

Active Analysis in the Beginning Acting Classroom

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Abstract

Often, the exercises in the acting classroom can feel at odds with the processes used in the rehearsal room. I believe Konstantin Stanislavsky's rehearsal method of Active Analysis provides tools and perspectives for dealing with these challenges. At The S Word Symposium in November 2022, I outlined a process I developed for teaching beginning acting using principles of Active Analysis as a tool to bridge the gap between training and rehearsing. This article outlines the experiences and thought processes that went into creating this class structure and reviews the benefits for students. Applied in this way, Stanislavsky's impulse to place embodied action before intellectual analysis yields valuable results in the classroom as well as the rehearsal hall.

Keywords: Stanislavsky; Active Analysis; acting; training; beginning actors.

Introduction

At the S Word Symposium in November 2022, I outlined the process I developed for teaching beginning acting using principles of Active Analysis and focusing on iterative improvisation of a scene's sequence of events. In Active Analysis, Stanislavsky reversed the standard rehearsal process to place embodying the action of the scene before detailed analysis or learning the lines of the script. Based on this emphasis on embodying, I designed a structure for scaffolding beginning acting skills from basic improvisational situations to scripted scene work, with the goal of unifying the concepts taught in the classroom with practices used in the rehearsal room. This essay expands on

the symposium presentation and clarifies the thought processes and experiences that went into developing the pedagogical structure. It takes as its starting point my personal experience as an acting student, actor, and teacher in the hope of providing useful insights for other practitioners. Using my own range of experiences allows me to empathize with the student actor and understand his struggle; to use my subsequent training as a professional actor to clarify the problem; and to assimilate both points of view as a teacher to synthesize a potential solution. The data may be personal and anecdotal, but I believe it will have universal application.

Background

As a young actor in the Master of Fine Arts programme at the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco in the 1990s, I was given a common definition of acting, expressed as “living truthfully in imaginary circumstances.”¹ One professor defined it as “the passionate pursuit of an objective.” While I understood the terminology in both cases, I didn’t understand how these definitions applied to our work in the classroom. We began our training with exercises intended to practice individual skills required for acting, such as relaxation, concentration, and public solitude, and then progressed to working on scripted material. The individual exercises did not seem to link directly to work on scripted material, instead, we were simply given scenes, analysed their circumstances, rehearsed them, and then presented them to the faculty for critique. For me, this exercise was destined to fail – and it did many times – because I was unable to bridge the gap between the exercises, the analytical work, and the stated goal of “living truthfully” in the scene. Fundamentally, I was focused on the performance result, which led to pre-planning the scene and anticipating responses before they happened. I didn’t truly understand the concept of “living” in imaginary circumstances, so I attempted to create the appearance of it. As Stanislavsky put it, “[b]ecause of their inability to

discover the conscious path to unconscious creation, actors [...] are stuck in a kind of superficial stock-in-trade [...].”²

I struggled with this until the concept of living in imaginary circumstances finally became clear through the practice of improvisation a number of years later. For many years I participated in an ongoing Master Class at the Seydways Acting Studios in San Francisco. The class, taught by Executive Director Richard Seyd, focused on long-form improvisation as a tool for actor development. The improv scenarios were complex, detailed, and involved high stakes. Through these regular weekly sessions of improvisation, I gained extensive experience in “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” The class periodically worked on scripted material as well. While successful at both, I began to realize that I felt a sense of freedom and connection in the improv work – a sense of reality – that was somewhat missing in the scripted work. Towards the end of my time in the class I began to work on consciously integrating improvisational sensibilities into my work on scripted material. Before I completed this integration, however, I left the class for my current academic appointment at Utah State University.

When I realized that my new position would involve teaching a course titled Introduction to Acting, I was determined to find a way to teach the course which included improvisation as a part of the methodology. I also felt it was important that the skills explored in the classroom be directly applicable to the rehearsal and performance of scripted work. As I began to research textbooks for the class, I noticed that most of the books recommended by colleagues followed the same structure: a version of the initial “object exercises” developed by Uta Hagen, which focus on individual aspects of the Stanislavsky “system” as expressed in *An Actor Prepares*, followed by work on

scripted material.³ This structure seemed to mirror the one I felt was not successful in my own training.

