

STANISLAVSKI'S REHEARSAL PROCESSES RE-VIEWED

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Background

ONE OF THE CORNER STONES OF GOOD ACTING, and one of the most difficult, is that of mastering a text-based approach to acting. It is not new; the rules for actio—or “speaking to the ear” and “speaking to the eye”—had been established by the rhetoricians during the Greek and Roman periods of antiquity and reached their peak in the Shakespearean era, laying down some rules for vocal delivery, which this column has reported on in previous editions, and which I have written on widely in *Voice in Modern Theatre* (Martin, 1991). Nowadays, as rhetoric has fallen from favor and visual and physical performances have assumed prominence in theatrical style, a text-based approach to acting has been called into question. Nevertheless, audiences consistently report that they cannot hear nor understand what actors are saying on stage (Report on Audience Development project—Talking Theatre). This has instigated a research project into investigating rehearsal processes. Seeing as Stanislavski's System has been such dominating force and formed the basis for actor training in many drama academies in the world, an international group of respected directors, all schooled in the Stanislavski approach, agreed to participate in a symposium in Stockholm in 1986 in order to investigate Stanislavski's legacy. This essay is a report on that symposium.

The Rise of the Stanislavski System

It took many years for Stanislavski to develop workable rehearsal processes. The main reasons for this were that Russian theatre of the 19th Century was actor-driven; the idea of a director shaping a production was unheard of. In a repertoire where actors were cast to type and a ‘star system’ flourished, quantity ruled over quality; sets were used over and over again, there being no attempt at historical accuracy, and costumes depended on the actor's purse. Worst of all acting was reduced to imitation, with the actors having to follow the prompt—situated down stage centre as rehearsal time was practically non-existent.

By 1899 when the infant Moscow Art Theatre (M.A.T.) staged *The Seagull* Stanislavski had had seven years to establish his particular directing style, which toppled dangerously towards dictatorship. Although he did not understand Chekhov's play well he created an unforgettable nuance-filled *mise-en-scène*, replete with the barking of dogs and croaking of frogs, the likes of which had never been seen on the Russian stage before. Unfortunately the many details he had worked out on paper for his actors did not translate to the rehearsal room—so he was left with a revolutionized outer form for staging without any truthful portrayal of life on stage by the actors.

The Drama of Life (1907) was the first production in which Stanislavski consciously examined ‘the inner character’ of the play and its roles, however he was still at the ‘demon director’ stage of development—forcing a blend of analysis and spirituality on his actors—asking them to follow hieroglyphics denoting their various emotions and inner states! He maintained that these littered the text to signpost the character’s emotional journeys, which the actors were then expected to experience.

By 1910 Stanislavski’s rehearsal methods had been simplified: the actors were now asked to identify the rather more attainable ‘bits’ of a text (often translated as ‘units’) and ‘tasks’ of a character (often translated as ‘objectives’). This combined what Stanislavski called the three **inner motive forces** of thought, will and action. This meant that through intellectual analyses (via the thought centre) the actors determined what they were doing (in the action—or will centre) and why they wanted to do it (through the emotion—or feeling centre). At this time the major components of, **bits, tasks, affective memory, inner motive forces** and **communion** had been identified—in other words Stanislavski’s System was in place. He never stopped searching and towards the end of his life when he discovered how important the **Method of Physical Actions** was, he insisted on **Active Analysis** as the only way to rehearse.

From being one of the most feared directors at the M.A.T. Stanislavski became an inspirational director, whose processes became *de rigueur* and were slavishly followed, even though Stanislavski himself was always looking for improvements and change. As Soviet Realism under Stalin became the favourite genre, Stanislavski’s methodology and approach was upheld as supporting Revolutionary ideology. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Stanislavski System rather than Meyerhold’s Biomechanics came to be regarded as the corner stone of Russian Theatrical excellence.

