

# More than ‘Dead Pet Acting’: Legacies of Stanislavsky

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It is easy to misunderstand Konstantin Stanislavsky.<sup>1</sup> He is reviled by the left, champions of Brecht, for his bourgeois humanism; ignored by the post-structuralists, champions of Artaud, for his arch-modernism; claimed by the psychoanalysts of the Actors Studio as the inventor of the Method. His achievements are rendered as a unified, completed corpus—a *theory*—characterized in uncomplicated opposition to the equally unproblematized “theory” of his compatriot, collaborator and friend, Vsevolod Meyerhold. Meyerhold’s topography of the actor, goes the story, followed the logic of the (William) Jamesian schema (famously: “I saw the bear, I ran, I felt afraid”) to produce an “outside-in”, “physical” theory of acting. Stanislavsky, in contrast, worked from the inside out, producing a “psychological” theory of acting; the theory that, notwithstanding the political/formalist diversions of Brecht, won out in the grand narrative of theatre history.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Stanislavsky only reluctantly committed his work to the page. His first book, the autobiographical *My Life in Art*, was published in 1924 in response to the success of his company’s American tours of 1923 and 1924; the second, *An Actor Prepares*, was written as the first of what Stanislavsky expected to be a seven book *magnum opus*, and published posthumously in 1936. The other English-language publications bearing his name—*Building a Character* and *Creating a Role*<sup>3</sup>—are better read as collections of drafts and notes, rather than the explication of a single model.

For Stanislavsky was first and foremost a *practitioner*; a man of the stage. Meyerhold wrote of his regard for “the great master”, “standing head and shoulder above the hurly-burly . . . gallic by nature . . . wielding his rapier like a master, with a tirelessly supple body . . . born for the theatre of extravagant grotesque and enthralling tragedy . . . [a] lover of cloak-and-sword drama.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed Stanislavsky’s work is best understood less as a dis-

crete, coherent, positive achievement—a *theory*—than what, two millennia before, the “enlightened Lesbonax of Myteline” called “manual philosophy”.<sup>5</sup> That is, an embodied, unfolding, practical philosophy: a sustained interrogation of human being, undertaken in the chaos and fluidity of the workshop, rehearsal room and studio.

Viewed thus, Stanislavsky appears less as one pole of an irreducible opposition than as a practitioner mediating, at a quotidian, embodied level, a cluster of countervailing ideas, aspirations, logics, knowledges and political imperatives. As the opening lines of *My Life in Art* suggest: “I was born in Moscow in 1863, a time that may well be taken as the border-line between epochs ... from serfdom to Bolshevism and Communism, I lived an interesting life in an age of changing values and fundamental ideas” (p. 13).

Stanislavsky mediated the call, on one side, of an ascendant, post-Enlightenment scientific positivism, and on the other, of an insistent mysticism and spirituality, which pervades Stanislavsky’s own breathing and relaxation practices, and informs his attempts to understand the effect theatre has on its audience. Stanislavsky was torn, too, between his own bourgeois sensibility—strikingly apparent upon a reading of his autobiography—and the dictates of post-Revolutionary sovietization. In turn, this played out both in Stanislavsky’s negotiation of his status as a figurehead of (Soviet) theatrical respectability, toeing the party genre line, and in his grounding as a “lover of cloak-and-sword drama”, and his fascination with the kinds of experimentation with technique and form with which Meyerhold was working—and which led to Meyerhold’s death. An added complication was the various censorships to which his work was subjected, implicitly and explicitly, by the Soviet state and its various organs on the one side, and the imperatives of the free market on the other. Market and state conspired to ensure the somewhat contradictory reification of his work as “The System”, and its mystification and appropriation in contexts outside the Soviet Union.

