007 production, for instance, of Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life,* at the National Theatre, clearly demonstrated this. Subtitled *Seventeen Scenarios for Theatre*, the text offers various perspectives on the strangely elusive and polymorphous figure of Anne, whose identity is constantly shifting and evolving through various traces, which are revealed during the course of the performance. Is she an artist, a terrorist, a porn star or a car? Is she none of these things, or a combination of all of them? For a play that rejects the notion of stable and knowable identity in favour of the complex, heterogeneous nature of lived experience, Mitchell's developing use of technology seemed ideal – a view supported by an extract from a review of the production. Andrew Haydon writes:

> It is rare to see so many outstanding performances in what is ostensibly an ensemble piece; almost every actor shines. [...] The scene changes, controlled by an abrupt alarm siren, suggesting performers suddenly forced to improvise their way through telling each portion of the script. Each scene seems to begin with its first speaker off-camera, lost on the stage and having to start unexpectedly, as if caught unawares, but knowing that once started they must continue.[83]

Whereas for many contemporary theatre directors, experiments with fragmented texts and digital innovation represent a desire to move away from more traditional modes of representation – especially those associated with Stanislavskian realism – this is not true of Katie Mitchell. For her, the use of multimedia technologies in performance also allows for an intensification of the representation of human feelings and experiences rather than a diminution of them.

For both *Waves* and *Attempts on Her Life*, Mitchell collaborated with filmmaker Leo Warner, Creative Director of Edinburgh-based media

company 59 Productions. In recent years, their ongoing creative partnership has nurtured the development of what is now referred to as 'live cinema'.[84] Notable productions have included *Forbidden Zone* (Salzburg Festival, 2014), *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Schaubühne Berlin, 2013) and *Fräulein Julie* (Schaubühne Berlin, 2010). Weaving together the arts of theatre and cinema, these works introduce a new sense of immediacy and tension to performance. It's not only the performance itself that fascinates but also the processes by which it is created: the cameras, the lighting, the sound, the live musicians, as well as the occasional mishaps. As always, for Mitchell, attention to detail is of primary importance, as is suggested by the following review of *Fräulein Julie* (Figure 5.3):

> It's a rigorous and highly technical account of Strindberg's play that is nevertheless soulful, attentive to small gestures in a way that feels achingly precise. Directors Katie Mitchell and Leo Warner have blended camera technology with theatre, creating a peculiar intimacy. Everything seems deeply charged, and even the buttoning of a shirt resembles an act of religious significance [...] Characters were now to be examined as if they had been grown in a Petri dish and were being looked at under a microscope.[85]

The creation of 'live cinema' strongly emphasizes the role of the director in a way which is often regarded as alien to the British tradition. For example in the British press Michael Billington, of *The Guardian*, has described her as 'an auteur whose signature is on every moment of a production'; Nicholas De Jongh, of the *Evening Standard*, has accused her of doing 'big damage' to Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*; and Charles Spencer, of *The Telegraph*, suggests that she specializes in 'smashing up the classics'.[86] In Germany and Austria, on the other hand, Mitchell's work has been extremely well received both by critics and audiences. This difference from Britain may perhaps be explained by a different tradition of directing. Philip Oltermann suggests: 'One explanation for Mitchell's continental success is that she has always aspired to the German ideal of *Regietheater*, which prioritises the director's interpretation over the writer's intention. "In Germany, we aren't thrown by directors who are irreverent towards the original material," Peter Laudenbach, theatre critic for *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, says, "It's commonplace now."'[87]

Despite questions as to whether or not she is an 'auteur', and whether that matters, it remains the case that Mitchell's commitment to and development of the techniques developed by Stanislavski is beyond doubt. Her painstaking attention to detail in research and rehearsal, her use of improvisation as a means to enable each actor to enter the world of the play and inhabit a character's persona, her desire to unpick and examine the minutiae of human interaction and behaviour – these are all traits and qualities that she has in common with Stanislavski. So too her understanding of the craft of acting earns her, as it did with Stanislavski, genuine respect from performers.[88]

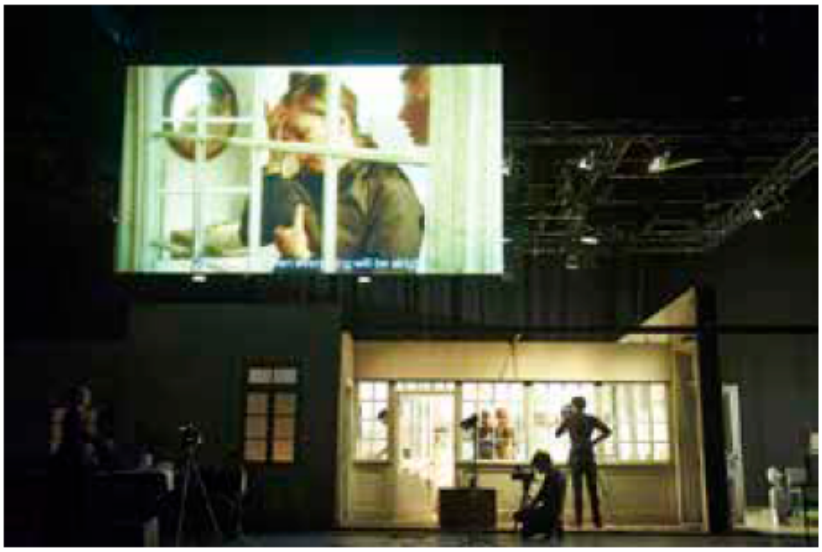

FIGURE 5.3 Fraulein Julie. *A Schaubuhne Berlin production directed by Katie Mitchell based on* Miss Julie *by August Strindberg. A version by Katie Mitchell translated by Maja Zade. With Tilman Strauss as Jean, Jule Bowe as Christine (on screen), Luise Wolfman as Miss Julie. Opened at The Barbican Theatre on 30 April 2013. Photographer: Geraint Lewis. Copyright: Geraint Lewis.*

In recent years, her experiments with the 'biology of emotions' and the physicality of emotional expression have had a significant impact on her work. Charlotte Higgins writes: 'Her actors convey a sense of minutely observed, psychologically accurate naturalism. In her shows, actors do not declaim: if they are anxious or frightened, they stumble anxiously or fearfully over their words, to the detriment, sometimes, of audibility. That fear or anxiety, too, is strongly embodied: physical language does much of the work.'[89]

Thus, whether applied to classical Greek and Shakespearean theatre, to politically motivated new writing, to verbatim theatre or to live cinema, the detail and rigour of Stanislavski's approach, his remarkable understanding of theatre art, and his curious and inquiring spirit mean that very few, if any, of his ideas can be dismissed as irrelevant. We may choose consciously or otherwise to adapt and reinvent some of his techniques, or even to dispense with them entirely, but as long as we continue to value theatre forms that seek to represent carefully observed, truthful reflections of the 'life of the human spirit', it would indeed be foolhardy to ignore the dynamic vibrancy and relevance of a methodological approach to theatre-making that remains as cogent now as when it was originally conceived. Moreover, if the time comes when we decide that Stanislavski's work is no longer useful to the kinds of theatre that we wish to create, even then we could do considerably worse than to follow his advice: 'Create your own method. Don't depend slavishly on mine. Make up something that will work for you! But keep breaking traditions, I beg you.'[90]

NOTES

Chapter 5

1 Bella Merlin, *The Complete Stanislavski Toolkit* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2007), 3.

2 Examples include N. Gorchakov, *Stanislavsky Directs* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1954) and more recently, A. Migliarisi, *Stanislavsky and Directing: Theory, Practice and Influence* (Ontario: Legas Publishing, 2008).

3 Vasily Osipovich Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, trans. and intro. Jean Benedetti (London: Methuen Drama, 2008), 109.

4 Quoted in P. Roberts and Max Stafford-Clark, *Taking Stock: The Theatre of Max Stafford-Clark* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2007), 21.

5 Other productions of new works included Ron Hutchinson's *Rat in the Skill* in 1984, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* in 1988 and *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* in 1991, Howard Brenton's *Bloody Poetry* in 1988 and Claire McIntyre's *My Heart's a Suitcase* in 1990. Further notable productions during this period were his celebrated revivals: Edward Bond's

The Pope's Wedding (1962) in 1984, and George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) in 1988.

6 Maria Shevtsova and Christopher Innes, *Directors/Directing: Conversations on Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 238.

7 Ibid., 238.

8 Other productions by Stafford-Clark include *The Libertine* by Stephen Jeffreys in 1994, and by Mark Ravenhill both *Shopping and Fucking* in 1996 and *Some Explicit Polaroids* in 1999.

9 Each of these companies enjoyed the luxury of recruiting a permanent ensemble of actors that benefited from prolonged periods of training and rehearsal.

10 Max Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George: A Director's Handbook of Techniques* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2012 [1989]), 4.

11 Ibid., 95.

12 Ibid., 66.

13 Quoted in Roberts and Stafford-Clark, *Taking Stock*, 40.

14 Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, 24.

15 Roberts and Stafford-Clark, *Taking Stock*, 30.

16 Ibid. During workshop sessions for *Our Country's Good*, for instance, Stafford-Clark made extensive use of Roy Porter's *English Society in the 18th Century* (1982) and Henry Mayhew's volumes entitled *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851).

17 Roberts and Stafford-Clark, *Taking Stock*, 151.

18 Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, 69.

19 Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work* on a Role, trans. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2010), 237.

20 Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, 70.

21 Ibid., 115.

22 Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, 16.

23 Ibid., 19.

24 See Bella Merlin, 'Acting Hare: *The Permanent Way*', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Hare*, ed. R. Boon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 125.

25 Bella Merlin, '*The Permanent Way* and the Impermanent Muse', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 17, no. 1 (2007): 43.

26 Ibid.

27 For example, see Tom Cantrell's article 'Playing for Real in Max Stafford-Clark's *Talking to Terrorists*', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 31, no. 2 (2011): 167–79.

28 Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 96.

29 Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 54.

30 Richard Eyre, 'Speech Impediments', *The Guardian*, 21 February 2004. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/feb/21/theatre (accessed 10 August 2016).

31 Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, 66.

32 At the National Theatre, Donnellan directed Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in 1990, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* in 1992 and Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeny Todd* in 1993. At the RSC, he directed *The School for Scandal* in 1999 and *King Lear* in 2002.

33 Declan Donnellan, 'Declan Donnellan', in *On Directing: Interviews with Directors*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi and Mary Luckhurst (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 22.

34 Donnellan, 'Declan Donnellan', 21.

35 Ibid., 21.

36 Jonathan Pitches, 'Conclusion: A Common Theatre History? The Russian Tradition in Britain Today: Declan Donnellan, Katie Mitchell and Michael Boyd', in *Russians in Britain: British Theatre and the Russian Tradition of Actor Training*, ed. Jonathan Pitches (London: Routledge, 2012), 192–209, 198.

37 Interview with the author, 26 July 2016, and ensuing quotes.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Donnellan, 'Declan Donnellan', 23.

41 Interview with the author, 26 July 2016.

42 Donnellan, 'Declan Donnellan', 20.

43 Interview with the author, 26 July 2016.

44 Donnellan, 'Declan Donnellan', 22.

45 Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2005 [2002]), 17.

46 Ibid., 77.

47 Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 535.

48 Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 84; Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 535.

49 Quoted in Sharon Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus* (London: Routlege, 2009), 77.

50 A fuller discussion of the difference in emphasis appears in David Shirley, 'Stanislavski's Passage into the British Conservatoire', in *Russians in Britain: British Theatre and the Russian Tradition of Actor Training*, ed. Jonathan Pitches (London: Routledge, 2012), 38–61.

51 Vladimir Mirodan, 'Lying Bodies, Lying Faces: Deception and the Stanislavskian Tradition of Character', *Stanislavski Studies* 4, no. 11 (2016): 35 (italics in original).

52 Donnellan, 'Declan Donnellan', 20.

53 Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 82.

54 Quoted in Aleks Sierz, 'Declan Donnellan and Cheek by Jowl: "To Protect the Acting"', in *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, ed. Maria Delgado and Dan Rebellato (London: Routledge, 2010), 158.

55 Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 139.

56 A fuller discussion of each of Stanislavski's categories can be found in Chapter 7 of Carnicke's *Stanislavsky in Focus*.

57 Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 9, 82.

58 Ibid., 233.

59 Ibid., 8.

60 Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 111.

61 Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 2–3.

62 Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 519.

63 Ibid., 529.

64 A fuller discussion of all of these techniques can be found in Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 98–122.

65 Ibid., 112.

66 Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, 535.

67 Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*, 83.

68 Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2009), 227.

69 Katie Mitchell, 'Katie Mitchell', in *On Directing: Interviews with Directors*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi and Mary Luckhurst (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 102.

70 Mitchell, *The Director's Craft*, 227.

71 Ibid., 230.

72 Mitchell, 'Katie Mitchell', 96.

73 Dan Rebellato, 'Katie Mitchell: Learning from Europe', in *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, ed. Maria Delgado and Dan Rebellato (London: Routledge, 2010), 320–1.

74 Katie Mitchell, `Katie Mitchell', in *On Directing: Interviews with Directors*, 97.

75 Quoted in Pitches, *Russians in Britain*, 201.

76 Mitchell, *The Director's Craft*, 155.

77 William James, 'What Is an Emotion?', in *The Emotions*, ed. Carl Lange and William James (Hafner Publishing Co., Inc., 1922/1967), 11–30, 13 (italics in original).

78 Mitchell, *The Director's Craft*, 231.

79 Ibid., 232.

80 Ibid., 227.

81 Ibid., 226.

82 Interview with Mark Kermode presented on *The Culture Show*, BBC 2, 29 July 2008. Available online: http://www.bbc.co.uk/cultureshow/videos/2008/07/s5_e9_mitchell/ (accessed 26 August 2016).

83 Andrew Haydon, 'Review of *Attempts on Her Life*', *Culture Wars*, 20 March 2007. Available online: http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2007-03/attempts.htm (accessed 15 August 2016).

84 Philip Oltermann interviewing Katie Mitchell in *The Guardian* has defined 'live cinema' as 'performances that come alive somewhere between the chaotic scramble on stage and the smooth, cinema-quality output on the screen'. Philip Oltermann, 'Katie Mitchell, British theatre's true auteur, on being embraced by Europe', *The Guardian*, 9 July 2014. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jul/09/katie-mitchell-british-theatre-true-auteur (accessed 1 August 2016).

85 Review of *Fräulein Julie* at the Barbican Theatre, *The Evening Standard*, 1 May 2013. Available online: http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/fr-ulein-julie-barbican-theatre-theatre-review-8598500.html (accessed 7 August 2016).

86 Links to the reviews of each critic are included below and were accessed on 18 August 2016. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/nov/29/theatre.euripides (Michael Billington); http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/this-seagull-is-birdbrained-7387461.html (Nicholas De Jongh); http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3669609/Women-of-Troy-Euripides-all-roughed-up.html (Charles Spencer).

87 Oltermann, 'Katie Mitchell, British theatre's true auteur, on being embraced by Europe'.

88 For example, Benedict Cumberbatch's comments on working with Mitchell, in ibid.

89 Charlotte Higgins, 'Katie Mitchell, British Theatre Queen in Exile', *The Guardian*, 14 January 2016. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jan/14/british-theatre-queen-exile-katie-mitchell (accessed 25 August 2016).

90 Sonia Moore, *The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), quoted in Josha Logan, 'Foreword', in xvi.

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7.3 Summary

Alongside tracing the transition of Stanislavsky's work into the British conservatoire tradition, a significant component of this thesis has sought to uncover and analyse the extent to which the work of American Method practitioners has influenced the development of British actor training.

The work of this chapter not only highlights the differing approaches of three extremely influential British directors – all of whom have written books that are used in drama schools on a regular basis – but also reminds us that far from being fixed and restrictive, Stanislavskian technique is extremely adaptable and permeable. Different directors (and different teachers, or actors) can utilise Stanislavsky's methods in accordance with specific interpretative training needs.

Donnellan's assertion that 'the quest for transformation is as vain as the quest for perfection' (Shirley, 2018, p. 124) marks an important moment in the discussions and ideas emerging from this thesis. Working from within the context of classical theatre, the expression of such a view and his denial of the notion of 'character' feels especially challenging. And yet, Donnellan's view feels compelling given some of the observations that have previously surfaced in the publications that are included here – the need for greater degrees of expression drawn from selfhood, for instance, or the resistance to conventionalised modes of representation, and even a pre-occupation with style. Donnellan's efforts to nurture in his work the 'recognition of life through the operation of spontaneity' (Ibid: 122) seems very much in tune with more contemporary thinking about the actor's creative process, and by implication the function of actor training in the UK.

Chapter Eight

Shirley, D (2024). A Slice of Zoom Life: Transforming Actor Training in a Global Pandemic

In *Stanislavsky and Pedagogy: Contemporary Perspectives* Stefan Aquilina (ed.). Routledge Taylor and Frances, pp. 95–112

(Published Work 6)

8.1 Introduction

The final publication included in this thesis captures the findings of a *research in action* project. Responding to the impact of a global pandemic,[45] this chapter, which is based on my own teaching practice, charts and explores the degree to which the move from a face-to-face studio environment to a technological platform (in this case, Zoom) impacted the delivery of a series of Stanislavsky-inspired workshops using a synchronous online learning environment.

Introducing, once again, the work of Uta Hagen, whose techniques were also discussed in Publication One, the chapter also explores the distinction between the concept of *theatrical truth* and *actuality*, as well as processes of *endowment* and the use of the *imagination*.

In addition to examining the pedagogical implications for Stanislavsky's work when working in an online format, this chapter examines the centrality of the use of imagination in an actor's work. In this respect, it recalls one of Sanford Meisner's key tenets – namely that of 'living truthfully under imaginary circumstances' (see Shirley, 2010, p. 203).

As the chapter reveals, however, the notion of being *truthful* should not be confused with the reality of everyday existence or, more succinctly, with 'actuality'.

The exercises represented here are the product of my own work and development of the exercises over a twenty-year period. In this respect, the chapter brings together my professional practice as an actor trainer and a researcher experimenting with an entirely new mode of delivery.

The students involved were first-year undergraduate students newly enrolled on the BA acting course at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA).

[45] Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in China in December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency on 30 January 2020. The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus was characterised as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 and lasted until 5 May 2023.

8.2 Chapter Publication

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STANISLAVSKY AND PEDAGOGY

Stanislavsky and Pedagogy explores current thinking around the pedagogical implications of Stanislavsky's work. The volume depicts the voices of a number of practitioners, teachers, and scholars who are themselves journeying with Stanislavsky, and who in his work find a potent instigator for their own pedagogical practice and study.

This book outlines instances in which updated interpretations of Stanislavsky's pedagogy are adapted to cater for contemporary needs and scenarios. These include the theatre industry, new digital technologies, the need to develop playfulness, application to a broad repertoire, performance as pedagogy, university managerialism, and interdisciplinary crossovers with dance and opera. The pedagogies that emerge from these case-studies are marked by fluidity and non-fixity and help to underscore the malleability of Stanislavsky's system.

Stanislavsky And... is a series of multi-perspectival collections that bring the enduring legacy of Stanislavskian actor training into the spotlight of contemporary performance culture, making them ideal for students, teachers, and scholars of acting, actor training, and directing.

