

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Exploring Theatre  
Stanislavski**

# EXTRACT

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## SAMPLE PAGES

Extract 1.

1. Why another resource on Stanislavski? I felt that my previous work on Stanislavski, which includes the very first one I wrote back in 1999 - *Stanislavski Through Practice* – needed updating and expanding. The result is something that is very complete, combining background and practical exploration. It is all new work, with a whole bunch of new exercises not used either in the Through Practice resource or in Styletasters 1.

2. And a new approach too... this resource is addressed to both students and teachers. Built in throughout is work for students to do on their own, as well as practical exercises for the whole group.

3. With awareness of what exam boards are now asking of students, this resource is aimed at helping the student whether they are applying Stanislavski to a written text or to devised work.

Extract 2:

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### Extract 3

#### PHYSICAL AND VOCAL CONTROL

With the idea of control, we are now reaching the essential dilemma at the heart of Stanislavskian Naturalistic acting: how to present something truthful and real while at the same time being in control of what one is doing. How to be 'in character' whilst at the same time remaining aware that on a certain line one has to be Downstage Right. The idea of 'I am Juliet' suggests that the actor has to have so *become* the character that she lives the emotions and the events of her life, freshly, giving the effect of surprise, the illusion of it's unfolding, now, in front of the audience. Only that way will the spectators be caught up in the emotions of the characters, living and grieving with them, heart in mouth at the terror and sorrow of it all. For that is what Stanislavski wants the audience to experience.

Yet it is, as the words above suggest, illusion. It has to be. After tussling for years with the problem, Stanislavski's compromise was to call the version of truth being presented to the audience 'artistic truth': real life in an organised, tidied up and, crucially, self-monitored form - by the actor, that is. Reality is, Stanislavski reluctantly decided, altogether too messy and random.

This is particularly true of strong emotions. Someone streaming with tears is incoherent, hiccuping, gasping and hardly able to get the words out; fury rages and gibbers - one can catch the tone but not the outpouring of words, at least not in a controlled enough way to understand the nuances. All emotions, if felt in untrammelled reality, can look cluttered: we pace, wring our hands, a bevy of facial expressions chase

each other, the whole effect being impossible to follow. So the emotion that is presented has to be reined back enough to make it both watchable and audible. It has to be monitored by the actor, but not to the extent where the result looks stilted - that illusion of reality must be in place, and it only can be if the actor has practised so hard that he no longer has to think about where he should be or what he should bring onto the stage with him. All of those details must have become automatic, a comfortable habit.

So, to be able to make the kind of adjustments that show strong emotions coherently, it is necessary to be physically and vocally in tip-top condition, so as to be flexible enough to tackle any character and to display the full range of that character's ruling emotions. On top of that, the actor should practise so hard that every move on stage, every instruction from the director, every difficulty presented by the setting or costume is so well rehearsed that it becomes habitual. You get used to that over-tall hat, that awkward doorway too narrow for your costume, those props which must be remembered and placed in the correct position. The actor must aim to perform all those necessities on automatic pilot. This allows room for creativity to take place and, with luck, moments of genius to blossom.

But the bedrock for this flowering has to be bomb-proof. You cannot take any shortcuts with playing the role because others are relying on you. How can your stage partner in a scene arrive in that particular circle of light, as the director desires, if you are having a moment of creative genius that has swept you to the other side of the stage? There is always going to be this dilemma: Stanislavski wants those moments of creative genius but he also wants the whole engine of the play, with its many cast members, props, lights, sound effects, the positioning of the furnishings, to arrive at the same moment at the same time. Creativity can happen, but not to the detriment of the whole.

What is Stanislavski's answer to this? That ALL the actors must be on automatic pilot, must be so totally on top of what they are supposed to be doing at every moment of the piece that they are not thrown by one performer doing things a little differently and beginning to soar. Rather than being knocked sideways by such a change they can ADAPT and soar along with him/her, creating an unforgettable moment in the play, where everything and everyone has come together and taken flight. Obversely, If even one person is thrown off kilter, then the whole play-engine comes juddering to a halt.

Of course, actors may have to adapt for other reasons too: a curtain stuck, a light blown, a prop not placed in the right position. In order to adapt without breaking the illusion of reality happening now, all the actors must be so drenched in the moves and words that nothing throws them. They will carry on regardless, without a twitch to reveal that all is not as it should be. It is not for nothing that Adaption is a key element in the System, albeit one that cannot be practised for here.

This is one of the reasons that Stanislavski took so long over rehearsals. Every member of the cast must have reached the stage where they are not having to think, 'Oh yes, I'm supposed to be over there on that line and then I must sit...' Every move must

have become so habitual that their body remembers without prompting from the mind; thus the mind is freed for that all-important creativity of becoming the character. As Stanislavski says: you must work until 'the difficult becomes habitual and the habitual becomes beautiful.'

