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1

Stanislavski's Theoretical System

Stanislavski (1863–1938) is one of the most familiar names in the modern theatre, and yet he is known primarily as a theorist. This situation is to some extent puzzling. Theatrical reputations might be thought to be generally established by prominence or reputation in performance or in writing scripts: quite simply, those who are famous in the theatre have traditionally been actors or playwrights, and more recently directors. In fact, Stanislavski was a dedicated and admired actor, and a significant director, but his prominence is undoubtedly due to the fame and reputation of his 'system', which is a mode of preparation for actors. There was, in the history of the European theatre, no real precedent for this, nor, indeed, for a pedagogic system of acting which crossed cultural boundaries to such great effect. So perhaps the opening questions in relation to Stanislavski should be why he felt the need to prepare actors, and why that need was experienced (and still is) so universally, or at least in a wide range of cultures.

To the first of these questions there is no convenient answer, except to assume that the late nineteenth century saw a crisis of some sort in the capacity of actors to perform in those scripts judged by management and audiences to be most appropriate. What may well be the case is that we are witnessing, in the phenomenon centred on his name, a massive shift in taste or reception which created a break with the past, one in which we are still to some extent involved. There are two associated phenomena which make that likely: the first is the certainty which now surrounds the cultural changes summarized in the term 'modern', and the second is the apparent dominance of related concepts of realism in divergent western cultures, and indeed outside them. Stanislavski was as

important to psychological realism in the United States of America, in both the theatre and film, as he was to the uniform if problematic concept of socialist realism in the former Soviet Union, which was applied as readily to music as to the theatre.¹

But the temptation to link Stanislavski conveniently to some definition of realism is likely to deny some crucial aspects of the historical and theatrical context. Even if we were to assume, loosely enough, that 'realism' is an acceptable term for plays written to reflect contemporary society, then it has to be admitted that the Moscow Art Theatre which Stanislavski founded with Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1898 did not exclusively concern itself with contemporary plays. To take one prominent example, in one of his earliest accounts of the preparation of an actor, Stanislavski chooses to discuss a leading role in the bizarre if classic verse drama by Griboyedov, *Woe from Wit*, which was neither contemporary (it was first performed in 1831) nor, by virtue of its verse rhythms, realist in any convincing sense we could bring to the term.² Nonetheless, it is plain that the portrayal that Stanislavski chooses to bring to a leading role in the play, that of Chatski, and the exemplary place he grants it in his demonstration of what an actor should do, make it central to the continuing revolution which he inspired in acting.

Of course, *Woe From Wit* stood as a classic of the Russian literary theatre – in Stanislavski's time a complimentary term – and that readily explains its choice. But it is evident that the objective of inner or psychological conviction in the actor in his actions on stage represents a cultural value which is not restricted to a particular class of scripts. Nor is it tied to a particular kind of scenic convention, which might choose to represent a material reality in some detail. The prevalent mode of production in the more radical companies was that of naturalism, but this was compiled of curiously disparate elements. So, in the early years of the Moscow Art Theatre, fidelity in the creation of scenic environments ranged from an archaeological tendency for plays with a historical setting such as *Julius Caesar*, which was heavily indebted to the influential Meininger company, to the evocation of the underclass for a production such as Gorky's *The Lower Depths*.³ But the plays of Shakespeare, Gorky and Chekhov, even if realized with an accent on detailed material illusion, do not inherently make a stylistic composite which might compel the actor to respond within a specific mode of performance. Even naturalism does not arise naturally out of the innate scenic or scenographic qualities of the plays themselves.

So I wish to point out that there is something enigmatic in the creation of the modern theatre, and that if we use Stanislavski as a marker in defining it we are doing no more than to return to a problem we do not fully understand. What is clear is that this is a context for Stanislavski, one with which he is struggling and to which he is constantly trying to bring some coherence. He is not, as some others are to do, formulating a manifesto for a particular and specific intervention, but creating an alternative performance text for acting in changing circumstances.

There are, in fact, many different contexts that might be applied to Stanislavski. The first is the work of the Moscow Art Theatre, which now has some reasonable documentary representation in English, through the publication of selections of correspondence with a commentary, and of a good analytical account of some leading productions over its many years of existence (Benedetti 1991 and Worrall 1996, respectively). A second is biographical, a trend in understanding that is not only conventional for leading practitioners of theatre, but which is prompted by Stanislavski's autobiography, *My Life In Art*.⁴ This volume is, significantly, the first work that was published in English, although it is by no means the earliest writing of Stanislavski which is now available in English, even discounting the letters. It has an important role in providing a charter or a justification for the system of preparation for the actor, which Stanislavski was to record and promulgate both in English and his native Russian language, and I shall discuss it a little later in this chapter. It should be read alongside the related but distinctive autobiographical work by his partner in the Moscow Art Theatre, Nemirovich-Danchenko (1937), which helps to complete the link between the experience and values of the directors and the activity of the theatre company. Yet another context is provided by the history of theatre schools in Russia: at present the material available in translation on this topic is piecemeal, although it is vital to our understanding of theatrical education and training in Europe and America and beyond, and of the constitution of the modern theatre itself. I shall discuss it very briefly below.

There can be no doubt that Stanislavski as the phenomenon he is could not have come into existence without his propensity and talent for writing, which was in some respects motivated by the need for income. He not only worked in the theatre when he was ill, in later life, but he kept writing and preparing editions of his writing. There is a compulsion in this which has had lasting effects,

and which could not have arisen from a mere inclination to record a few thoughts, or some good practice, to use the contemporary jargon. Nor is his approach to writing simply that of the enthusiast, who sees the written text as a transparent means to the communication of important perceptions or intuitions. His texts are carefully designed, and although we must allow for the intervention of editors who were originally quite close associates, the form his writings take is to a large extent the substance of his influence. What exactly the 'system' is, or was, or has become outside reference to and reliance on the writings is very hard to track. As the Stanislavski scholar Benedetti has observed, drawing on comments made by Grotowski, different disciples of Stanislavski have disseminated the theory at different times, and Stanislavski himself never came to finite conclusions about its tenor and exact content (Benedetti 1989, 72–3). One major aspect of this diaspora is the role and influence of Boleslavsky, whose emigration to the United States gave rise eventually to the formation of method acting by Strasberg at the Actors Studio, which has had an immense impact on postwar cinema.⁵ In fact, interpretations of Stanislavski within practice or in institutions are immensely diverse, and it is quite beyond the scope of this book to track them.⁶ But it is worth questioning whether there is such a thing as the 'system', or whether it has become one of the most influential myths of the modern theatre.