The Stockholm Stanislavski Symposium

Half a century later the Swedish National Touring Theatre Company, together with Teater Scharazad, Stockholm’s City Theatre, the Theatre High School in Stockholm, the Dramatic Institute and the Institute for Theatre and Film from Stockholm University decided to hold a symposium in Stockholm in 1986, the theme of which was Stanislavski’s view of theatre. Teater Scharazad had earlier arranged a similar symposium around Meyerhold and were now keen to learn what they could from the opposite court—the Stanislavskian tradition—to see how it could offer a methodical way of working for Swedish theatre practitioners and even to see what it could offer contemporary theatre.

The Symposium was divided into two sections—a section which was open to the general public, containing lectures, demonstrations of Russian training films with Tovstonogov and Moniukov as well as guided tours from the Stanislavski Museum in Moscow; the other was a closed section, where invited lecturers, or master directors, worked with groups of actors on the floor. Lectures were given by Stanislavski experts—including the actress Angelina Stepanova, who had performed under Stanislavski’s supervision for a long time, the theorists Jean Benedetti from the United Kingdom, Freddy Rokem from Israel, Martin Kurten from Finland, as a translator and author of *Att Vara Akta pa Scen (Being Truthful on the Stage)*—which addressed many misconceptions and incorrect uses of terminology for the first time in the Swedish language and Robert Cohen, from the U.S.A., a self-described post-Stanislavski theorist and author of *Acting Power: An Introduction to Acting* (1978). As a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Theatre and Film Science in Stockholm I had the privilege of being asked to co-edit a report on this Stanislavski Symposium.

Mindful of the fact that since 1986 further re-evaluations of Stanislavski’s teaching and rehearsal processes have appeared (Benedetti 1990, 1991, 1994, 1999; and Merlin 2003) and inconsistencies in

translation been addressed (Carnicke, 1998)—the questions I am seeking to answer with this research are:

- What can be learned from this 1986 symposium about the working methods for rehearsing as demonstrated by directors trained at the M.A.T. in the Stanislavski tradition?
- How were these methods received by contemporary Swedish actors not trained in the System?
- How strictly did their approaches follow Stanislavski's model and where did the differences lie?

The four master pedagogues who worked with a group of actors and directors in the closed rehearsals on the floor for five days working on special scenes from different texts were Oleg Efremov and Anatolij Efros both from Russia; Alexander Bardini from Poland and Robert Cohen from the United States. The observers in each group consisted of actors, directors, drama pedagogues, acting students and University students of Theatre. I was assigned to Cohen's group, where I worked as translator between Cohen and the acting cohort. I have direct observations from these days, whilst the other groups reported back to a group leader. These rehearsals have been video recorded. Access to these video recordings will be made available to me from the Archive for Sound and Moving Images and the Dramatic Institute in Stockholm. What follows is a summary of the main points from the report where the groups are presented one at a time.

Oleg Efremov received his actor training at the Moscow Arts Theatre school, where he also taught from 1949. He became artistic director of the M.A.T., where today he is still engaged as director and actor. He has also made a number of films. The chosen text used was Chekhov's *Ivanov*, Scene One. As a practical theatre person Efremov had a vast experience about how to apply Stanislavski's theories. Even though he spoke directly to the group through a translator, he had such intensive and living body language—speaking only one sentence at a time, he was able to keep close contact with his group.

Efremov's working process was just like a rehearsal. He began by giving the actors very simple circumstances e.g. Ivanov is sitting out in the garden reading. He wants to leave; Borkin comes and tries to attract his attention. By defining their objectives and lines of action, Efremov built up their mutual relationship, emphasizing that when conflicts occur something happens.

Efremov constantly asked questions of the actors: What is Ivanov thinking about this evening? Sunset: what does that mean? He asked for volunteers to come out on the floor and try things out. He broke the act up into a number of 'bits' sometimes very small ones and encouraged etyds (or improvisation) as a working method. (In Stanislavski's terminology this is **Active Analysis**—through the simple sequence of reading the text, discussing and improvising, the actors find that their words and actions move closer to the playwright's script, with the formal reading of the text reduced to a minimum).

