

Stanislavski

Background (The conditions against which Stanislavski was working)

At the beginning of the 19th Century, Russian theatre was heavily censored and only Moscow and St Petersburg sustained acting companies. Towards the middle of the century, social comedies began to disguise scathing attacks on society and gradually broke down censorship. Playwrights, such as **Gogol** and **Schepkin**, tried to make acting a respectable and structured practice; but by the time Stanislavski came to it, it was as chaotic as it had ever been. Stanislavski's chief worries early on as a director lay with the punctuality of the actors and their backstage drunkenness.

The acting style itself was almost anarchic. Actors would strut on stage as they saw fit and deliver the lines downstage to the audience, without any regard to addressing fellow actors. The actors or theatre store provided whatever costumes they had to hand. The theatre provided sets and props from stock, while set design placed doors for the convenience of actors rather than to create a realistic aesthetic for the crowds. In 1894, Stanislavski directed Shakespeare's *Othello* and took a trip abroad to buy props and fabrics for costume that would actually fit the play - something unheard of at the time.

Stanislavski not only disliked the costumes and props, but also the general feel of theatre which neglected the training of actors and used no rehearsal process, relying primarily on cheap French and German farce comedies. In a bid to eradicate this problem, he developed a method, or more accurately a system, with which to train the actors he directed. This system led Stanislavski to become the father of modern theatre.

The theatre of his time was a mixture of the broad over-the-top gestures of those one-dimensional characters suitable for melodrama and the early 'realism' of playwrights like Gogol as explored by actors like Schepkin, who believed in finding the source for his characterisations by studying life itself. There was no actor training as such; actors were adopted into a company and served apprenticeships where they observed older actors and their techniques. This, of course, encouraged a perpetuation of the same style of acting; few young actors would dare risk being expelled from a company by 'doing something different;' far more likely, they would copy 'tricks' that an older actor had found effective - in, for instance, gaining a laugh or creating an impression of grandeur.

In addition, apart from one or two exceptions, most popular theatre made actors into stars, known for particular types of role whilst writers were often hacks, often forgotten and there simply to create the roles for the star actor.

In 1897 Stanislavski met **Nemirovich-Danchenko**, a theatre critic, teacher and director, very well-connected in both the social and theatre world and together they devised a manifesto for a new type of theatre. Nemirovich-Danchenko also put Stanislavski in touch with Chekhov, recognising that here were two kindred spirits in their aspirations for theatre. The new theatre was called the **Moscow Art Theatre** and it took as its symbol a seagull, which was the title of the first Chekhov play performed there.

The Moscow Art Theatre became a centre for the growth of the **Naturalistic** style of acting but this was not easily achieved. First the earlier training of the established actors they invited to form the ensemble group at the new theatre had to be broken down. This took years of work, not always successful, and caused Nemirovich and Stanislavski to realise that a new type of actor was needed for the 'slice of life' style of playing. Thus **the Studio** was formed, the first of a number, as a means for practical experimentation into the art of acting and into discovering new ways to approach character. In addition, Stanislavski started to formulate what became known as '**the System**', which for the rest of his life he experimented with, using it to improve his own acting and to teach other actors and acting students.

- a] Stanislavski's System arose out of practical trial and error over a long period of time
- b] though he often seems to present-day students 'old hat' and 'obvious' he was truly innovative in his own time
- c] the System was constantly evolving and elements of it were being tested out all through his life. This explains the contradictions that are within much of Stanislavski's writings - he changed his mind about a number of things, most notably the use of Emotion Memory.
- d] his long life was devoted entirely to theatre and the improvement of acting practice tells us that he was a true enthusiast and it is this obvious passion for his subject that made him a great teacher and that inspires us when we read his books today.

Stanislavski saw the importance of **the sub-text**. Text was no longer a matter of surface meaning: characters could and did say things that had hidden agendas. It was on the way towards an understanding of this and how it could be communicated with feeling that many aspects of the system were devised.

Stanislavski & the Given Circumstances

The **Given Circumstances** are the basis for an actor and his role, they are created by the playwright, the director and designer and form the context in which the actor can ask: what **if**....?

Stanislavski lists the circumstances as:

- The story of the play
- Its facts, events, epoch, time and place of action
- Conditions of life
- The actor's and director's interpretation
- The production, the sets, the costumes, the props
- Lighting and sound effects.

