



## STANISLAVSKI: A DISCOURSE ON 'SYSTEM' DRAMATURGY

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### ABSTRACT

Stanislavski knew that Western theatre had gone through many different styles and different staging in creating a theatre performance and that there was no one correct way of making a theatre. As an avid experimenter in theatre – art and crafts, he was continually open to learning new approaches and combined new ideas and application of old and new techniques. He is famed for revolutionizing through his 'system' the Western "ideas about acting. His discoveries still form the basis of actor training in Western theatre" (Allen 1). One such influence of the 'system' is seen in American 'Method' acting. Stanislavski writes about his 'system' that it "is the result of lifelong searches" in which he has "tried to find a method of work for actors to enable them to create the image of a character, breathe into it the inner life of a human spirit", and he takes recourse to "natural means" so as to embody it [character] "on stage in a beautiful, artistic form" (Stan. cited in Allen1). The present paper attempts to explicate 'system' dramaturgy within this perspective.

Keywords: system, American 'Method', empathy, alienation, psycho-technique, virtuoso

### Introduction

Stanislavski (1863-1938) was one of the most significant theorists and practitioners of 20th century Western drama and theatre. As per Allen, he was born in Moscow on January 5, 1863, and was baptized Konstantin Sergeevich Alekseyev. He later adopted a stage name 'Stanislavski'. He was one of the co-founders of the Moscow Art Theatre. Allen sees him as the first person who developed "a cogent and practical system of acting", and was devoted throughout his life, seeking answers to some fundamental questions concerning 'great acting', a possible grammar of acting, its technicality, the steps one had to go through in creating a character, and the ways to imbibe the inspiration at every performance. He, thereby, exerted "the most important influence on actor training today" (*ibid.*). American version of 'Method' acting is said to be a partial derivation of the 'system', which was about the holistic view of theatre performance.

The new theory and practice of theatrical presentation available to the modern Western theatre may broadly be classified under three approaches. They are (i) Stanislavski's realistic creative approach, (ii) Brechtian 'Epic theatre' imbued with socialistic flavour, and (iii) the Artaudian 'mystical approach'. Stanislavski favoured an illusionistic and emotive style of communication, inviting empathy and emotional involvement of the play-actor and the audience. He wanted that spiritual reality should not be sacrificed by presenting crude naturalism in the theatre. On the contrary, in Brechtian anti-illusionistic and cognitive theatre, there was a heavy reliance on alienation-affect, leaving little scope for empathy in the audience, who were supposed to maintain aesthetic distance and critical stance. Thus, in a sense, Brecht promoted distancing from emotions as if to shun a contagious kind of social virus. Further, there was the 'theatre of the absurd' with one of its key figures Samuel Beckett who responded to the disruption of life in a different way, claiming to have showcased existentialist central assumption that man lives in a chaotic and meaningless world where existence is absurd and sans of purpose.

Elizabeth Hapgood writes that Stanislavski's three volumes *An Actor Prepares*, *Building A Character*, and *Creating A Role* comprise "planned trilogy on the training of an actor". Pursuing "his search for better ways" he "was always revising his methods (in Translator's Note xi). In the trilogy Stanislavski devised a semi-fictional form, a dialogic pattern of presentation, in which interaction takes place in 'teacher-pupil' situation. The venue of the master classes of the 'system' is visualized as a small but otherwise well-equipped theatre. Stanislavski is the master-teacher disguised as Tortsov, the fictional Director-teacher, helped by an Assistant Director named Rakhmanov, assisting the Director in theatre-school activities. The student-actors (real but all given fictional names) attending the classes as pupils include Grisha Govorkov, Sonya Veliaminova, Vanya Vyuntsov, Paul Shustov, Leo Pushchin, and Kostya, who appears as Stanislavski's double as a fictional pupil. He maintains a 'diary' (again fictional) in which he keeps regular records of classroom deliberations, and so on.

Stanislavski valued effective emotional listening, which actually helps the actors to hear the feelings behind what is being said. He had a similar opinion or feeling as that of his fellow actor, Salvini, who foregrounded the view of empathetic understanding:

Every great actor must feel, and especially he should feel the thing he is portraying. I even find he must feel this emotion not only once or twice, while he is studying his role but to a greater or lesser degree at every performance, whether it is the first, or the thousandth.... (cited in Allen 64; Yashoda 128)

#### **As an actor and his approach to acting:**

In 1990, when Stanislavski played Dr. Stockman in a version of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1900), the foremost focused on the 'truthfulness' and the 'inner image' of the role and acted accordingly. Its tremendous success proved for him a turning point. He realized that in play-acting when an actor begins with the 'internal', the 'external' follow it naturally and intuitively. He felt that the greatest joy an artist can feel is to become another [impersonated character] by intuitive transformation. (Stan. cited in Allen 53).