Musicians and dancers will recognise the truth of this. They will know how the fingers move without prompting from the brain, that the steps of the dance just happen, after long hours of rehearsal, which means that the whole patterning of the dance structure has sunk into the muscles and nerves of the body. When something becomes habitual, the body remembers for you.

Clearly, in an educational situation, there is no time to arrive at this point. Even in a theatre context, very few companies will have the time and financial resources to reach this enviable state. All we can do is look at some of the exercises and types of activity suggested by Stanislavski. As with everything dealt with so far, it ought to be borne in mind that, having 'done' a section it is not finished. Every aspect of training we have looked at so far, along with the technical areas to come, needs to become a part of a student actor's daily life. This was certainly so for those studying under Stanislavski or his teacher-followers, who ran his Studio training sessions at the Moscow Art Theatre. But how exciting it must have been for them. A real acting school - and the first of its kind.

Because 'artistic truth' rather than real life is the goal, body and voice must be instruments that are fit for purpose at all times. Along with Observation, Relaxation, Concentration and all the other elements we have already touched upon, Stanislavski would expect an actor's daily regime to include physical and vocal exercises. The emphasis for this is always, however, to remain 'natural'. Stanislavski did not want a body to be over-muscled or artificial, just fit and supple.

## **PRACTICAL EXERCISES for the body**

The most famous of his exercises for this purpose is the Mercury Exercise. In his day, mercury was used in a number of ways; no one realised then that liquid mercury is poisonous! Why Stanislavski uses imaginary mercury for this exercise is because of its viscous, globular quality. It does not run fast, as water would; its consistency is much thicker, making it easier to control and it tends to stick together into one blob. Imagine a liquid compounded of water and powdered paint, or flour, mixed till it still runs if tipped, but much more slowly.

**Imagine that drop of mercury/ paint mixture has been implanted under the skin of your finger tip and 'watch' its progress down the finger, over the palm of the hand, the wrist, up to the elbow - the arm needs to extend and create a slope downwards here - and then to the shoulder and back to the finger tip. Keep the**

movement controlled and steady; the drop of mercury should travel at an even pace.

Try it again, travelling along behind the shoulders and to the opposite hand. Then try with both legs, from foot to hip. Lastly imagine it starting from the tip of one finger down to the foot on the same side.

The exercise encourages controlled, fluid, supple movement.

Get in to pairs, with one threesome if an odd number, face a partner and call yourselves A and B [+ C if necessary]. A's begin to relate something that happened recently. Bs observe how they use their body as they speak: head and neck, hands and arms, the tilt of the torso, the way the legs are planted, the movement of the hips down to the feet. At the same time, the Bs listen and receive the gist of what is being said. When the A's run out of steam, the Bs 'become' the A's, repeating what they've just observed and mimicking their movement [what they said is less important, but is there as a platform]. Cs will have the benefit of watching both A and B first, though they should be careful to imitate A.

Top tip: Sometimes it helps to exaggerate these body tics and gestures at first, then gradually pull them back into reality.

**A's then observe while Bs do the talking.**

Follow this by the whole group moving around under different Given Circumstances. You need to adopt a character as quickly as possible for this - there must be no sheep-like movements where all are doing exactly the same. To avoid 'in general', use a character you have studied before and can easily slip into, perhaps a relative, a close friend or someone you showed the rest of the group from observation in the street.

The fire alarm has just gone off; you head for the exit door and group there. You have been told to keep calm.

You are all browsing and window-shopping along a busy street. It is nearing Christmas.

You are walking in the countryside, observing the beauty of your surroundings and enjoying the sunshine on your skin after a long period of rain.

You are trying to find shelter as the rain tips down. You are not dressed for bad weather.

You are worried you will miss your bus; you can see it ahead of you. The boss at work is a stickler for punctuality.

Add to this list if you like. In every case, have one or two members of the group standing and observing. These observers will report back at the end of each scenario, commenting on how far they believed in the situation and whether everyone was an individual or they felt were acting 'in general.'

## COMMUNICATION USING THE BODY

Some of the section on Communication in *An Actor Prepares* can sound pretty wacky! In it Stanislavski talks about *rays* produced by the actor's own *will*, which can communicate with a partner on stage. Taking it further, the concentration of *rays* can communicate with the amorphous mass of the audience. After the initial shock of hearing the practical Stanislavski putting over a lot of what sounds rather weird, you will think about it and realise that the idea is not very far from what anyone who is focused and concentrated is capable of. Many practitioners after Stanislavski talk about the power of concentration, which can be strong enough to create a kind of shared space, in which the audience are netted in to share what is happening on stage with the actor. Peter Brook talks of netting the audience while Antonin Artaud, for instance, talks of 'infecting' an audience, which is not far removed from the same idea.