Stanislavski said that the actor should begin his study of the text by analysing the *externals of a play*. He himself didn't consider feelings within the play until he had mastered the facts and *every tiniest circumstance, every fact, was important*. He suggested that actors should learn by heart and write down the existing facts, their sequence, and their external physical connection with one another. This would help to orientate the actor at any point in the play and would also help him/her to get at the inner circumstances of the play.

Achieving this was done through:

- a. studying the play
- b. discussion with other actors
- c. improvisation.
- d. understanding the **Here, Today, Now** of the character
 - Where have I just come from?
 - Where am I?
 - What am I doing?
 - Why am I doing it?
 - When is this happening? What time of day, month, year? In which period?
 - Where am I going to now?

When you begin to study a role you should first gather all the materials that have a bearing on it, and supplement them with more and more imagination...

If you speak any lines, or do anything mechanically, without fully realising who you are, where you came from, why, what you want, where you are going and what you will do when you get there, you will be acting without your imagination.

Units and objectives.

You cannot make a single mouthful either of a whole turkey or a five act play.

The objective is the whetter of creativeness, its motive force. The objective is the lure for our emotions.

Both physical and psychological objectives must be bound together by a certain inner tie, by consecutiveness, gradualness and logic of feeling.

The actor must break down a play into smaller sections or “units”. To define a unit, look for where a new action begins-and where it ends. Stanislavski suggests you need to **find a title that captures the essence of each unit** (_____)

For each unit, you should ask yourself: “what happens?” Define the action and not the subject matter. **In every unit, “there is a creative objective”- a goal** (I want to _____). You need to be able to define the character's objective in each unit. The objective should always be believable. When Beatrice drops her glove in Act 1 Scene 1, you need to decide what her objective is and this would then affect the way in which you acted. **The objective needs to be expressed in terms of an active verb.**

You would use units and objectives to help you to:

- identify the “channel” or creative line
- define the creative objectives – inner, outer and rudimentary psychological ones
- name the unit
- think about the super objective
- be clear about the through line of action

The Score of a Role

Let us call this long catalogue of minor and major objectives, units, scenes, acts, the score of a role. . . . One can call them natural objectives. There can be no doubt that such a score, based on such objectives, will draw the actor--physically speaking--closer to the real life of his part. [It] . . . stirs the actor to physical action.

The first requirement is that the score have the power to attract. . . . excite the actor not only by its external physical truth but above all by its inner beauty. . . . Let us now add depth to the score. . . . The difference will lie in the inner life . . . inner impulses, psychological intimations . . . that constitute the inner tone. . . . We can experience varying emotions when playing a score with the same objectives but in different keys . . . quiet or joyful . . . sad or . . . disturbed or in an excited key. . . . One's score which is to portray human passions, must be rich, colourful, and varied. . . . An actor must know the nature of a passion . . . how to cull [from the text] the component units, objectives, moments, which in their sum total add up to a human passion. . . . The score saturates every particle of an actor's inner being. . . . In this innermost . . . core . . . all the remaining objectives converge, as it were, into one superobjective . . . the concentration of the entire score. . . . For the actor the through action is the active attainment of the super-objective. --Creating a Role

The super objective

This is

- (a) **The ruling idea of the play, its core or overriding theme.** When Stanislavski was rehearsing “Three Sisters” he felt that at first it wasn’t coming to life. It seemed gloomy and dull. He then realised what was missing. *Chekhov’s characters do not wallow in their own sorrow. Just the opposite; they seek joy, laughter, courage. They want to live and not to vegetate...I came to life, and intuitively knew what to do.* He had discovered the super objective. The three sisters dream of going to Moscow and escaping the triviality of provincial society; the aspiration for a better life is the ultimate goal they all share.
- (b) **Each character’s main objective.** All the other objectives become steps leading to the final goal. You can trace a line through the role and Stanislavski called this “**through line of action**”.

The actor must learn how to compose a score of lively physical and psychological objectives; to shape his whole score into one all-embracing supreme objective; to strive toward its attainment. Taken all together the superobjective (desire), through action (striving), and attainment (action) add up to the creative process of living a part emotionally. Thus the process of living your part consists of composing a score for your role, of a superobjective, and of its active attainment by means of the through line of action.