The publication history of Stanislavski's writings has been set out clearly by Benedetti, with additional commentary coming from other scholars (Benedetti 1989, Appendix: 76–9).⁷ Stanislavski exists very firmly in both the English and Russian languages, but is different in each. This is a result of the timing of publication, which could not be coordinated, and of the effects of different editorial support and intervention, which have their own histories in the United States (with Norman and Elizabeth Hapgood) and in the Soviet Union and now Russia (with Gurevich, Kristi and others). One important characteristic is that publication came relatively late, and began (in English) after the decisive visit of the Moscow Art Theatre to the United States in 1922–23. The significant theoretical texts in English are these: *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Building a Character* (1949), *Creating a Role* (1961), with *Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage* (1950), a transcript from a student's notes of lectures given by Stanislavski to opera singers between 1918 and 1922. *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character* are essentially two parts of one work, *An Actor's Work on Himself*, of which the first alone was published

before Stanislavski's death in 1938. *Creating a Role*, although published last, combines studies written at different times on three plays: the first (mentioned above, on Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*) between 1916 and 1920, the second (on *Othello*) between 1930 and 1933, and the last (on Gogol's *The Government Inspector*) in 1936–37. Of other English translations, *Stanislavski's Legacy* is a collection of minor pieces of little theoretical importance, and *An Actor's Handbook* is a dictionary of 'pithy statements' of Stanislavski's ideas.⁸ The whole sequence of texts has its prelude in the publication of the autobiographical *My Life in Art* in its English version in 1924. New English-language translations of the major works, taken from the Russian editions, have been promised for some time, but it is through those listed here that Stanislavski has been known in English during the twentieth century.

Tracing the genesis of the system is bound to be intriguing, and much of Stanislavski's autobiography is dedicated to a sense of the discovery of an artistic mission which must be accurately identified, and of the promise and guarantee of artistic integrity that the evolution of a method will embody. But *My Life in Art* is not referring to an existing body of published texts, and so the charter that it aims to offer is, paradoxically, in support of something that is not as yet overtly expressed. As it seems, the context for the generation of a disciplined preparation for the actor is formed of many constituents. The first of these is Stanislavski's work on himself as an actor conceived ideally in a tradition of great actors of his century, notably in succession to figures such as the Russian Shchepkin (who died in the year of Stanislavski's birth) and the Italian Salvini, who was seen by Stanislavski. Both are mentioned regularly in the autobiography and in later writings. The demands that Stanislavski placed on himself plainly form a core of experience, on which he draws to place demands through specific exercises and challenges on the performer in the company, or the actor as student.

Secondly, there is the contribution made by the system of introducing a play to actors which was embraced by both Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko for the Moscow Art Theatre (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1937, 94–5). The mechanical implementation of a script without discussion or examination is recorded by Nemirovich-Danchenko as a standard feature of theatrical practice rejected by both partners (*ibid.*, 96–8). Nemirovich-Danchenko complains that in that prevalent scheme of rehearsal the actors quite quickly

'arrange the play by themselves', whereas a defining feature of the regime established by the pair was the continuing importance of the director, what Nemirovich-Danchenko calls 'the dictatorial will of the director-*régisseur*' (*ibid.*, 98 and 88 respectively). The model for this was undoubtedly the 'monarchical authority' of Kronek, the director of the Meininger company, which had visited Russia in 1885 and 1890 (*ibid.*, 104).⁹ Both men acknowledged his influence upon them, and both had for some years exercised authority in their respective groups, Stanislavski in the Society of Art and Literature, and Nemirovich-Danchenko as head of the drama school at the Philharmonic Society, one of two in Moscow, which he ran from 1891.

This last fact introduces a third constituent, which is the pedagogic quality of their formation as directors. In his autobiography, Stanislavski makes no mention of the school he added to the Society of Art and Literature in 1888, but Nemirovich-Danchenko writes of both partners as pedagogues:

To begin with, we were both of us in our groups absolute *régisseurs* and pedagogues. Both of us were accustomed to impose our sole will; more than that, we accustomed our pupils to submit to it. Furthermore, we were convinced it could not be otherwise. (*ibid.*, 106)

In this connection, Worrall has provided some useful information on the development of drama schools in Russia in the nineteenth century. He also gives a short account of the foundation of the Moscow Art Theatre school in 1901, and its early years, for which there is little documentation available in English (Worrall 1996, 65–7). The numbers admitted were small, and over three years of induction they regularly became smaller. Lastly, and in addition to the involvement of both directors in teaching the students, there is the intermediate status of the successive studios of the Moscow Art Theatre to take into account as a site for research into method. But the system itself became truly significant as a practical possibility when it was formally adopted as the company's rehearsal method in 1911, despite Nemirovich-Danchenko's doubts and reluctance.¹⁰ To make matters more awkward, the principal accounts in English translation of Stanislavski's methods in rehearsal date from the later periods of his activity for the company, in the early 1920s and at the end of his life.¹¹

This combination of factors makes the identity of the system hard to determine, in its different manifestations as an intensive process for production-preparation and rehearsal, or as an extended programme for student training. It is perfectly possible that the idea of a system, which will support and yet discipline the actor, is the primary ambition. This may then constitute what I referred to earlier as a myth, shifting in modes of re-telling from its inception in the aspirations of Stanislavski, through practical implementation and textual record, to the continuing promise of satisfactory induction and successful training.