Stefan Aquilina is an Associate Professor in Theatre Studies at the University of Malta, Co-Director of the Stanislavsky Research Centre, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Stanislavski Studies* journal. He has published extensively on modern theatre (especially Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, and amateur theatre), the transmission of embodied practice, and reflective teaching.

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STANISLAVSKY AND PEDAGOGY

Edited by Stefan Aquilina

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5

A SLICE OF ZOOM LIFE

Transforming Actor Training in a Global Pandemic

David Shirley

Introduction

To say that the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the arts and creative industries have been nothing short of monumental is by no means an exaggeration. Cancelled performances, prolonged closures of theatres and concert halls, significant job losses, social distancing, isolation, and lockdowns have all taken their toll and it will take a number of years at least for the sector to recover. If the performing arts industry itself has been traumatised by the COVID-19 crisis, so too have the training and pedagogical environments that play such an important role in nurturing creativity and enabling the careers of future practitioners. Heavily dependent on the liveness of deeply embodied and often bespoke pedagogical practices associated with professional training in dance, music, acting, etc., the global pandemic confronted many specialist performing arts training institutions across the world with a stark choice – to halt their activities and shut down entirely *or* to find ways of innovating the training curricula and continue in accordance with the demands of a new reality.

The following discussion will both highlight and critique how – in response to the global pandemic – a series of first-year undergraduate acting classes at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) sought to circumvent the challenges of COVID-19 and adapt in accordance with the opportunities afforded by the digital environment. Utilising and building on the work of Uta Hagen, with particular reference to her development of the Basic Object Exercise, herein referred to as the 'Solo Object Exercise', these classes sought to transfer a deeply embodied practical training regime from a face-to-face studio environment to an online Zoom platform. Exploring concepts such as actuality and theatrical truth, as well as endowment and the imagination, the discussion

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will draw from the work of both Uta Hagen and Konstantin Stanislavsky in attempting to identify and evaluate key themes and discoveries emerging from the online sessions. At a time when many conservatoire schools sought to utilise digital environments as a means to prioritise more theoretical modes of learning (preferring to return to practice-based learning once face-to-face teaching had resumed), this class sought to preserve the integrity of a practice-based approach to training by adapting Hagen's methodology to an online teaching environment.

Whilst the situation initially appeared challenging, one of the positive consequences emerging from the COVID-19 crisis has been to further promote and significantly enhance the wider application of digitised modes of teaching and learning, through video platforms such as Zoom or Google Workspace, or via augmented, blended, or virtual reality technologies. Although capability of this kind seems ideally suited to the delivery of disciplines such as history, literature, and philosophy, or even to subjects such as law, economics, and business, its suitability for performing arts training, predicated as it is on embodied practice and skill rather than theoretical learning and intellectual understanding, feels much more problematic. What, challenges, for instance, are presented when attempting to teach a ballet class online? Assuming that a student has the digital capability and equipment to join such a class, is it possible to work on an Arabesque, a Pirouette, or a Chassé in the limited confines of a bedroom or kitchen? Similarly, how realistic is it to expect an opera student to develop resonance and a secure vocal technique when working in a confined space shared by roommates or family?[1] When it comes to actor training, however, as this discussion will demonstrate, there are contexts in which this challenge feels less daunting – at least in those situations where students can work in isolation towards the development of the sensory and imaginative skills that are such an essential component of an actor's technique.

During the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, between March and June 2020, it was necessary to suspend all face-to-face teaching for first-year actors at WAAPA. However, rather than cancelling teaching altogether, as Executive Dean of the School and the tutor leading a first-year acting class, I took the decision to replace what initially had been designed as a programme of highly energised, ensemble-based workshops with a series of solo exercises that could a) meet the needs of an online training environment and b) advance the development of a focused and highly disciplined interpretative technique. The material chosen for such work was derived from the techniques developed by American-German actress and teacher, Uta Hagen (1919–2004).

The decision to move away from a face-to-face ensemble-based, physical mode of training that is dependent on reciprocity, the development of mutual trust, and a high degree of 'playful' interaction is important in that it highlights an implicit awareness of the potential limitations of a Zoom teaching space. Anna McNamara (2021) argues convincingly that the disconnection and siloing effect that arises from a Zoom training environment undermines the collaborative

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and transformational experiences often encountered in a shared physical space. Moreover, the separation between physical/experiential engagement on the one hand and more observational/intellectual participation on the other dislodges the reliance on the embodied dynamics of more traditional approaches to actor training. Of equal importance here is the realisation that the Zoom training environment (and indeed other similar platforms) is not 'created' by the class, but rather entered into by individual participants who remain isolated and separated from each other by a) the technology used to access it (tablets, mobile phones, laptops, etc.) and b) the actual space where they are located (e.g., a room or the home environment). Stefan Aquilina (2022) offers a comprehensive overview of how both he and a colleague, Dr Judita Vivas, adapted their teaching practice at the University of Malta in order to overcome some of these difficulties and facilitate meaningful and enabling transitions to an online learning environment. To such adaptations, and within the context of a conservatoire training ethos in which over ninety percent of the training takes place through embodied, practice-based training, I would like to recommend the work of Uta Hagen as an opportunity to continue a focus on practice, albeit within a more autonomous and 'private' environment.

One of the most highly respected theatre actors of her generation, Hagen was also a renowned and much sought after acting teacher, who – together with her husband, Herbert Berghof – trained some of the most accomplished American actors, including Liza Minelli, Whoopi Goldberg, Jack Lemmon, Debbie Allen, and Steve McQueen.[2] Drawing from Stanislavsky's work, and heavily influenced by the Group Theatre, New York (1931–41), Hagen's techniques are a subset within what can broadly be described as Method acting.[3] Importantly, whilst Hagen is happy to acknowledge Stanislavsky's influence on her work, she is by no means restricted by it, preferring instead to adopt a fluid and open interpretation of his methods that enable a continuous process of experimentation, reflection, and self-discovery. Instead of sticking slavishly to his doctrines, she adapted his work in accordance with the historical context in which her own practice was situated.

Although Hagen's approach to actor training stresses the importance of using the 'self' as a basis for creating a character – **'...the basic components of the characters we will play are somewhere within ourselves'** (Hagen 1991: 55, emphasis in original) – it is important to acknowledge the distinction she draws between *naturalistic* and *realistic* acting technique:

> **Naturalistic acting** is often confused with **realistic acting** but they are worlds apart. The very expression 'I want to be natural' implies a desire to be ordinary and leads to a search for the habitual, for the trivial details of daily life, to an irrelevant imitation of nature. It produces the nose rubbing, the sniffing and throat clearing, the shrugging and scratching [...] all the tedious mannerisms [...] by the actor who wants to feel comfortable and natural on stage [...].

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> **Realism** entails a search for *selected* behavior pertinent to the character's needs within the prescribed circumstances of the dramatist. We must take *from* life in order to create the reality of our *new* life on stage. What it is that we take is a reflection of our vision, our point of view – and the power of our selection is the measure of our artistry. [...] Naturalism, which pursues the unselective imitation of life, is the antithesis of art.[4]
>
> Hagen (1991: 49–50, emphasis in original)

The contrast Hagen draws between Naturalistic and Realistic acting also informs her understanding of *theatrical truth* as distinct from *actuality*:

> [...] the *naturalistic* actor often falls into the trap of demanding the wrong kind of truth [...] He may think it truthful to drink real liquor on stage, but the liquor will prevent him from fulfilling the truth of the character's actions [...] The *realistic* actor learns that, at will, he can induce specific, imagined stimuli to produce an organically correct behavioral response in order to arrive at the essence of the experience.
>
> Hagen (1991: 76–7)

Hagen's reference to the 'wrong kind of truth' recalls an incident when Anton Chekhov visited an early rehearsal of *The Seagull*, into which Stanislavsky had introduced dogs barking and dragonflies buzzing as part of the setting. Mindful of the need not to confuse the *artifice* of stage life with the *actuality* of life itself, Chekhov referenced a painting by Kramskoy featuring a superb representation of human faces. 'What would happen if you cut the nose out of one of the paintings a substituted a real one? The nose would be "realistic" but the picture would be ruined' (see Aronson in Gottlieb and Allain 2000: 138). Like Hagen, Chekov cautions against attempts to replace artificiality with actuality, in preference for a creatively coherent, imaginative approach to interpretation that doesn't undermine the artistic integrity of the work as a whole.

As Carol Rosenfeld, the current Director of the Hagen Institute at HB Studio in New York City, suggests, the foundation of Hagen's methodology is established on principles related to the need for theatrical truth, artistic integrity, and close self-observation on the part of the performer:

> Self-knowledge is the work of the actor. Acting gives you the opportunity to shed the social mask you wear every day in order to protect yourself as you make your way in the world. In some ways the work you do on yourself, your instrument, is like peeling an onion, layer by layer. As you remove each layer, you can't help but become more honest with yourself in recognizing and accepting your strengths as well as your weaknesses, imperfections and idiosyncrasies.
>
> Rosenfeld (2012: 130)

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Hagen's emphasis on the importance of drawing from the self as a means of creative discovery began in periods of unemployment during her acting career. Frustrated by the problems she repeatedly encountered during performances – irrespective of the role she was playing at the time – such as lapses in concentration, bouts of self-consciousness, a mechanical use of gesture, a lack of spontaneity, pushing emotions etc., she developed a series of solo exercises – the Solo Object Exercise discussed here is a key example of these – that she could undertake alone in the confines of her own home:

> In desperation, I came on the idea of working by myself at home to devise corrective exercises for all of the problems I was having by exploring personal behavior under a variety of circumstances. I soon discovered that each of my problems was based on a misunderstanding or an omission of something fundamental to human behavior and response.
>
> Hagen (1991: 132)

Notwithstanding the fundamentally collective and ensemble-based nature of theatrical performance, Hagen managed to find an effective autonomous means by which she could fine-tune her craft in the absence of acting class, rehearsal, or performance. The discoveries she made, specifically in relation to physical action, inner impulse, the use of emotion, the power of endowment, the process of transference, and the importance of authenticity have proved particularly influential in drama schools and colleges all over the world and her training techniques remain as vibrant and influential today as when they were first deployed in the late 1940s.[5]

Small wonder then, that in the wake of the challenges presented by COVID-19, Hagen's work provided a well-established mechanism by which WAAPA's first-year students could continue their training away from school in the safety of a home environment. Although initially conceived of as a series of theatre-based exercises to be shared in the context of a face-to-face class, the solo nature of the exercises and the requirement to re-create everyday activities that take place in the privacy of the home, suggested that this work would translate well to a Zoom-based environment. Moreover, a medium of this kind offered the potential to work with enhanced degrees of *specificity* and *authenticity* – qualities to which Hagen attached great importance.[6] The reference to 'authenticity' here is important in that it highlights the extent to which this modified approach to the exercise would offer a space where we could explore recreated behaviour in the actual environments where the activities took place. In the live studio-based context of pre-COVID-19 conditions, such spaces would be imaginative recreations of the bedrooms, kitchens, and living rooms depicted.

The Solo Object Exercise

Closely aligned to Hagen's technique, the Solo Object Exercise requires students to re-create fifteen 'ordinary' minutes of their own lives when they are alone in a

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room that is very familiar to them and in which they feel relaxed. It is important that there should be no sense of crisis influencing their behaviour (e.g., the need for haste or of feeling unwell) and that they are in pursuit of a simple task involving three physical activities towards the completion of an overriding objective. An example would be:

> *I am getting ready to entertain a close friend who is joining me for dinner on her birthday. (Objective)*
>
> *My physical activities will be:*
> 1. *Laying the table*
> 2. *Preparing the dessert*
> 3. *Wrapping the gift, I previously bought for her*

The emphasis on the need for *physical* activities underlines Hagen's behaviouralist approach to actor training as distinct from some of the more introspective techniques developed by Lee Strasberg.[7] The purpose of the exercise is to select activities that involve the need to focus on a simple need – to polish shoes, iron a shirt, pack a suitcase, etc.

In preparation for all of Hagen's exercises, it is important for students to begin with what she describes as The Six Steps.[8] These involve a series of questions which actors can use for exercises aimed at self-discovery, such as the Solo Object Exercise, or as a basis from which to begin work on creating a dramatic character. These six steps are as follows:

1. **Who am I?**
   What is my present state of being? How do I perceive myself? What am I wearing?
2. **What are the Circumstances?**
   What time is it? Where am I? What surrounds me? What are the immediate circumstances?
3. **What are my Relationships?**
   How do I stand in relationship to the circumstances, the place, the objects, and the other people related to my circumstances?
4. **What do I want?**
   What is my main objective? My immediate need or objective?
5. **What is my obstacle?**
   What is in the way of what I want? How do I overcome it?
6. **What do I do to get what I want?**
   How can I achieve my objective? What's my behavior? What are my actions?

Hagen (1991: 134)

When students first work on these exercises, it is important for them to work from their own experience rather than that of an imagined personality or a character

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drawn from a play. An important aim of this exercise is the need to recreate actual lived experience and represent it as if it were happening in the present of the classroom. The use of an actual experience as the basis for theatrical representation nurtures an attention to detail, an understanding of the difference between theatrical truth and actuality, and an avoidance of the fictitious or invented as a means of creative investigation.

Whether working on class-based scenarios drawn from participants' own personal experiences or commencing work on a role, notice how these questions insist on an attention to detail and observed behaviours (of self and others). Wary of what she described as a '... loose way of working that depends solely on intuitive or illusive inspiration', Hagen developed a system of working that '... can be structured in an orderly way over which the actor has control, although no part of it is mechanical' (Hagen 1991: 256–7).

Under normal circumstances, when the Solo Object Exercise is presented in a class-based studio environment, students are required to make use of personal objects and possessions as a means of stimulating the imagination and furthering the selected objective and physical activities. To aid this process, Hagen encourages students to choose scenarios carefully and to avoid the need to mime objects or structures that cannot easily be transferred to the studio space – such as doorframes, windows, fireplaces, etc. For the exercise to work effectively, it is important for actors to *endow* the studio environment with the qualities of the *actual* space that is being represented, a process which Hagen described as follows: '**Use real objects, endowing them with the physical and psychological properties that will make them your own until you believe that the place you have recreated in the studio is *where you live***' (Hagen 1991: 139, original emphasis). By recalling – through the power of the imagination – the colours, smells, sounds, textures etc. of particular objects, the actor can transfer to people, places, objects, etc. qualities that are not inherently present. At a very simple level this may mean imparting to a glass of cold tea, the alcoholic taste and smell of whisky, or alternatively, to another actor the personal attributes of the character s/he is representing. Endowment extends not just to physical attributes, but to psychological qualities as well. A stage prop, for instance, can be endowed with the qualities of rarity, fragility etc., but it is also possible to invest it with symbolic significance – a gift received from a now dead relative, or a painful reminder of a troubled past. Under normal circumstances – where students present object exercises in a face-to-face learning environment – endowment becomes an important means by which actors can start to build 'belief' in both the physical environment and the psychological conditions in which their scenarios take place. Consequently, the use of objects is of central importance to the exercise. Linking Hagen's use of endowments to Stanislavsky's 'As If' techniques, Carol Rosenfeld (2012: 145), suggests that such an approach serves to strengthen stage relationships, enable more compelling emotional connections to situations, characters and objects, and motivate character/scenic action.

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Rather than adopt an improvisational approach to the presentation of selected scenarios, Hagen stresses the need for close rehearsal, and she qualifies this to mean *'doing'* it (Hagen 1991: 140; original emphasis) instead of merely thinking about the scenario or mentally going through each aspect of the presentation. Unlike Stanislavsky's Active Analysis techniques, which use improvisation as a tool through which to build an embodied and holistic engagement with the strangeness of a text, this approach seeks to bring spontaneity with that which is familiar. Both techniques strive for the same outcome, but the starting point is different in each case. These exercises are designed to bring to our awareness the unconscious impulses and reactions to the often pedestrian tasks that we perform on a daily basis (e.g., brushing your teeth or ironing a blouse) – they enable us to discover truths about ourselves and our behaviours that frequently go unnoticed. For Hagen, an unrehearsed, improvised presentation 'will be of little value in establishing the correct behavioral reflexes we are all hoping for…' (Hagen 1991: 140). Her use of the word 'reflex' here is interesting, since it points to an emphasis on the need to become aware of and include the habitual physical and psychological impulses that often take place unconsciously – which may include sighs, groans, mutterings, etc. Studio-based classwork, therefore, becomes an extremely practical means through which student actors can develop increased sensitivity and self-awareness.

Having carefully worked through the details of the chosen scenario and practised it for at least an hour, students are then required to share their work with the tutor and their classmates. An important aim is to overcome self-consciousness and begin to experience a feeling of 'public solitude'[9] in which the actor's concentration and focus are directed at the imagined surroundings (objects, furnishings, clothing, etc.) and the completion of physical activities that lead to the completion of the chosen objective (see above example). With careful briefing and detailed tutorial guidance, this exercise can enable students to realise the following pedagogical aims:

- an appreciation of the importance of detailed preparation, careful selection, and rigorous rehearsal in seeking to present a chosen scenario;
- an understanding of how to engage *physically* with an *objective* using at least three practical *activities*;
- an informed practical understanding of 'public solitude' and an increased sense of 'spontaneity' in class-based preparation and presentation;
- the ability, at will, to generate organically appropriate responses to given circumstances and stimuli, and to work with a strong sense of theatrical truthfulness and belief in the chosen situation.[10]

What then was the impact of presenting this work in an online environment? Did such an approach serve to enhance or diminish its relevance to fledgling actors? And how important were notions of imagination and authenticity in this context?

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The classes

Following the declaration, by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the 11 March 2020, that the COVID-19 outbreak had developed into a global pandemic, WAAPA, like many other conservatoire schools, switched the majority of its teaching online. For our newly recruited first-year actors, for whom the semester had only just begun, this meant many of them chose to return home until it was safe to return to class. Following a series of briefings with the entire cohort, the first of a series of online Object Exercise classes shared via Zoom Video Conferencing began in late March. Thanks to the dedicated work of a highly motivated and committed group of students, the results proved both extremely engaging and highly revealing. Whilst the shift to a seemingly more authentic and highly personalised environment (at least for the student's presenting) may appear to offer enhanced learning opportunities, some of the interpretative issues that emerged raise important questions about the experience as a whole.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that for a generation who are very familiar with a wide range of social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok etc., the prospect of working online did not appear disconcerting, at least from my own point of view. On the contrary, students responded to the Zoom learning environment with a genuine sense of ease and naturalness. Indeed, following a tendency, in early sessions, to appear in nightwear (pyjamas, dressing gowns, etc.), or to arrive at classes eating breakfast, it was necessary to emphasise the highly concentrated nature of the work being undertaken and to stress the point that online classes should be just as formal as would normally be expected in a face-to-face studio session. This observation is important since it points to the extent to which, for participating students, the boundaries between 'theatrical truthfulness' and 'actuality' often became blurred; a consequence of a) the medium through which we were working and b) the fact that the environments in which they presented work were their *actual* bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens, etc. rather than *representations* of these spaces recreated in a teaching space. Of equal importance here is the realisation that in a Zoom context, the self-consciousness that might usually accompany a student's live classroom presentation – the awareness of 'presence' (breathing, moving, coughing etc. by students observing) – is greatly reduced by the intensification of a 'fly-on-the-wall' observational atmosphere. Zoom includes the capability to switch off both camera and sound controls thereby eliminating any obvious external indicators of presence. At one level, this offered various benefits to the work: it helped to foster increased levels of focus and concentration, it promoted a keener sense of 'public solitude', it facilitated a feeling of naturalness for both the presenter and the observer, but at another level, it served to complicate the relationship in this work between the *implied* and the *literal* or perhaps more pertinently between the *imagined* and the *real*. Stanislavsky clearly makes the point that the 'normal world is not art. This by its very nature, needs inventiveness. [...] Our imagination has an enormous role to play here. So we ought to

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spend a little longer on it and become more familiar with its creative function' (Stanislavski 2008: 60).

