

DRAMA *Works*

Stanislavski Through Practice

EXTRACT

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STANISLAVSKI

General Introduction

So much has been written by and about Stanislavski, that it is unnecessary for me to reiterate what others have already done so much better. In any case, it is outside the brief of this booklet to cover that ground again. Instead, what I am attempting is to cover the salient points he made in his many books and Studio experiments, to order them into some kind of logical form so that they may be easily followed and understood by students and to translate them into purely practical terms, so that each theory can be tested through practice.

In doing this I make no claims to originality. In fact, many of the exercises I use are adaptations of Stanislavski's own, or of his chosen 'disciples' who ran his experimental studios for him. Some of these exercises are inferred by Stanislavski's own writings and I have merely picked them out and clarified them. Some have their basis in his work, but I have given them a modern context so that today's students can see their relevance. And yes, a few are 'made up', though I believe these are in the spirit of the master and hope he is not turning in his grave!

My main claims to 'originality' are in the efforts I make to keep things simple, logical and easy to follow, so that students may pick up the points made and turn them easily into essays backed up with practical knowledge.

The following reminders about Stanislavski need to be said as a starting point to students:

Whatever you feel about Stanislavski, he is rightly called the 'father of modern theatre'. Nearly all other practitioners use him as a starting point, either to build from or to react against. He cannot be ignored.

Much of what he says may seem obvious - but this simply proves how far his methods have been absorbed into our understanding of what acting is. In fact the 'obvious' points, which of course need to be stated in essays however banal they appear, are what make him so hard to write about as a practitioner. Remember what he has to say about acting and actors was revolutionary in his own time.

The enthusiasm with which Stanislavski writes about what he has felt, experienced and experimented with is the key. There is nothing dry or tedious about him when you read him in the original (translation of course!) and every student should try to read at least one of his books to get a flavour of his enormous love for and enduring excitement about his subject.

His books are full of contradictions, sometimes even within the same volume and this gives us another clue as to how we should approach him. We should always remember that he was forever experimenting. He was never satisfied with results and always sought better ways for an actor to perfect his craft. Those who try to use the System

like a straitjacket will fall flat; the System was in a constant state of flux and was constantly being reassessed. Up to the end of his life he continued to change his mind - notably over the use of Emotion Memory - and this is part of his charm. If you see Stanislavski for what he was - an experimenter, ceaselessly trying to improve his methods - then you will cease to see him as a boring old stick-in-the-mud as so many students do, and be carried along by his endless energy and enthusiasm.

Other pointers are obvious probably but I just add them as reminders of what we are dealing with here:

The System and the main body of Stanislavski's work is to do with Naturalism. This means that there are huge numbers of plays and styles for which his techniques simply are not applicable. [It is worth remembering that Stanislavski was open to other ideas and experimented with many different styles, such as the work he did with Craig on 'Hamlet'. Once again, we see here no stick-in-the-mud, but an experimenter, willing to take risks like all good theatre practitioners.]

The System needs to be seen as a single unified entity. When studying it we tend to become immersed in the minutiae, the component parts and it is easy to forget this most important fact. Thus, one element is not followed by another, but most elements are happening at the same time and continuously. The actor is constantly using concentration, relaxation, imagination, adaption, etc.etc., just to pick some random 'elements'; there is too much of a tendency to slavishly trot out the order of the System as published at the end of 'Building a Character'. When you actually use the thing itself it is obvious that numbers of these elements are part of a continuous process.

It is important to make sure that every student not only experiences the Stanislavski way through participating in the practical exercises but also understands both why each element is important in its own right, that is helpful to an actor, and how the elements combine to become a sound structure for any actor to follow. A good essay on Stanislavski shows understanding of the theories, plus experience through practice showing how practice proves the efficacy of the theories. Simply trotting out practical exercises with little understanding is as valueless as trotting out the theories without any knowledge of the practice. Both are important and one must prove the other. Consequently, at the end of each element dealt with I suggest you make sure that students write down the practical exercises as well as the theories they are exploring, plus any personal comments they have as to how the exercises worked for them or helped with their understanding.