The earliest component of the written theory that is available to us is the first part of *Creating a Role*, which is an exposition in three parts of Stanislavski's approach to the role of Chatski, the disillusioned lover, in Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*. The background to this is interesting, because the play had been produced by the Moscow Art Theatre in 1906, after some delays, and revived in 1914, but in both these productions Stanislavski had taken and developed the role of Famusov, the father-figure of the satirical comedy, rather than Chatski.¹² Early in 1915 Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to Stanislavski complaining that Stanislavski did not understand 'the actor's particular theatrical gift', and lamenting the inability of the partners to 'direct plays together' (Benedetti 1991, 299–300). In the letter he alluded to the history of that failure:

In the past this was explained by the fact that you went from the outside, from the characteristics, from the 'picture', and I from the inner image, from the psychology, the 'sketch'. But then you moved over to the psychological.¹³

Nemirovich-Danchenko then claims that he offered Stanislavski a 'sketch' for the role of Famusov, 'acted it out' several times 'in order to make it clear' and was twice asked to repeat it by Stanislavski, but that the latter subsequently failed to credit him with any influence on the success of the role. Stanislavski apparently began writing his study of the role of Chatski in 1916, but as a compensation, it seems, for a sense of frustration in the actual productions, which had been directed substantially by his partner. So this is theory not documentation, presenting the preparation for a fantasy role in a fictional production.

The presentation is given as a direct address to the reader, and is clearly theoretical in its organization and its frame. The three parts of the process that are announced at the outset are an early version of the more familiar, later form of the developed theory of process, with inner preparation ('the period of emotional experience') in the second part, and physical realization supposedly the subject of the third. These correspond, in anticipation, to the first two parts of *An Actor's Work on Himself*, which we now find in *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character* respectively. In addition, there is included as the first part an opening period of study, which confirms the importance of the radical changes that Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavski brought to the early period of preparation for rehearsal and production. The presiding imagery, which introduces and forms the continuing frame for the presentation, is that of sexual desire and union between a man and a woman. So the first reading of the play is like the 'first meeting between a man and a woman . . . who are destined to be sweethearts, lovers, or mates', and 'first impressions have a virginal freshness about them' which acts as a stimulus. They are also 'seeds', and they 'often leave ineradicable traces which will remain as a basis of a part, the embryo of an image to be formed' (*Creating a Role* = CR 3). In this sensitive moment, the reader who reads the play to the cast acts like a tactful go-between, and must not intrude his personal interpretation on the roles, since the actors must be free to feel the play emotionally, without obstacles (CR 5). Enticing as the imagery is, it also serves conversely as an dire warning against rushing carelessly into a script: 'You cannot erase a spoiled first impression any more than you can recover lost maidenhood.' The ideal reader sounds remarkably like Nemirovich-Danchenko, whose reputation as a writer and literary figure had confirmed for many years his predominance as the literary manager for the Moscow Art Theatre (CR 6-7).

The debt to Nemirovich-Danchenko may be more than that, or it may be that at this time Stanislavski the nascent writer and theorist is looking to his literary partner to provide assurance and validation. In the opening of part two, the imagery of the seed is ascribed to a comparison, or simile, made by Nemirovich-Danchenko, in which the seed of the author's script, planted in the actor, must decompose to emerge as a plant. In this vision, the metaphor of nature as creativity is simple and reassuring, but as presented it also suggests a dual authorship for performance and production, shared between actor and script-writer, which has an immense resonance in the

twentieth century. The role of the director is noticeably marginal here. For Stanislavski, this second period is one of creation, equivalent to consummation and conception, and the organic quality which he asserts for acting offers a vital charter for the proper study of that discipline, and a high status for the activity itself:

The creative process of living and experiencing a part is an organic one, founded on the physical and spiritual laws governing the nature of man, on the truthfulness of his emotions, and on natural beauty. How does this organic process originate and develop, of what does this creative work of the actor here consist? (CR 44)

Conceived in this way, the study of acting is a natural science like any other. The process of acting already exists as an organic entity, both physical and spiritual, and as such it has both truth and beauty: all that remains is for the natural scientist to discover its originating sources or inspiration, and to chart the stages of its progression and natural development. It is a model which will recur in the theatrical theory traced by this book. The completion of the imagery at the opening of part three, in which physical embodiment is compared to birth and early growth, is tame by comparison, since the work of the image has been done.

Much of the first part of the presentation is pragmatic, granted the premise that the play must be studied. But there are principles on which Stanislavski insists, and they reveal a particular profile for the kind of analysis that he envisages. For an actor, he states, knowing is feeling, and so an actor's analysis is an analysis of feeling. This must include a search for sensual memories which will be related or will relate the actor to the play, and these are stored in the actor's 'emotion memory' (CR 9). Stanislavski here concentrates on the principle to which he alludes at the opening of part two, one which characterizes his later theoretical position consistently: granted a creative process is organic, what matters above all is to find its sources. So creativity must find a root from its unconscious state into action, motion and effect, and that requires conscious preparation: 'Through the conscious to the unconscious – that is the motto of our art and technique.' (*ibid.*). Studying the course of the action in the play is working on one plane, and studying the social situation is working on another, but ultimately Stanislavski suggests reliance by the actor on imagination to put life into what he calls external circumstances. Through imagination the actor

can exercise a mental version of what we might now call virtual reality, wandering about the house in which the play is set and confronting specific characters (CR 21–30). The actor may set up an imaginary dialogue with a character, and the imagination may also provoke the actor's own feelings into dialogue, by suggesting acceptable motives for characters whose behaviour is emotionally repellent (CR 32 and 36–8 respectively).