Unbroken line of Life

This links the character’s past, present and future and determines moments between scenes as well as reflecting the inner significance of the play. For example, as an actor playing Irina, Stanislavski would suggest that you looked carefully at the given circumstances and used your imagination in order to understand how she makes the journey from bubbly, happy, optimistic young girl in Act 1 to the woman who is prepared to marry a man she doesn’t love.... As an actress you would have to understand the stages the character went through in order to arrive at the person they have developed into at the end of the play.

Through Line of Action (Remember the diagram and before the exam re-read the sheet with it on!)

For the *scoring of actions*, actors begin by distinguishing between *actions* and *activities* and learning to execute them. *Action* denotes what the actor does to solve the *problem*, set before the character by the *given circumstances* of the play and production. Thus, *action seeks to accomplish something*. Expressed as an *active verb*, action is both ‘mental/inner’ and ‘physical/outer’; it must be ‘apt’ in relationship to the circumstances. While actions are the means through which the events of the play unfold, *activities create contexts* for scenes (e.g., Lady Macbeth *hosts* her husband’s banquet while *covering up* for his crazed reaction to Banquo’s ghost). As actors rehearse, they write down the sequence of their actions, creating personal *scores of actions*, which guide them during performance. Each action follows ‘logically’ and ‘consecutively’ from what precedes it. Each actor searches for a *uniting thread* that links together all the characters’ actions to produce an

overall sense of what the play conveys to the audience. This unifying force is the *through-action*.

If you're asked about the through line of action, you would also be mentioning units and objectives, plus:

- the coherence of the role
- the moments between scenes
- emotion memory
- activating the subconscious
- reconstructing the experience
- identifying with the character

Faith and a sense of truth.

Every moment on stage should be filled with a belief in the truthfulness of the emotion felt and the actions carried out. Stanislavski said ***Truth on the stage is whatever we can believe in sincerely.*** When Macbeth sees the imaginary dagger leading him towards the king, he must believe in its presence and in the emotions it stirs in him.

If you cannot grasp at once the truth of the larger action, then you must divide it into smaller parts, and try to believe even if only in the smallest of them...Perhaps you do not yet realise that, often from just one moment of faith in the authenticity of an action, an actor can immediately begin to feel himself in his part and to believe in the greater truth of the whole play.

sincerity

- Imagination
- Given circumstances
- the inner feeling of the actor
- a sense of Faith
- Belief
- analogous emotions
- self-study
- sensitivity
- realistic physical detail
- justified physical action
- coherence
- logical sequence
- Creation of the human soul in the part
- Improvisation
- avoidance of cliché
- Units and Objectives
- Magic If
- Concentration of Attention
- tempo-rhythm

Imagination.

It is not possible for a playwright to supply all the information that actors need to know about characters. Stage directions may say, "enter Kulygin" but the actor needs

to know where he is coming from or going to. The actor has to fill out the Given Circumstances with his imagination.

If you say a single word, or do anything on stage mechanically, without knowing who you are, where you have come from, why, what you want, where you are going and what you will do when you get there – you will be acting without imagination, and this part of your time on stage, be it long or short, will not be truthful for you- you will be like a clockwork machine, an automaton.

A character does not have a full biography. The actor must find details of a character's life from hints within the text or invent them. Stanislavski demanded his actors to undergo a visual journey of motivation, including: who you are, where you came from, why, what you want, where you are going and what you will do when you get there. According to Stanislavski, speaking lines without fully realising the answer to these questions means not acting with your imagination.

- The importance of the imagination as part of the system
- magic if
- the inner chain of circumstances
- creating the whole picture
- fixing the who, what, why, where, when
- exercises to develop the imagination
- the role played by the imagination in the concept of emotion memory
- Stanislavski's later concerns about emotion memory.

Magic If

What would I do if I were in this situation? This helps to put you in the character's shoes; it acts as a lever lifting us into the world where it is possible to create – the world of imagination. It does not ask you to believe something is real, you simply act as if you were in those circumstances.

“As If” leads to action- both internal and external- and it does this without force, in a natural way.”

What would you do if you were in Juliet's situation at the end of Romeo and Juliet when she wakes up alone in the cold tomb and finds Romeo dead beside her?

Never having been in that situation, you would have to use your imagination, but also your understanding of the character's **Given Circumstances** in order to react in a way which is truthful to you, but also consistent with the facts that the playwright has included about Juliet in the script.