Standing, then, on the fault-lines of the first half of the twentieth century, Stanislavsky attempted to reconcile these influences in an economy of practice, to a profoundly humanist end: “[o]ur art is not only to create the

life of a human spirit, but also to express it in a beautiful, artistic form.”<sup>6</sup>

### **A Brief Biography<sup>7</sup>**

Born into a bourgeois Francophile Russian family, Stanislavsky acted as a child in a family company, the Alexeyev Circle. “Fired by our stage activity,” Stanislavsky wrote, “Father built us a fine theatre in our Moscow home” (*MLA*, p. 76). Later, he formed a theatre company rather grandly named the Moscow Society of Art and Literature. As an actor, he quickly came to recognise both his own limitation—“I was tall, ungraceful and had a faulty diction” (*MLA*, p. 94)—and the limitations of the craft itself.<sup>8</sup> He had a poor memory, learnt through imitation (in the classic master-apprentice model), was able only to reproduce performance mechanically (no more was expected), and suffered from stage fright. He despaired at the lack of systematicity in the craft, the randomness of approach. His physical attributes and his willingness to play romantic lead roles managed to get him through.<sup>9</sup>

In 1890 the Meiningen Players performed in Moscow, showcasing spectacular work staged by director Ludwig Kronegk. Kronegk’s orchestration of crowd scenes, his mastery of lighting and his other naturalistic stage effects revolutionized the way in which theatre was made—he is often credited with “inventing” the stage director as the pre-eminent creative agent in theatrical work.<sup>10</sup> In the 1890s, Stanislavsky threw himself into this first-wave auteurism, mounting productions on the basis of extraordinarily detailed plans, developing a dictator-like control over every element of each work.<sup>11</sup>

In 1897, Stanislavsky met with playwright, director and acting teacher Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko—a meeting celebrated as perhaps the most significant in modern theatre history.<sup>12</sup> For eighteen hours, the two put the theatrical world to rights, formulating the blueprint for the Moscow Art Theatre, dedicated to the highest ideals of ensemble art, good citizenry and public education. The bases of the Company’s approach were to be simplicity, clarity, an end to traditional modes of employment for actors, the alternation of large and small roles, and detailed realization of the essence and world of each play (*MLA*, pp. 216-22).

This was the great flourishing of naturalism—the determination to reproduce the world on stage. Research was fetishized; the mundane real was recreated. Things came to an immediate head with the famous 1898 production of Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, which was a disaster. Chekhov was incensed at Stanislavsky’s pedantry, reminding him that “the theatre is art”.<sup>13</sup> Although Stanislavsky was revolutionizing theatrical form, he still had no way of leading actors towards a realization of the complex inner life that Chekhov had written for them. Around the time of Chekhov’s death in 1904, Stanislavsky recalls summing up his experiences:

I had accumulated a bagful of artistic experience and acting and directing tricks. But all this was in utter disorder, not systematized, making it impossible for me to use the artistic wealth I had amassed. It was necessary to put everything in order, sort out, classify and assess this material. (*MLA*, p. 346)

### **The “System”**

From this point, Stanislavsky’s focus shifted. What became known as “The System” was indeed Stanislavsky’s attempt to put the craft of acting on a solid, rational, scientific basis. However, the system in itself was not the end of Stanislavsky’s work, but the means to a higher vocation. For Stanislavsky, the end of theatre was the revelation of truths of the human spirit. The realism to which he aspired was not that of the mundane world—his art was not to simply reflect the quotidian, but to illuminate it through an access to a higher, spiritual order of being.

The cardinal principle guiding this aspiration was “inspiration”. The actor reproducing a rhetorical language of the stage, or the outward signs of a truth they perhaps once experienced, but now only signify, cannot hope to reveal human truths. Instead, the actor must access the truth in every moment of their performance. Inspiration is the realm of what is routinely translated in Stanislavsky as “the subconscious”. Yet the actor’s obligation is not to yield to the capriciousness of the inspired subconscious, but consciously to bring the subconscious to heel. This then, is the central, paradoxical idea in Stanislavsky: to structure that which by definition is unstructured. To be

inspired on cue, nightly, continuously: “in our art you must live the part every moment that you are playing it, and every night.” (*AAP*, p. 19)

The system is explicated most completely in *An Actor Prepares*. Jean Benedetti has spent a great deal of time reconstructing the totality of the system from Stanislavsky’s notes, the accounts of his students, and the fragmentary writings, some of which have been published as the companion volumes to *An Actor Prepares*. Benedetti’s work is impressive, presenting a useful, if perhaps overly schematic diagram.<sup>14</sup> Merlin’s more recent approach has been to offer a chapter-by-chapter précis of the entire book.<sup>15</sup> Rather than attempt to schematize, and in so doing, feint towards a closure Stanislavsky never himself managed, I will point only to a number of key features of the system as adduced in *An Actor Prepares*.