This approach continues for part two, in which the imagination prompts the actor to recreate a scene, offering the actor a path into the inner action that is so strongly desired (CR 45–8). It is this inner action which forms another essential principle, and Stanislavski spells out the paradox: the most decisive kind of action is internal. As such it must be lived by the actor, and it can only be lived if it is composed from the actor's own feelings and desires (CR 50). So desire is more than a suggestive image; it is an indication of a vital motive which must be coaxed rather than commanded from the actor. In order to coax it successfully, there must be an objective, which 'is the lure for our emotions' (CR 51). In relation to the role of Chatski, this objective, like the desire, is overtly sexual, that of preventing 'an unnatural and unaesthetic union' taking place. Stanislavski is, on this topic, not altogether clear whether this constitutes a conscious or unconscious objective, which is perhaps just as well in a performer who draws on his ability to 'be touched by his own efforts to save an inexperienced girl intent on destroying herself.' (CR 53–4). Furthermore, psychological objectives must be bound up with physical objectives, and in such a manner that the inner life of the character is not only manifest when the actor is speaking the character's lines. This means that the actor must create an alternative and complementary script to that of the play itself, something that Stanislavski designates 'the score of a role' (CR 56–62). Later, Stanislavski is to distinguish between two 'scores' for Chatski, that of a friend and that of a lover (CR 76).

The analysis of objectives, and alternative scores, is complex, and from it issue two more crucial components of Stanislavski's theoretical vision: contradiction, and the notion of the superobjective. Contradiction is a quality of genius in Stanislavski the writer, and one which is seldom noticed in dogmatic or mechanical accounts of the system. In some respects, the analysis here of process based on the role of Chatski degenerates into simplicity, as Stanislavski, caught by his own theoretical framework of desire,

settles on passion as a central definition of the character. Yet, at the same time, this relatively uninspired simplicity – it is a perception adduced to add ‘depth’ to the portrayal – is combined with and qualified by the admonition that passions are formed from individual, varied, and even contradictory feelings: the example given is that of the passion and feelings of a loving mother when she strikes a child in anger after it was nearly run over. Similarly, he advises that the evil in a good character should be sought out, the stupidity lurking in intelligence, the gravity in an ebullient character (CR 67–8 and 69 respectively). Most impressively, the line of action for any character will encounter frustrations and obstacles, and be confronted and confused by those of other characters: life is a struggle, and those collisions and conflicts ‘constitute the dramatic situation’ (CR 80).

In some senses, this is far more subtle than the presentation of the superobjective, ‘the objective of all objectives’, the transcending principle of interpretation which is the ultimate and satisfying unity of all endeavour, and ‘the quintessence of the play’ (CR 78 and 79 respectively). This concept, incorporating as it does such theoretical absolutes as unity and transcendence, can inevitably only be realized by ‘artists of genius’, and so like many theoretical objectives remains withheld from most readers. It is paired with the far more comprehensible, analytical ‘through line of action’ which permits the actor to attain the superobjective, as it has allowed the writer to express it (CR 78–9). Yet this combination of the writer and the actor, although it looks attractive, makes the concept of the superobjective problematic at this stage. On the one hand it is banal, equivalent as it seems to the familiar idea of the dominant passion in any individual: this is the illustration that Chatski offers, of passion in its erotic form, and Stanislavski suggests further unremarkable examples in the miser’s aspiration for riches, the ambitious person’s ‘thirst for honors’, the aesthete’s ‘artistic ideals’ (CR 79). But, in the writer, Stanislavski identifies spiritual and metaphysical superobjectives (Dostoyevski’s ‘search for God and Devil in the soul of man’ in *The Brothers Karamazov*, ‘the comprehending of the secrets of being’ in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*) with thoroughly personal quests, such as Tolstoy’s ‘unending search for “self-perfection”’ (CR 78). Whether and how these are contained or expressed in the work itself, or to be sensed of the author through the work, is unclear. But the final theoretical formula is already certain of its terms:

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. (CR 80)

The third part, on physical embodiment, significantly fails to rise to these heights, with little even in the way of valuable instruction for the actor, apart from the pedestrian advice to rely on observation, or to make sketches.

Notes taken by a student rather than a text prepared by Stanislavski form the substance of *Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage*, translated by Magarshack and published in the same year as his biography of Stanislavski (Stanislavski 1950). The notes date from 1918–22, when Stanislavski responded to a request to open a studio for singers of the Bolshoi Opera. In his autobiography Stanislavski states that in the first year of operation a small number of established singers came along, but that for subsequent years he insisted on having younger singers, for whom he constructed a syllabus (Stanislavski 1924, 558–62). Not much of that syllabus is apparent from the 30 talks that constitute the shorthand record, which carry the title ‘The System and Methods of Creative Art’. Magarshack comments that Stanislavski ‘did not believe in “lecturing”’, and that these ‘discourses were never prepared’, and certainly they are inordinately repetitive and for the most part unrevealing about the nature of the teaching involved (Stanislavski 1950, 79). Stanislavski concentrates on the ethics of belonging to a studio, offering in the centre of the series observations on such topics as alertness, concentration, and even gladness. Momentarily, the discursive flow of exhortation is broken by allusions to specific examples or exercises, which are tantalizing. In talk XII Stanislavski fixes on a knife which is to be used, in a dramatic plot, to kill a rival, and starts with concentration on the implement itself. He then insists on the performer widening the circle of concentration to include the memory of the time when this enemy was a friend, in childhood, or the occasion on which he saved ‘your’ life, complicating the feelings by what I have called his technique of contradiction (*ibid.*, 145–8). This principle is repeated in talk XVII, in which the performer is urged to discover at least one moment when a villain has shown courage or been good. Stanislavski covers this advice with the ethical principle of ‘courage’ as a performer, but it is plain that contradiction is understood to be an intense quality of successful portrayal (*ibid.*, 185–6; he follows

this with another reference to the relationship of mother and child, 186–7).