Uta Hagen shares Stanislavsky's perspective as can be seen from the following:

> In defining the difference between reality in life and reality in art, Tolstoy said, 'Something is added to nature which wasn't there before.' That 'something' is the artist's point of view and his power of selection, which comes *from* life and makes *new* life.
>
> Hagen (1973: 77, emphasis in original)

It is, of course, essential to understand that the Solo Object Exercise is designed to enable students to present an extract taken from their own lives (a slice of life) and, in this regard, is not regarded as a piece of dramatic fiction. There are no 'characters' per se and no 'conflicts' to overcome. The challenge is to present a sequence of events that remain as true to their own life experiences as possible. Such a requirement does not, however, preclude the need for a process of selection, of editing, or the need to structure the presentation in such a way as to afford a high degree of logic and coherence. We know for instance, that the immediacy of the given circumstances in which the presentation is framed are a fiction. In the original situation, for instance, the student was not being observed by seventeen other people. Even though they may once have been true – the student, for instance, has 'set up' the cleaning of his room – we also know that the date/time depicted in the exercise is likely to be very different to the *actual* time of the presentation (for example, the actor is presenting the preparation of breakfast during a session with the tutor starting at 14:00); indeed the actor's organisation of the physical activities chosen (laying the table, making the dessert, wrapping the present) may impose a coherence and logic that was not present in the real-life events. One of the great paradoxes of Stanislavsky's System is that whilst it acknowledges the fictional and highly constructed nature of theatre art, it is predicated on the insistence that everything becomes real in the imagination of the actor.[11] In contrast to truth in life, theatrical truth draws from a series of presumptions and suppositions which become available through the actor's belief in and connection to the 'given circumstances' that frame the scenic action. For Stanislavsky, as was borne out from the experience of the students working on the exercise, theatrical truth is made up of two separate, but closely woven elements, *truth* and *belief:*

> Truth is inseparable from belief, and belief from truth. They cannot exist without each other and without both there can be no experiencing or creative work. [...] Everything onstage must be convincing for the actor himself, for his fellow actors and for the audience. Everything should inspire belief in the possible existence in real life of feelings analogous to the actor's own. Every moment onstage must be endorsed by belief in the truth of the feelings being experienced and in the truth of the action taking place.
>
> Stanislavski (2008: 144)

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According to Stanislavsky, 'scenic truth' is achieved when the actor succeeds in personalising the given circumstances and all the actions undertaken by the character. At this point, it becomes possible for the actor and the spectator to *believe* in the reality of the internal feelings and actions that are experienced on stage. This view of an actor's subjective approach to creative interpretation is shared by Uta Hagen, who referred to it as Realism and suggested it involved a process whereby:

> [...] the actor puts his own psyche to use to find identification with the role, allowing the behavior to develop out of the playwright's given circumstances, trusting that a form will result, knowing that the executions of his actions will involve a moment-to-moment *subjective* experience.
>
> Hagen (1991: 42, original emphasis)

A focus on the need to understand the distinction between *theatrical truth* and *actuality* is a common feature of actor training regimes across the world, and WAAPA is no exception. This said, by dislodging the significance of this distinction and diluting the need for endowment, our 2020 Zoom classes significantly shifted the experience of Hagen's methodology in a way that was not initially anticipated. At this point it is important to acknowledge that whilst it is possible to access filmed recordings of Hagen's classes,[12] these sessions were always recorded in the presence of a live audience (usually her students) and as such maintained the aesthetic of a live theatre performance.

In the Zoom context, where students rehearsed and presented their work in the real spaces in which their chosen scenarios took place, the gap between *theatrical truth* and *actuality* was significantly narrowed. Moreover, the value of 'belief' as a framing device – at least in relation to place – appeared redundant. Students do not need to believe in the *imagined* reality of their living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, etc. because they are physically located in the spaces themselves. In this regard, the 'signified' and the 'real' become one and the same. But why is this significant? Shouldn't such a situation offer an opportunity for deeper creative engagement? Surely, wouldn't the opportunity to locate the action of the solo object exercises in the spaces where depicted events actually took place, whilst using authentic possessions instead of endowed objects, serve to heighten the sense of realism rather than diminish it?

Throughout his work, Stanislavsky repeatedly returns to the crucial importance of the actor's *imagination* in creating the reality of a fictional world. Whilst external details can certainly help to generate truthful responses, it is the quality of the actor's inner feelings and the sincerity of belief that ultimately leads to a sense of theatrical truthfulness:

> There is no genuine art without truth and belief. And the more real the surroundings are onstage, the nearer to nature the actor's experiencing should be.

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> But often we see something quite different. A realistic setting is created, décor, props, everything about them is true, but the truth of the feelings and experiencing in the acting is forgotten. This contradiction between the truth of objects and the falsity of feeling only serves to underline all the more strongly the absence of genuine life in the performance.
>
> Stanislavski (2008: 154)

In replacing what would normally be a studio-based represented environment with an online actual one, an important aspect of the actor's creative process – namely the need for imaginative investment – was significantly undermined, even if it has to be said that the students involved in the Zoom classes worked with immense dedication and commitment throughout the sessions. In fact, whilst it is certainly true that the actors worked with integrity and care, the 'lived-in' *literalness* of the environments in which they were working removed the need for imaginative engagement in relation to the surrounding detail. Unequivocal in his view that 'without imagination you cannot be an actor' (64), Stanislavsky beautifully illustrates his point in Chapter 8 of *An Actor's Work*, when Tortsov (the director/teacher) invites Kostya (a student) to revisit an exercise with which he has previously struggled. Instead of providing props to work with, Tortsov insists that his student mimes the action of counting money, paying very particular attention to the physical details of the scene. For Kostya, the task proves revelatory:

> As a result of all the actions Tortsov suggested to me, I developed a new attitude towards working with 'nothing'. It exactly filled the role of the imaginary money, or rather, enabled me to focus on an object which in reality did not exist.
>
> Stanislavski (2008: 161)

Through a series of carefully chosen external actions and gestures, the imagined reality of a handful of used rouble banknotes, became a theatrical truth in the mind of Kostya. Rather than happen automatically, the student is guided '…[action] by action, second by second, logically, in sequence…' (161) to a point of discovery.

Recognising the value of mime as a means through which to develop the actor's imagination (Hagen 1991: 38), Uta Hagen also shares Stanislavsky's concerns about the contradictions that can arise between the truth of objects and the falsity of feelings:

> And be sure to use the objects as tools to further your actions, not as 'props' […]. Conceiving of your *objects* as props leads to an illustration of boring, naturalistic pieces of business rather than to the discovery of the truthful behavior that results when we *need* the objects to further our life.
>
> Hagen (1991: 139, emphasis added)

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For both Stanislavsky and Hagen, an essential component of an actor's craft is the need to actively develop and utilise the power of the imagination in the creation of truthful given circumstances. This can be achieved with mimed objects (as demonstrated by Kostya) or with carefully chosen real ones – to which specific needs are attached. As is frequently the case with young children, once the imagination is engaged, *belief* will follow.[13]

In a face-to-face class, the focus of a solo object exercise is directed at the need to re-create in as much detail as possible the external reality of the original environment as well as the given circumstances in which the action takes place. Of necessity, the external reality, in this context, must be 'imagined' and part of the actor's work involves building credibility and a sense of belief in the surrounding detail. To achieve this, students are expected to make choices that facilitate a smooth transition from the actual site of the scenic action to a studio environment. The process of selection and editing, together with the need to order the chosen material to meet this requirement creates a series of *gaps* or *falsities*, which threaten to undermine the actors (and the spectator's) sense of belief. To minimise this threat, actors are encouraged to draw on their imaginations and endow objects and spaces with the particular qualities needed for the successful execution of both the physical and psychological aspects of their chosen scenarios. The alien nature of the studio environment forces the need for verisimilitude, a coherence that allows for the presentation of something that may not be true in actuality, but which is nonetheless believable.

In the Zoom environment, where students are actually located in the spaces where the original events may have taken place, the need to select and order the arrangement of the external environment is significantly reduced. Whilst the authenticity afforded by the external surroundings might at one level appear advantageous, the impact on the actor's creative process can prove disabling as indicated by Stanislavsky's comments about the importance of imagination:

> There is the kind of imagination which takes the initiative, which works on its own [...]. There is also the kind of imagination which lacks initiative, but which readily accepts anything accepted to it and then develops it independently. [...] However, if the imagination just accepts what has been suggested to it, and doesn't develop it, then there are problems.
>
> Stanislavski (2008: 64)

The active deployment of the imaginative process that is required of a face-to-face studio presentation is akin to the first example cited by Stanislavsky. The need to create and personalise a space; to re-arrange the room; to decide where the spectators should be positioned; to gather the props and furnishings; and to make use of the endowment technique ensures that the actor's imagination is *actively* stretched and engaged in bridging the gaps and compensating for any shortfalls in detail. Conversely, our experience of the Zoom classes removed those aspects of the

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imaginative process that address the limitations of the external environment and as a result, the quality of the surrounding details – though authentically real – felt significantly less theatrical. In this regard, the teaching and learning experience felt more akin to the *ready acceptance* that Stanislavsky identifies in the second example of how the imagination works.

Whilst it is true that in presenting their work via Zoom the students sought to personalise the *psychological* dimensions shaping their chosen scenarios – and in this way certainly nurtured their imaginations – the overall impact of the work was perhaps not as enabling or empowering, at least for first-year undergraduate actors, as it might have been in a studio setting. Even more revealing is the realisation that, whereas in the past, generations of students have responded to these exercises with enormous enthusiasm and a genuine sense of achievement, the students who experienced the Zoom sessions appeared less sure of the overall merits of the work. This isn't to suggest that they didn't learn anything of value, but rather to highlight how the shift from a face-to-face delivery mode to an online one can affect the work in ways that might not seem immediately obvious. Notwithstanding these observations, the Zoom sessions did provide some very useful insights into alternative ways of working. An investigation of certain psychological aspects of character, for instance, as expressed through relationships to objects, situations, other characters etc., has the potential to work extremely well on Zoom. Moreover, consideration of how to translate stage action to screen in a way that doesn't diminish the overall effect, is certainly worth investigating via Zoom and other similar platforms. Many student actors – especially in the early stages of their training – do a great deal of solo work, on voice work and dialect; on movement and physical expression; and on text-based interpretation. With carefully selected exercises that are broken down into discreet elements, there is no reason why Zoom cannot be used as a powerful medium for both practical class work and assessment purposes.

Conclusion

As we begin to reflect on the impact of a global pandemic – particularly with regard to performing arts training and pedagogy – it is important to acknowledge the extent to which new technologies have made it possible to re-visit long-established training practices and develop alternative and often highly innovative approaches to pedagogy. Whereas for many performing arts disciplines, it would previously have been unthinkable to suggest online modes of delivery, it is now possible to conceive of a situation in which most institutions will introduce some degree of blended learning. Indeed, in an economic climate in which funding for the arts and education are likely to diminish, online delivery may well appear as a cost-effective means of ensuring survival. Stefan Aquilina (2022: 18), for example, usefully points to those instances where the introduction of 'video material, blogs, hand-held recording devices, and online learning platforms' provide a powerful

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addition to the more traditional teaching practices that are often common to a conservatoire training ethos - the emphasis, certainly, is on addition and complementarity, not on substitution.

It is certainly always essential to embrace new technologies and seek out alternative ways of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, though it is equally important to protect the richness and immediacy of more traditional studio/classroom-based environments. This is particularly true of the performing arts, where there is an increased emphasis on the need to a) nurture *embodied* skill development, b) provide *individualised* feedback and tuition and c) utilise pedagogical strategies that build knowledge as a result of *shared* experience. The liveness and immediacy of a studio-based Solo Object Exercise presentation, for example, requires both the actor and the observers to *actively* invest in the possibility of a truthful response *to* and belief *in* imagined stimuli. In this context, the created space requires the imaginative investment of all present and consequently has the potential to be transformed into a collective experience of 'theatrical truthfulness'. Such a process is much more problematic in a Zoom environment where the 'actuality' of the environment shifts the need for imaginative investment away from the setting and onto the situation itself – rather like putting the cart before the horse. A major component of the exercise, however, is aimed at developing the power of the senses – sight, touch, smell, taste, and sound – as a means by which to induce *belief* and stimulate *real* responses to imagined objects.

Although the experience of transferring Hagen's exercises from a live face-to-face environment to an online one proved less straightforward that was initially anticipated, this shouldn't preclude the possibility of undertaking future attempts. However, rather than assume that enhanced authenticity will necessarily result in stronger imaginative engagement, it will be important, at the outset, to find ways of disrupting a gravitational pull towards the 'authentic' in favour of the more active processes of creative invention. An example might be to offer online preparatory workshops that investigate endowment as a means of stimulating the imagination. Another might involve requiring actors to present their Solo Object exercises in spaces that are different to those in which the *actual* events depicted took place. Adjustments of this kind will serve to enhance the suitability of Zoom environments so that, in Stanislavsky's words the 'imagination takes the initiative in the creative process, drawing the actor along behind it' (Stanislavski 2008: 63).

Finally, when thinking about moving practice-based work of this kind to an online learning environment, it might be useful to keep the following list of considerations in mind. The intention here is to highlight useful starting points rather than provide a prescribed approach:

- Try to brief in precise detail what is expected of the exercise. In the case of the Solo Object Exercise, this will necessitate a discussion about preparation, structure, duration etc. Ideally, each exercise should last no more than 12–15 min.

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- Before embarking on the classes, it will be useful to offer a couple of preparatory workshops on endowment (places and objects) and the importance of the imagination in creating a sense of belief in the given circumstances.[14]
- It is useful to start each session with a warm-up – something that can create a sense of ensemble and collective endeavour. The Zoom space can feel isolating, so anything that can break this down will prove beneficial for the individuals working in the group.
- Before publishing a schedule of presentations, it will be worth running some creative workshops that explore the limitations and possibilities of home-based environments. What is the best way of practicing? How can an individual's private spaces be re-arranged to meet their desired outcomes of the exercise? How can the use of imagination be a tool for bridging gaps? Does the use of entrances and exits need to be explored?
- It is important to identify a list of do's and don'ts for the Zoom environment. Students should treat online sessions in the same way as formal face-to-face classes; don't arrive in nightwear or eating breakfast. I would also advocate keeping the camera on but switching off the sound.
- In the context of online environments, it may be useful for students to record their practice sessions and play them back to identify areas for further development. These do not need to be shared with the group.
- During the de-brief/feedback sessions invite all students to switch on the sound and to raise digital hands before offering observations. As with face-to-face sessions, feedback should be based on what is being attempted by the presenting student rather than giving 'advice' about alternative scenarios/situations.
- The tutor should carefully co-ordinate feedback sessions and ensure that commentary is constructive and enabling. It may be beneficial to disable the chat facility so that individuals don't get distracted by sending messages to others in the group.
- Develop ways of promoting group support and trust. It is not as easy for students to 'read' and 'feel' the atmosphere of a digital space, so some investment in building trust and confidence will pay dividends later.
- It can be useful to find ways of warming down after sessions. This can include tutor summaries and insights as well as allowing the group to reconnect and say thank you to each other.
- Finally, it is important for the tutor to manage group expectations. Ensuring that students have an opportunity to repeat exercises when necessary and building in one-to-one tutorial advice sessions will build confidence and resilience.

Notes

1 Excellent discussions of online teaching of both ballet and opera can be found in Bayyat (2020) and Alpiste Penalba et al. (2013).

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2 See https://www.hbstudio.org/about-hb-studio/uta-hagen-100/ (accessed 1 May 2022).
3 It is important to distinguish Hagen's work from early Method practitioners such as Lee Strasberg. In contrast to Strasberg, Hagen's techniques emphasise the importance of observation, given circumstances, and the external environment. In this regard, her techniques are much closer in spirit to the behavioural approaches developed by Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner. For Stanislavsky's impact on American actor training see Gordon (2010).
4 For a similar juxtaposition between Realism and Naturalism see Benedetti (1989: 11–2).
5 A fuller discussion of Hagen's influence on actor training can be found in Shirley (2012).
6 For a collection of Hagen's exercises see Hagen (1973 and 1991).
7 For a good discussion of different approaches to the Method see Krasner (2010).
8 For a detailed discussion of each of the Six Steps see Hagen (1991: 256–88).
9 Hagen's discussion of what she terms the 'Fourth Side' can be found in Hagen (1991: 152–9).
10 In this context 'theatrical truthfulness' refers to the extent to which the student has succeeded in transferring as much detail as possible to the physical and emotional recreation of the *represented* activity as was present in the *original/actual* event. The notion of 'truthfulness' refers to the rejection of anything extraneous in favour of a carefully rehearsed representation of lived events.
11 For a very useful discussion this aspect of Stanislavsky's work see Carnicke (2009: 136–41).
12 For an example see: https://www.hbstudio.org/about-hb-studio/uta-hagen/uta-hagens-acting-class/ (accessed 13 April 2022).
13 For a powerful illustration of a child's ability to engage the imagination and believe in the reality of the non-existent, see the episode involving the young girl and the sick doll (in Stanislavski 2008: 155).
14 Workshops of this kind would have greatly benefitted the Zoom classes held at WAAPA. Such an insight has emerged from the experience of running the sessions without the benefits if these workshops.

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8.3 Summary

The discussion of the imagination in this chapter is important in that it invites further reflection on other publications included here. Imagination can be taken to refer to environments, objects, relationships, given circumstances, historical periods etc. No less credible, however, is the realisation that imagination can also extend to the use of language (poetic/Shakespearean etc.), to different genres (pantomime, musical theatre etc.), and conventions (melodrama, Kabuki etc.). The truth values we attach to these forms will vary in accordance with both the material itself and the actual genre. One of the main drivers of theatrical realism – especially as it is manifest in the Method – is the need to appear *lifelike* and to represent life as it is. Indeed, as Published Work Four states, new and emerging forms of drama are addressed to this aim. However, as Uta Hagen herself makes clear (Shirley, 2024, p. 97), and as these workshops revealed, an over-emphasis on actuality as distinct from imaginative engagement/recreation threatens to undermine the more artistic aspects of the actor's craft.

As British actor training methodologies adapt to the demands for change, it will be important to keep this realisation in mind.