Roughly, I divide my practical teaching of Stanislavski into two areas: 1] the general training of the actor which prepares the student in the main principles of the System and 2] the preparation of a role showing how the System is useful in building towards a characterisation. This booklet follows the same format.

Extract One

BELIEF.

1. The teacher could begin the work on belief with an exercise in which the students do not even realise they are participating! Come into the studio in a real flap and tell the students you've lost your wallet, car keys, glasses, register, notes on Stanislavski, whatever you like! Make sure it is something really important - without the lost item, you, or they, will be in real trouble - so that they are really looking everywhere. You think it may have fallen behind something, have been picked up by mistake and be in someone's bag, etc. It's up to you to keep the urgency going in any way you can. Keep it going as long as you can, constantly whipping up their concern and commitment to the task. Eventually you disclose that this is all an exercise and that you want them to repeat their search from the beginning, trying to remember how they felt, behaved, etc. Observe them carefully. How convincing are they? Do they believe in what they are doing? How can you tell? Comment on their 'performance' as fully as you can. [Another way of doing this is to let one or two students in on the secret at the beginning, giving them instructions to observe closely the differences in feeling, commitment and sincerity between the two searches.] Either way of approaching the exercise is a useful starting point and will fuel an animated discussion, which should be fully explored, explained and written up by the students. The realisation they should come to, hopefully of their own accord, is that doing something for real is one thing, imitating that activity in such a way as to convince an audience that it is real is an altogether different thing and infinitely harder to pull off.

Central to Stanislavski's System is believing in what you are doing. Only if the actor believes will the audience believe. They are drawn in by the sincerity of what the actor is doing. Basically the whole System is the set of aids by which the actor is helped to believe he is the role he is creating.

Despite the fact the whole System is working towards belief, I find it helpful to do some 'belief' exercises with students early on, which can prove a number of important things, starting with the realisation that belief 'in limbo' is well-nigh impossible.

Practical Work

2. Sit in a circle. Teacher leads by passing a scrunpled up piece of paper around the circle and telling them it is a bird that has fallen out of its nest, fully feathered but not yet able to fly. The students must be very gentle. Keep talking about the bird, its colour, size, the brightness of its eyes, ' Look at its beak opening, perhaps it's hungry'; 'How its claws grip, don't they?' - you are trying to build up belief by building up visual facts to hang onto.

When the bird returns to you, you can do a number of things. You can mash it in your hands - this cruelly tests belief - those who have begun to believe will be horrified. You could gently place it in a box, or take it outside. It is up to you. The seriousness

with which you, the teacher, approach this gives the students a clue as to how seriously these actors' exercises should be taken.

3. Still in the circle, pass round an envelope containing a blank piece of paper. It must be used as:

a love letter

a coded message containing escape plans

exam results

a letter calling off the engagement

news of the death of a rich old aunt from whom you are due to

inherit

the offer of a job

news that your son has been killed in the war

the letter has been given to you by mistake - it should really

have gone to another member of your family

4. Pass an object around and each person must use it in a different way convincingly. The object could just be a stick, or the biro you have in your pocket. It could be used as a comb, a dagger, a mobile phone, etc.

Variation: scatter and use any object in the room as something it is not; retain the same object and change what you use it as at least twice more.

After this series of exercises discuss the difficulties. Some will have the quality of 'naivety' that allows them to lose themselves in the imagination quickly and easily. Whether they could sustain that quality with a number of distractions is another matter. Others will have found it difficult to do these exercises. These students may well be those who are most honest about 'feeling' and 'believing' themselves. Encourage this honesty. Encourage them to see the difference between 'pretending' and 'believing'. How many, when challenged, honestly believed in what they were doing?

Belief is helped by facts. Remind them how many found it easier to believe in the bird the more detail about the bird was added.

This is the same relationship that 'magic if' and 'given circumstances' have to one another. 'If' is the plunge that the imagination is taking - 'if this piece of paper were a bird that had fallen from its nest' - the imagination then asks questions - what? why? how? etc., it needs more detail, more facts, more 'given circumstances' - beak, bright eyes, colour, etc. Each new fact acts as an aid, a kind of fixative, to the imagination.