Apart from these moments, there are glimpses of theoretical ideas, notably the insistence, which is surely part of the 'system' to which Stanislavski constantly alludes, on the thought of "'I want to'" which must motivate every action and so every part of the script or libretto (*ibid.*, 157–9, 173 and elsewhere). Similarly, 'if' recurs throughout the talks, to mark significantly the difference between the mere fact of impersonation and the artistic challenge that should result from it: not 'I am this character', but 'if I am this character, then what follows from that'. The two principles should then combine, as Stanislavski explains: "'If I am Tatyana, I want to give my love, I want to disclose to you the inmost secrets of my heart...'" (*ibid.*, 180). Towards the end of the sequence, there is even a momentary reference to 'the little magic word "'if'" (*ibid.*, 245). In fact, in these concluding talks, exercises and the style of teaching do begin to emerge: in talk XXVIII a Miss X is faced with the task of entering the studio and picking a quarrel with each of its members, starting with Stanislavski himself (we find here that there are five in the room). There is no representation of dialogue, but the talk contains a response in character from Stanislavski accused of infidelity in the opening gambit by Miss X, a self-critique by him, and then a critique of Miss X and her approach (*ibid.*, 239–44). In talk XXX, Mr Y is told to sit down and imagine himself to be an old, sick man. Instruction proceeds by way of an immediate criticism of Mr Y's representation, by re-setting the problem, by a second immediate condemnation of the results, and by the suggestion of a detailed score of physical actions that Mr Y then follows (*ibid.*, 251–3). The rehearsals of Massenet's *Werther* that conclude the series of talks are less revealing, and date from just before the Moscow Art Theatre left (in 1922) for its tour in Europe and the United States.

On the first foreign tour of European cities in 1906, Stanislavski had been accompanied by Nemirovich-Danchenko (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1937, 277–326). The second European tour was conducted by Stanislavski alone, and it concluded with a voyage to New York, and performances in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston (in 1923). After a period of rest in Europe, Stanislavski returned later in the year for a second season in New York, and toured other American cities in 1924. The American tour was marketed by the theatrical manager Morris Gest, and

founded Stanislavski's individual reputation as a celebrity in the United States. As a companion to the promotion of the tour came an offer to publish a theatrical life, a stage autobiography by Stanislavski, and to this project he committed himself earnestly.

My Life in Art, is a complex, intriguing and charismatic account of its subject, and an immensely successful exercise in public relations. It was first published in English in 1924, and revised for a Russian edition published in 1926 (Benedetti 1989, 76–7). Like many autobiographies, it is vocational, which means that the narrative takes the reader through a series of false starts leading towards the goal. The book successfully communicates this sense of frustration, and by doing so supports the feeling that a great conclusion is eventually found. The spiritual history is confessional, with self-criticism and self-transcendence constant motifs, written in a manner which testifies to effort, dedication, honesty and survival, and which also leads the reader emotively towards the belief in a solution. There are other, signal characteristics of the narrative, of which the most telling is the emphasis on the inadequacy of the actor.¹⁴ Stanislavski is a harsh judge at times of his own portrayals, and this critical self-consciousness is translated into what becomes at times almost an ideology of the actor's weakness, fallibility and sheer idleness. *My Life in Art* is ultimately a history of the revolution undertaken by Stanislavski against that debilitating *ancien régime*, and the announcement of his system promises the disclosure of the secrets of the art of acting held by 'the great masters of the stage', but rarely if ever passed on to another by them.

The absence of this tradition sentenced our art to become diletantism. From the inability to find a conscious path to unconscious creativeness, actors reached destructive prejudices which denied spiritual technique; they grew cold in the surface layers of scenic craft and accepted empty theatrical self-consciousness for true inspiration. I know only one method of combating this so dangerous circumstance for the actor. This is to describe in a well-balanced system all that I have reached after long researches . . . (Stanislavski 1924, 571)

Autobiographies should contain profound rejections, and may also issue in a sense of enlightenment. *My Life in Art* is an immense success in confirming celebrity and establishing the pattern of per-

sonal achievement, and it is a charter for a practice which has discovered, after a lifetime's effort, 'a few grains of gold.' What is promised is 'a guide, a series of exercises' that will lead to inspiration for the actor, and seldom has the hope of theatrical redemption found such devoted adherents (*ibid.*, 572 and 571 respectively).

An Actor Prepares is probably the most familiar of all Stanislavski's writings in English translation. It has, of the systematic works, the longest history since it was published in 1936, and *Building a Character*, the second of this English-language trilogy, appeared only in 1949, to be followed after another extended interval by *Creating a Role* in 1961. We may also detect, in this relative popularity, a bias in reception towards that part of the system or method which relates to work on the inner, emotional psychology of the role, which may take its lead from a preference expressed in the work itself. In *An Actor Prepares*, Tortsov says 'I do admit that I incline towards the emotional side of creativeness...' (*An Actor Prepares* = AP 248). Alternatively, it may be that Stanislavski's supervision of this volume has resulted in something more convincing in printed form; a final possibility might be that it is simply more successful, more consistent and more thorough as a written presentation than its sequels.

An Actor Prepares is conceived most overtly in the form of a dialogue, and Stanislavski may have had any number of models for this. The origins of the literary dialogue lie with Plato who used it to expound, through the person of Socrates, the philosophical victory of right thinking over mistaken beliefs and arguments. Dialogue is ideally suited to contradicting error, and had precedents in theatrical theory of which Stanislavski was almost certainly aware, namely Diderot in the influential *Paradox on the Actor* and some of the writings of Edward Gordon Craig, with whom Stanislavski had collaborated.¹⁵ Dialogue almost emerges from the final talks in the series from the Bolshoi Opera studio, and it is relatively plain that Stanislavski engaged his students in this kind of interrogation of realization and achievement. But a dialogue in literary form is not just a record of a conversation, pedagogic or not, and the framework of the narrative is carefully established. It transpires that we are reading an account recorded by a student Kostya of the instruction given by the Director, Tortsov, in a drama school or studio; we learn, in the course of the account, that Kostya has shorthand skills (AP 240). As has been pointed out by (for example) Benedetti, Kostya is the familiar version of Konstantin, and so Stanislavski can be present both as the narrator, the 'I' of the

account, and as the teacher Tortsov, whose name carries the connotation 'creator'.¹⁶ In this way Stanislavski is able to chart learning as well as instruction, and to incorporate a version of the autobiographical conviction he had constructed in *My Life in Art*.