As I looked closer, it became clear my challenges with this approach were related to three main issues: (i) dividing the acting process into discrete skills for practice, (ii) scoring a scene for rehearsal and performance, and (iii) a focus on “objective.” I believe all of these issues stem from the historical development of acting pedagogy in America. As readers of this journal will know, the roots of American acting pedagogy lie primarily in the publication of *An Actor Prepares* and the rise of the Group Theatre in the 1930s. *An Actor Prepares* was an incomplete elucidation of Stanislavsky’s ideas about acting and actor training. These incomplete ideas were popularized by members of the Group Theatre who became seminal acting teachers in America – Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner – and who had a lasting impact on acting pedagogy.⁴ Their teachings, rooted in questionable translations of Stanislavsky’s incomplete writings, resemble the period of Stanislavsky’s work known as “cognitive analysis,” involving extensive table work in advance of the actors’ work on their feet, and which formed the basis of much of the acting methodology that is currently taught in academic circles in America.⁵

Stanislavsky’s lifelong goal was to find a process that would help an actor to “live” on stage. To describe this sense of living on stage, he used the Russian word *perezhivanie* – which roughly translates to “experience” in English – and he sought a process for acting that would lead to “experiencing” the role. In my view, however, an approach to training actors which involves breaking the acting process into individual skills for practice, scoring scenes in advance of rehearsal, and focusing on objectives, creates unnecessary challenges for the beginning actor in their attempt to “experience” a role.

The first challenge arises from attempting to break acting into its component parts and train them individually. In practice, the individual parts do not effectively add up to the whole. As Sharon M. Carnicke expressed it:

Familiar preparatory exercises that derive from the System usually serve as the foundation for most acting classes. However, exercises deconstruct the various elements in acting (relaxation, concentration, observation and the like) and, in so doing, inadvertently create an artificial gap between acting skills and acting as performance. I have met too many students, who become expert in exercises without being able to transfer their skills to the rehearsal of texts.⁶

The analogy I use with students draws a parallel to driving a car. If one wants to drive a car, studying how the internal combustion engine or the power steering system works will be of little use in understanding the experience of driving. Driving is a complex action that puts the whole machine to use for a specific purpose. Without an associated experience of driving a car for reference, an analysis of how the engine works becomes a purely intellectual exercise. The same is true for acting. Acting incorporates all the individual skills that Stanislavsky delineated in *An Actor Prepares* – Action, Imagination, Concentration of Attention, Relaxation of Muscles, etc. – but practicing the skills separately seems to contribute little to an experience of the whole event. In my view, an exploration of the individual parts can be useful only after one has experienced the whole.

The second challenge involves the analysis of a scene or play for performance, often referred to as *scoring* the scene (“scoring” in the sense of a musical score that lays out a plan for the scene).⁷ The fundamental concept is that a play (or a scene) needs to be broken down into smaller sections to facilitate easier analysis, understanding, and rehearsal of the story – an outline of the play or scene, if you will. In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky described this process of dividing of the play into “units” as a

tool for understanding the structure of the play as well as for finding the “creative objective” of each unit (generally stated in terms of a verb).⁸ Further, the series of objectives of the play should create an “unbroken chain” or “line” and provide a “channel” to guide the actor through the play.⁹ Stanislavsky also recommended naming each unit with a title that captured the fundamental objective of that unit.¹⁰ This style of script analysis, or scoring a scene by breaking a play into units and identifying each unit’s objective in advance of rehearsal, is a common enough practice, but I feel it can burden the beginning actor’s imagination with too many extraneous details, creating a sense of obligation to include all of the results of the analysis in performance – a need to “show your homework.” Stanislavsky maintained that:

[...] this method leads to major errors since the actor, by examining the role at the table, separates the psychological from the physical and, with no opportunity of experiencing the actual life of their character’s body, are at a loss. This inevitably leads to a purely cerebral analysis of the role.¹¹

Another challenge stems from the concept of the “objective,” as, for example, expressed by Hagen in her book *Respect for Acting*: “What do I want?”¹² The phrase “what do I want?” is often considered interchangeable with the term “objective,” but, while it may be relatively easy for actors to intellectually decide what their characters want, actually *wanting* to pursue that objective is a different thing altogether. In my experience, picking an objective for a unit of a scene was often an intellectual exercise that did not serve me in rehearsal. Without knowing how to create a sense of *wanting* what my character wanted, I was left mimicking what I thought “wanting” would look like in that situation. In teaching I have found that this is frequently true for beginning actors – performing an idea of what one thinks pursuing the objective should look and sound like rather than actively pursuing it in the moment of the scene.

An example of this isolated focus on objective often occurs during a common beginning acting exercise. In this exercise, actors choose a verb from a list and use it as their objective. Verbs are a customary focus in acting classes because Stanislavsky said that objectives should be phrased as a verb and not as a state of being (an action that can be taken rather than an emotional result to be achieved).¹³ Choosing a verb from a list leads to examples such as “I want to *tease* you into giving in” or “I want to *lure* you to support me.” While these examples might be appropriate to the scene, I often see actors choosing what they think are more dynamic or dramatic verbs such as “slap” or “stab” – “I want to *slap* some sense into you” or “I want to *stab* you with my anger.” Simply focusing on what seem like strong, active verbs without considering what is happening in the scene can lead the actor to vocally indicate the idea of “slapping” or “stabbing” when there’s no actual slapping or stabbing happening in the scene. This is just one example of how putting analysis before experience can lead to intellectual choices resulting in a misguided imitation of life on stage.

Our concept of “objective” stems from Elizabeth Hapgood’s translation of *An Actor Prepares*. In it, Hapgood translated the Russian word *zadacha* as the English word “objective,” and this term became deeply ingrained in American actor training. There has been much discussion about the meaning of *zadacha*, but contemporary scholars, like Sharon Marie Carnicke, often lean towards “problem” as a closer English alternative.¹⁴ Jean Benedetti, for his part, used the word “task” when creating a new translation of Stanislavsky’s writings; with Maria Shevtsova similarly emphasising “task” as the correct translation.¹⁵ In the case of either “problem” or “task,” Stanislavsky’s intent seems to be for the actor to identify the character’s motivated action rather than a final goal the character wishes to achieve. Semantically, identifying a problem your character is trying to solve may seem very similar to choosing an

objective that your character wants to accomplish, but, in my view, an actor can carry out a task or solve a problem on stage whether they *want* to or not; whereas pursuing an objective seems to be predicated on *wanting* to pursue it. Thinking in terms of a task or a problem focuses the process of acting on *action* rather than on the actor achieving a specific emotional state of *wanting*. A well-chosen task or problem should spur the actor to take action. Stanislavsky expressed this idea as follows: “the actor uses a compelling task to draw unconscious creative feeling out of the depths of his being,” and this task “[...] brings all [his] psychological drives, will, intelligence and emotion into action.”¹⁶ All of these versions of the terminology are useful and can reveal different aspects of the character and the situation as long as we remember that we are describing the complex inner life of a human being. The problem arises in actor training when the simplified idea of “objective” loses its connection to the human being and becomes an isolated intellectual concept used for analysis.