First, there is, if not a discrete system, an emphasis on systematicity. An actor must prepare—work on one’s self—before getting near a role. The actor works in the service of a play, not the life of a character. The actor therefore needs to know the circumstances given in the play—not an abstract idea about the life of a character. Stanislavsky recognises characters as dramaturgical constructs, not as lives. The key innovation, however, was the work on memory, inspired by early experimental psychology, and in particular the work on emotion memory of the pioneering French experimental psychologist Théodule Ribot (1823-91)—references to whom were all but excised from the English rendering of *An Actor Prepares*.<sup>16</sup>

Stanislavsky described memory as a house with many rooms (*AAP*, pp. 173-4). The actor must prepare for their work by ensuring that they have as many keys to as many rooms in the house of their memory as possible. They must be able to unlock, systematically and at will, a memory of an emotional state *analogous* to that being experienced by the character they are to play. There is no stigma attached to memory: it is simply a resource, rather than a source of trauma; nor, in Stanislavsky’s pre-Freudian topography of the self, does memory figure as aetiology, as explanation for character.

Critically, Stanislavsky advised that actors were not to work with the recalled emotion *per se*. Rather, emotion is the endpoint—ideally, the spon-

taneous product on stage, night after night—of the efficacious recall of the physical circumstances of the actor’s original experience. A character emerges as the actor strings together a series of analogous memory experiences as a “throughline”, in the services of the play, and in accord with the character’s “superobjective”, itself extracted by means of a careful analysis of the play text.

This work was to be conducted in the pursuit not of a mere naturalism, but of artistic truth. “[N]ot every kind of truth can be transferred to the stage”, advises the Director, Tortsov. “What we can use there is truth transformed into a poetical equivalent by creative imagination” (*AAP*, p. 160). Thus, exercises for the imagination are central to his teachings, along with exercises, some derived from yoga, to relax actors, easing their stage fright, and ensuring the maximum use of the actor’s physical, mental, psychic and affective resources.

Pushed to clarify some of his teachings, Tortsov reveals, throughout the text, a precarious tightrope walk between the confidence in system and a quasi-metaphysical obfuscation—much to the frustration of some of the students. One has asked him to define the truth to which acting must aspire: “I shall not undertake to formulate a definition for it,” he explains:

I’ll leave that to the scholars. All I can do is to help you feel what it is. Even to do that requires great patience, for I shall devote our whole course to it. Or, to be more exact, it will appear by itself after you have studied our whole system of acting and after you yourselves have made the experiment of initiating, clarifying, transforming simple everyday human realities into crystals of artistic truth. (*AAP*, p. 160)

## **Prana**

Indeed, the most intriguing passages in *An Actor Prepares* are those in which Stanislavsky wrestles with his loyalty, on the one hand, to science and to reason, and, on the other hand, to his own embodied experience—to describe which he has to turn to decidedly unscientific language. The chapter is revealingly entitled “Communion”, and in it the class is invited to

consider the various mysterious exchanges taking place in the act of making theatre. Tortsov explains:

I have read what the Hindus say on this subject. They believe in the existence of a kind of vital energy called Prana, which gives life to our body. According to their calculation the radiating centre of this Prana is the solar plexus. Consequently, in addition to our brain which is generally accepted as the nerve and psychic centre of our being, we have a similar source near the heart, in the solar plexus.