Certainly you will discover for yourselves, through observation of people in many different situations, the extraordinary range of tools for communication everyone has at their disposal.

### **PRACTICAL EXERCISES**

**Have a volunteer stand in the performing area, while the rest of the group observe. The volunteer stands with their back to the audience, so the group is only able to 'read' body language. Stand absolutely still and hold the position until a hand clap. From that moment, on each hand clap, the volunteer shifts their body in tiny ways - a slight tilt of the head, a shift of weight from one hip to the other, a movement of the foot, the shoulder, the hand, the neck.**

The audience becomes adept at reading the position - which may not have been invested with any deliberate intention from the actor.

**Another volunteer goes up and faces the audience. Try to keep facial expression blank and concentrate on slight shifts of the parts of the body. Particularly try different positions of the hands and arms. If you can blank out the face, with a white neutral mask for instance, this makes sure the focus of the audience remains on the body positioning rather than facial expression. What does a slight tilt of the head appear to communicate, a lift of the shoulders or one foot resting on its toe?**

Notes should be taken and the results of what people noticed shared afterwards. You will be surprised how similarly people read certain positions. This is as useful for the student actor as observing themselves in a full-length mirror. Observation of these effects on an audience might result in a kind of catalogue of gestures which the actor can practise and use until they become habitual.



**The third volunteer has the instruction to communicate without sound, but using only the face and, especially, the eyes. The body remains still. It may be that the volunteer can block out their body with curtains or an item of furniture, isolating the face. Try large expressions of the face and minimal ones, where just the eyes move, or the eyebrows.**

It should be noticeable how much wider the range of communication has become: from the limitations of the back only, to the front - slightly broader in range - to the actor's face and eyes, with almost limitless possibilities.

Notice that I have mentioned making a list of what works in body communication. This appears against Stanislavski's instruction, explored more fully later, that with the correct emotion built up *inside* the actor, the *external* features take care of themselves. In other words, if you genuinely feel anger, or grief, your external self will show it *without planning*.

However, in these early stages of learning, what I have suggested is a way of remembering behavioural observations. These observations will sink in to the psyche of the actor and may surface later, under the appropriate emotional circumstances, without their being conscious of it.

You can prove how wonderful an instrument the body and face can be by the following exercise, which is Stanislavski's own. This time you can use the voice as well.

**The group pairs up and chooses one of the following opening sentences as a starting point for an argument.**

**The world is about to end.**

**Eating meat is wrong.**

**Euthanasia isn't right under any circumstances.**

**Bring back death sentences for the worst crimes.**

**We shouldn't save animals on the brink of extinction; it is natural selection at work.**

**Drama is the most important subject on the curriculum.**

**Religion is the opiate of the people.**

Subjects such as trolling, the role of social media, or any current situation might also be used. What is important is that the couple should have strong opinions which will give reality to the argument. Close friends might not be the best choice to pair up for these, unless they disagree over something personal to them both.

After the general argument has developed for a while, a couple shows a part of theirs to the rest of the group, who jot down some of the gestures, facial expressions and body positions used. Take care to use good descriptive language. [This doubles as an exercise to practise for the part of the examination where you have to review a play. Students always find the hardest part of writing a review, which needs to be done in such a way that it comes to life for someone who has not seen the production, is describing a

particularly successful moment of acting in detail. This requires attention to the details of facial expression and body language and finding the right descriptive words to encompass them. Every time you make yourselves do this your descriptive vocabulary will expand.]

Stanislavski's exercise follows: **the tutor observes a couple arguing and touches part of the anatomy of first one then the other. The part touched is thus 'frozen' and can no longer contribute to the argument. One could consequently lose the use of one arm, or the chest, a part of the face such as the eyes, which would have to close, or even the voice. The argument must continue without the use of whatever has been touched while the tutor continues to touch more places. It might be that both actors end up with, say, nothing but their eyes, or their chins, or their shoulders to continue their point of view. The argument will be reduced to just the strong feeling that boils inside the participants - which may perhaps generate those famous 'rays'!**

**Return to the whole group continuing their arguments, and have a group leader call out the parts of the body for everyone to freeze. Allow time between each call, for the participants to experience what it is like to lose that feature.**

Discuss afterwards what difficulties everyone encountered. Could you channel your anger elsewhere? What did you learn about how the body is used to communicate?

**Again in pairs, a volunteer begins to relate a recent incident in their life. Their partner observes and mimics the speaker's moves, body positions, facial expressions.**

At all times during this and the following, remember that Stanislavski is about Naturalism. Don't exaggerate with your imitation. Try to be exact. And narrator, be yourself.