With these issues in mind, I delved into Stanislavsky’s work on improvisation (beyond the short etudes in *An Actor Prepares*, such as “searching for a brooch”), including sources like Carnicke’s *Stanislavsky in Focus*, Bella Merlin’s *Acting: The Basics* and *The Stanislavsky Toolkit*, and, finally, James Thomas’s *The Director’s Guide to Stanislavsky’s Active Analysis*. In Benedetti’s 2010 translation of *An Actor’s Work*, I found a quote that eloquently described my experience of frustration during my early training:

[After a long process of analysis, study, and discussion] the actor’s heart and mind are filled with a mass of details, some useful, some not, like a chicken that has been fattened up by being stuffed with nuts [...] And then they tell him, “Get up on stage, play your part and apply everything you have learned in the recent months of group study.” With a stuffed head and empty heart the actor goes out on stage and simply can’t do anything.¹⁷

This quote, which wasn't included in Elizabeth Hapgood's 1961 version of the same material (*Creating a Role*), vividly expressed my experience as a young actor with a "stuffed head and empty heart." In Carnicke's *Stanislavsky in Focus*, I found a quote that pointed to a possible solution. In a December 1935 letter to his son, Stanislavsky wrote:

I am setting a new device (*priem*) in motion now, a new approach to the role. It involves reading the play today, and tomorrow rehearsing it on stage. What can we rehearse? A great deal. A character comes in, greets everybody, sits down, tells of events that have just taken place, expresses a series of thoughts. Everyone can act this, guided by their own life experience. So, let them act. And so, we break the whole play, episode by episode, into physical actions. When this is done exactly, correctly, so that it feels true and it inspires our belief in what is happening on stage, then we can say that the line of the life of the human body has been created. This is no small thing, but half the role.¹⁸

These two quotations confirmed that late in his career Stanislavsky's dissatisfaction with analysis and objectives had led him to focus on the events of the play rather than the objectives, placing experience before analysis and creating an improvisation-based process which came to be known as Active Analysis.

In every book or article I read about Stanislavsky's later work, I found confirmation of what I'd experienced in the acting class at Seydways Acting Studios, namely that improvisation is the touchstone for "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances." Indeed, at its core, improvisation *is* living truthfully under imaginary circumstances. Stanislavsky seemed to know this and used improvisation (or etudes) to work out challenges in both the classroom and the rehearsal room.¹⁹ I was astounded and excited by this and began to search for more information about Active Analysis, including Maria Knebel's *On Active Analysis of the Play and the Role*.²⁰ The concepts made perfect sense to me, merging effortlessly with my previous work in the studio and

giving me theoretical foundations to support my work in the classroom. In this manner, I developed my own understanding of the theory and practice of Active Analysis without the benefit of any explicit first-hand training in it. I felt my past experience had provided the perfect prerequisites for me to engage with and implement the underlying approach, or at least my version of it.

With ample citations for supporting theory, I began to focus on how to apply the ideas in the classroom. In considering this, it struck me that in his letter to his son Stanislavsky had originally referred to the method of Active Analysis as a rehearsal process. Similarly, Merlin also observed that “Active Analysis is a rehearsal approach. Although it’s grounded in psychophysical actor training, it’s not the actor training itself.”²¹ Given these references to rehearsal, I wondered if it was possible to use the concepts of Active Analysis as the foundation of a beginning acting class.

The process of Active Analysis, or “analysis through action,” involves exploration of the play with the actors “on their feet” rather than “around a table.” Actors refer to the script periodically, but do not hold it in their hands as they rehearse with scene partners. Instead, they begin with improvisations based on the circumstances, relationships, and, most importantly, events of the play. It is a process of embodying the role from the outset. I found Merlin’s summary of Knebel’s description of Active Analysis to be simple and clear:

The basic steps are remarkably simple:

- (1) read the scene;
- (2) discuss the scene;
- (3) improvise the scene; and
- (4) discuss the improvisation.

The repetition of these four steps guides the actor through the whole process of Active Analysis, from first read-through to dead-letter-perfect production.²²

It is important to note that the improvisations used in Active Analysis aren't random or separate from the story of the play. As Stanislavsky wrote in his letter, "we break the whole play, episode by episode, into physical actions," and these "episodes" provide the basis for the improvisations. The improvisations are repeatedly compared to the script in order to guide the actors' work towards a realization of what the playwright has written. Through this strategy, Stanislavsky modified his rehearsal process to place *action* – or the embodying of the events of the play – at the forefront, with subsequent research and analysis used as needed to support the actors' specific, detailed understanding of the enacted events.