I tried to establish communication between these two centres, with the result that I really felt not only that they existed, but that they actually did come into contact with one another. The cerebral centre appeared to be the seat of consciousness and the nerve centre of the solar plexus—the seat of emotion. (AAP, p. 198)

This is the most explicit statement of Stanislavsky's topography of the self, and he immediately moves to qualify the ontological claims nestling in his assertion:

I have no desire to prove whether Prana really exists or not. My sensations may be purely individual to me, the whole thing may be the fruit of my imagination. That is all of no consequence provided I can make use of it for my purposes and it helps me. If my practical and unscientific method can be of use to you, so much the better. (AAP, p. 190)

A bit later, after he has taken his class through a number of exercises intended to demonstrate *prana*, Tortsov/Stanislavsky betrays his epistemological anxiety: "My difficulty here is that I have to talk with you about something I feel but do not know. It is something I have experienced and yet I cannot theorize about it. I have no ready-made phrases for something I can explain only by a hint ..." (AAP, p. 211).

Referring to the "wordless communion" between Hamlet and Ophelia, Stanislavsky/Tortsov resorts to a phenomenological epistemology: the

testimony of experience attests to the tangibility of *prana*, a testimony articulated to a quintessentially modern confidence in science:

Haven't you experienced it in similar circumstances, when something streamed out of you, some current from your eyes, from the ends of your fingers or out through your pores?

What name can we give to these invisible currents, which we use to communicate with one another? *Some day this phenomenon will be the subject of scientific research.* Meantime let us call them rays. (AAP, p. 212; italics added)

The metaphor abruptly shifts from the mystical to the scientific: what was *prana* is now a species of radiation, potential knowable in positivist, objective terms. And then follows the archetypal pedagogic moment: having established first the mystic, then the phenomenological provenance of the quality of communion, the Director moves to furnishing the students with their own tangible experience, by means of an exercise in which one, the authorial voice Kostya, is encouraged, without words or actions, to commune with another. The following exchange is recorded:

'Did you understand that feeling of an out-going current?'

'I think I did,' I replied, with slight indecision.

'In our slang, we call that *irradiation*.' (AAP, p. 217)

In these passages we see the struggle of the theatre worker negotiating on one hand with the science towards which he aspires, and on the other with the language of the spirit to which he is drawn; reaching towards an Eastern mysticism, and a final resort to the inexorability of lived experience. Kostya's indecision, moreover, betrays the subtle coercion of the pedagogy. The authority of the teacher is hard to resist in such circumstances: this pedagogical model, too, is one of the legacies of Stanislavsky, as we will see.

### **Dead Pet Acting**

Stanislavsky is not, of course, without his critics. Among the most trenchant is the American playwright, novelist, screenwriter and screen director David

Mamet. For Mamet, Stanislavsky's legacy is "dead pet acting". "The self-concerned person is a bore," he writes,

And the self-concerned actor is a bore. And whether the actor is saying, 'I must play this scene in order to be well thought of,' or 'I must remember and re-create the time my puppy died in order to play this scene well,' makes no difference. In both cases his attention is self-centred . . . and will tell us nothing.<sup>17</sup>

Mamet's 1997 *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* ramps up the attack:

'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 practised; 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.<sup>18</sup>

He damns Stanislavsky with faint praise:

Stanislavsky was certainly a master administrator, may have been a brilliant director and/or actor, and was widely heralded as a theoretician. But I say that his contribution as a theoretician was that of a dilettante, and has, since his day, been a lodestone for the theoretical, I will say the *antipractical* soul. For amateurs. For his theories cannot be put into practice.<sup>19</sup>

*True and False* is a chapter-by-chapter refutation of *An Actor Prepares*: almost page by page, Mamet rips into the sacred cows of Stanislavskyan technique—emotion memory, concentration, "what if", text analysis, characterization. All are swept away in favour of a heroic, outward facing (rather than indulgent) approach to acting. Mamet's greatest contempt is reserved for "[t]he academic-bureaucratic model of the theatre—that put forward by the school and by the critics—[which] presents itself as intellectual, but has nothing to do with intelligence or culture; it is antiart."<sup>20</sup> For all this hostility, there is something appealing in Mamet's writings:

a brash anti-intellectualism, a celebration of *doing* rather than theorizing, of practice, not talk.