Efremov held Stanislavski in great respect but indicated that some of his principles were today rather outmoded—like relaxation exercises, because today's actors are too relaxed; they need to gather themselves more. He never dictated what the playwright meant, but during these days laid the ground for a methodical way of working by constantly posing questions that stimulated the actors' creativity. In this way he was successful in arriving at truthful and logical action as well as believable characterizations, even in such a short time. It was also most obvious that this way of working for the Swedish actors was entirely new. Efremov demanded more of them than the external cliché-ridden first attempt at rehearsing a scene which they had obviously been used to. His methodology followed Stanislavski's

recommendations closely—where the director was to be regarded as being able to help actors if they did not understand the super-objectives of their roles. It was clear that this master teacher had a deep understanding of human behaviour and used psychology freely.

Anatolij Efros The text chosen for this practical work was Molière's *Don Juan*.

On the floor were just a table and two chairs for Efros and the translator. Those actors who participated were those who answered Efros' leading questions and whose answers he considered worth taking up and performing. Efros decided to run the workshop in 'slow motion' so that the different steps in the analysis process would be clearly understood by the participants.

Analysis of the text through "action" was the process by which Efros rehearsed with the actors, as he believed that this increases the actors' understanding of the play. During the analysis process the actors should open themselves intellectually and emotionally. Thought and action are the two sides of the same coin for Efros. The analysis is carried out in small steps; the elementary actions are placed beside each other—like pearls on a string. Efros believes the director should be very careful about when he reveals his interpretation of the text and the characters for the actors comparing it to opening a parachute—"if you do it too early then everyone gets stuck in the wings; if you do it too late everyone is likely to crash. The director must know the overall objectives—the actors do the rest!"

His way of working is the way he rehearses a play for production: he begins with the text—goes quickly over to action—works through each scene—only to come back to the text at the end of one month, when the **line-of-action** is clear. Then he has, what he calls a '*partitur*'. The next month is spent rehearsing this partitur. He does not like the actors to use the words of the text in the early stages of rehearsal believing that when theatre is good the audience should be able to follow the action with their eyes—even if they don't understand the text.

Efros' way of working created enormous uncertainty among the actors. Some of them were surprised at the freedom they had during the analysis process: they would rather have analysed each scene and immediately performed the results of their analysis. The fact that he demanded artistic discipline was also unpopular.

During his long artistic career **Aleksander Bardini** has worked as theatre and opera director, actor, musician, theatre director and theatre pedagogue as well as film director in particular (*White, Blue and Red*). Since 1950 he has been a professor at the State Theatre High School in Warsaw.

The texts chosen to demonstrate Bardini's working process were from Chekhov's *Uncle Vanja* and *Three Sisters*. Surprisingly he began the first session with an explanation about the hidden side of Chekhov: sexuality. Bardini explained that in Chekhov's plays one constantly meets people unhappy in love, but no one ever speaks about sex.

Bardini begins his analysis with a short general description of the circumstances and the characters. It can often be a short psychological sketch of the performers, a description of their situation and a hint about the special conflict situation in which they will be acting.

The actor is placed in a definite situation (in Bardini's case this is directed as a *mise-en-scène*). He gives suggestions for the action; then as the actors play the scene he stops the action often to ask them for explanations for their actions. Bardini explains that exactly as with Stanislavski the actor is expected to have a logical, controlled and proper action.

During his rehearsals Bardini tried to explain his way of working. He spoke about "an analysis

through action” which was to be done on the floor as opposed to “around the table”. He spoke about thematic exercises, which would develop the through line of action. For Bardini **tempo-rhythm** was a very important aspect of the play, the different characters and their interaction. This relates to Stanislavski’s **Method of Physical Actions**. As with Stanislavski he too “coached” while the actors performed.