Other important features of this publication are as follows:

- The chapter records and examines the results of moving what would normally be a face-to-face, studio teaching experience to an online teaching environment, something that has never been done previously at WAAPA.
- The chapter looks in detail at the practical application of Uta Hagen's methodology and traces its connections to Stanislavsky.
- The use of actual objects in the exercise used here offers a sharp contrast with the work of Lee Strasberg and his preference for the use of imaginary objects (Shirley 2018, p. 170).

Chapter Nine

9.1 Conclusions

Throughout the latter half of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st century, the work and writings of Konstantin Stanislavsky have been a focus of considerable discussion and debate amongst academics and practitioners all over the world. His investigation and analysis of the acting process, along with the the techniques and exercises he developed to enhance understanding of this important art form, provide a crucial touchstone for contemporary discussions on the actor's craft.

Until very recently, the understanding and appreciation of Stanislavsky's contribution to theatre art on the part of British academics and theatre practitioners tended to be filtered through American interpretations of his work. Indeed, when introducing his book, *Russians in Britain*, Stanislavsky scholar Jonathan Pitches notes 'a significant bias towards the US branch of the Stanislavsky tradition' (Pitches, 2012, p. 3). As Pitches clearly acknowledges, this can be attributed to a range of factors, including Stanislavsky's own visit and tour of the USA with the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1920s; to the influence of Stanislavskian 'disciples', such as Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya; and to the development and immense popularity amongst practitioners of what is now recognised as the Method.

Unlike the case with the US, however, the arrival of Stanislavsky's work in the UK is much more fragmentary and intermittent. It is worth noting, for instance, that whereas there is a wealth of American published material, dating back to the 1960s, that relates to and describes the *practical* application of Stanislavsky's methods by highly successful actors – Lee Strasberg, Uta Hagen, Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, Robert Lewis et al. – there are hardly any produced by British actors.[46] Moreover, and as previously mentioned, many American actors – including those mentioned above – either established or worked as teachers at actor training schools and academies. Consequently, the proliferation of Stanislavsky's techniques across the US was much more organised and impactful than was the case in the UK. Though many celebrated early 20th-century British practitioners were certainly aware of and excited by Stanislavsky's work (e.g. John Gielgud, Peggy Ashcroft, Michael Redgrave),[47] more formal mechanisms by

[46] Notable examples in recent years include Bella Merlin (2002) and John Gillett (2007).
[47] See Shirley, D (2012, p. 38).

which to test out and explore his methods in a *training* environment took many years to become established.

In tracing the various routes and histories by which the methods Stanislavsky developed have been transmitted, applied, and adapted in UK actor training, this thesis significantly extends the understanding of his legacy through a specific focus on the cultural context of British performance and training practice. Acutely aware of the importance of American interpretations of his work, each of the publications included in this thesis addresses the specific contexts of our own theatrical traditions and, in so doing, establishes new parameters from which to consider not just the UK's absorption of Stanislavsky's work but also its dissemination more generally. Assertions made by American Stanislavsky scholars Sharon Carnicke (2009) and Mel Gordon (2010), cited in the introduction to this submission, that the US can stake claim to a primogeniture relationship to Stanislavsky's legacy are very much problematised by the trajectories that have been uncovered within this thesis.

In embracing the Stanislavskian tradition, British training and professional practices have remained consistently in tune with the legacies and histories from which they emerged – mediaeval, Shakespearean, Restoration, comedic etc. Where the intensely *realist* readings of Stanislavsky's work haven't chimed with its traditions, British actor trainers and practitioners have reinterpreted and adjusted the work to meet their own needs. Sometimes, this has served to emphasise the physical life of the actor, or the importance of the external environment. On other occasions, as was the case with Michel Saint-Denis, it has prompted reflection on the suitability of Stanislavsky's system when it comes to how to begin to 'live a part that is beyond the natural world' (Saint-Denis, 1982, p. 38, quoted in Shirley, 2012, p. 44).

One of the most significant ideas to emerge from the thesis is the idea that instead of being fixed or rigid, Stanislavsky's system remains fluid and permeable. Far from dislodging his sense of vision in relation to an actor's work, the adjustment of a single Stanislavskian idea or exercise, or even of several at a time, only serves to deepen and extend it. It is, in fact, as Saint-Denis suggests:

> If Stanislavski's system is applied literally, it leads merely to realism, but applied selectively, with discrimination, it can be made 'the grammar of all styles. (Ibid: 44)

It is precisely this process of *selectivity* and *discrimination* that has served to characterise the reception and application of Stanislavsky's work in the UK. Whereas different interpretations of the Method nevertheless subscribe to a generally agreed understanding of *realism*, British training and interpretative practice has sought to move Stanislavsky's work beyond this point to something that is much more malleable, and which can be adapted to meet the needs of an eclectic range of genres and traditions.

This thesis examines the degree to which the transition, adaptation, and application of Stanislavsky's work has served to shape the development of actor training in Britain between 1938 and 2022. Each of the publications included in this submission offer a critical engagement with and analysis of different aspects of Stanislavsky's work, including:

- Close analysis of the routes by which Stanislavsky's System was absorbed into UK training methodologies (the London Theatre Studio, the Old Vic Theatre School, and the London Drama Centre).
- How British interpretations of Stanislavsky's methods have differed to those adopted in the USA (Uta Hagen, Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg).
- How British professional/industry-based applications of Stanislavsky's work have served to develop our understanding of his training methods (Max Stafford-Clark, Declan Donnellan, Katie Mitchell).
- The adaptation of Stanislavsky's techniques to meet the demands of new technologies and training environments in a post-pandemic environment (Synchronous Online Learning).

As can be seen from Figure Two, whilst the individual publications included in this submission offer responses to the four subsidiary research questions that form the foundations of this research, taken together, they represent a comprehensive, critically engaged, and highly original response to the overriding thesis. As a result, theatre scholars, professional practitioners, students, and teachers/actor trainers have access to an authoritative and multidimensional examination of the development and influence of Stanislavsky's work on professional actor training in Britain.

As is often the case for many great artists and thinkers, Stanislavsky's work resists the fixedness of an absolute and all-encompassing definition. Interpreted and adapted in accordance with different professional and training contexts across the world, his work continues to be a source of interest and fascination for practitioners and scholars alike. Although this thesis has focused on his influence on British actor training within a specific period, there are many more dimensions to the reception/application of his work that are worthy of closer examination.

9.2 Potential Directions for Future Research

In the light of shifting social norms and the changing values of Western cultures – notably, as a consequence of the impact of key initiatives, including *Black Lives Matter (BLM)*, *#MeToo, Contemporary Identity Politics*, and *Mindfulness and Mental Health* agendas – it has been suggested that many of the principles informing Stanislavsky's system of training need to be revisited.[48] Each of these categories is worthy of in-depth analysis and further research when it comes to interpreting and utilising Stanislavsky's techniques. One area that has become particularly pertinent and pressing in recent years relates to the need for the acknowledgement of *race*.

The opening page of the very recently published *Stanislavsky and Race: Questioning the "System" in the 21st Century* by Sirri Scott and Jay Paul Skelton (eds) (2024) Routledge, suggests the following:

> *Stanislavsky and Race* is the first book to explore the role that Konstantin Stanislavsky's "system" and its legacies can play in building, troubling and illuminating today's anti-racist theatre practices.

This publication, which includes a chapter by American academic Monica White Ndounou, entitled *I Ain't Studyin' Stanislavsky: We Are the Key to Reimagining 21st Century Actor Training* (pp. 162–75), raises important questions pertaining to the ongoing relevance of Stanislavsky's work in the 21st century.

[48] Significant work has commenced in these areas, including the *Stanislavsky and Race Online Symposium* in November 2021 and the *Stanislavsky and Mindfulness Symposium* in April 2023, both hosted by the Stanislavsky Research Centre in the UK. In addition, Staffordshire University hosted the *Performance, Pedagogy and Practice Symposium* in June 2023.

> Founded in 1901 in Eastern Europe, Konstantin Stanislavsky's system of acting was not developed with Black creatives or with Black narratives. Translated and taught by Richard Boleslavsky in the US, the "system" was reshaped by Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Uta Hagen and others. Stanislavsky's "system" and its variations are intended to help all actors achieve realism and consistency in performance. While some of these theories and theorists may be more conducive to intercultural engagement, they do not always address how the process of achieving realism may differ for and impact historically misrepresented people, particularly of the African diaspora; like Black Americans. (Ndounou, M, in Scott, S and Skelton, J. P. (eds) 2024: p. 164)

Ndounou's observation is important because it highlights two key points. Firstly, that Stanislavsky's methods were designed to help *all* actors achieve realism and consistency, and secondly that the systems by which his theories have been transmitted often do not address the need for intercultural engagement or a recognition of the experiences of marginalised identities. Although Ndounou's comments reference Black American experience, similar concerns can also be made in relation to many other cultural identities, as well as to the LGBTIQ+ community.

If it is to be argued that Stanislavsky's work can embody what Saint-Denis has described as a 'grammar of all styles' (Saint, Denis, 1982, p. 38), then it is imperative to embark on research that takes account of and engages with a much wider range of cultural experiences and understandings. To some extent, this will necessitate a distancing from the personality of Stanislavsky as creator of the system in preference for an approach that focuses on the merits and weaknesses of techniques themselves. Just as we don't refer to Italian monk Guido of Arezzo (c 990–c 1033) when we discuss musical notation, consideration of Stanislavskian methodology should proceed from an evaluation of the work itself rather than the personality of its creator.

Finally, alongside consideration of the relevance of Stanislavsky's work across much broader cultural and social experiences, it is also worth examining the extent to which his techniques can be deployed beyond conventional modes of realism towards more innovative and experimental work. A possible foundation for this has been established by James McLaughlin (2012) in his PhD thesis, which has been referenced in this submission (see section 1.3.4).

Work of this kind will also serve to evaluate new trends and aesthetic changes taking place in the professional workplace – some of which were highlighted in Publication Four of this thesis, 'The Reality of Doing: Meisner Technique and British Actor Training'.

As has previously been stated, there is a wealth of published material pertaining to the work of Konstantin Stanislavsky. Yet despite this, there is so much more to learn about his work and the varied ways it can be interpreted and adapted to meet the needs of different cultures, genres, and performance traditions. In many respects, it feels as if the immense depth and layering in his work is only just beginning to reveal itself. Given this observation, future research activity promises to be both deeply insightful and enormously inspiring.

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Appendix One

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Appendix Two

Shirley, D. (2010) [2007] 'Stanislavski's System: The Anatomy of an Actor's Art.'
In *reACTING: A Fresh Approach to Key Practitioners* Oberon Books (2010) [2007]

The inclusion of this publication is intended to provide a general overview of Stanislavsky's System as well as a glimpse at some practical exercises I have designed to support actors in training.

reACTING

a fresh approach

to key practitioners

by Penny Cherns,
David Shirley and
Stephen Unwin

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CHAPTER ONE

Stanislavski's System: The Anatomy of an Actor's Art

by David Shirley

Introduction

Born in Russia in 1863 to a wealthy manufacturing family, Konstantin Sergeevich Alekseev enjoyed what must surely have been a highly privileged and extremely stimulating childhood. Keen to encourage a taste for the arts in their children, Konstantin's parents regularly accompanied them on visits to the theatre, opera and ballet. Small wonder then, that at the age of only fourteen, Stanislavski began producing his own plays in the fully equipped theatre that his father had built on the family estate. Together with his eight siblings, Konstantin – or Kostya as he would have been known – experimented with and adapted mini-dramas and plays that were later staged for the entertainment of his parents and their guests.

From these early teenage investigations and youthful incursions, Stanislavski was to develop a lifelong passion for performance. A passion that would not only fuel his development as an outstanding and much acclaimed actor and director, but also help to foster both the emergence of a new kind of theatre and an alternative, often radical, approach to actor training.

The influence of the 'System', as it has become known, is difficult to underestimate. From its initial inception at the Moscow Arts Theatre in 1906, where a group of irritated actors were forced to tolerate what appeared to be a series of 'eccentric' exercises, Stanislavski's 'grammar' of acting has established itself as a domineering feature of Western theatrical discourse. The first serious attempt to articulate a series of logical and coherent principles specifically related to the numerous impulses that inform the actor's creative process, the System laid the foundations for an entirely new approach to actor training. When, in the years following the emergence of the Soviet Union in 1917, the Moscow Arts Theatre – under Stanislavski's leadership – toured Europe and the United States, the company's fame spread. Indeed, such was the acclaim and fascination with the group's work that many of its most gifted practitioners sought new lives outside of Russia as actors, directors and teachers. This factor coupled with the

increasing availability of English and European translations of Stanislavski's own writings helped further his ideas on acting and subsequently promoted the efficacy of the System in the West.

Although much of what Stanislavski's System advocates may now appear obvious, it is important to bear in mind the kind of background against which it emerged. During the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, the Imperial theatres of Moscow and St. Petersburg favoured 'low-risk', popular forms of entertainment that ensured wide appeal and maximum income. Strict censorship meant that morally challenging or politically subversive material was prohibited. Instead, audiences were offered highly conventional forms of melodrama and vaudeville featuring formulaic character types such as the lover, the low-life and the villain. Actors were expected to adopt particular archetypes and embody the physical gestures and vocal mannerisms with which they were associated. Established custom meant that audiences could expect to see favourite actors recreate familiar roles in new plays. In this tradition, the play came a poor second to the personality of the 'star' actor and the idea of an ensemble was unheard of. With no training to speak of and alarmingly short rehearsal periods the quality of performance was generally regarded as poor. Stanislavski's intense dislike for such forms of theatre is evidenced in the first of his three famous books on acting. Warning against the pitfalls of depending on superficiality, the enigmatic Tortsov – Stanislavski's surrogate acting tutor – counsels his students as follows:

> *'With the aid of his face, mimicry, voice and gestures, the mechanical actor offers the public nothing but the dead mask of non-existent feeling. For this there has been worked out a large assortment of picturesque effects which pretend to portray all sorts of feelings through external means.'(1)*

It was in his efforts to reject such pretence and formulate a richer, psychologically complex and emotionally more demanding

system of performance that Stanislavski was to devote much of his working life.

Always a prolific writer, Stanislavski maintained a lifelong habit of transcribing his thoughts on theatre and acting. As a consequence, it is possible to glimpse the origins of the System in some of his earliest notebooks, a number of which were completed when he was just fourteen. How, for instance, might it be possible to judge the quality of one's own acting? When is a performance truthful? Is it possible for an actor to reveal the psychological dimensions of a role? In later years, the answers to these and numerous other questions pertaining to the actor's craft would find an outlet in some of the various publications that bear Stanislavski's name. Through his own work as an amateur, later a professional actor, and subsequently as one of the founding directors of the Moscow Arts Theatre, Stanislavski experimented with and perfected the techniques that would have a profound influence on the development of realist performance practice in both theatre and film.

Towards the end of his life, Stanislavski had amassed a vast array of journals, lesson plans, notes and book drafts. By the time of his death in August 1938, he had approved the publication of two major works: the autobiographical *My Life in Art* (1924) and the first of three famous acting manuals *An Actor Prepares* (1936). The latter was initially intended to form part of a much larger volume entitled *An Actor's Work on Himself*. Due to what was felt to be its excessive length, however, Stanislavski agreed to divide the work into two halves, the second of which was published posthumously in 1949 under the title *Building a Character*. The final volume, *Creating a Role,* which is a compilation of various draft manuscripts and production notes, was published in 1961, twenty-three years after his death.

Whilst, at one level, the effort to record his ideas on acting and develop them into a formal system for training is certainly theoretical in scope, it is important to recognise the great efforts that Stanislavski took in order to ensure that his ideas retained their essentially practical and organic relevance. Rather than

simply offer endless descriptions of tried-and-tested techniques or provide us with a list of instructions, Stanislavski organises his material in such a way as to arouse curiosity and provoke reflection. Through the creation of a fictional classroom in which imaginary students attempt to master key exercises and grasp new ideas, Stanislavski explores both the mysteries of acting and the nature of theatre art. Just as we begin to comprehend one concept, Tortsov confronts us with the complexities surrounding another. The result is that the reader, like the students that attend the classes, becomes utterly absorbed by the intricate range of problems that are presented. As with any acting class, there are confident and not-so-confident students, introverts and show offs, sceptics and devotees. Through detailed analysis, practical illustration, argument, discussion and rehearsal, Stanislavski gradually puts forward a complex, but extremely dynamic set of principles; which, when taken together, constitute a remarkably coherent and consistent practical guide to an actor's craft. Far from reaching a point of closure or completion in his work, Stanislavski continued to refine existing ideas and experiment with new ones until the end of his life. Indeed, at the time of his death, he was in the midst of delivering a series of new classes to a hand-picked group of eager students at the Opera-Dramatic Studio, based in his own apartment in Moscow. It is imperative, therefore, to view his work as a lively and progressive series of experiments and investigations into the uniquely challenging, often illusive and occasionally profound modes of communication that the theatre makes available.

What follows is an attempt to offer a clear insight into the workings of the System and the various elements contained within it. Key components and concepts will be discussed in detail and, wherever possible, a series of practical exercises and questions will accompany each section. The overriding aim is to encourage both intellectual understanding and practical competence in this multi-faceted, highly dynamic and impressively holistic approach to acting.

The Art of Acting

In the second chapter of *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski identifies five different modes of acting: *living the role*, *representing the role*, *the mechanical reproduction of the role*, *overacting* and *exploitation*. Of these, only the first is considered suitable for the kind of artistic approach to which Stanislavski aspires. If a performance is to realise the fullest artistic potential then it is necessary for the actor to appreciate the importance of the need to 'live the part'. In other words, the actor is required to take account not just of the physical life of the character, but also the inner life as well:

> *'He must fit his own qualities to the life of this other person, and pour into it all of his own soul. The fundamental aim of our art is the creation of this inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in an artistic form'*(2)

If the theatre spectator is to gain any real insights into the nature of humanity, then it is imperative that actors begin to look and sound like real human beings. For this, it is necessary for the performer to take account of the psychological aspects of a role and determine the extent to which inner impulses can become manifest in outer behaviour. At the root of Stanislavski's art is the assumption that the more convincing an actor's performance – the more realistic it appears – then the more likely it is to provoke a reflective and emotive response from the spectator. The ability of human beings to empathise with each other, to mutually experience pain, grief and joy etc., represents one of the key principles informing much of Stanislavski's work. Whilst there is no doubt that Stanislavski emphasises the need for his actors to look and sound like real people, he is acutely aware that many of the fictional situations that they are likely to encounter will appear entirely alien. How are actors to portray complex situations in which the characters experience thoughts and emotions that are not their own? How can they begin to make the carefully rehearsed – the artificial – appear lifelike and spontaneous, as if it were happening for the first time? For Stanislavski, it is in the attempt to make those watching an

actor's performance believe in its spontaneity and empathise with the character's experiences that the art of acting begins. Thoughts and emotions are considered essential components in the construction of credible characters and it is only when his students have begun to understand the importance of this aspect of human nature that the principles informing Tortsov's training regime can really begin to take effect.

