The Birth and Evolution of Stanislavsky’s Method

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Abstract: The stanislavskian system arises in full development of the realist current. Starting from the word, the actor expresses through gestures, intonations and mimics. The pre-stanislavskian actor is dominated by dilentatism and emotional “accidents”, the balance is tilted to an act full of clichés and crafts. Perhaps the most important lesson that Stanislavsky gives us is that for the actor in his work to reach a credible character, he must go through all states, sensations and feelings required in building a character. We cannot forget, however, that Stanislavsky devised a new method of representation also due to the emergence of Chekhovian texts. To give effect to the new ways of writing, the attention must focus on the actors, without neglecting the scenography. Stanislavsky wants to convince the actor that if he doesn’t want to use tricks to present truth, he should be just like a painter or musician, to devote his whole being, “body and soul especially” in the creative process.

Key words: System, Method, Stanislavsky, Representation

“As long as those who imitate men in action, and in their way are virtuous or sinful (...), imaginary characters will be times better than us, or worse, or like us, as do painters: it is known that Polygnotos portrayed people handsomest, Pauson uglier, Dionysios as real. It is clear, therefore, that each of said imitations will keep these differences and will be different from the way that it mimics an object, as we have shown.”

Aristotle sees the art of imitating “-up today does not have a name for it” with admiration. For him the end result, the show, must inspire pity, fear and terror. If that does not succeed, the show is a failure, the emphasis was on oratory art and less on interpretation of characters. Characters, temperaments and characters’ feelings were distinguished exclusively through the art of dramatic writing, while the interpretation of characters is limited to imitation.

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The actor’s art arises from ancient rituals dedicated to the gods. The evolution of interpretation starts with imitating the sounds of nature, animals and later the imitation of human characters and temperaments. Around 1769, Denis Diderot wrote Paradox of Acting, called by Strasberg the most important attempt to deal with the problem of acting. Is the actor an artist or an imitator? The thesis is written as a dialogue in which “The First” claims that the actor should not feel anything on stage, he must be lucid and he must get rid of any trace of emotion, and “The Second” counteracts the concepts of “The First”, but it is obviously the opinion of the French Enlightenment.

“If it were sensible, what good to play twice the same role, with the same passion, and having the same success? Offering a lot of passion at the first representation would make the third one weak and stone-cold. Otherwise, as a good imitator and an apprentice of the human nature,(…) as a hard imitator of himself or of his knowledge and as an unobserved observer of our sensations, his play, far from being weak, would meet the new reflections that would be made, it would burst or it would calm down, and you would be more pleased. At the time, he is himself while he plays, how can he stop being himself? If he would want not to be himself, how would he feel in the moment he should stop?”

Diderot wanted to see passion on the stage, so he came up with a simple path in the character creation process: intro, development, closure. Stanislavsky uses this simple syllogism to build his own system, since Diderot’s era does not allow us to talk about any rule of a system. Stanislavsky is the first person who realizes that an actor has to experience and experiment personally.

The stanislavskian system emerges as a product of the flourishing realism and the only way to represent realism correctly is through the word, which is the foundation of an entire cultural movement. “An actor throws himself into his work”, stated the late Diana Cheregi, actress from Constanța. Starting with the word, an actor expresses himself by means of gestures, intonation and mimic. Above all, an actor has to understand the PSA symbol: P - postures; S - sensations; A - affections. Perhaps the most important lesson offered by Stanislavsky is that an actor, in order to become a credible character, has to experience every posture, every sensation, every affection.

necessary in the metamorphosis of the character. “A definition of acting is deeply rooted in the realistic, socio-political context, as well as in the inner creative process.” The stanislavskian system is used successfully nowadays because it is not characterised by any convention of acting, but the inner power used to express emotions and thoughts, concluding that the psychology of the character is above the exterior background. The exercises proposed by Stanislavsky ensure a certain empathy with the character, but one can never state with certainty that the purpose is successfully accomplished. The creative process is subjective and there are no absolute successful recipes for each character. Meanwhile, the chosen path through various means of representation leads to new ways of communication with the character.

“Peter Brook talked about the game of ‘living’ with ‘distance’, Brecht admits the feelings as the joy of the study, and Meyerhold as the joy of creation.”

At the beginning of the XIXth century, the directors, who now have a great creative importance of the theatre play (until then, the role of the director was to balance the distribution and handle the administrative part of the play) have the purpose to permanently bring new ideas in the creation of the play. They diminish the importance of the dramatic writing and focus on the new methods of the aspects of dramatic writings. Stanislavsky was not pleased with the importance that the director gives to the play, neglecting the creating process of the actor. By that time, the realist background had become rich, the accent was touching the beautifully worked props, and the paintings would be painted with great finesse. The work of the actor was clearly undermined by the opulence of the scenography. We cannot miss that Stanislavsky conceives a new method of representation because of the apparition of the Chekhovian writings. For him to give course to the new modality of writing, the attention must have been focused on the work of the actors, without neglecting the scenography part. Stanislavsky refuses the instinctive play. This manner of representation can touch high cotes on the actor’s sensibility and the play’s course, but only some times, though usually the play is full of clumsy gestures,

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unjustified pauses, huge dead times, and improbable characters. Stanislavsky is disgusted by the simple idea of mere representation, the actor being unable to control his emotions and reactions. The pre-stanislavskian actor is dominated by dilettantism, by sentimental “accidents”, the balance being inclined to a game full of clichés and crafts.