## **Acting School**

Perhaps the most tangible legacy of Stanislavsky is that experienced in actor training institutions. The notion of work on one's self; the privileging of embodied, experiential knowing over propositional knowledge; the emphasis upon tapping one's own memory and life experience: these are still the fundamental currency of acting school.

Mamet's disdain for acting schools is directed towards the university-based actor-training of the United States. In Australia, the picture is different: here, conservatory-style, state-funded training schools dominate the field. Students are selected through rigorous audition processes, and subsequently live in fear of being asked to leave. Competition to be selected, to remain enrolled in such institutions, the personal nature of the work, what might be seen as the rather subjective criteria for success, and the cultural framing of the art/craft/practice of acting all conspire to create a very particular climate within which the learning of acting takes place. I trained in one such institution in the late 1980s.

At acting school, we learnt many extraordinary things, and did so in extraordinary ways. We were told that *here*, in this place, in these rehearsal rooms, we were being given the privilege of not having to theorize. We were never required, in three years, to read a book other than the scripts of plays we were rehearsing. Instead, we were to *just do*. One of the corollaries of this imprecation is a radical dearth of literature about acting schools. The radical decentering of the propositional, the discursive and the literary—which itself constitutes the appeal of the experience—counterindicates sustained critical reflection. Instead, the experience is mystified, romanticized and rarely subjected to analysis. Graduates talk of their experiences in training in terms reminiscent of veterans recounting war stories.<sup>21</sup>

I recall the excitement, the empowerment of those initial interdictions against “theorizing”. We experienced amazing things, bonded, “normed and stormed”, indulged the inflationary economy of emotional excess as we cried

and hugged, as we “broke through” and “broke down”, as we threw ourselves headlong into our art. After a few weeks, I took myself up to the college library and found a copy of *An Actor Prepares*. It was unthumbed, mint condition. I borrowed it, took it home, and immediately rebelled. I remember, literally, casting the book aside. It was so ... *bookish*, bearing so little relation to the world of embodied knowing into which I was being led. It was irrelevant, nonsensical. What use had I for books? I could “just do”. Books had nothing to teach me. And I certainly could not see anything of myself, or any of my classmates, in the bumbling, clumsy efforts of the naïve, credulous Kostya. Mamet’s jeremiad resonated with such experiences. He captures that turgid, tumescent rejection of all things bookish and effete; the rejection of the preciousness and impracticality of the long dead Russian.

And yet . . .

Five years later I sat down with *An Actor Prepares* and tried again. As I have already suggested, it is an extraordinary book—perhaps the most significant book on acting ever written, to this day. It is also, in so many ways, monstrous. The manuscript that became *An Actor Prepares* was originally titled “The Actor: Work on Oneself, Part 1”, and in the course of its development fell foul both of Soviet censorship and of commercial imperative in the United States. As written, it was an unsatisfactory concretization of what was in fact a fluid, living body of practical work—a literary imposition upon a practice that was itself never complete. As translated, the text is highly problematic. The 1936 translation by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood systematically misrecognizes, ignores and concretizes misapprehensions about Stanislavsky’s thinking and practice.<sup>22</sup>

The conceit of *An Actor Prepares* is that it is the diary of a neophyte student—Kostya, the Chosen One—attending classes with the master director, Tortsov (“The Creator”).<sup>23</sup> The book entrenches what Mamet describes as the pedagogy of the acting studio: “[t]he prestige of most acting teachers rests upon the idea of apostolic succession.”<sup>24</sup>

As I read, fresh from my time as an acting student, I recognized things I had been doing for three years: specific exercises, languages, implicit theories and

topographies of the self that I had, as Mamet suggests, thought my teachers' inventions. I felt cheated, resenting the radical dualism that banished thought in favour of action, privileging passion over reflection, doing over thinking.

And yet . . . there is knowing in action, in passion, in doing. Deep, cellular, non-propositional knowing—what I would later come to know, again, through the writings of the phenomenologists: Charles Sanders Peirce and Pierre Bourdieu, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ed Casey, Drew Leder, Lowell Lewis.<sup>25</sup> Health Science practitioners with whom I've collaborated call it, rather aridly, PCK—Practical Craft Knowledge.<sup>26</sup> We might also think it as embodied knowledge, habit, habitus: manual philosophy.