Remember:

Stanislavski did not require actors to **be** the part, as is a popular misconception, but he did demand that they lived the part with the magic if.

Concentration of Attention

Stanislavski developed this because sometimes the actor's attention on stage can be scattered. You can be too aware of the audience. He used the device of **Circles of Attention**. It gives the actor a focus for their attention. The circles radiate from the centre of attention (the actor) and in increasing circles take in the whole of the stage

area. In the smallest circle the actor can create **Public solitude**, a condition that focuses the actor within him/herself. By increasing the focus the actor can begin to take in further objects and gradually, by concentration, the whole of the stage/imagined world is brought into focus.

Imagine yourself on a pitch-black stage; suddenly a spot light is turned on which creates a pool of light. Once you enter this light you are isolated, nothing exists outside of it except an empty blackness. In this situation anything that happens within this area will have your full attention. A space has been divided, in this case with light. When performing you must try and create your own mental circle of attention, which will only include the space in which you are performing, everything outside ceases to exist.

Another method of maintaining your attention is to use what Stanislavski called **Objects of attention**. This method takes away any empty moments during a performance, which are the most dangerous in terms of concentration.

During rehearsals make sure your character has an object of attention at all times, this can be a physical move or reaction, or simply the task of listening. The important point, is that at every moment of a performance, you know where and what you should be concentrating on, there are no free moments.

One important point that needs to be addressed concerning concentration is the need for the performer to retain a level of relaxation. Concentration should not make you stiff or tense and relaxation of muscles should help you to concentrate. (remember the piano and the mental arithmetic.)

fourth wall
circles of attention
public solitude
objects of attention
observation
inner attention

Emotion memory.

Our lives are a rich source of memories, experiences and observations. Stanislavski suggests that the actor selects the “most absorbing memories” of feelings and sensations, and weaves the life of the character from them. He recognised the danger in trying to force feelings too directly. Emotions can be indirectly evoked from use of other areas of the system like physical action. External elements of the production like lights and sound can also act as a stimulus. Sense triggers were suggested.

• the influence of Ribot: *Two travellers were marooned on some rocks by high tide. After their rescue they narrated their impressions. One remembered every little thing he did....The other man had no recollection of the place at all. He remembered only the emotions he felt. In succession came delight, apprehension, fear, hope, doubt and finally panic.*

- sensation memory (running parallel with emotion memory)
- unlocking the archives of the memory
- using inner and outer stimuli to lure the emotion memory
- the transformation from human sympathy to the feelings of the character

- finding analogous experiences
- re-living the emotion on stage
- the region of the sub-conscious

these direct, powerful and vivid emotions do not make their appearance on the stage in the way you think. They do not last over long periods or even for a single act. They flash out in short episodes, individual moments. In that form they are highly welcome. We can only hope they will appear often, and help to sharpen the sincerity of our emotions, which is one of the most valuable elements in creative work. The unexpected quality of these spontaneous eruptions of feeling is an irresistible and moving force.

Always and for ever, when you are on the stage, you must play yourself. But it will be in an infinite variety of combinations of objectives, and given circumstances which you have prepared for your part, and which have been smelted in the furnace of your emotion memory. This is the best and only true material for inner creativeness.

INNER CREATIVE STATE ON THE STAGE

When an actor comes out on the stage before an audience he may lose his self-possession from fright, embarrassment . . . [or] a sense of overwhelming responsibility. . . . At that moment he is incapable of speaking, listening . . . thinking, feeling . . . , or even moving in an ordinary human way. He feels a nervous need to gratify the public, to show himself and to hide his own state . . . (which we call a mechanical, theatrical mood).

I clearly realized the harm inherent in the mechanical, theatrical mood, so I began to search for some other spiritual and physical state while on the stage which would be beneficial rather than harmful to the creative process. . . . My observations taught me . . . that in the creative state a large role is played by the absence of all physical tension, the complete subordination of the body to the actor's will. . . . Then I perceived that creativeness is first of all conditioned by the complete concentration of an actor's entire nature.

So an actor turns to his spiritual and physical creative instrument. His mind, will and feelings combine to mobilize all of his inner "elements." . . . Out of this fusion of elements arises an important inner state . . . the inner creative mood. The habit of being daily on the stage and in the right creative state is what produces actors who are masters of their art. --An Actor Prepares