The art of representation excludes the living in the creation process. The actor, in the moment he feels the “inner feelings” of the character, while in rehearsal, has to memorize the process happening on the outside (gestures, mimic, and rhythm) and use with precision “the outside representation” for “fooling” the audience that everything is happening in real time. Stanislavsky states that this is also a method, but the final result cannot be appreciated at its fullness. The climax, the living process, must be controlled, but not excluded. The actor must control the character, and not the other way round. For Stanislavsky, the living process is inevitable. It is only by the presence of the feeling in real time, that the process of creation can be credible. Stanislavsky wants to erase from the diletante actor’s memory the methods of the craft, of the instinct, which ultimately leads to an amateurish acting, not enough for the theatrical act. At this point, his method finds its beginning.

Unlike other forms of arts, Stanislavski affirms that the actors must express collectively, because the art of acting can’t be born in solitude. It’s a team work and the desired result can only be achieved with perfect harmony. Because the real feeling appears only if the actor perfectly understands the feelings and thoughts that his character is feeling, Stanislavsky asks himself what happens when the actor and the character don’t have anything in common. The answer can be found through the character’s biographic knowledge and the emotional charge of his feelings. The first step is the creation of a list in which the actor writes down all the qualities and defects of his character that he can pinpoint and the percentage off his “alikeness”. So that he doesn’t “cheat” on this exercise, the actor must get rid of his frustrations and inhibitions, and he needs to look at his soul the same way he stares in a mirror. Accepting his defects is the biggest step an actor can make at the very beginning of his career. Managing to get over this moment leads to some true feelings on the stage. The art of acting is unique because it makes you muster your strength and exploit your qualities and defects. Subsequently,
the actor needs to assimilate the factor that determined his character to think/feel/do the way he does, and he needs to build situations at last related to him. Of course this is improbable when we talk of characters like Hamlet or Medea, but the real life references can replace this by “diving into” the situation. In this situations, we need to take into consideration the actor’s talent associated with his understanding of transposing himself into imaginary situations. This way the actor stops “playing” and starts “living”. But thing are not that simple. In our lives we answer to real stimuli trough gestures, mimics, tones and the actor must do exactly the same things, but answering to some imaginary stimuli, and more than that he needs to be more expressive so that he can “go beyond the footlights”.

“The artist lives only his own emotions... On stage you never ever lose yourself. You can never escape yourself. But if you give up your ego, you lose the ground under the feet and that’s the worst thing... Your loss on the stage is the moment after the living ends and suddenly starts the surface playing.”

Stanislavsky wants to convince the actor that, just like a painter or a musician, he needs to dedicate “his entire body and, most importantly, his soul” to the creating process so that he does not “fake the presence of truth”.

Another problem that Stanislavsky addresses is the amount of material given to the actor. If the painter has his canvas and brushes, the musician has his voice and instruments, the actor works with his body. Of course, it is the same in ballet, but the dancer is a technician, the execution of movements are in the foreground, the interpretation occurring through the choreography. The actor uses his body gestures in everyday life and is forced to do the same and put this on stage, but in imaginary circumstances and with different bio-data. The gestures used to greet the loved person must be used in the same way even with a stranger that he does not feel anything for, or worse, inspires repulsion or indignation. This duplicitary act the actor is bound to, is his way of expressing himself. But the art of acting is a repetitive act, and if the inspiration goes away, the same thing happens with the true feelings. With his methods, Stanislavsky searches for the answers to the question that marks

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generations of students and beginners alike: how can you make your inspiration kick off? For this to happen the actor must believe everything that happens on stage, the same way he does when that happens in everyday lives. If the actor believes in the situations, in the character, every lie and convention of the stage transforms itself from imagination to REALITY.

“All artistic activities on the globe are at our feet, being our ways of education, culture and information.”

The actor gets stuck in the process of organic creation because of the repetitive process he goes through, which he arrives at in the “final rehearsals” and then, in the middle of the show. So that the actor can get over this obstacle, Stanislavsky suggests using the affective memory. The creativity of the actor is subjective. No one can feel the “emotions” of another, or think with someone else’s thoughts, the actor can’t guide his character in an objective way. Because the actor builds his character through the stanislavskian method, he builds some similar situations for his character so that he can find and discover the character’s thoughts and feelings which he (the actor) feels in the given situation and no one can contest his thoughts. “Defend your character until death!” – this is the way we can translate the conclusion that the actor finds through this method. Never mind that he has to play a killer he does not resonate at all with. Finding out his temper, his character, his way of thinking and his soul, the actor has the chance to understand why the “bad guy” takes the decisions that he does. The affective memory comes in the help of the actor and guides him so he can build characters, not ideas.

To get to acquire the correct biographical data for the character, Stanislavsky suggests, in An Actor Prepares, the exercise with the magical “if” and “I am”. The principle is simple. Taking as an example the character Medea, the work begins with: I am Medea. I’m a wife, I have two children, I left my father and motherland, I killed my brother so that my husband escaped misfortune and I am on foreign land. But what if my husband leaves me to marry the daughter of a king? What if I am exiled by him? Entering the depths of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art, powerful characters shaped by the tragedian of the ancient art.
tragedians, in the psychology and inner self of the character, the obvious answer will be “I will kill my children and no one is able to snatch them from death.”

A text, no matter how well written, if it is not taken as a whole, does not have the capacity to sensitize the viewer, unless instructed diligently by an actor on the way to the unseen path of Thalia.

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7 Reference to one of Medea’s lines.