An Actor Prepares covers the first year of training in this school, and the narrative supposedly offers a record of between eighty to one hundred lessons, almost exclusively with the Director, who is himself called off infrequently to perform or to tour. There is occasional mention of other lessons – dancing, gymnastics, fencing, voice-placing and diction is the largest list, without further detail – and repeated reference is made to 'drill', which appears late in the book to refer to exercises in muscular relaxation and concentration, repeated from earlier in the course (*AP* 170 and 266 respectively).¹⁷ The students are introduced indirectly to aspects of lighting and scene-design or scenic arrangement, which appear to be supervised by the Assistant Director, Rakhmanov, who is also responsible for discipline in the school, and for putting up the placards used to announce a specific concept (*AP* 2–3 for discipline, and *AP* 223 for the placard announcing 'adaptation'). The number of students is small – six are characterized to some effect, but others are named – and classes take place on the stage of the school for the most part, with the stage curtain drawn for much of the time to obscure the auditorium. The personal circumstances of any student are only exceptionally revealed in any depth when they emerge unavoidably into the lessons: one female student has had an illegitimate child which died. The Director, Tortsov, relies on a small number of improvised scenes, to which he makes the students return to some purpose; some scenes from a shortlist of plays (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Brand*) which partly stem from student choices; illustrative anecdotes; various, arranged stage environments; and a series of challenges, often given to individuals or to the class in turn. The teaching is founded on a principle that Tortsov describes as 'learning by vivid practical example', and he declares that he is fearful of 'falling into philosophy and straying from the path of practical demonstration' (*AP* 242–3). It is distinctly noticeable, from the narrative itself, that the students become more confused and recalcitrant towards the end of the year and of the book.

In some respects, the narrative is presented as seamless, as a constant progression through exercises which concentrate on a particular perception or activity, and then move on, often abruptly, to another. In fact, there are two major breaks in the flow. The first

occurs at ch. VI, when Kostya hurts himself and has to rest, and Tortsov interrupts what he calls 'the strictly systematic development of our programme', interposing exercises on the relaxation of muscles which properly belong to 'the external side of our training' (AP 95). This is, in fact, a distinction which has not been made as yet to the students, or the reader. The second break occurs at the end of ch. XI, when Tortsov states to the students that he has brought them 'temporarily to the end of our study of the internal elements necessary to the creative process in an actor' (AP 243). The remaining elements are displayed on placards, and they will be deferred to the second part of the training which we find in *Building a Character*, although that is not plainly stated at this point. So a potential second year and second part, on external training, haunt the narrative of the first and interrupt it, suggesting a design for the method or system which is not made explicit.

It may be helpful to see these three sections of *An Actor Prepares* as successively concerned with basic principles, theory and realization, all three in connection with what Stanislavski allows Tortsov finally to fix as the 'inner creative state' of the actor. The opening process is like an audition rather than a lesson, one in which the Director expressly does not teach, but allows the student's own sense of failure to illumine a need. The primary statement of principle is framed by quotations from the actors Salvini and Shchepkin, and it insists on the need for feeling in acting to be moved by the subconscious, and for the actor to reach the subconscious by oblique or indirect means, so ensuring that acting is both natural and true (AP 12–14). This, for Tortsov, confirms that 'realism and even naturalism in the inner preparation of a part is essential, because it causes your subconscious to work' That principle issues in an imperative, which in its two parts implicitly describes the organization of the system: 'An actor is under the obligation to live his part inwardly, and then to give to his experience an external embodiment' (AP 15). The method to be followed, which is identified with 'true art', is contrasted with other, unsatisfactory means of acting such as representation (a 'mirror' form), the mechanical (drawn from conventions), and over-acting (reliant on clichés); the final category of error is that of vanity, which forms part of Stanislavski's persistent caricature of the female student Sonya.

Other basic principles follow this induction. If it is necessary to act inwardly, then the 'fundamental principle' of 'unconscious creativeness through conscious technique' is best activated by introdu-

cing the 'if' as a stimulus to the imagination (AP 50). The 'given circumstances' of the play, 'its facts, events, epoch, time and place of action, conditions of life', the interpretations of actors and director, its *mise-en-scène* and production values will provide the 'if', and by this means the actor will 'bring to life what is hidden under the words' (AP 50–1). The imagination is vital, either in its visual and pictorial capacity of visualizing (students are asked to be a tree, and see what the tree sees) or in its capacity of displaying a virtual reality such as entering a house, which was explored in the study of Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit* (AP ch. IV, 54–71). This opening sequence of the statement and discovery of principles, and their exploration and validation through exercises, is concluded with work on the concentration of attention.

The brief hiatus granted by Kostya's accident and an excursus on the relaxation of muscles allows the narrative to move into its central, and heavily theoretical section. The actor must analyse a play and a role within the play, breaking both down into units, each of which should have an objective at its heart, and the succession of both units and objectives should form a 'channel', or 'a logical and coherent stream' (AP 115 and 117 respectively). The objectives may be physical and external (the approach to a formal handshake), or psychologically simple (a sincere, heartfelt handshake) or complex (apologizing for an insult) (AP 119–20). The objective is drawn from the unit by finding a verb – an active motive – rather than a noun to describe it. The simple technique is to apply 'I wish to do – so and so' to a unit to find the objective, and the students confirm by their own explorations that 'the *verbs* provoked thoughts and feelings which were, in turn, inner challenges to action' (AP 121–6).