The other modes of acting described in the chapter – though not all without merit – fall considerably short of the creative insight that Stanislavski demands. Whilst the *representational* style of acting certainly attempts to re-create the emotional life of the character, it does so only inasmuch as it allows for an impression of an emotion rather than the emotion itself. Whilst actors of this kind might certainly dazzle us with their brilliance, delicate and intricate human feelings are likely to be glossed over, resulting in a performance technique that *'is less profound than beautiful'* (3).

Whereas *representational* acting at least attempts to reference genuine human feeling, *mechanical* modes of performance avoid it completely. Instead performers rely on a series of hackneyed conventions that are designed to replace any sense of genuine emotion. Though more or less extinct now, such performance techniques were widely used in the melodramas and vaudevilles that enjoyed enormous popularity in the Nineteenth Century. Established clichés such as the hand on the heart as an expression of love, rolling the eyes as an indication of jealousy or the use of exaggeratedly high or low vocal tones in moments of joy and despair are common examples. Through its dependence on a series of highly stereotypical external conventions, acting of this kind is entirely devoid of anything even resembling an inner life and consequently was ill-suited to the artistic techniques Stanislavski set out to develop.

The remaining examples referenced in the chapter are not so much formal acting styles than instances of undisciplined and unfocussed performance practice. The first, which is referred to as *overacting*, results from a poor attention to detail and

gross generalisation. It involves little thought or preparation and is built entirely on external traits and mannerisms. Finally, we are offered an example of what is described as *exploitation* in which, instead of serving the demands of the material or the interests of the company, individual performers use acting as a means of exhibiting what they consider to be superior qualities such as beauty, personality and charm. Performers of this kind are the *'deadliest enemies of art...and if they cannot be reformed must be removed from the boards.'* (4)

Although each of these examples of performance practice is analysed and discussed separately, Stanislavski emphasises the point that it is only from a theoretical perspective that the work of an actor can be divided into such categories. In practice all actors, even the most accomplished, experience moments – sometimes in a single performance – when the potential for true artistic insight is marred by the tendency to resort to convention or rely on the ability to charm and seduce the audience.

For acting to be taken seriously as an art form, Stanislavski believed that it was necessary to avoid the need to rely on personality, stereotype or mimicry and work instead to develop the habit of 'living the role'. Once this has been achieved even the smallest, seemingly insignificant details become part of a rich interpretative landscape which the actor can use to begin to fine tune a performance and convey the minutiae of human behaviour and social interaction.

Relaxation

In order to begin to work creatively, it is necessary, first of all, for the actor to reach a state of relaxation in which the body is free of unwanted tension and the muscles are loose and flexible. To convincingly embody both the inner and outer life of a character, the performer needs to develop a sensitive and expressive body that is alive to the nuances and vicissitudes of dramatic circumstance and situation. Muscular tension and physical unease inhibit the actor's ability to work freely.

It is essential, therefore, to develop strategies that will ensure maximum physical release and openness.

The need for physical training is at the very heart of Stanislavski's methodology. *'You cannot at the very beginning of our work, have any conception of the evil that results from muscular spasms and physical contraction'.*(5) Although not the subject of in-depth analysis and discussion, the physical aspects of the work undertaken by the students that feature in *An Actor Prepares* are clearly important. All students attend regular classes in gymnastics, dancing, fencing and singing – the chief aim of which is to develop, train and fine tune a controlled and expressive use of the body.

Due to the very public nature of their work – often on vast stages, in front of large audiences, under the glare of powerful lighting etc. – actors are predisposed to extreme forms of tension and, as a consequence, the often detailed and moving work that is undertaken in rehearsal can be severely undermined. It is well known that fear can often have a paralysing effect which locks the body and produces an entirely fixed, almost rigid appearance. The dilemma facing the actor is that of finding a way of dealing with the natural fear and nervousness that accompanies performance, whilst at the same time maintaining a state of complete physical relaxation.

Stanislavski's solution to this problem is to encourage the actor to develop an enhanced degree self awareness. Through a series of repeated and systematic exercises, the actor will develop a capacity for internal observation that will prove invaluable in controlling and eliminating unwanted tension and stress. Such a process must be developed to the extent that, even in the most dramatically exciting or challenging moments of a performance, the instinct to remain relaxed is stronger than the tendency to allow the body to become tense. In order to achieve such a perfected state of relaxation, Stanislavski insists that the 'inner observer/controller' of our muscles must become an innate part of an actor's physical makeup. Such a condition can only be realised when the habit of relaxing

muscles is developed *'daily, constantly, systematically'* so that it proceeds *'while we are going to bed or getting up, dining, walking, working, resting, in moments of joy and of sorrow'*(6). Only through the subconscious management and elimination of physical tension and stress will the actor prevent it from interfering with the instinct to be creative.

In order to begin the process of removing physical tension, it is first of all necessary to become conscious of it. The following exercises are designed to promote a stronger sense of physical awareness and lay the foundations for establishing the internal observation and control that Stanislavski's System demands.

Exercises Promoting Physical Awareness

- Lie in a semi-supine position on a smooth, flat surface (e.g. the floor of the classroom) with the knees upraised so that the soles of the feet, which should be slightly apart, are in full contact with the floor. Try to ensure that the full length of the spinal column is also in contact with the flat surface. Starting first with the toes and gradually moving up through the body to the ankles, calf muscles, knees, pelvis, chest, arms, shoulders, neck, face and head, contract each group of muscles as tightly as you can for a count of ten before releasing them and resuming as full a state of relaxation as possible. This exercise should be done slowly and carefully and close attention paid to the difference between muscles that are tense and those that are relaxed. Try to isolate each group of muscles so that only specific areas of the body are tense at any one time.
- Go through exactly the same process, only this time instead of lying on the floor, walk slowly around a good sized room and examine the effects of muscular tension in different parts of the body. Try to develop a sense of how tension in the ankles, knees, pelvis, back etc. affects the rest of the body. Having completed the process with as many groups of muscles as possible, continue walking around the room with a relaxed and fluid physical demeanour. Where there is tension try to eliminate it so that the body moves as freely and openly as possible.
- Adopt a physical position that involves either crouching on the floor or stretching outwards and upwards and try to locate and release areas of tension. Using your imagination to make sense of different positions will prove enormously beneficial in this exercise. For instance, when crouching try to imagine that you are crawling through a very small, cramped place or when stretching, imagine reaching to catch a ball that has been thrown just out of your reach.

So that you can begin to monitor and check your growing self awareness, it is useful to begin working with a partner who can identify areas of tension in your body that may have gone unnoticed. Using the above exercises, verify with your partner whether or not your muscles really are tense/relaxed/free.

Having completed this stage of the work, the next step is to begin to foster the development of an instinctive ability to identify and remove unwanted physical tension. By promoting increased self reliance and enhanced physical control, the next group of exercises enable the establishment of the internal controlling impulse that Stanislavski describes.

Exercises Promoting Increased Physical Control

- Lift a reasonably heavy object – such as a toolbox, a suitcase or a small table – and, without moving, hold it for a few moments. Take the time to identify those areas of the body where there is tension. Apart from the group of muscles that are being used for the task of lifting and holding the object, every other part of the body should be relaxed. Check that this is the case. Repeat the exercise a second time, only instead of actually lifting the object, *pretend* to do so. Mime lifting the toolbox, suitcase or table etc. Once again check the physicality for areas of tension. Ideally, the same group of muscles used for lifting the first time around will have contracted again. If not, can you make them contract? Remember to check that those areas

of the body not involved in the mimed lifting are relaxed and free.

- Repeat the above process, only this time instead of maintaining a fixed position, begin to move around the space. Once again, find a real reason to be lifting and moving the object, an imagined circumstance of some kind – taking it to a different part of the room, carrying it for a friend etc. As in the case of the first exercise, take the time to scan the body to eliminate unwanted areas of tension. The task is slightly more difficult this time because of the action involved. Nevertheless, don't allow unnecessary tension to creep into the body merely because you are moving. When you are satisfied that only those muscles necessary for performing the task of lifting and moving the object are engaged, go through the process again, only this time perform the actual movement involved, but mime the object you are carrying. Where is the tension? It should be the same as when you were actually carrying the object. Try to eliminate unwanted physical stress and ensure that only the required muscles are contracted.
- Standing in a relaxed position with the feet slightly apart, isolate and move different areas of the body. Lift the upper part of the right leg, for instance, so that the knee is at a ninety degree angle to the torso and hold that position for one minute. Turn the head and neck muscles to the left and hold that position for one minute. In each case, check to ensure that tension is kept to an absolute minimum and that only those muscles that are actually needed for each movement are engaged. Finally, try folding and unfolding the upper body downwards and upwards from the waist checking the extent to which you can isolate the individual joints that make up the vertebrae column. There are actually twenty four in total from the base of the spine to the top of the neck. How many can you pick out?
- During the course of a given day, whilst washing and dressing, on the way to college or work, queuing for lunch in the canteen, reading, watching TV, in the bath or lying in bed, take a few moments to scan the body for areas of tension. Quickly identify and isolate which muscles are actually needed for the task you are undertaking. Where tension occurs in muscles that are not actually in use try to relax and free them.

In order to reach the level of internal awareness that Stanislavski's System requires, it is important to be able to identify the difference between wanted and unwanted tension. Not all forms of tension are destructive. Without the innate capacity to tense and release muscles at will, it would be impossible to undertake even the simplest actions like walking, lifting or carrying. For this reason it is important to ensure that in each of the physical exercises undertaken there is a balance between moments of tension and release. Only then can the actor begin the process of learning to recognise which forms of muscular tension are necessary and which are not.

Equally important, is the need to understand that because a muscle is relaxed it does not mean that it should be slouched. In an ideal state, muscles that are relaxed should also be ready to respond immediately to demands that we place on them. Sluggish or tired muscles are inefficient and do not perform well under stress.

Focus and Concentration

Learning to focus and concentrate in such a way as to become immune to the tendency to be distracted by anything that is extraneous to the world of the play is of the utmost importance to Stanislavski's way of working.

To illustrate the point, *An Actor Prepares* includes an episode in which Torstov relates a Hindu tale of a Maharajah, who in a quest to find the most suitable candidate to undertake the role of minister, announces that the position will be given to the person that can carry a dish filled to the brim with milk around the top of the city walls without spilling a single drop.

After many failed attempts, a man came forward who – despite taunts and abuse from the crowd, threats and gunshots from the army, false fire alarms and terrifying screams – succeeded in completing the task. When asked why he was not distracted by the surrounding commotion, the newly elected minister declared that he heard and saw nothing and that his attention was solely concerned with the need to avoid spilling the milk.

If one considers the artificial environment of a stage space where, in the presence of often large and not always sympathetic audiences, actors are required to reproduce considerable amounts of memorised text, cope with physical tension and nervousness, deal with technical effects such as sound and lighting and handle props that are often far removed from the objects they actually represent, the potential for constant distraction and loss of focus is huge.

When one of his students confronts him with a similar observation, however, Tortsov, with his customary frankness, responds as follows:

> *'You feel powerless in the face of such a task... and yet any simple juggler in a circus would have no hesitation in handling far more complicated things, risking his life as he does it'.* (7)

To begin to overcome the various forms of distraction that an actor is prone to, it is necessary to channel and control concentration in such a way as to ensure that the focus of attention is always directed at the creation of the imagined world of the play rather than the real environment of the theatre/performance space. Needless to say, the imagination, something to which we will return later, has an important role to play here, but without an understanding of how to develop concentration and focus attention in such a way as to release the imaginative impulse, any connection to the imagined world of the play can only ever be tenuous.

In order to start to develop the ability to concentrate on stage, Stanislavski suggests that it is necessary to find a way of dealing

with and managing the actor's awareness of the audience. To help eliminate the risk of becoming overly conscious of the *'black hole'* (8) that represents the auditorium, Stanislavski recommends constructing an invisible wall between the stage space and that of the audience. By directing the actor's attention behind the footlights instead of in front of them, both the instinct to 'show off' as well as the tendency to become overly self-conscious is considerably reduced. As one becomes more accustomed to the use of such a technique it is possible either to place imaginary objects on the 'fourth wall', e.g. a clock, a mirror, a painting, or to extend its boundaries so that the wall becomes a marker for a distant horizon. The important thing is to ensure that direct eye contact with the audience, either in general or with particular individuals, is completely avoided. Instead, actors must work towards the achievement of what Stanislavski referred to as a state of *'solitude in public'*(9) in which concentration and focus are developed to such a degree that instead of experiencing feelings of nervousness and anxiety, the actor begins to tune into the various elements that make up the imagined world of the play – objects, spaces, characters, relationships and so on.

At this point, it is important to note that although Stanislavski's approach certainly aims to reduce the actor's preoccupation with the spectator, there is no attempt to suggest that the performer should ignore the audience entirely. To force or insist on the pretence that one is actually alone is contrary to the *shared* and very *public* nature of theatre art. The notion of achieving a state of 'public solitude' necessarily involves an acknowledgement of the audience's presence and as such embodies an artistic technique that is designed to foster a heightened state of concentration.

Having established the principle of the 'fourth wall', Stanislavski goes on to describe three different levels of concentration that are appropriate to the work of the actor. These *'circles of attention'*, as they are described, offer the means of engaging the imagination and concentration at a level that is appropriate to the needs of particular kinds of dramatic situation.

The first circle of attention encompasses a small clearly defined area, in which the actor is the centre and which may also include a few small objects on a table, for instance, or a nearby desk. By focussing attention on the objects included in this space, which might initially be defined by the use of light, and learning to observe detail in a relaxed and unforced manner the actor can begin to experience what is perhaps the strongest and most sustained sense of 'public solitude'.

The next circle of attention involves using a larger area that includes an increased number of objects, some items of furniture and possibly some people as well. Once again, the actor is placed at the centre of the circle and this time concentration and focus are extended to take account of every detail of the larger space. Rather than attempt to achieve a 'generalised' state of concentration, it is important for the actor to examine small sections of the area in detail before moving on to embrace the circle as a whole.

Finally, there is the third, and most demanding, circle of concentration, which might initially include everything on stage, but can also be extended to include the full auditorium as well – to imply a distant horizon, for instance, or a small vessel on a vast ocean.

Movement between these circles of attention can often prove difficult in that the larger the circle the more likely it is that concentration and focus will dissipate. To circumvent this problem, Stanislavski recommends reducing the size of the circle to that of the first and concentrating on smaller objects before gradually increasing the size of the circle.

By continuing to practice this technique so that the actor becomes comfortable with moving between and adapting to different levels of concentration, the ability to focus at exactly the level that is required by the dramatic moment will be greatly increased. Moreover, the ever present threat of distraction will be kept in abeyance.

Alongside the ability to develop attention in relation to external phenomena, Stanislavski also emphasises the need to develop internal attention, by which he means *'the things we see, hear, touch and feel in imaginary circumstances'* (10). *'The objects of your "inner attention"'*, he asserts, *'are scattered through the range of your five senses'* (11). For Stanislavski, the acting process requires the performer to draw on both material (external) and abstract (internal) sensations. In either case the qualities pertaining to such sensations – size, shape etc. – can be real or imagined and it is necessary for the actor to become adept at moving between the two. In the case of internal attention, there is an added complication in that imaginary objects – due to the mind's tendency to wander – demand an even more disciplined use of focus and concentration than real ones. As in the case of learning to focus and concentrate on the external environment, however, the mind too can be disciplined and trained in such a way as to develop the skill of inner focus.

The following groups of activities and exercises are designed to help develop increased powers of observation, focus and inner concentration:

Exercises to Develop External Focus and Concentration

- Ask a friend to fill a tray with a collection of small items e.g. a ball of string, a teaspoon, an egg cup. Spend a few moments looking at the objects and then remove the tray and try to remember the contents. As you become more skilled at this exercise, begin to increase the level of description for each item so as to include colour, texture and size. Start with observing about twenty objects over a three minute period at first and gradually increase the number to about 30 or 40 whilst simultaneously reducing the amount of time available for observation. The aim of this exercise is to observe and register as much detail as possible. It is important, therefore, to handle and inspect the objects closely and compare the way in which you describe them to that in which they actually appear.

- Ask a friend to arrange twenty different items – e.g. pencils, books, photographs – on a table or a desk. Spend two minutes observing the arrangement before turning away and asking the friend to remove everything. Now replace each item in accordance with exactly the same arrangement as you first observed them.
- Using a blindfold taste different kinds of food. Can you describe the difference between red grapes and white grapes, between a watermelon and a honeydew melon, between a Gala apple and a Granny Smith, between red and white cabbage, between white, plain and dark chocolate?
- Repeat the same exercise only this time instead of tasting foods see if you can identify substances according to their scent, for example foodstuffs, fragrances, flowers, detergents, alcohol.
- Ask a friend to wrap up an item that is unfamiliar to you and of an unusual shape, weight and texture. Using a blindfold unwrap the item and, describe the way it feels. Is it rough or smooth, heavy or light, blunt or sharp?
- Try to identify different sounds that are taking place close to you, but out of sight e.g. drawing, washing a floor, folding paper.

Exercises for the Development of Different Levels of Concentration

- Sit at a table in a large, preferably unfamiliar, room and define three circles of concentration, small, medium and large. Observe and digest the contents of each circle taking in as much detail as possible – colours, shading, texture, and weight. Begin to get a sense of how things appear from a distance as well as close up. After about fifteen minutes leave the room and describe it in as much detail as possible to a colleague. Return to the room with the colleague and compare your description to the observations of your colleague. What details were missing? How accurate was your description?
- Spend no more than one minute observing a friend that is beside you. Look at the colours and texture of the clothing, the physical features and stance, the possessions that they have around them. Turn away and describe what you have observed to a third party who continues to look at your friend. Compare your description to what the third party sees. How accurate are you?
- Repeat the same exercise only this time observe a person that is further away from you – say within the scope of a second or third circle of attention.
- Spend a few moments listening to the sounds that are in your immediate environment – the kitchen, for example, or your bedroom. Enlarge the focus of attention so as to include the sounds that are in the rest of the home. Extend the range further so as to include the noise from the street immediately outside your home. Describe in detail the sounds that take place in each zone of attention. It is often useful to do this exercise with a friend and compare notes afterwards.

Exercises for the Development of Internal Focus and Concentration

- Last thing at night, before going to sleep, spend some time recalling the events of the day. Focus on one activity in particular e.g. a particular train journey, a lecture, a pleasing meal. Try to recall all of the sensory experiences afforded by the event in as much detail as possible. Visualise and recall all of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings involved. For the first few evenings start with small events e.g. an evening meal, before gradually building up to more detailed recollections, e.g. a party or a trip to the seaside.
- Recall a multi-sensory event that took place at some point in the not too distant past – a special Christmas, for instance, or an exciting birthday party – something that

remains fairly vivid in your memory. Begin to flesh out the details of the event in your mind – what made the event enjoyable or special, what colours, sounds, tastes, aromas can you recall?

- Bring to mind a good friend or family member and see if you can build up a strong mental image of this person in an environment that is familiar to both of you. How is s/he dressed? What particular features stand out? What position are they in? What is his or her mood and tone of voice? How vivid a mental impression can you make of your chosen person and the surrounding environment?