Practical Work

5. Use a stick, a strip of stiff cardboard or similar. The stick is a knife. It is used in an exercise that in some way involves life and death: you are contemplating killing a rival, or freeing a condemned captive, or performing an operation under difficult circumstances in which the patient may die.

You will need to build up a whole scenario answering the questions who? why? when? where? how? etc. Each one of these invented facts, or circumstances, will help the process of belief and make it easier.

It will be helpful to build up belief in the 'knife' by starting with a kind of meditation on the object. Concentrate totally on it till you see its shape, size, feel its weight, test its sharpness and so on. Only when you really believe in the knife should you complete the exercise and perform the scene.

After the exercise is finished, jot down how many elements of the System are used and interrelated here. Magic if, given circumstances, concentration, imagination. All the elements feed into one another.

6. Test the inter-relationship of imagination/magic if with given circumstances to aid belief in another series of exercises:

Find your own space. You are cooking. There is your stove in front of you, saucepans and so on. Now begin.

For a moment they will look flummoxed; this is because they have so little to go on. Then they'll begin. Let them all carry on in their own space for a little, then stop them and ask a few questions: who are they? where? etc. By the readiness of their answers you will know if they have already felt the need to do this process for themselves. Hopefully, some of them will have found it impossible to proceed without inventing circumstances.

Now start the exercise again, but this time give them more specific scenarios with more detail:

You are an older sister/ brother having to prepare supper for awkward younger siblings. They are fussy; neither eat the same things; Mum, however, has specified they must have a balanced meal...

You are a busy chef in a popular restaurant at half past ten on a Saturday night. Orders are coming from all directions, it is hot, the noise level is terrific...

You are preparing a supper for a boy/ girl friend, wanting very much to impress with your capability; your parents are out for the evening, your special visitor is due to arrive in half an hour ...

They should see at the end of this:

- a] how important detail is to aid belief. The fuller the circumstances, the easier it is to believe.
- b] how different circumstances will change the basic action and prevent the actor from acting 'in general'. The first instruction, simply 'to cook' will lead to acting 'in general'. The different given circumstances will dictate how the actor cooks, in quite a unique fashion according to each set of circumstances.

Explain how this exercise needs to be used when studying a playtext for such directions as 'Enter George'. The details of: from where? to where? what time of day? what state of mind is George in? and so on, will all affect the way George enters.

Practical Work

7. Try some enter/exit exercises. Treat it as a game with volunteers performing from the following categories in turn. Others must guess, for instance, where they are coming from.

- a) a series of entrances showing -**
 - where you are coming from**
 - what has happened offstage to affect mood [argument with boss, for instance]**
 - when - what time of day it is**
 - why you are entering [to look for lost purse, for instance]**
- b) a series of exits showing -**
 - where you are going off to**
 - when - time of day**
 - why - the reason for going**
 - what you are feeling [e.g. you are psyching himself up to face a dreaded interview with the headmaster]**

Finish this section by setting a number of tasks for which the individual students must invent their own 'if' and 'circumstances'. Remember that the 'if' is 'magic' because it gives the imagination that stimulatory nudge which will excite the actor into action. The 'circumstances' which he will 'give' or invent for himself are the facts needed to give substance to that imagined person and situation.

Take them through the process first by sending one student up on the stage. Tell him to sit and wait. Then tell him to invent a reason for sitting there. Next he must add as many details as he needs - who is he? where is he? why is he there? what is he feeling about it? [How does this feeling make him sit?] This latter question is verging on the over-analytical at this stage. Analysis is useful but after the event. At this analytical stage discuss, too, a) how much of the feeling was stimulated by the invention of detailed information and b) how much the expression of that feeling, i.e. body language, facial expression, came naturally out of the inner state. Were any of these physical signs consciously imposed?