And perhaps Stanislavsky's great contribution, his practical legacy, lies in his living example as a manual philosopher, rather than in any abstraction such as system or theory. To this extent, Mamet is right: as a theoretician, Stanislavsky was a dilettante. As a philosopher, however, he was certainly something more.

## **Not The Method**

In matter of fact, in virtually every other respect, Mamet gets Stanislavsky more or less completely wrong. So eager is he to discredit bookish learning that it looks like he hasn't really bothered to do the work. For a start, Mamet commits a cardinal sin—the sin against which I warn my undergraduate students on pain of summary failure: he conflates Stanislavsky's work with “the Method”.<sup>27</sup>

So let's be clear. The Method is what happened when, in the 1920s, Stanislavsky's work crossed the Atlantic, both in the bodies of some of Stanislavsky's students—most significantly Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya—and through Stanislavsky himself, and the publication of his terrible, wonderful book. Precisely because the book was written, reluctantly, as part of a proposed, and never completed, larger body of work; because it treated of the “inner” work of the actor (this is particularly the case in translation); and because Boleslavsky had worked with

Stanislavsky during a phase of Stanislavsky's work with "inner" work, Stanislavsky was received as a psychologist, as a theoretician concerned exclusively with the inner life of human beings.

These ideas were seized upon by the leftist actors of the Group Theatre in Manhattan, Lee Strasberg amongst them. Strasberg wrote the famous 1957 *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on acting, thereby institutionalizing a particular discourse of "emotion memory" as the *sine qua non* of acting. Stalin would have been delighted: around this time, what was coming to be referred to as "the Stanislavskyan System" was adopted as official Soviet artistic policy. For Strasberg and others, the psychological, inner-orientation they found in Stanislavsky gelled with a nascent psychoanalytical paradigm. From this mix evolved The Method. Stella Adler's famous break with Strasberg derived from her own experiences with Stanislavsky's later work on Physical Actions in Paris, in 1934. Michael Chekhov also remarked upon his reluctance to pay too much attention to writings purporting to define Stanislavsky's work, recognizing the fluidity of Stanislavsky's thinking.

The central psychoanalytical tenet of The Method is that we are all the products of our past. Stanislavsky's experiments with memory, his discovery of the power of memory to evoke emotion, and his development of exercises to facilitate this process, were seized upon by Strasberg and others. Method actors indulge their memories. For Strasberg, the memory upon which the actor draws must be at least seven years old: only then can the actor be assured that it is significant and pungent enough.

In The Method, characters *exist* independently of the play text. Improvisation becomes the key to rehearsal—constructing a character, endowing it with your memories (preferably traumatic ones), effecting a transformation from actor to character, taking this new life, this character, out for a spin in a range of situations, furnishing it with a past, with a psyche, with being. For The Method, language presents as a problem, a medium too insipid to deal with the tumultuous, heaving carnival of the psyche. The heroes and heroines of The Method signify psychological depth not through great words, but through radical inarticulation and neurotic symptom.<sup>28</sup>

That is The Method; that is dead pet acting. This is what Mamet has a problem with. Yet nothing could be further from Stanislavsky himself.

Here is one of the great things that Stanislavsky wrote—but it could be Mamet:

Never lose yourself on stage. Always act in your own person, as an artist. You can never get away from yourself. The moment you lose yourself on the stage marks the departure from truly living your part and the beginning of exaggerated false acting ...

Always and forever, when you are on the stage, you must play yourself. (*AAP*, p. 177)

### **Postscript: Meyerhold**

In his final years Stanislavsky moved away from a concern with psychology, with the inner life, to a focus on what became known as the “method of physical actions”. This work needs to be understood in relation to the shadow haunting Stanislavsky’s career—Meyerhold. Throughout their careers the two men worked in close proximity, if not ever in a fully realized collaboration. Meyerhold ran the 1905 Studio at the Moscow Art Theatre, eschewing psychological categories, adopting a resolutely behaviourist understanding of action as inculcated habit, and an aesthetic grounded in physical efficiency. For this, Meyerhold is remembered as the experimental hero; Stanislavsky, by contrast, is demonized as the conservative darling of Stalin, or mistaken as the advocate of the bourgeois psychologicalism of The Method.