Bardini maintained that the actor should first act in his own name in order to then go over to the character’s way of thinking—the “**magic if**”. The important thing is impulses to the actions at this stage of the analysis. The work on the role becomes a sort of seeking after motivation.

Bardini follows Stanislavski in the main, particularly in his deep psychological investigations, but he differs from Stanislavski in two key ways: he actively leads the analysis work, and he gives the stage directions.

Robert Cohen is Professor and Head of the Drama Department at U.C.L.A. at Irvine. He has written a number of books on acting and translated a number of plays. He refers to himself as a post-Stanislavskian theorist, because he believes that the driving force for an actor in a situation is not what “caused” the situation to exist, but what the “purpose” is for the character’s actions: ask “what for”—not “why”; the character is “pulled by the future”, not “pushed by the past”. In other words, in all action on stage Cohen believes one should progress from the deterministic to what he calls ‘the cybernetic; way of thinking: the actor should look forward, rather than backward.

The texts chosen were some scenes from Shakespeare’s **Hamlet** and **King Lear** as well as a scene from Sam Shepherd’s **Fools for Love**.

Cohen uses three terms which form the basis for his working method. First, ‘Victory’: what the actor is striving to attain, which will determine his actions and his characterization. He explained this was what Stanislavski referred to as “tasks”. Second, ‘Realcom’—a portmanteau word meaning “a relation” and “a communication”—where the actor and his or her fellow actors stand in a constant “sender/ receiver” situation. The flood of information which is created is transformed into “feed-back-loop”; Cohen maintains this is what for Stanislavski was “the undertext”. ‘Realcom victories’ are those for which we strive—consciously or subconsciously—in our relationships with other people. Finally, ‘Obstacles’ are things which stand in the way of the actor attaining his goal—these can come from the text, other actors or the director. For Cohen this is the director’s main task: to establish where these are. ‘Tactics’ are what each actor chooses in order to attain their goal. The actor must also work with effort, and have expectations.

Cohen uses three levels in his rehearsal process: the situation, the style, and the performance.

- The situation. Here Cohen uses, as a metaphore, a downhill skier, who must reach a goal and win. There are obstacles in the skier’s path; the actor must ask themselves what they can do in order to overcome these and win.
- Style: the dramatic level. Cohen likens these to the flags on the ski-run, within which the actor must work. Style also encompasses the literary, social and political aspects of the role.
- The performance. This is the level of the theatrical level; Cohen emphasises the importance of developing a relationship with an audience).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Cohen’s working process was (as wa the case with Bardini) his constant “coaching” of the actor working on the floor. This was a great irritation to some of the actors

but Cohen explained that eventually they were all working to become their own coaches.

Conclusion

The Stockholm Stanislavski Symposium certainly introduced this way of working to the Swedish Theatre community—most of who had been trained according to the Brechtian aesthetic. As the political climate changed artists realized that there was a lack of real emotional and truthful acting on the Swedish stage, which prompted this Symposium, where through the master classes Swedish actors and directors were introduced to the fruits of Stanislavski's life-long labours to promote truthful acting and the 'spirit of humanity' in all productions. More details about the reception of this praxis will be possible with a closer interrogation of the rehearsal tapes housed in Stockholm.

What this research has revealed to date is the delayed approach to using the text in rehearsals. Earlier interpretations of Stanislavski's System demanded of the actors that they try to do everything at once in rehearsal—work on the action, work on the subtext and work on the text and this was in a very long rehearsal period, compared with today's short ones. Later interpretations, and those workshops witnessed in this Stockholm Symposium advocated delaying the work on the text and concentrating on getting the action of the scene secure first—often by improvisation—then when the whole play was built up 'like pearls on a necklace' the actor would be invited to use the playwright's words from the text. In this way the text is based on something very secure and is not 'empty' or lacking action. I would recommend this practice for contemporary actors who seem to be grabbing at one acting method after the other, seeking instant results in ridiculously short rehearsal times, whilst the delivery of their spoken texts remains limp and unconvincing.

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