- 8. Try inventing an 'if' and 'given circumstances' for the following:**
- writing a letter**
 - tidying a room**
 - digging a hole.**

Extract Two

TEMPO-RHYTHM

Probably the nearest translation we can come up with for tempo-rhythm is 'pace,' though it embraces the idea of timing as well. Tempo-rhythm, as Stanislavski explained, is important both externally and internally. External and internal tempo-rhythm may or may not correspond according to the state of the character; it might be that a character is hurrying to make herself ready to meet her lover; here her outer movements would be reflecting her inner state, excited, adrenalin rushing, impatient, near ecstatic. Or, if the subtext of the character is reluctant, fearful, perhaps she anticipates a break-up in the relationship, yet she still has to catch that train to meet up with the lover, then the outer tempo-rhythm will still be hurried but the inner state will also at times affect it; there may be a certain carelessness, the actions less sharp and emphatic, because the inner tempo-rhythm is anxious, hesitant, syncopated.

Tempo-rhythm was always important to Stanislavski's System, but before the end of his life it became far more so as he came to see it as the most important way of moving from the preparation of a character into action. Pace and rhythm, if rightly established, have a unique way of affecting the emotions and exciting the actor into action. I discuss this at greater length in the next section of this booklet, which also touches on the changes in the System and in Stanislavski's thoughts.

Practical Work

1. Establish the students moving around the room in any direction, but without bumping. Start by taking them up [with a handclap or a drumbeat] into a faster and faster pace, till they are as fast as they can go without running. Tell them they are frantic, stressed, important people with important work to do. Talk strictly and urgently yourself as you tell them how busy, how near to cracking with pressure, they are. All the time they keep moving. Then throw them into an instant improvisation situation:

an office;

the stock exchange;

the casualty department of a hospital after an accident.

Let the rhythm in which they have been moving spill over into the scene, although they will no longer be constantly on the move. It is important to keep them moving right up to the moment that they start to improvise, so describe the circumstances to them while they are still moving around.

Try this exercise at a variety of paces before moving on to the next one. A very slow pace might lead to:

a scene in a funeral parlour;

a formal gathering or presentation;

a ceremony;

a banquet.

Slightly faster than this might suggest a group of people doing something under duress, like a group of teenagers asked to tidy up their mess after a party when it wasn't them that caused the mess.

2. Now try one or two scenes where first the 'right' pace for the scene is established - make sure this is discussed - and then the scene is repeated at a different pace. How does this affect the scene? For instance, you could establish a scene where someone is having to break bad news to a group of people - a friend has had an accident perhaps, or they are going to lose their homes. The 'right' pace will obviously be slow [on the whole]. Try repeating it at a fast pace. What does it do to the scene? Discuss the general paces of tragedy, comedy, farce. Does a slow scene become comical or even farcical at an inappropriately fast pace? Does a light-hearted scene become heavy and tedious if taken too slow? Try a scene with a group of people making ready for a Christmas party - decorating, sorting music, making food and so on. The atmosphere should be festive and excited. Now slow the scene down.

3. Try some scenes where the inner tempo-rhythm is contradictory to the outer one.

A. Solos. First one where inner and outer tempo-rhythms are the same: waiting impatiently for loved one to arrive or to phone.

waiting for the murderer outside the door to find you

waiting for a train on a busy platform when you are terribly late for an important interview

sitting in a crowded waiting-room having received good news

sitting in a crowded waiting-room having received bad news

You will notice that of course the inner and outer tempo-rhythms only differ if there is a need for concealment for some reason. A character alone on the stage can show what is going on inside. As soon as another character enters, the inner state is pushed down under an outer state appropriate to the new situation. There are not many exceptions to this, though Stanislavski found one when he cites as a solo exercise an actor nervously pacing the dressing-room, while reciting his lines slowly and frantically trying to do up his tie at the same time.

B.Pairs. An interview where one is very nervous but trying to appear calm one breaks bad news to another but is secretly jubilant at doing so a parent conceals sympathy for his/her child while imposing some punishment

C. A scene: A has taken the diary or a letter belonging to B. Perhaps curiosity motivated him, or jealousy. Now B has come to enquire whether A has seen it. A is nervous because the offending article is concealed nearby: how to get rid of B without making him suspicious. Before A succeeds, C enters to ask A to help him with something. A has to perform the task while twitching inwardly everytime B comes close to the hidden article. What happens?