This exercise moves on from imitation to commentary by means of physical communication. **The partner who is listening should start to subtly express any of the following:**

**disbelief**

**amusement**

**irritation**

**anger**

**growing anxiety**

**sympathy**

**horror**

**Finish with a quick round where volunteers go up one at a time in succession to express with their whole bodies, not voices, the following.** Each person is alone, so they are expressing an emotion that comes from inside them and is expressing itself out of deep feeling rather than trying to communicate to another person. Each actor should take a moment before they have to make their entry, to key in to a memory of when they felt

their given emotion. Stanislavski calls this Emotion Memory. You will also need to use Given Circumstances [given by yourself] as an extra help. For example, the time where you were stung by a wasp on your foot, for Pain, or the time you had to wait outside the Head Teacher's office, knowing you have done wrong, for tension.

**desperation**

**fear**

**sympathy**

**love**

**anger**

**impatience**

**boredom**

**tension**

**disappointment**

**arrogance**

**lack of self-esteem**

**concern**

**patience**

**joy**

**excitement**

**pain**

There are of course many you can add to this. Just make sure not to force or exaggerate and to use those elements of the System you have already covered to help you.

Discuss the findings of this exercise, both as participants and as audience. How easy did you find it to underpin your given emotion with an actual memory?

### **FOR THE STUDENT before moving on:**

*Summarise your own findings from this work. Use the examples that worked best for you to illustrate those findings.*

*Emotion Memory is a large part of the System and perhaps the part that Stanislavski became least happy about. Did this first sampling of its use work for you? How useful do you think your own memories might be to underpin playing a role? For instance, if you remember your first sexual attraction towards someone, that might help you play the part of Romeo or Juliet. But what if you were playing the part of someone who is very dissimilar to yourself? Stanislavski said that in that case you should find a memory that is as close as possible to key into. For example, if you had to play the part of a murderer - hopefully*

*you would not have a relevant emotion memory to use! - but you might have felt extreme anger at someone and that could be a starting point.*

*What do you think might be the pros and the cons of this contentious element of the System? Write these down to share with the group at a later time.*

Extract 4.

*Before moving on to Part Two, where the System is applied to pieces of text, make sure you are clear on all the elements so far. Have a different person in the group sum up each one from the above list. They should be able to say:*

*Why is this element important?*

*How does it work in combination with other elements?*

*How does it help an individual actor hone his skills AND how does it effect the whole ensemble in performance. [Often, if you read Stanislavski's books, the component parts of the System sound as if they are addressed to individuals, who work on them by themselves. But it needs to be remembered that acting never happens without other people; even a monologue will be bearing in mind what comes before and what after and will have had to adapt to the Director's wishes and the demands created by the design team.]*

#### THE SYSTEM PART TWO: APPROACHING A ROLE

The work you have done so far just about covers, in a very reduced way, all the different parts of the System which can be explored without being tied to an actual text or role. As a platform it should be useful, for it means that in this next section, where a text and a role is explored, you will see how all these parts slot together to make the whole: a fully rounded living and breathing character, in believable relationship with other characters, in the situation posed by the playwright.

To use this section you can take one of three suggested paths:

The first is to follow through a piece of text supplied by myself.

The second is to use a text of your own choice or that you are studying as a part of an examination.

The third is to follow through a suggested scenario as a platform for devised work. You could work through a part of this, or you can invent your own scenario for devising.

Extract 5.

#### 4] RULING IDEA AND SUPER-OBJECTIVE

Most of the last section involved using the actors' intellect to discover the emotional content of each line. There are a couple more intellectual hoops to jump through before we try out how Objectives can help you directly access emotion.

When working on an entire play, the director and cast together don't just identify the Units, each of which will have an Objective or motivation for the actor. It is important for every actor to also know what the Super-Objective of the whole play is and what is the Ruling Idea.

The Super-Objective is the climactic point, usually at or near the end of the play, which is where the whole play is heading. What drives it is the Ruling Idea, which can translate as the main theme.

To give an example: the Super-Objective of *Romeo and Juliet* might be the death of the two young lovers; that is where the whole action of the play has been heading from the opening scene. The Ruling Idea might be the pig-headed stupidity of the two families who will not give up their hatred for each other. It is this that drives the action - made up of many different scenes and Units with different Objectives - to that terrible wasteful climax.

Every character in a play will be contributing to the Ruling Idea and the Super-Objective. They might be furthering it [Tybalt, Mercutio] or seeking to block it [Friar Lawrence, the lovers themselves], but they are still contributing.

Every character also has his or her own Super-Objective, their most important moment. Understanding of that moment to come is important, so that an actor can build Perspective into his part. It is during the Unit which is the character's own Super-Objective that the actor pulls out the emotional stops; every Unit and scene previous to that will be emotionally lower on a scale from one to ten. ...