Central to the process of developing the ability to concentrate and focus is the need to closely observe the world around us. If an important aspect of an actor's work is to recreate human behaviour and experience, then it is vital to develop the habit of watching and studying the environment in which we live. How human beings respond and relate to each other in moments of joy, conflict, anxiety and stress etc. and the ways in which our physical mannerisms, facial gestures and speech can provide an indication of how we feel internally, offers an important platform on which to build creatively meaningful and artistically rewarding portraits of humanity.

Imagination

It is in the attempt to observe and make creative and artistic use of the events and things that we see around us that the actor's imagination comes into play. *'There is no such thing as actuality on stage'* (12), Stanislavski advises us in the fourth chapter of *An Actor Prepares*. Instead, the actor must develop the ability to transform the fictive world of the play into a *'theatrical reality'* (13). The most important element in this transformative process is the imagination. It is vital, therefore, to ensure that this aspect of an actor's technique is highly cultivated and extremely agile. If the imagination is unable to personalise and own the dramatic

events represented in the play, how can an actor even begin to engage the imagination of the spectator?

For Stanislavski, imagination also includes the realm of fantasy. Unlike the imagined, however, which is based on the possibility that something can be or could happen, fantasy involves the invention of things that have no material existence or which will never take place. For him, both imagination and fantasy are inextricably linked. To highlight this idea, Stanislavski reminds us that whilst the flying carpet is a product of fantasy, aviation or space travel certainly is not. For the dedicated actor it is every bit as important to invest credibility and a sense of truth into a portrayal of the Cowardly Lion that features in Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* as it is for the role of Hamlet in Shakespeare's famous play. Both characters feel isolated, both are capable of great warmth, both have great potential and both lack courage. Each character, of course, is fictitious, but whilst one is very clearly the product of fantasy, the other can quite easily be imagined.

In order to arrive at a creatively satisfying and artistically truthful interpretation of a given role, it is necessary for an actor to pay very close attention to what might at first strike us as insignificant detail. What has happened to the character before the play begins, for instance, or between the scenes in which the character appears? To what extent might outward behaviour confirm or contradict the character's inner feelings? How can the various relationships presented in the play help to shape our understanding of the character's personality? To what degree can the actual lines be used in such a way as to indicate psychological complexity and subtle shifts in temperament or mood?

If an actor is to begin working on a role in this way, then it is important to be able to steer the imagination so as to ensure that it serves our interpretative needs. It is first necessary to retain a strong sense of logic and coherence in the things we try to imagine. Even in moments of fantasy, it is important to ensure that it is possible that one set of given circumstances

can arise from another. *'Always remain in close contact with logic and coherence'*, Tortsov urges his students, otherwise the imagination will *'balk at being asked to work from a doubtful premise to a stupid conclusion.'* (14)

Equally important, is the need to avoid vagueness or generality and work instead to flesh out the specific details of each character, relationship or given set of circumstances.

> *'Suppose you take a journey around the world. You must not think it out "somehow", or "in general", or "approximately", because all those terms do not belong in art. You must do it with all the details proper to such a large undertaking.' (15)*

Moreover, if we can link all of these 'details' into a chain of imagined circumstances that are accompanied by a corresponding series of inner visions, every moment of the play will be illustrated for us in such a way as to stimulate a character's changes in mood or emotional shifts. To make the point clearer, Stanislavski uses the metaphor of film and suggests that the action of the play must become like a moving picture that plays itself out on the screen of the actor's inner vision. It is through this process of internalising the content of the play that the actor begins to personalise the events it depicts.

Whilst such a technique might at first appear rather complicated, the starting point is remarkably straightforward. By recourse to what he refers to as the *'magic if'* (16), Stanislavski points the way to a technique that makes it possible for the imagination to begin to justify almost any given set of circumstances. What if it were a sunny, warm day today instead of a cold dark one? How would my behaviour change? What if it was night instead of day? What if it was the last day of term instead of the first day? What if I was born twenty or thirty or forty years earlier? How might my view of the world shift?

By ensuring that all creative investigations are justified by suppositions of this kind, it becomes possible for the imagination to test out a whole range of interpretative ideas. Even simple

things like chairs and tables can move from functioning as thrones and altars to castles, ships and pyramids.

Closely related to the notion of the *'magic if'*, is the idea of what Stanislavski refers to as the *'given circumstances'*, which describes all the details of the play and the actual style of the production, including the dramatic narrative, the period in which it is set, the location, the events depicted, the design concept, the director's aims and the actor's interpretation. Close attention to this level of detail helps to focus the imagination and enable the actor to make specific and appropriate interpretative choices that are informed by the context in which the play is staged. If the *'magic if'* provides an essential starting point for the imagination, then the *'given circumstances'* help to ensure its continued development.

> *'"If" gives the push to the dormant imagination, whereas the "given circumstances", build the basis for "if" itself. And they both, together and separately, help to create an inner stimulus.' (17)*

When the imagination is simulated to the stage where it becomes possible to establish a truthful and credible connection to the fictional world and life of the character, then it is more likely, Stanislavski suggests, that the actor will be able to convey real emotion and true feeling. Importantly, Stanislavski distinguishes between pursuing an emotion for its own sake and focussing on the *'given circumstances'*. Whereas the largely subconscious nature of emotions makes them difficult to command, the *'given circumstances'*, by means of research and careful observation, are easily accessible. Once an actor has a firm grasp of these and knows how to use them in such a way as to influence a character's outward *behaviour*, Stanislavski believes that the emotional responses will follow quite naturally without the need to force them. For this reason Stanislavski places great emphasis on the need for careful definition in relation to every aspect of the *'given circumstances'*. By advocating the use of the *'magic if'* as a means with which to engage the imagination and the *'given circumstances'* as a way of nourishing it,

Stanislavski believes that it will become entirely possible for the actor to convey a sense of complete transformation both in relation to his/her own physical and inner life as well as that of the surrounding environment.

To help initiate the process of understanding and personalising the play in such a way as to begin to bring about this kind of transformation, Stanislavski recommends organising our thoughts in such a way as to undertake careful reflection on the following six questions – the answers to which can only be found from several extremely close readings of the play and in-depth research into the period and culture in which it is set:

Who am I?	This question relates to the character's age, background, education, influences, likes, dislikes, relationships, habits and personality traits.
When is it?	Is it winter, spring, summer or autumn? What is the year, the month, the time of day?
Where am I?	What is the place that I am in? What surrounds me – furniture, objects, textures and colours? Is this my own environment or does it belong to somebody else?
What do I want?	The answer to this question helps to locate the character's need, desire, or intention. What previous events have brought me to this point?
Why do I want it?	This provides the justification for the thing that the character needs or desires. Such a justification must be strong enough to fuel all of my actions.
How will I get it?	What future actions must I undertake in order to achieve the thing that I want? What must I do?

Of these six questions – *Who? When? Where? What? Why?* and *How?* – Stanislavski urges us to pay particularly close attention to the fifth: *Why?* In attempting to find an answer to this question, the actor is forced to clarify the character's thoughts and make *practical* sense of his or her actions. The emphasis on the need to reach a practical understanding of the character's actions is important, since for Stanislavski, a collection of abstract facts or intellectual concepts is of little value. Rather than use the above questions to embark on an intelligence gathering exercise, the aim is to find ways of connecting all of the discoveries that are made in the imagination which, for the actor, must always be evidenced through action.

Inevitably, the imagination will be more developed in some people than in others and, as a consequence, some actors find it easy to empathise with the fictional lives of dramatic characters. Whatever the individual case, Stanislavski was keen to point out that the imagination, like a physical muscle, can be developed and trained. The following exercises are designed to begin this developmental process and stimulate imaginative responses to material objects as well as ideas:

- Using a painting or an old photograph of someone that is entirely unknown to you, begin to outline an imaginary biography of the person depicted. Examine the picture very closely so as to reach decisions about age, tastes, habits etc. Where was this person born? What did s/he do for a living? Rather than simply guess at the answers to these questions try to piece together the answers by studying the details contained in the picture – the background against which the subject is standing, for instance, often provides important clues! Look at the facial expression, the posture, the hands and feet and the way in which the person is dressed. Having completed this task, give the portrait to a partner and ask them to go through the same process. Compare notes!
- Working in a small group use the '*what if*' technique to transform the appearance and texture of everyday objects.

A screwed up piece of paper, for instance, can become a mouse with a broken leg, a screwdriver can become an ice lolly or a potato a human heart. Try to ensure that in each case the focus is directed at imparting to the actual object the qualities of the imaginary one. Avoid playing out personal responses to what is imagined – it is the object itself rather than what you feel about it that is important.

- Explore the extent to which the use of the *'what if'* technique can change your relationship to different objects. How might your relationship to a particular book, for instance, change if it was a) a long overdue library book, b) recently bequeathed to you by a deceased grandparent, c) an illegal copy of a book that has been banned by the authorities d) a book that you have saved for a long time to buy.
- Recall a recent event in your private life – a party, a holiday, a wedding etc. Starting with small details begin to imagine how things might have been different under changed circumstances. If it were night instead of day, for instance, summer instead of winter, or if certain key participants were missing. How might your own behaviour as well as that of other people have changed? Gradually increase the degree of change so that the event becomes less real than a fantasy. Try to retain a sense of logic and coherence and, wherever possible, find justifications for the adjustments that are made.
- Using a character from a favourite play as your subject, provide detailed answers to all of the six questions given previously. Ensure that each answer is as informative as possible and that it includes information that stimulates your imagination. In order to undertake this task it will be necessary to read the chosen play quite a few times and undertake some research into the period in which it is set.

As has been previously stated, not everyone possesses a vibrant and active imagination. If a performer, however, is to fully realise the artistic potential afforded by the theatre and enable the spectator to share in the many forms of fictional

experience that it makes available, it is essential to pay very careful attention to this aspect of an actor's craft.

A Sense of Truth

One of the great paradoxes of Stanislavski's System is that, whilst it recognises the fictional and highly constructed nature of theatre art, it is predicated on the insistence that everything becomes real in the imagination of the actor. Unlike actuality, imagined truth is based on a series of presumptions and suppositions which become available to us through use of the *'magic if'* and the *'given circumstances'*. Unless the actor can find a way of believing in the character's situation and the world of the play, the performance will lack credibility. In this kind of theatre, it is the actor's ability to make the audience believe in the people and events depicted, that forms the basis for theatrical truth.

At this point it is important to recognise that, for Stanislavski, the notion of 'theatrical truth' is made up of two separate, but closely interwoven elements – *truth* and *belief*. For Stanislavski, *truth* in the theatre represents *'scenic truth'* (18), which is realised when the actor has succeeded in personalising the character, the given circumstances and all of the actions that are pertinent to the play. Once this has been achieved it becomes possible for both the actor and the audience to *believe* in the reality of the internal feelings and sensations that are represented on the stage.

> *'Truth on the stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues. Truth cannot be separated from "belief", nor "belief" from truth. They cannot exist without each other and without both of them it is impossible to live your part, or to create anything.' (19)*

Conversely, Stanislavski reminds us of the need to recognise and maintain an awareness of the fact that theatre is a form of artifice, which requires the audience to suspend disbelief

and invest in the imaginative possibilities it affords. The extent to which an audience is willing to 'conspire' in the creation of a fictional world is entirely dependent on the actor's ability to appear credible and convincing. A sense of what constitutes an *untruthful* or *false* moment of interpretation, therefore, will prove invaluable in helping the actor decide at precisely what level to pitch a given performance – thereby reducing the tendency to overact or indeed to become fixated by certain seemingly 'dramatic' moments at the expense of others.

For Stanislavski, the theatre is at its most effective when it provides us with truthful glimpses into the workings of the human spirit and it is only when this level of representation is achieved that acting can truly be described as an art form. Whilst a depiction of the material environment in which the drama is situated certainly helps to prompt our imaginative processes, ultimately they are of no value beyond providing a framework in which to contemplate and reflect on the human condition. It is not the objects in and of themselves – the furniture, props, costumes, sets etc. – that make an audience believe in the dramatic circumstances, but the quality, nature and scale of the human involvement. If all the other aspects of a production are entirely detailed and realistic, but the actor's portrayal of a given role lacks a sufficient degree of truth and credibility, the performance is destined to prove a failure.

Although Stanislavski encourages the actor to reveal the psychological or 'internal' dimensions of human experience, he is only too aware that such an enterprise is only possible when very close attention is paid to the importance of physical or 'external' behaviour. For him, there is no inner impulse that does not find expression in physical action of some kind – an avoidance of eye contact, perhaps, or a sigh, or even a moment of complete stillness. Rather than approach a role by attempting to stir and reproduce the emotional life of the character, the System emphasises the need to identify a series of physical actions that can be used to lay the foundations for recreating a meaningful and truthful emotional response to each dramatic situation. The choice of which actions to perform must

be justified by the given circumstances, the character's aims and the action of the scene. Each movement or gesture must be sufficiently detailed so as to arouse a strong sense of belief and conviction in the performer. Only when there is a consistent interplay between physical and psychological behaviour is it possible to stimulate the psycho-physical approach that Stanislavski advocates. Whilst it is certainly most important for an actor to have a clear intellectual grasp of a character's inner life – hidden feelings, desires, emotional responses etc. – the most practical way of accessing such experiences is through a clearly defined and carefully selected process of physical actions. The *Method of Physical Actions*, as this approach has become known, provides the most reliable means of ensuring that all forms of emotional expression are spontaneous and organically connected to the dramatic situation that the actor is trying to convey.

To illustrate the effectiveness of this approach *An Actor Prepares* (20) includes a sequence in which Tortsov invites one of his students to mime a series of actions leading up to a particularly tragic moment in a carefully selected improvisation. By insisting, in the first instance, that the actor mimes the scenic action paying very close attention to even the smallest, seemingly imperceptible physical details, the tutor enables the student to identify a detailed *score* on which to base the physical action of the scene. For the student, the results prove something of a revelation:

> *'The moment I was convinced of the truth of my physical actions, I felt perfectly at ease on the stage.' (21)*

In addition to promoting a greater sense of relaxation and ease on the stage, this approach also encouraged the actor to adopt a much more improvisational and organic connection to the work. By ensuring that all of his actions were highly detailed and carefully justified, the student was able to experience greater spontaneity and artistic freedom and as a result the performance appeared much more truthful and 'lifelike'.

With careful analysis, extensive improvisation, and continuous repetition, it is possible to build up a complete score of actions for a given role. By developing a coherent and logical chain of activities in this way, the actor can arrive at a much more informed *practical* understanding of the play and the thoughts and ideas it sets out to convey. Moreover, by promoting an enhanced degree of awareness of the ways in which the physicality acts as an indicator of a character's mental or emotional state, the actor can begin to develop a much more sensitive and expressive use of gesture.

By setting out to consciously justify and create the physical aspects of a given role, Stanislavski maintains that the actor will succeed in stimulating a chain of corresponding subconscious responses. What makes this approach particularly appealing is the way in which it combines intellectual, imaginative, intuitive and physical processes into a cohesive whole.

Closely related to the *Method of Physical Actions* is the idea of *Emotion Memory*, a technique which helps to further motivate and arouse internal feelings and emotions. Essentially, this approach involves a process whereby the actor draws from feelings that have resulted from personal experience and transfers them to the life of the play. Rather than retain emotional experiences in their original detail, Stanislavski maintains, that our memory scatters them through our subconscious so that only a series of remnants and partial impressions remain. With the progression of time, the most vivid of these provide a kind of synthesised memory of once significant and sometimes even painful events.

> *'Time is a splendid filter for our remembered feelings – besides it is a great artist. It not only purifies, it also transmutes even painfully realistic memories into poetry.'* (22)

For the actor, this store of *emotion memories* provides an invaluable reference point that can help to clarify and fine tune the represented feelings of the character.

Whilst this process may certainly involve a high degree of empathy and personal investment on the part of the performer, it is important to stress that it is designed to foster feelings in the actor that are analogous to those of the character rather than replace them entirely. Any attempt to re-create one's own emotional experiences on stage instead of those of the character – which emerge from a specific set of given circumstances, at a particular time and place – amounts to an unnecessary form of indulgence. It is most important, therefore, to make a clear intellectual and physical distinction between learning to draw from personal experience in order to motivate and shape feelings and emotional states that are akin to those of the character, and colonising and replacing such feelings with those of your own.

To begin to be able to work truthfully and with a genuine sense of integrity it is most important to pay very close attention to even the smallest details of each dramatic moment. The following exercises are designed to illustrate the importance of such detail and enable the actor to begin to lay the foundations for future rehearsal/performance practice.

- Using seven or eight consecutive minutes from your own immediate past life as the basis for a constructed 'scene', carefully recreate a series of recently performed activities involving physical action of some kind. This exercise works best when the chosen actions are selected from your daily routine – for example: getting ready for bed, laying a table, tidying a messy room, packing for a holiday. Wherever possible the chosen scene should take place in the same location as that in which the actual events themselves occurred. Pay attention to the order in which events occur, to physical mannerisms, facial expression. Try to recall the thoughts and feelings you were experiencing at the time when these events actually took place. How spontaneously can you reproduce them? Repeat the sequence of events several times until you become familiar with them. Having completed this stage divide the activity into a series of much smaller actions that should be matched to corresponding

inner thought feelings. Repeat each section slowly and carefully at first, before building up the speed to real time. Move through each section in this way until the entire sequence is formed into a *score of physical actions*. When you are satisfied that this is detailed and complete, run the entire sequence again. How accurately have you managed to recreate a realistic sense of the chosen actions? To what extent did your 'scene' feel alive and spontaneous? How far did the sequence of physical actions serve to stimulate inner feelings and thoughts?

- Choose a small extract or scene from a favourite play involving a character that you would like to portray. The extract should be no longer than three or four minutes in duration and should not involve moments of extreme physical action – no murders, suicides or battles etc. Having read the whole play several times and made careful decisions in relation to the biographical detail of the character and the given circumstances of the chosen sequence, begin to mark out a series of physical actions and gestures that you feel begin to evoke what happens in the scene. Such gestures should serve to reveal both the external activity of the scene (i.e. the physical things that the character actually does) as well as the internal impulses that inform or are prompted by them (i.e. the things that the character may be feeling). Ignore the dialogue of the scene at first and use only mimed gestures. The aim is to recreate a vivid and coherent sequence of actions that can later be used as the basis on which to build the content of the scene. When this has been achieved, slowly and carefully introduce the dialogue paying particular attention both to the words themselves and to the ways in which your *score of actions* might influence the way in which they are said – how they are communicated. Once this stage has been completed begin to introduce objects and furniture into the scene so as to begin to create a sense of the 'world' in which the action takes place. How do the details of this world – colours, textures, sounds etc. – influence your mood, temperament or feelings? Are such feelings

analogous to those of the character? If not, what external details can you introduce to the scene in order to bring the feelings you are experiencing to those of the character? When you fully understand what internal feelings the character is experiencing begin to consider whether or not there have been episodes in your own life when you have felt something similar. If so, try to translate these feelings into the life of the character. Run the scene again allowing your own emotional energy to make contact with that of the character. Remember, the aim is to shape and craft the character's emotional responses not replace them with your own. Use your own experience, therefore, in the way an artist uses paint – as a means of creating something new. The colours already exist, but the image is entirely original. Due to the detail involved in this exercise, it is perhaps best to work on a scene involving an exchange between two characters. This means that ideas about the scene can be discussed and improvised and the work of finding props etc. can be shared.