Towards the end, Stanislavsky was virtually a house prisoner—“isolated but preserved”, in Stalin’s words—conducting his research in his Opera-Dramatic Studio, situated in his own apartment.<sup>29</sup> Initiating a correspondence with Pavlov,<sup>30</sup> he pursued the method of physical actions, in which complex and difficult emotions are broken down into a series of simple actions. The premise was that bodily rhythms are a powerful trigger for the emotions: territory that Meyerhold had worked since the 1905 Studio.

At the end, it was to Meyerhold that Stanislavsky entrusted the legacy of his life’s work. Shortly before his death in 1938 he instructed his deputy, Yury

Bakhrushin, to “[t]ake care of Meyerhold; he is my sole heir in the theatre—here or anywhere else.”<sup>31</sup> As events transpired, Stalin’s police put paid to Meyerhold barely months later, executing him for his failure to renounce his “formalist” heresies. And thus the standard narrative of Stanislavsky’s legacy fell into place: the “System”, conveniently uncomplicated, bowdlerized and abstracted, conflated with The Method, lampooned by Mamet, and barely cognisant of the complexity and struggles of the man himself.

NOTES

- 1 I will spell Stanislavsky with a ‘y’; Konstantin with a ‘K’. This choice will yield some minor inconsistencies in the following notes.

Born Konstantin Sergeyeovich Alexeyev, in 1885 Stanislavsky took his stage name for reasons that are variously reported. David Magarshack in *Stanislavsky: A Life* (New York: Chanticleer Press, 1966) claims it was in lovestruck admiration for the ballerina Stanislavskaya of the Moscow Opera (p.10), an account further complicated when, a few pages later, Margarshack reports that the name was borrowed from another young actor, also an admirer of the ballerina, with whom our Stanislavsky had worked as an amateur (p. 19). David Mamet reports, without elaboration nor citing any authority, that Stanislavsky “was the name of a Polish vaudeville performer”: “Stanislavsky and The Bearer Bonds” in *Some Freaks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 72. Stanislavsky’s own account is no less mysterious: “Often I was forced to play in the company of suspicious-looking people . . . gamblers and demi-mondaines. And I, a man of position . . . It was necessary to take a stage name . . . I had known an amateur, Doctor M., who was known on the stage as Stanislavsky. He had stopped playing, and I decided to adopt his Polish-sounding name” (*My Life in Art* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d. [1925], p. 115 (hereafter I will use the abbreviation *MLA* for this work).

- 2 Joseph Roach notes the “Whiggish” tenor of “the vision of theatre historians” who have tended to analyse and understand theorists of acting “only in relationship to the degree to which they anticipated Stanislavski”. Thus Peter Brook, in *The Empty Space* (1968), refers to the “great system of Stanislavsky, which for the first time approached the whole art of acting from the point of view of science” (qtd Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), p. 15). Roach argues this as paradigmatic of an enshrining of Stanislavsky (and