Stanislavski was convinced "that the theatre above all else is for the actor and cannot exist without him" (cited in Allen 63; Yashoda 128), and, therefore, came to the conclusion "that creativity on the stage demands the actor's complete concentration – mental, physical, and emotional" (*ibid.*).

#### **Two States of acting**

Stanislavski observes that in a "normal state" of acting one may notice a "debilitating split" between the actor's "internal and external" capabilities. On the contrary, an actor who reaches the zenith of the 'creative state' in performance is capable of achieving harmony between internal and external attributes, between 'body' and 'soul' (Stan. *passim*). In other words, an actor achieves empathy, the state of imaginative and emotive oneness with the character impersonated.

Stanislavski advanced an approach to acting in which psychological and artistic elements go hand in hand. An actor interfaces two lives on the stage – his own individual self and the other self of the character impersonated. An actor by accomplishing greater cohesion and poise in intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions his/her

of enactment can touch the mark of perfection. This can happen when an actor reaches a higher spiritual plane of acting (Allen 63).

To Stanislavski an actor's performance that bodies forth psychological realism can reach the creative state only when his/her acting ensues from inside, from within. He visualizes the art of acting as if proceeding from "being" to "becoming". An actor is an individual person or a human being, the "Self (in itself)". In the course of performance of acting, he/she invokes inherent "self-willing" in action. The result is that he/she becomes someone else i.e., the character or role he/she is impersonating (Stan. *passim*).

#### **Seeming versus Being:**

Method acting was a reaction against the artificial styles of acting that were popular at that time about which "Stanislavski said that the difference between the 'external' acting of his time (all on the surface, with no inner feeling for the truth of the part) and his own method is difference between seeming and being" (cited in Mobley 90-91; Yashoda 212). Stanislavski, thus, emphasizes imaginative and empathetic self-involvement of the actor in the character he/she has to play. At the psychic level, by invoking inner motivation and sensitized impersonation the actor can become the being he/she has to perform; thus, turning play acting as something spontaneous and natural (*ibid.*).

To excel in 'system' and its American adaptation 'Method', an actor is supposed to practice in synchronizing his/her faculties of the trio – (i) being, (ii) feeling, and (iii) doing – to achieve a remarkable performance level. A skillful blend of physical actions and psycho-techniques can help an actor to be other-self (i.e., in incarnating a character/role): to become, to feel, and to do alike, while impersonating a character. Only such performance can reach the level of excellence in acting.

Stanislavski felt that if the 'inner life' is lacking in the actor's performance, there can be no 'feeling of truth', which in essence makes the show convincing for the audience. The actors must play their roles well on the stage with 'truthfulness' imagining them placed 'as if' in a real-life situation. For him one of the basic principles of true art was "Love the art in yourself, not yourself in art" (Stan. cited in Hapgood 250; Allen 8; Yashoda 6).

#### **Interpenetration of psycho and external reality:**

An actor can achieve this end only when he learns to look inside, instead of depending on external method to imitate a favorite actor. To achieve the best result in acting an actor needs to harmonize three 'virtuosos' in his/her enactment, and interrelate and integrate inner and outer phenomena (*ibid.*). 'System' psycho-technique as devised by Stanislavski foregrounds the use of three virtuosos (skills) if acting has to achieve the level of perfection. In performance, by blending poise among three centers – emotion, will, and mind – an actor can reach a state of tripartite harmonization, which, as per Stanislavski, leads to the generation of 'inner intent' or 'motive forces'. Consequently, the actor's psycho-reality is stimulated. Its impact is reflected in the actor's psycho-physical deeds, in other words, his/her articulated verbal and non-verbal behaviour on stage-performance or cine-acting (Stan. *passim*).

An actor of feeling, for Stanislavski, is a performer, who has acquired the ability to synchronize the 'outer with the inner' and vice versa, and makes effective use of that ability in his/her techniques of acting. The 'inner' and 'outer' attributes of one's being inter-relate, thereby achieving a concordance of inner with outer phenomena, psychological with physical reality, non-substantial with substantial reality, spiritual motivation/action with non-spiritual motivation/action, and psychic motivation/action with somatic motivation/action (Stan. *passim*).

Through his 'system' Stanislavski desired to achieve the great goal of dramatic art and theatre: "to create the life of a human spirit in a role or a play" (cited in Hapgood (trans.), *Building A Character*, Ch. IX, 165; Yashoda 215). He required from his actors not to copy somebody else's performance, but to live the role-taking their models from life, and not from the stage (echoing great Russian actor, Mikhail Shchepkin). Audiences are transfixed by watching great acting, which conforms to 'truthful' acting.