- Once the above exercise has been completed go through exactly the same process with a different extract only this time increase the level of dramatic tension and emotional energy.

Whilst the above exercises may appear painstaking in their attention to detail, it is most important to recognise that – as is the case with every other art form – the most moving and inspiring moments that occur in the theatre do not happen as a result of accident or casual generalisation. If an actor is to have any real success in revealing the highly complex, intricate and often baffling facets of human nature, then it is essential to recognise the need to develop a craft that is capable of absorbing and reflecting even the smallest and seemingly insignificant details that accompany every aspect of human behaviour.

Creating Relationships

Having explored the importance of learning to work in a relaxed, focussed, imaginative and truthful way, it is now time to turn our attention to the need to create credible and appropriate relationships on stage. For Stanislavski, a stage relationship only becomes meaningful when the actors involved in a given scene have mastered the ability to communicate affectively. As with other aspects of the System, the aim here is to reveal the inner workings of the psyche, but unlike some of the techniques described earlier in the chapter, the emphasis on this facet of an actor's work is on the need to change and be changed by the objects and people that are around us.

> *'... without absorbing from others or giving of yourself to others there can be no intercourse on the stage. To give or to receive from an object something, even briefly, constitutes a moment of spiritual intercourse.'* (23)

Whereas in reality communication is based on an entirely spontaneous exchange of verbal and non-verbal signs and signals, many of which are involuntary, the contrived nature of theatre art imparts an added significance to the entire communicative process. It is as if the various processes by which we communicate are placed under a microscope and the audience is invited to look through the lens. Hence, Stanislavski's assertion that *'...if communication between persons is important in real life, it is ten times more so on the stage.'* (24)

In the theatre, of course, one of the primary means of communication is through the spoken word. In an essentially literary and aural medium, spoken language remains the most dominant mode of interaction. No less important for the actor, however, are the various forms of non-verbal communication. These range from physical gestures and facial expressions to variations in the tone, volume and speed of individual utterances. Often communication of this kind can highlight inconsistencies between the things a character is saying and

the things s/he might be thinking or feeling. Through the use of non-verbal communication, or *subtext* as it is known, the actor can find ways of augmenting the meanings that are available in the playwright's words.

Stanislavski identifies two plains on which communication in a play takes place. The first involves direct communication between the actors during the course of dramatic action and the second functions indirectly with the audience who interpret such action and infer meanings from the ways in which it is presented to them. In some instances, it is possible for an actor to have direct contact with the audience – as with some of Brecht's plays, for example, or in the case of pantomime – but such approaches tend to undermine the seamless and unified forms of characterisation that Stanislavski's System favours.

To create genuinely convincing relationships on stage, it is necessary to establish a truthful and spontaneous flow of interaction between yourself and the other performers. Rather than try to build a relationship with imaginary characters or persons, it is important to enter into communication with the real people that are on the stage with you. They embody the 'world' of the play and are the means by which you can both produce and reflect changes in the given circumstances. Through a continuous 'unbroken' exchange of words, thoughts, gestures and feelings it becomes possible not only for the actor to personalise the experiences of the character, but also to share such experiences, indirectly, with the spectator:

> *'When the spectator is present during...an emotional and intellectual change, he is like a witness to a conversation. He has a silent part in their exchange of feelings, and is excited by their experiences. But the spectators in the theatre can understand and indirectly participate in what goes on on the stage only while this intercourse continues among the actors.'* (25)

Once an actor is both intellectually and physically engaged in all of the processes by which real communication takes place – listening, absorbing, imagining, thinking, reflecting,

embodying, speaking – it becomes possible to shape credible and appropriate stage relationships. Needless to say, in embarking on this aspect of rehearsal, it is essential to ensure that the kind of relationship that emerges is closely informed by and pertinent to both the given circumstances of the scene, the demands of the story and the personalities of the characters involved.

Rather than simply wait for a cue and then recite and direct dialogue at other performers, it is vital that an actor learns to interpret meanings behind words, gestures, tone etc. as well as to absorb and reflect the effects of such details in the physical behaviour of the character. Concentration, observation, sensitivity and reciprocity, therefore, are of the utmost importance. No less essential is the need to ensure that every moment of communication on stage is organic and live. Rather than mechanically reproduce what has happened in rehearsal or in previous performances, it is imperative to establish new and 'unbroken' lines of communication for each moment of interaction.

Occasionally, an actor is called upon to communicate with an imaginary object or being – as in the case of Shakespeare's Hamlet when he is confronted by the ghost of his dead father (*Hamlet*: Act I, Sc. 5) or Macbeth, when the figure of the murdered Banquo appears before him (*Macbeth*: Act III, Sc. 4). At such moments it is important to make a distinction between the drive to make both the actor and the audience believe in the tangibility of the ghost and the need to convey an impression of the effects of such a vision on the *behaviour* of the character. In other words, it is the change that occurs in the character's behaviour that should be the focus of the actor's energy rather than the creation of an external imaginary presence. The use of the '*magic if*' will prove invaluable at such moments. 'What would I do if the unhappy and tortured spirit of someone I once loved appeared before me and spoke directly to me?'

Unlike previous exercises, the following tasks are designed to be undertaken with a minimum of one partner. If actors are to

develop the skill of being able to communicate and respond truthfully moment by moment, it is absolutely essential to avoid the temptation to work alone. Ideally, the following exercises should be observed by a colleague, for instance, or a tutor – who can offer feedback and advice on the results produced. Whatever the case, it is very important to discuss each exercise very carefully before and after undertaking it.

- Ask a friend to relate to you the details of a meaningful event that has taken place in his/her life in the fairly recent past. The event should not involve a painful memory or anything that is of an overly personal nature, but it should be of significance. An important interview or audition, perhaps, an episode involving a confrontation of some kind, a tense visit to a hospital or the much dreaded arrival of a letter containing important exam results. Your partner should not play a character or do anything that is forced or superficial. Instead they should simply and clearly relate the details of the chosen event without overtly commenting on it. That is to say that wherever possible phrases such as 'I felt like this' or 'I was really frightened by that' should be avoided. During the course of your colleague's description of the event carefully observe the alterations that occur in his/her physical demeanour. What changes take place in the body, the face, the expression of the eyes? How does the tone, speed and volume of the voice change? Try to make a comparison between the actual words that are used and the speaker's mental (inner) attitude. What discoveries can be made about a) the speaker's public and private feelings b) the nature of the event itself and c) the impact it has had on the person to whom the event happened? When this exercise is completed in front of a group of people it can be revealing to have two or three 'observers' who then compare notes.
- Set up an improvisation involving two participants who are not allowed to speak. Let us say that they are both foreigners who do not share each other's language and have never met. Each has been instructed to meet the

other in a public space – a park, a station or a bank – and to exchange important documents. They both know that they are under surveillance, so it is important to ensure that the documents are handed over to the right person. Gesture should be used sparingly in this exercise so as not to draw too much attention to a potentially dangerous and highly exposing set of given circumstances. How do the individual actors begin a process of communication and in what ways do they begin to test each other out? How does communication change from the beginning to the end – when they are unsure of each other to when they feel confident that the right person has been identified?

- Without the use of spoken language and in the presence of a partner, an individual actor should embark on a fairly complex imaginary physical activity – making a toy model, for instance, or sticking holiday pictures in a photograph album. The activity should be executed with absolute focus and total clarity. When the partner has fully understood the action that is taking place, s/he should join in the activity and help to complete the task. Once the partner has become part of this exercise it should be sustained for as long as possible in order to observe the silent communicative process that takes place between both participants. How do they interact with each other? How do we know when agreement has been reached or when one participant is confused?
- Set up an improvisation involving three people that have never met or spoken before. It is late at night and dark in the hospital and all of the patients are tired. One of the participants has an operation the following morning and is rather nervous. Another is hoping to be discharged the following day and the third has just been admitted for observation. The participants shouldn't enter the improvisation with any specific aims or objectives that are extraneous to the situation described above. Instead each participant should listen and respond to the other two in such a way as to establish believable and meaningful

relationships. It is the quality of communication that is important rather than the need to create a fictitious character. This exercise works particularly well in a shaded/dark room where the features of each actor can only just be made out. How easy or difficult is it to establish a continuous 'unbroken' line of communication?

- Working as a pair, set up an improvisation in which a conversation takes place between participants in different spaces. Where one person is downstairs and one is upstairs, for instance, or where one person is in the bathroom and the other is in a bedroom. The topic of conversation should not be overly intense, but it shouldn't be trivial either. The actual details need to be carefully discussed and agreed beforehand. It might prove revealing, for example, to discuss whether or not to go to a party – one person is really keen and the other would rather give it a miss. Alternatively, the discussion might be centred on the possibility of moving to a different part of the country – one of the participants has been offered a new job and is very excited, but the other is very anxious and not at all convinced that it is a good idea. Tune into your partner's tone of voice, vocal quality and pauses. How easy is it to interpret your partner's mood and feelings from the things that are said? At what points did your partner sound anxious, angry, disillusioned?
- Using the same or similar scenarios, repeat the same exercise as above only on this occasion try to conceal your real feelings about the situation from your partner. Your feelings about the topic of conversation shouldn't change, but you don't particularly want to draw attention to them and you certainly don't want your partner to gain easy access to your actual thoughts. How does this exercise compare to the previous one? What observations can be made about the physical and vocal life of each scene? What adjustments need to be made when attempting to conceal one's feelings from those around us?
- Repeat both of the above exercises but instead of being located in separate spaces, imagine that both of you are in

the same room. Let your use of gesture, eye contact (or the lack of it), facial expression, pause and vocal tone reflect meaning and reveal inner thought processes. How does the improvisation change when you can see each other? How much more difficult is it to hide one's real feelings or to endorse those of your partner? How easy is it to interpret your partner's feelings? In what ways do the feelings of your partner become physically manifest?

In order to become skilled communicators, it is important for actors to develop each of their five senses in such a way as to become alert to and tune into every aspect of human communication. With clear objectives, a well defined inner life and the ability to sustain focus and concentration, a performer can '*grasp*'(26) each vibrant moment of the play and in so doing seize and captivate the attention of the spectator.

Units, Objectives and Adaptations

In order to begin working on a play, it is first of all necessary for an actor to ensure that every aspect of it is fully understood. What is the narrative of the drama trying to convey to us? Why do the characters behave in the way that they do? What causes conflict in the play and how is it resolved? In what ways do unforeseen circumstances shape the actions of the characters? How does individual behaviour influence the experiences of the community? Without being able to offer accurate and detailed answers to these and other questions about the play, any interpretative work that is undertaken is destined to be the product of generalised and often highly inaccurate speculation. To begin to do justice to some of the complex situations presented by the dramatist, it is vital to be able to discuss and analyse the play from a variety of different perspectives.

Notwithstanding this observation, it is also important to recognise that, for actors, the task of researching a play does not mean preparing to write an essay or give a seminar presentation.

Rather than serve essentially theoretical aspirations, an actor's preparation for a role must ultimately be directed at the artistic aims for which the play was originally conceived. In other words, actors need to *perform* in the plays they study and it is important, therefore, to ensure that the methods used for undertaking research are suited to this *practical* outcome.

It was with this precise aim in mind that Stanislavski developed his technique of dividing the play into small 'units of action'. Just as we wouldn't attempt to consume an entire meal in one mouthful, preferring instead to cut each portion into smaller morsels that are then flavoured and slowly chewed and digested, so we shouldn't seek to 'devour' a whole play at a single reading. To fully appreciate all of the subtleties and variations that the play makes available, it is necessary to break it into smaller 'segments' that are then examined in close detail through discussion *and* action. Generally speaking, an actor's 'units of action', do not always coincide with the scenic divisions that may have been used by the playwright. Instead, each scene is divided into a series of smaller individual components. Each component encapsulates a 'unit of action' and starts and begins whenever the action is changed or altered in some way. For instance, in a scene involving two characters locked in an intimate discussion, a change in the topic of conversation, the departure of one character, the arrival of a new one, or a sudden shift in the given circumstances will generally mark the end of one component and the beginning of another.

By going through each scene and dividing it into 'units of action' in this way, a performer can begin to acquire a strong practical sense of the overall structure of the play. In order to prevent the possibility of becoming overloaded with too many units or with too much unhelpful detail, it will prove beneficial to pick out some of the drama's key components along the way. Perhaps the best way of doing this is to locate the foundation on which the play is established – the thing without which it would not exist. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for example, we can say that without the determination of the two central characters to become Scotland's rulers and the horrific acts of murder that

are instigated in order for them to achieve and then to retain their hold on power, much of what else happens in the play would prove nonsensical. By comparing the work of an actor to that of an airline pilot that determines his route through a series of unmistakable landmarks, Stanislavski emphasises the need for economy:

> *'So an actor must proceed, not by a multitude of details, but by those important units which, like signals, mark his channel and keep him in the right creative line.'* (27)

Having identified a series of 'units', it is then useful to label each one in such a way as to begin to trace an outline of the developing action. This process is invaluable in that if it is done with sensitivity and care it can reveal objectives for each of the characters that appear in the scene – not all of which will be the same!

It is this particular feature of the uniting process that imparts one of the most dynamic and creative elements to an actor's interpretation of the dramatic action. By choosing and playing out *objectives* that are coherent with the movement of each scene, the given circumstances and the characters relationships, the actor will begin to reveal the multifarious meanings – both internal and external – that the play makes available.

The term *objective* is used to describe the things that the character desires, needs or strives to achieve. It provides the justification for all of the character's physical actions and in so doing locates both psychological and emotional needs. Although it is customary to speak of objectives in physical terms, it is most important to recognise that both the psychological and physical dimensions of a character's desires are inextricably linked. In choosing a character's objective, therefore, it is important to bear in mind the degree to which it reflects both the inner and outer needs.

Whereas it is perfectly acceptable to use a noun when labelling a unit – e.g. *The Arrival* or *The Discovery* – it is important to use an active verb when identifying which objective to play

in a given scene. This helps to animate dramatic action and drive the play forward. To ensure that each objective is as dynamic and attractive to the actor as possible, it is helpful to ask 'What do I want?' The answer to this question needs to be as precise as possible if it is to stimulate the imagination in such a way as to initiate action of some kind. Hence whilst an answer such as *'I want her to stay'* might offer a somewhat vague indication of a character's need, the statement *'I want to make her change her mind! I want to make her understand how much I love her! I want to let her see how guilty I have been feeling and how much I regret my actions; I want to urge her to give our relationship another chance'* helps to provoke the imagination in a much more urgent and compelling way. In addition, therefore, to identifying what it is that a character wants during a given sequence, it can also help to sharpen the objective if a response is found to the additional question: 'What do I need *to do* in order to get the thing that I want?' The emphasis on the need *to do* something is important, since acting necessarily involves action of some kind.

To guide the actor in arriving at appropriate and playable objectives, Stanislavski provides the following criteria that can be used as a means of assessing the efficacy of the creative choices that are made:

1. The actor must ensure that the objective is directed at the other actor(s) in the scene rather than at the audience.
2. The objective must draw from the actor's own personal experience – his/her emotion memory whilst at the same time being analogous to the experiences of the character.
3. The objective must be the product of creative and artistic investigation. It must provide the basis for offering a profound insight into human behaviour.
4. Every objective must be based in real human experience rather than drawn from cliché or tired theatrical convention.

5. The choice of objective must have a strong sense of integrity and truth so that both the spectator and the other actors in the scene can believe in it.
6. The actor must be attracted to the objective – it must prove stimulating and exciting to the individual actor and provoke the imagination.
7. The choice of objective must be extremely detailed and appropriate to the personality of the character, the given circumstances and the socio-historic environment in which the play is situated.
8. The objective must be connected to the inner life of the character. It must be meaningful and have the potential to reflect complex psychological impulses.
9. The objective must be dynamic and forward moving. It must serve to advance the action of the play.

Although this list might initially strike us being somewhat demanding or unnecessarily detailed, a careful consideration of each point will prove invaluable in enabling an actor to make informed, creative choices that will serve to empower and enrich the rehearsal process.

Having carefully united the play and selected appropriate and playable objectives for the character, the next stage is to begin to experiment with different ways of achieving the desired objective. What changes need to be made – to the tone of voice, the expression in the eyes, to the way in which the text is delivered? If the objective is to be fully realised, then it will necessitate a series of adjustments in the character's behaviour. These adjustments, or *'adaptations'*(28) as Stanislavski refers to them, are the means that an actor uses in order to realise the character's objectives.

Although there is a tendency in modern teaching/rehearsal practice to replace the word *adaptation* with *activity*, *action* or *tactic*, it is important, at the outset, to recognise that none of these words accurately capture the numerous ideas that Stanislavski attributes to the concept of *adaptation*. For the

purposes of the present discussion, therefore, the original Stanislavski term will be used. Although the meanings of the other words are far from interchangeable with Stanislavski's, everything that pertains to the term *adaptation* can be applied in more or less equal measure to any of the alternative ways of describing the general concept.

For Stanislavski, the term *adaptation* is used to describe *'the inner and outer human means that people use in adjusting themselves to one another in a variety of relationships and also as an aid in affecting an object.'* (29) Whilst in many circumstances adaptations are employed as a means of enabling the achievement of chosen objectives, they can also be used to draw attention to inner feelings, alter the mood of a partner, change the atmosphere in a given scene, or even to express unspoken thoughts and impulses. The most important feature of this aspect of the System is that it insists on the need for the actor to adjust his/her behaviour on stage in such a way as to remain extremely sensitive to all of the other elements that make up the scene. In much the same way that our behaviour in real life is shaped by an awareness of those around us – how they feel about certain things, their personality traits, their moods – so too should an actor's behaviour be similarly influenced when creating convincing stage relationships. Indeed rather than assume that instinctive adjustments in behaviour can be taken for granted, an actor needs to become acutely aware of their affect in order to maximise on the creative opportunities that such changes can afford.

> *'If people in ordinary walks of life need and make use of a large variety of adaptations, actors need a correspondingly greater number because we must be constantly in contact with one another and therefore incessantly adjusting ourselves.'* (30)

The choice of which *adaptation* to use at a given point is determined by all of the surrounding circumstances, the personalities, moods and interests of the other people in the scene, and the character's own disposition. For this reason

it is necessary to experiment with many different *adaptations* before selecting which are best suited both to the choice of objective and the nature of the scenic relationship.

Let us assume, for instance, that an actor, having undertaken a close analysis of a scene and divided it into units of action, has chosen to play the following scenic objective:

'I want to make her change her mind! I want to make her understand how much I love her! I want to let her see how guilty I have been feeling and how much I regret my actions; I want to urge her to give our relationship another chance'

If I am to achieve my *objective* I need to bring about a change in the way my partner is feeling and behaving towards me. In order to do this I might begin by exploring any of the following as the basis for an *adaptation*.

- I will make my partner feel sorry for me.
- I will make her feel guilty about the apparent ease with which she can simply abandon our relationship.
- I will remind her of all the good times we have had together and how fantastically well suited we are.
- I will warn her of the consequences if she does leave and make it clear to her that she can never ever come back.