By the middle of *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski is sufficiently confident to introduce the term 'psycho-technique', notably in a chapter which emphasizes that 'every physical act... has an inner source of feeling' (AP ch. VIII, 151 and 144 respectively). The introduction of this term announces the central theoretical position to be occupied by 'emotion memory', which must be distinguished from the more superficial 'sensation memory', associated principally, for Tortsov, with the senses of smell, taste and touch. Stanislavski's approach to this central concept, derived or adapted from the French psychologist Ribot, is to have Kostya witness and record an accident in the street, which a week later is displaced or adjusted in his memory by other incidents that happened earlier in his life.¹⁸ Memories, in Tortsov's explanation of this phenomenon, are filtered

by time, which produces a result like an archive, a source of inspiration in the actor's work for which a stimulus is required. This stimulus may be provided by the stage setting, or it may be activated by sympathy in the actor for the character. Since this is a theory that links the art of composing scripts – Shakespeare applied his own 'crystallized emotion memories' to stories received from others (*AP* 173) – to the art of acting we expect more here, but the theory falters on these two rather disparate and generalized stimuli. Indeed, it is not clear that sympathy is essentially a stimulus, because Stanislavski has Tortsov conclude that it is a parallel source to emotion memory as creative material (*AP* 190). The vocabulary of means is limited, and tentative in describing the process: so we read of a 'psycho-technical store of riches', but of a 'lure' or of the need to 'coax' out emotions, which are 'as shy as wild animals' and 'hide in the depths of our souls' (*AP* 191). It is a hesitation that will recur with the concept of the superobjective at the close of the book.

The unsystematic nature of what is proposed as a system is apparent from the faltering steps with which Stanislavski–Tortsov proceeds to the third section of the book, which nonetheless contains the summation of the theory. After chapters on communion with self and a partner on stage, and the adjustments or adaptations that an actor needs to realize in the path of performance, Tortsov announces the end of 'our study of the internal elements necessary to the creative process in an actor' (*AP* 243). This announcement, as I have mentioned, is accompanied by placards indicating other elements that Tortsov chooses to postpone. It is then followed, without explanation, by a celebratory recapitulation of the three vital 'inner motive forces': feeling, the mind or imagination, and the will. These are apparently the 'masters' that play upon the elements and methods of psycho-technique, but Tortsov faces a complaint that he has concentrated the attention of his students largely on feeling, which he answers by claiming that he is compensating for a general tendency to discount feeling in acting (*AP* 247–8). There is a short silence at the end of this lesson, as if Stanislavski is willing to admit the inadequacy of his exposition as Tortsov. The subsequent chapters prepare the line of the actor towards the goal, which will not be clear until the line is established.

The 'unbroken line' is a principle of continuity for the actor in performance, and it has two facets. The playwright offers only what the characters say and do on stage, and this is inadequate for the actor: according to Tortsov, 'we have to fill out what he leaves

unsaid' in the lives and experience of the characters (AP 257). The second facet of continuity, which would be less contentious, is that of the actor's attention on the stage, which must also be unbroken. This unbroken line in the life of a character will then have a direction, which must be sustained through the realization of objectives by the inner motive forces of feeling, mind, and will; if the objectives are vague, then this will adversely affect the inner creative mood (AP 270). The overall direction taken is guided by an awareness of the super-objective, about which Stanislavski is as uncertain as he was when it was introduced in the study of Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit* discussed above. The personal, spiritual motives of Dostoyevski and Tolstoy as authors are mentioned again, and in this case are linked with Chekhov, who, for his part, 'wrestled with the triviality of bourgeois life', a struggle which 'became the *leit motiv* of his literary productions' (AP 271). These authorial quests are, according to Tortsov, in some way to be associated with the superobjective of the given work, notably the play, but how we or the actors are to understand this subtle and obscure process is not explained. Instead, Tortsov chooses to equate the superobjective with the apparently simple but problematic concept of the 'main theme' of the play:

The main theme must be firmly fixed in an actor's mind throughout the performance. It gave birth to the writing of the play. It should also be the fountain-head of the actor's artistic creation. (AP 273)

Once again, Stanislavski chooses to conclude with silence on the part of the students, and with the dissatisfaction with the system felt, on this occasion, by Kostya himself (AP 279–80).

Ultimately, the system is made to rely upon the subconscious, with which *An Actor Prepares* ends. It becomes apparent that the objectives, as steps towards a goal, 'will, to a large extent, be taken subconsciously' (AP 300). The through-line of action is made up of these objectives, large or small, and the through-line eventually realizes the superobjective. Even the 'main theme', which must be chosen to be 'in harmony with the intentions of the playwright', can only be found subconsciously by the actor, clothed in the person of the character (AP 301–2 and 306 respectively). So the whole process is subconscious, and appears as the initiation concludes to be rather like a mystical journey into the underworld, announced by a prophet: 'Then, as I have told you, truth and faith will lead you into the region of the subconscious and hand you over to the power of nature' (AP 295).