Stanislavski made it the goal of his 'system' that while playing role actors must synchronize and activate through conscious, their subconscious life. He underscored the fact that "nine-tenths of any genuine creative process" takes place subconsciously, intuitively; and the most precious things about it are those flashes of unconscious inspiration" (Stan. cited in Allen 72). The subsequent diagram (after *Building a Character*, Ch. XVI, 287, 289 *et. passim*) is self-speaking and will make the point easier to understand.



Fig. 1 (cited in Yashoda 216)

In his master classes, Stanislavski's assimilative approach blends, and inter-relates two aspects of an actor's training: 'Psycho-technique and 'external technique'. The interdependence between the 'inner creative state' and 'external creative state' makes the 'system' an integrated system of acting. Stanislavski in *Building A Character* (Ch. XVI, 287, 289 *et passim*) lists the elements of the 'inner-creative state' which is comprised of imagination (artistic); sense of truth (in art); emotion memory; attention; the triumvirate (inner motive forces) combining mind, will, and feeling; aided with the units and objectives, such as super-objective, through line of action, the sub-text, inner images, and perspectives – (i) of actor and (ii) of character/role; inner tempo-rhythm (affecting inner life/mood); actor's enthusiasm as stimulus to creativeness (*ibid.*).

Likewise, the elements of the external creative state include – the triumvirate (external motive forces) of mind, will and feeling; relaxation of muscles; body training and plasticity; voice training and speech technique; external tempo-rhythm (of action); logic & coherence of physical action; external characterization; external stage charm; restraint & finish; discipline & ethics, and sense of ensemble. All these components combine to make a whole or larger set of the composite system concerning the art of acting (*ibid.*).

#### **Actor to achieve empathy (oneness) with the character:**

As mentioned earlier Stanislavski played the role of Doctor Stockman at some theatre in St. Petersburg on March 13, 1901. The play was received with tremendous applaud, particularly Stanislavski for his Doctor's role. While playing the role "[h]e had concentrated simply on creating the character, and living the role, along the 'line of intuition and feeling' (Allen 35). He was not in favor of "thinking too much about the message [like Brecht]" believing that actors should prefer to "live with the thoughts and feelings of the role" (*ibid.*), and "[t]he 'message' would then emerge naturally by itself" (*ibid.*).

Stanislavski's wise counsel to the student-actors was:

What is the aim of our art? It is the conception and the birth of a new living being – the person in the part. It is a natural creative act, resembling the birth of a human being. (cited in Allen, 141; Yashoda 1)

An actor must work all his life, cultivate his mind, train his talents systematically, develop his character; he may never despair and never relinquish this main purpose – to love his art with all his strength and love it unselfishly. (*Building a Character; ibid.* 217)

... the best thing that can happen to an actor is to have his whole role form itself in him of its own accord. In such instances one can forget about all 'systems', techniques, and give oneself up wholly to the power of magic nature. (*Creating a Role* Ch. VI, 151; *ibid.*)

#### Adaptation and diversion:

Taylor (1975) makes a fine distinction between Stanislavski's 'system' and the American 'method' as developed by his followers and disciples, which views are cited as under:

American adaptation of Stanislavsky's teachings on acting and direction, stressing mainly the building of the role (as detailed in *An Actor Prepares*) rather than the technical side of its presentation. The leading idea here is the complete loosing of the actor in the role; the chief exponents of the Method (particularly Lee Strasberg, Elia Kazan and other connected with the New York Actors' Studio) place great emphasis on improvisation and exercises to improve the actors gifts of empathy, and the usual criticism of Method-trained actors, often if not always justified, is that they neglect diction and are effectively limited to naturalistic acting. If this is so, it is the lop-sided view of Stanislavsky's ideas on theatre presented by Method teachers, based as it is in effect on only one of his book which dealt rather specifically with the actors' preparation for performance rather than the performance itself. (185-86)

#### Conclusion

To sum up, 'system' is the outcome of Stanislavski's lifelong searches in which he sought to find "a method of work for actor's to enable them to create the image of a character, breathe into it the inner life of a human spirit", and, he wanted actors to employ natural means so as to "embody it [the inner life] on the stage in a beautiful, artistic form". He further adds, that "[t]he foundations for this method were my inquiries into the nature of an actor" (Stan. cited in Allen 1). On the point, whether Stanislavski had any acquaintance with Freud or knowledge of his writings Allen clarifies that his "notion of 'subconscious' had nothing to do with Freud – he didn't know Freud's work. He argued he was using terms such as the 'subconscious' and 'intuition' in their 'simplest, everyday connotation', and not in any philosophical or psychological sense" (cited in Allen 73; Yashoda 93).

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