When working with and experimenting with *adaptations,* it is important to ensure that they engage the actor physically so that the scene remains 'spontaneous' and 'active' rather than merely intellectual. If we were to reduce each of the above *adaptations* to a sequence of single words, we would arrive at something like SORROWFUL, GUILTY, SENTIMENTAL and CAUTIOUS. In order to produce such different feelings in my partner, it is necessary to make very significant adjustments in my behaviour. Moreover, if my partner is to believe in the things I am saying and doing it is imperative that they also reflect my inner thoughts and feelings.

Whilst the use of *adaptation* adds variety and dynamism to stage relationships, it is important to ensure that they are played in such a way as to enable the achievement of the desired objective rather than simply for their own sake. Their function is to aid the development of dramatic action in a way that is entirely coherent with the nature of each relationship, the given circumstances and the logic that informs the play itself.

If the practice of *uniting* enables the actor to understand the overall structure of a play and identifying *objectives* and *adaptations* provides a framework in which to translate this understanding into dramatic action, then the function of *super-objective* is to give resonance and meaning to all of the processes that an actor undertakes in creating a role. All of the imaginative insights, the individual traits and feelings that make up the personality of the character, the choice of objectives and tactics, the relationships both to events and other characters, must all converge so as to realise what Stanislavski refers to as *'the super-objective of the plot.'* (31)

Generally speaking the term *super-objective* is used to describe and encapsulate the essence of what we feel the play is about – the catalyst or impetus which animates the action and gives the play its driving force. The right choice of *super-objective* serves to focus all of the creative energy that is directed at the play and allows both the director and the performers to trace a logical and coherent through line for the drama as it unfolds. Without this essential cohesive element the finished product is in danger of appearing disparate and inconsistent.

Alongside the need to identify a *super-objective* for the drama as a whole, it is also enormously beneficial to choose one for each character in the play. Aside from helping to enhance the degree of consistency and logic in relation to an individual actor's interpretative choices, such a procedure highlights significant moments of tension and areas of conflict – a feature that is essential to all good drama! However, in making decisions about which *super-objectives* to use for individual characters, it is most important not to undermine the integrity of the one

which has been chosen to represent the artistic endeavours of the entire company.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, making good decisions in relation to *super-objectives* is far from easy. For this reason it is often best to delay making a choice until all of the actors and the director feel they have reached the stage at which they are extremely familiar with the play and with the different relationships and situations that it presents. At least when this stage has been reached it is possible to explore a wide range of opinion and insight that has been gleaned from the *practical* investigations that have taken place during the course of rehearsal.

Although, in the previous quotation, Stanislavski's use of the word '*plot*' might encourage the belief that the *super-objective* must be derived from the playwright's intentions, it is not unusual in more contemporary practice to relocate the rationale informing the choice of a *super-objective* so as to reflect the interpretative vision of the director, for instance, or even the artistic aims of a particular ensemble. Ultimately, whatever guiding principle is used to determine the choice of a play's *super-objective*, the important thing is to ensure that it imparts a strong sense of cohesiveness, logic and consistency in relation to all of the elements that contribute to the ongoing development of the dramatic action.

In order to develop the ability to unit a play and identify appropriate and playable objectives, it will prove rewarding to undertake some of the following exercises:

- Select a two or three hour period in your recent past in which you were engaged in a series of activities that were directed towards a specific goal. In preparation for a party, for instance, you might have washed your hair, ironed your clothes and wrapped a present. Having identified such an event write down all the details – everything you did, felt and thought during the period in question. When you have completed this task try to imagine that this episode in your life formed part of a scene in a play. Now go through the scene carefully and divide it into *units of action*. How many units have you identified? What name would you give to each unit?
- Working with a partner, select a small extract from a play that you know well and featuring characters with which you are both familiar. See if you can pick out individual *units of action* in the chosen extract. The focus on this exercise should be on the development of the story – the relationships and events that it depicts rather than the inner feelings of the character. Give each unit a title and try to ensure that each title captures the essence of the unit in question.
- Having completed this stage, revisit the units to try and identify individual objectives for each character. What does each character want in the scene? Try to keep the objectives simple to start with and focus only on what the character *wants* or *needs* in the given extract.
- When each of you have identified what each character wants from the given scene, try to express each objective in the form of a statement of some kind. Use Stanislavski's list of criteria as a guide and ensure that all of the requirements are met. Compare your statement with that of your partner – is there a conflict of some kind?
- The next stage is to identify what needs to be done in order to achieve the chosen objective. What *adaptations* might need to be introduced to the scene? It will be helpful to make as full a list of *adaptations* as possible at this stage so that when it comes to rehearsing the scene you will have lots of ideas to experiment with.
- Now begin rehearsing the scene with a partner and start to test out both of your ideas and a range of different *adaptations* in order to realise your objectives.
- Finally, when both of you feel that you know the play well and have a sense of the way in which all of the events serve to make up the essence of the play as a whole try to formulate at least three possible *super-objectives* that

could be used as a basis for rehearsal. Which one is best and why?

There is no doubt that taking the trouble to work on a play in this way produces enormous benefits and allows an actor to adopt an extremely detailed and imaginative approach to rehearsal. Initially, identifying *units of action*, *objectives*, *adaptations* and *super-objectives* can seem quite daunting, but with patience, dedication, practice and careful guidance it can become a natural and indispensable part of an actor's creative process.

A Sense of Transformation

If an actor is to achieve a genuinely convincing vocal and physical transformation, then it is necessary to begin to find ways of producing changes in one's own natural tempo and rhythm. It is often the case that inexperienced actors will become disillusioned when, despite all of their best efforts in every other aspect of the creative work that has been undertaken, they are unable to *feel* like the character. This absence of a complete sense of transformation is often due to a failure to understand the need to adjust the tempo-rhythms of the performer to those of the character. Consequently, all of their movements and action, the speed and quality of the voice and their inner responses remain unchanged, thereby producing a feeling of frustration and unease.

In all of the activities we undertake on a daily basis, whether travelling to work, relaxing in the bath, or taking exercise there are constant changes in our tempo-rhythm. Even in those moments when we appear to be absolutely still – as in prayer, or when we are locked in deep thought, for instance – there are constant variations in the speed and intensity of our thoughts and movements.

Stanislavski defines *tempo* as the speed or slowness of our movements and *rhythm* as the force and intensity behind them. Importantly, when thinking about producing variations in

tempo-rhythm, it is essential not to lose sight of the extent to which such changes affect our inner lives.

> *'In a word tempo-rhythm carries with itself not only external qualities which directly affect our natures, but also our inner content which nourishes our feelings. In this guise tempo-rhythm remains in our memories and may be used for creative purposes.' (32)*

If we bring to mind the experience of having witnessed a funeral, for instance, or being involved in an emergency of some kind, we will instantly recall and tune into startling differences in the *tempo-rhythm* of each event. Similarly if we listen to and compare different kinds of music – for example, rock music, and an operatic aria – we will experience differences in the speed, variation and intensity of each piece. The same can also be said about the things that we see and feel; a calm sea or a powerful thunder storm will produce different *tempo-rhythms* to those of a road accident or a gentle, warm breeze. In all of these instances, the physical changes we experience are matched by alterations in mood or emotional energy. How many of us feel gladdened by the arrival of summer, for example, or experience anxiety during the long dark evenings of winter?

Just as external influences produce changes in our physical behaviour, so too do the things we experience and feel internally. By stimulating our visual memories to bring past images to life it is possible to completely alter both the way we behave and the emotions we experience.

> *'Listen to how your emotions tremble, throb, race, are stirred inside you. In these invisible movements lie hidden all manner of rapid and slow beats… Every human passion, every state of being, every experience has its tempo-rhythms. Every characteristic inner or outer external image has its own tempo-rhythm.' (33)*

In order to produce a convincing transformation into the life of the character, an actor needs to be able to locate the variations in *tempo-rhythm* that occur through each stage of the play.

Alongside a careful consideration of the given circumstances, the character's personality traits, the nature of each relationship and the objectives and adaptations the actor has chosen to play, an examination of those moments involving conflict or struggle of some kind will help the actor to tune into different patterns of physical and emotional behaviour. How does my *tempo-rhythm* change when I am in physical danger, or when I am confronting a much feared enemy, or betraying a friend?

An understanding of *tempo-rhythm* can help the actor bridge the gap between the inner and outer realms of experience. Often, the source of conflict is located not in other people and events but in the character him/herself. Macbeth's growing paranoia and furious temper, for instance, spring more from his own sense of guilt and 'attacks' of conscience than from any external source. It can be helpful, therefore, when working on physical *tempo-rhythm* to explore the extent to which the outward behaviour runs counter to what the character feels or desires internally.

In the same way that changes in *tempo-rhythm* affect the way we move, they also produce changes in the way that we speak – the words that we use, the way in which we phrase things, even the sounds of the words themselves. Indeed, in spoken language, it is the structure and arrangements of the sounds and syllables that help to convey an additional layer of meaning. In other words, it isn't just what we say that is important, but also how we say it!

If the speed at which we speak marks the *tempo* of our utterances, the manner in which we punctuate the things we say – how often we pause, the emphasis we give at certain points and the adjustments in tone and volume – imparts a sense of *rhythm* to the things we say. In accordance with alterations in situation and circumstance, both of these things can change considerably. Notice, for instance, the way in which the *tempo-rhythm* of a TV news presenter's speech will change when relaying news of a grave and serious nature as opposed

to something of a more light hearted vein that typically appears towards the end of the programme.

Whereas the use of verse and carefully chosen imagery in a play can make it much easier for an actor to tune into the changes and shifts that occur in spoken language, the same is not true of prose. This isn't to claim, however, that a play written in prose lacks *tempo-rhythm*; on the contrary the reverse is true:

> *'There is tempo-rhythm in prose as well as in poetry and music. But in ordinary speech it is accidental. In prose the tempo-rhythm is mixed: one phrase will be spoken in one rhythm, the next in an entirely different one. One phrase will be long, another short, and each will have its own particular rhythm.' (34)*

By alternating patterns of stressed and unstressed vowels and consonants and learning to vary the speed and quality with which the words themselves are delivered, an actor can produce very significant shifts and alterations in the *tempo-rhythm* of a character's speech.

As with *tempo-rhythm* of movement, such changes prompt a whole series of internal responses that can serve to connect the actor to the inner feelings and emotional experiences of the character. Like movement, the *tempo-rhythms* produced by speech can have a profound affect on the way we feel internally. The realisation that millions of theatre-goers all over the world are regularly moved and delighted at performances of plays that are in languages that they do not understand bears testimony to this fact. In such instances, it can't be the words and speeches in and of themselves that have affected the audience, but rather the ability of the performers to locate and give expression to the constantly shifting *tempo-rhythms* of the linguistic exchanges.

In order to become sensitised to all of the possibilities that speech affords the actor, it is necessary to pay careful attention to words. The thoughts and images they can evoke, the sounds

they make individually and when grouped together, the powers they have to provoke both physical and silent responses in the listener, their ability to express the way we feel and make ourselves understood. In most instances, words come to the actor in the form of a written script, so an actor needs to acquire the additional skill of learning to read and make sense of punctuation. Aside from guiding the reader, and by implication the listener as to the meaning of the words that appear in the text, punctuation can also offer an indication of how to interpret the words – where to pause or hesitate, whether to speak in short, fast bursts or long, ponderous ones, or whether to stress a key point or skip over it.

In both *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character,* all of the students that attend Tortsov's acting classes also take part in regular movement and voice sessions. The chief function of these is to develop discipline, muscularity, sensitivity and expressiveness in both the voice and the body. If an actor is to become acutely aware of how to tune into and change the *tempo-rhythm* of both voice and movement, it will be necessary to attend regular classes with specialised tutors over a sustained period of time. Indeed, many actors never reach the stage where they feel ready to give up voice and movement classes, preferring instead to continue to perfect their ability to convey even the most subtle aspects of human behaviour with ever increasing precision and clarity.

In order to begin the process of becoming sensitive to changes in *tempo-rhythm*, it will prove rewarding to take part in the following exercises:

- Select two pieces of contrasting music. Listen to each one in turn and begin to feel the ways in which it affects your *tempo-rhythm*. Rather than become fixated by the music, it is often a good idea to listen to it when you are physically involved in performing another task – e.g. doing the washing up or cooking a meal. Try not to become too self-conscious, instead relax and let the music affect you. In what ways does the music influence the speed and intensity of your movements? What physical and internal changes do you notice in the way that each piece of music affects you?

- Develop the above exercise in such a way as to find a justification for your movements. If the music increases and lightens your *tempo-rhythm*, give yourself a justification for this change. For instance, imagine you have organised a surprise birthday party for a loved one. The house is full of guests and you have just heard that s/he is at the end of the road and will arrive in one minute.
- Repeat the above exercise finding justifications for a whole range of shifts in inner and outer *tempo-rhythm*.
- Closely observe somebody whom you believe to embody a very different *tempo-rhythm* to your own – either much faster and lighter or much slower and heavier or any combination of these. See if you can absorb a similar *tempo-rhythm* yourself whilst finding an inner justification for the change. Maintain the new *tempo-rhythm* whilst performing a series of different tasks e.g. eating, shaving, walking to work. What changes do you notice both internally and externally?
- Sitting or lying down in a comfortable position, try to picture yourself in a series of different environments. You might, for example, imagine that you are in the middle of a long overdue confrontation with someone who has continuously abused you. Alternatively, you might imagine going on a first date with someone that you have admired from a distance, but have been too afraid to approach. Try to be as creative as possible in the choice of situation and ensure that each one is different. Following each situation, spend a few moments analysing both your inner and outer *tempo-rhythm*. What changes can you detect in your breathing, or pulse rate? Has your mood or emotional energy changed?
- Examine an extract from a novel that you know well. Pay close attention to all of the punctuation and mark any particular shifts in emphasis or mood. Invite a friend to

listen whilst you read the extract aloud. How well have you communicated the content of the extract? Repeat the reading a second time only on this occasion rearrange the speed and intensity of your delivery in such a way as to alter the *tempo-rhythm* of the extract without losing the general sense of what is being communicated. How difficult did you find this task? How would you begin to describe the changes in each of the readings? In what ways did these changes alter or affect the way in which your partner listened to the extract?

- Repeat the same exercise, except on this occasion select an extract that contains a great deal of complicated or technical information that you do not understand. If you feel particularly confident about your ability to pronounce unfamiliar words or phrases, choose an extract from a foreign newspaper. Go through exactly the same process as the previous exercise. In what ways did your changes in *tempo-rhythm* serve to convey different meanings to the extract? Did they produce alterations in the way that either the listener or yourself related to the text?
- Working with a partner, choose a short extract from a play that alternates a series of four or five brief exchanges. Having made some decisions about the relationship and the given circumstances begin to read and re-read the text to each other whilst changing the speed and pattern of stresses in each line. Try to find an inner justification for each change. How many variations can you come up with? What are the effects of these – on the individual and the relationship?
- Repeat the above exercise with music playing in the background. It is important to let the music establish itself and affect you before starting to read the scene. What changes occur if the music is played gently, loudly or if it is changed completely? Try to combine shifts in the *tempo-rhythm* of speech with simultaneous changes in the body as a whole. What happens if the scene is performed whilst dancing to loud music in a park or when hearing

distant music whilst locked in a dark and extremely small cupboard?

When working on a play it is possible to experiment with limitless combinations and arrangements of tempo and rhythm. The important thing is to ensure that whatever combinations are finally chosen, they produce transformations that will ultimately enable the actor to make sense of the play's action and give clear and unambiguous expression to the ideas it embodies.

Conclusion

In light of all of the elements that have been examined in the preceding discussion, it would seem reasonable to claim that in developing his System for actors, Stanislavski succeeded in making a hugely significant contribution not just to our understanding of the actor's creative process, but also to the nature of theatre art in general.

Whereas previous generations of actors were expected to learn their craft from observing and imitating more experienced and often less accomplished performers, actors of today are afforded the comparative luxury of being able to experiment with and test out all of the techniques Stanislavski makes available in the relative safety of a classroom or rehearsal studio before being exposed to an audience. In providing the means for the actor to become self-consciously aware of the creative processes by which dramatic characters and relationships are created, the System has enabled actors to elevate their craft from that of a hackneyed collection of vaudevillian clichés into a detailed and highly fascinating art form.

Although, during the course of the discussion, each element of the System has been analysed separately and in close detail, it is important to bear in mind that the efficacy of the approach that Stanislavski advocates hinges on the mutual dependence and interplay between each of the various components. The System is entirely holistic and any attempt to fragment the

ideas it expresses into discrete entities will greatly diminish its impact.

Of equal importance is the need to recognise that far from bringing his System to a stage of 'completeness' or 'closure', Stanislavski continued experimenting with new ideas until the end of his life. The highly organic and 'live' nature of the techniques that he developed, draw their dynamism and potency from their ability to enable the actor to reflect human behaviour in all of its various guises. To attempt to suggest, therefore, that the System embodies a fully formed and complete methodology ignores the fact that human behaviour is in a constant state of flux. Indeed, one of the greatest advantages that Stanislavski's approach affords actors is its ability to constantly adapt and measure the affects it produces against the world it seeks to represent.

Whilst it is certainly true that the principles on which the System is based are predicated on certain assumptions about human experience – that character is knowable and can be clearly defined, that personality is stable, that experience is linear and that ideas about the relationship between inner and outer experience are shared across different nationalities and cultures – this is no reason to cast doubt on its efficacy.

Notwithstanding the tenets of postmodernism and its rejection of the notion of a stable and knowable universe, one of the consequences of the way in which language shapes our experience of the world and our ability to engage with it, is its tendency to produce an undeniable sense of unity and order. Whatever form our intellectual deliberations about the nature of memory, habit, psychology and identity may take, our practical and daily experience of these aspects of human nature are likely, for the foreseeable future at least, to remain somewhat similar to those described by Stanislavski. It seems entirely appropriate, therefore, for actors and directors alike to continue to explore, test out, adapt and reformulate one of the most profoundly influential systems of artistic representation ever to have been produced.

Discussion Points

- Recall a play that you have seen recently. With reference to some of the techniques described above, begin to offer an account of the actors' performances. Which aspects stood out as being particularly strong or convincing and which were less satisfying?
- Stanislavski's approach to acting is predicated on the belief that it is possible to describe and predict human behaviour in close detail. Do you agree that this is the case? What evidence would you use to support your argument?
- To what extent does Stanislavski's approach make it possible for an actor to become aware of the quality of his/her own acting? How far does the 'System' serve to empower those who adopt the principles it advocates?
- Would you say that Stanislavski's System is equally well suited to both theatre and film? What evidence can you draw on to support your point of view?
- Many theatre practitioners have argued that rather than use the stage as a mirror on which to reflect our daily lives, or to confirm the things that we already know about ourselves, it should be used as a means of provoking change or highlighting, as yet, unrealised potential. Do you agree with this view? What arguments can you use to support your point of view?
- Do you believe that the techniques originally pioneered by Stanislavski are as relevant today as they were when they were initially conceived? What evidence can you draw on to support your views?

Bibliography and Further Reading

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Notes and References

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