Building a Character represents, in its own account, the second year of the fictional course in the school run by Tortsov, which 'is devoted to the external aspect of acting, the building of our physical apparatus' (*Building a Character* = BC 275). Predictably, for this reason, the narrative includes references to a greater variety of classes apart from those led by the director, who introduces teachers and whose own role is more of an intervention in those classes. Apart from his assistant Rakhmanov's classes in 'drill', we read of 'regular daily exercises' in Swedish gymnastics (BC 37–8), of 'a famous circus clown' teaching tumbling (BC 39), of a dancing class (BC 41), of exercises in plastic movement led by Madame Sonova (BC 48), of voice classes led by Madame Zarembo (BC 92, 105, 108), and of classes on accentuation led by Sechenov (BC 171). The conclusion offers a picture of even more: gymnastics, acrobatics, fencing, wrestling, boxing and carriage or deportment are listed (BC 272). While these skills together provide one narrative framework of support for the physicality of the student-actor, the need for a discipline of acting is enhanced by analogy with other arts. This is first apparent in the curious exhibition assembled by Rakhmanov, which includes plaster casts of statues, paintings, photographs and books on costume, scene design, ballet and dance, and a list of the Moscow museums (BC 36). But the most insistent comparisons in the narrative, largely made by Tortsov himself, are with painting and then with dance and music. So a director may add a touch to the work of an actor rather as a master painter may improve the work of a pupil (BC 76), while the actor may make a painting with a word (BC 151), or use rhythms like a painter uses colours (BC 205–6). Musicians, singers and dancers are fortunate in the control of rhythm offered by metronomes, time and measure, conductors and choir masters, and these performers with the addition of writers and even a meticulous surgeon are later all examples of skilled practitioners who keep in daily training (BC 214 and 259–60). In conclusion, the actor must have control of his instrument, that is 'of all the spiritual and physical aspects of a human being', and actors should study 'the laws, the theory of their art' just as musicians do. It is this which constitutes 'the programme of work' which is the 'system' (BC 294).

Of the theoretical ideas elaborated in *Building a Character* possibly the most significant is that of 'subtext', that which 'lies behind and beneath the actual words of a part', as Tortsov formulates it in ch. VIII. The subtext runs towards the ultimate super-objective as an

equivalent, in its relation to speech, to the through line of action. More precisely:

It is the manifest, the inwardly felt expression of a human being in a part, which flows uninterruptedly beneath the words of the text, giving them life and a basis for existing... It is the subtext that makes us say the words we do in a play. (BC 113)

In this theory, the scripted word itself is empty or inert, 'not valuable in and of itself', like a musical score, until actors or musicians 'breathe the life of their own sentiment into the subtext' (BC 114). In order to illuminate his concept of the subtext, Tortsov draws on a picture-book theory of language which postulates that words (notably nouns) evoke mental pictures and 'visual images', which may then be communicated to an actor's partner on the stage (BC 115–18). These 'inner pictures' should be composed into 'a whole film, a running subtext', with the actor as 'author' of the subtext conveying the images and not just the words to a partner (BC 119). A reliance on this 'inner stream of images' which is 'like a moving picture constantly thrown on the screen of our inner vision' will also stimulate the emotion memory, just as physical actions had acted as 'lures' to the actor's feelings in the first part of the programme (BC 124–6). Curiously this theory reverses Stanislavski–Tortsov's insistence on the importance of verbs in realizing the objectives of a role, but it is not challenged by the students.

The demonstrations with the metronome that are meant to establish the value and validity of the concept of tempo-rhythm (in ch. XI) are extended, but provide little in the way of theoretical conviction, and fail absolutely to consider the cultural context and determinants of socially specific actions. The narrative relies on what Kostya feels to be the actions associated with different tempo-rhythms, with little sign of an accompanying systematic or disciplinary rigour. So, in the final stages, an agitated rhythm conjures up galloping to Kostya, but he himself becomes a fugitive in the mountains hiding from a pursuing horseman; when the melody tracing the tempo-rhythm turns 'tender', his thoughts turn to love, and it is his 'sweetheart' rather than a 'mounted bandit' in pursuit (BC 203). The power attributed to tempo-rhythm of suggesting 'not only images but also whole scenes' clearly extends to clichés of dubious systematic value, and the physical definition of the concept mutates into a metaphorical instrument for the analysis of roles. Not only are

different tempo-rhythms found in the actors performing different characters in one scene, but they may also be found 'inside one of them.' In Hamlet's irresolute and doubting soul 'various rhythms in simultaneous conjunction are necessary', a contention which proves extremely hard to demonstrate successfully in the examples of a drunken pharmacist, an actor getting ready for performance, or a woman being led to execution (BC 206–7). The concept of tempo-rhythm is also applied to 'whole plays' and 'whole performances', in which it is achieved by 'a series of large and small conjunctions of varied and variegated rates of speed and measures', but the assertion rests largely in a description of success rather than a communication of means or method. Faced by scepticism from the students, Tortsov concludes that 'our great predecessors' in the art of acting 'may have had special ways of doing this about which we, unfortunately, have no information,' and the required exercises remain far from the students' grasp (BC 217–18 and 222–3 respectively).

The concluding chapters (XIII–XVI) of *Building a Character* concern themselves with various kinds of accomplishment, with ch. XIII dedicated to 'stage charm', but they also permit Stanislavski to emphasize some fundamental principles governing his view of acting. One of these is the authority of the director or régisseur, and failure to listen to this presiding figure is classified as 'a crime against all other workers in the theatre', in a sequence which castigates the lazy or inattentive actor (BC 254–67). A second principle sees the actor compared to a priest 'who is aware of the presence of the altar during every moment that he is conducting a service' (BC 252). But the most important principles are those which supposedly 'naturalize' the system itself. The method advocated by Stanislavski–Tortsov was not, the author makes Tortsov claim, 'concocted or invented by anyone', but is 'a part of our organic natures', and is 'based on the laws of nature'. After all, he adds, since we have 'an innate capacity for creativeness' which is to us a 'natural necessity', it is inevitable that we should express it 'in accordance with a natural system' (BC 287). Tortsov completes the argument by suggesting that nature would be enough – 'All we ask is that an actor on the stage live in accordance with natural laws' – but for the unfortunate 'tendency toward distortion' that working in the theatre occasions. It is this tendency that the system is called upon to correct, 'in destroying inevitable distortions and in directing the work of our inner natures to the right path', so doing no more – it is claimed – than returning the actor to 'the creative state

of a normal human being' (BC 288–9). Theoretically, the system is merely a restoration of what is natural, but its ultimate promise is both ambitious and seductive: those wise enough to take advantage of it 'may grow into the class of those who are akin to the geniuses' (BC 289).

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