- his derivative tradition) as the inevitable end-point of the unfolding grand narrative of Theatre.
- 3 Both available in the “original”, and to date, only authorized English (mis-/selective) translations by Elizabeth Mary Hapgood: *Building A Character* ([1949]; London: Methuen, 1979); *Creating a Role* ([c1961]; London: Eyre Methuen, 1981). See also Sharon Marie Carnicke, “Stanislavsky: Uncensored and Unabridged”, *The Drama Review* 37, 1 (T137), 22-37, for an account of the vicissitudes of Stanislavsky’s life in literature.
- 4 In *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. Edward Braun (London: Methuen Drama, 1991), p. 175.
- 5 Lucian of Samosata, in *A Source Book in Theatrical History*, ed. A. M. Nagler (New York: Dover, 1952), p. 29.
- 6 Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* ([1936]; London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. 15. All subsequent references to *An Actor Prepares* refer to this edition, using the abbreviation *AAP*, and are incorporated parenthetically in the text.
- 7 This is not the place for an extended account of Stanislavsky’s life. The interested reader is directed to both *My Life in Art*, and David Magarshack’s *Stanislavsky: A Life* (1950; London: Faber and Faber, 1986). Bella Merlin offers a concise biography in *Konstantin Stanislavsky* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); so does Jean Benedetti, in a number of useful publications including *Stanislavski: A Biography* (London: Methuen Drama, 1990).
- 8 The bulk of *My Life in Art* is given to a documentation of the processes whereby Stanislavsky learnt how to act by means of imitation and the cultivation of appearance. This material reappears throughout *An Actor Prepares*, as the gormless narrator Kostya and his classmates fumble their way through the Master’s classes.
- 9 For example *MLA*, p. 83. Stanislavsky interpolates an examiner’s appraisal of his audition for a drama school in the early 1880s: “he has height, a voice, a figure, and you don’t often meet this combination on the stage” (p. 92); “in the summer of 1884 we rehearsed *Mascotte*, an operetta . . . in which I, needless to say, played the handsome shepherd Pipo” (p. 141); “Let a pretty high-school girl applaud the young actor, let another praise him, let a third ask for an autograph, and all the advice wise men give him evaporates before his conceit. I played Spaniards, ordered my top-boots in Paris, and over-taxed my immature acting abilities just to get praised by high-school girls” (pp. 140, 141).
- 10 Magarshack, pp. 40-43.

- 11 See Merlin, pp. 9-15, and her reconstruction of Stanislavsky's 1898 production of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which most dramatically played out the limits of the director-as-dictator model, and led directly to Stanislavsky's investigations over the ensuing decades: pp. 83-116.
- 12 David Mamet, "Slavyansky Bazaar", in *A Whore's Profession: Notes and Essays* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 227.
- 13 Merlin, p. 12, quoting Siegfried Melchinger's 1972 biography of Chekhov.
- 14 Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 61.
- 15 Merlin, pp. 39-82.
- 16 Carnicke, p. 32. There is one reference to Ribot in *AAP*, p. 166.
- 17 "Acting", in *A Whore's Profession*, p. 199.
- 18 *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), p.12.
- 19 Mamet, *True and False*, p. 15.
- 20 Mamet, *True and False*, p. 111.
- 21 If, as the title of Susan Letzler Cole's book has it, theatrical rehearsal is a "hidden world" (*Directors in Rehearsal : A Hidden World* (New York: Routledge, 1992)), that of the acting school is even more obscure. One of the few exceptions is an essay by Sydney actor, writer and film director Anna Broinowski: "Why Did The Actor Cross The Road?" published in *About Performance: Theatre as Performance (Working Papers 3)* (Sydney: Centre for Performance Studies, University of Sydney, 1997), pp. 120-127, and my own "Acting and the Limits of Professional Craft Knowledge", in *Practice Knowledge and Expertise in the Health Professions*, ed. Joy Higgs and Angie Titchen (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001).
- 22 See Carnicke, pp. 28-30.
- 23 Merlin, p. 41.
- 24 Mamet, *True and False*, p. 121.
- 25 This is not the place to extend this analysis: rather, the names cited point towards possible languages and approaches for thinking about (and through) experience.
- 26 See Maxwell, "Acting and the Limits of Professional Craft Knowledge".

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- 27 In his earlier, somewhat less polemic writings, Mamet demonstrates a far more generous understanding of, and admiration for, Stanislavsky than in *True and False*. See, for example, the wonderful “Stanislavsky and the Bearer Bonds”, cited in note 1.
- 28 See Colin Counsell, “Strasberg’s Method”, in *Signs of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth Century Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 52-78, for a critique, along these lines, of Method Acting.
- 29 Merlin, p. 28.
- 30 Jean Benedetti, p. 50.
- 31 Braun, p. 251.

An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of the Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences “Key Thinkers” series at the University of Sydney, April 2004.

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