This description of Active Analysis resonated with the process used for scripted work taught by Richard Seyd in his improv-based Master Class. In that class, we used an iterative process of expressing the thoughts of the character and comparing our in-the-moment expression with the scripted dialogue. This iterative process guided us from an instinctive expression to a specific understanding of the script and the ideas being expressed by the characters. That experience made Active Analysis a natural progression for me as an actor and confirmed its usefulness in the classroom.

The Classes

At the institution where I work, Introduction to Acting (THEA 1033) is a general elective (Breadth Creative Arts) course and open to all students. In addition, it is a required course for any theatre major who is not in the BFA Acting Program (technical theatre, theatre education, costume design, etc.). I have taught the course six times in the past five years (the duration of the course is fifteen weeks), with every class enrolling 18 students with a wide range of interests and degrees of experience. Students from outside the Department of Theatre Arts, for example, may have more acting experience from high school even though they are currently pursuing another field. Technical

Theatre and Costume Design students, who are required to take the course, may themselves have high school theatre experience but opted for a career path off stage. Finally, students of any major may enrol out of curiosity, or in pursuit of a fun arts elective. For the purposes of the course, all of these students are considered “beginners,” and the course assumes little knowledge of acting technique on their part. It aims to give students an active experience of the processes and terminology used by actors. Regardless of their background, my primary goal in teaching the course is to give the students experiences in listening and responding in the moment; engaging with imaginary relationships and circumstances; and understanding the concept of action.

In creating the structure of the class, I felt it was important that we start by agreeing on a definition of acting. I tell each class: “If we are going to study acting, we should agree on a definition that we will stick with and use as our guiding principle in our work.” Invariably, the discussions result in identifying two primary schools of acting: “indicating” what is happening, or “experiencing” what is happening. These two descriptions of acting are referred to as representational acting and organic acting in the text I ultimately selected for the course, *Acting Stanislavski: A Practical Guide to Stanislavski’s Approach and Legacy* by John Gillett.²³ (In addition to other useful information for beginning actors, Gillett’s text includes information on Active Analysis.) At the end of the discussion, students generally agree that they prefer to watch an actor who is experiencing what is happening (*perezhivanie*) over one who is indicating or representing it. Through further discussion and guidance, students come to a definition of acting that echoes Stanislavsky’s and Meisner’s idea of “living truthfully.” Often, we focus on the definition articulated in Gillett’s book, which refers to organic acting as “believing in and living through the circumstances and actions of performance as if they are real; living truthfully in imaginary circumstances.”²⁴ This

definition specifically introduces the additional ideas of “belief” and “actions” (concepts missing from the definition of acting as “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances”) which we use as a metric for the exercises going forward.

Once we agree on a definition of acting that incorporates the idea of “imaginary circumstances,” we face the task of addressing “imagination.” As a first step, I generally ask the students to imagine an elephant. Without fail, they all can. The results vary widely because each individual’s experience of imagination is different – for example, some students are more visually-oriented than others – but every student can create an imaginary elephant or have an imaginative sense of one. We then discuss how they were able to imagine their elephants. Many of the students can describe where their ideas for their elephant came from, and many can talk about the feelings they had or the things they saw or felt, but none of them can describe exactly *how* they imagined their elephant. In general, we can talk about the things that we do to prepare to imagine an elephant (for example, thinking of other elephants we’ve experienced previously) or the results of our imagining (such as specific details of our experience of our elephant), but it’s not possible to talk about how the “imagination switch” is actually flipped. It’s something we *do*. In *Building a Character*, Stanislavsky writes, “We are born with it inside of us, with an innate capacity for creativeness.”²⁵ Because of this, we collectively agree that imagination is an action or event – a complex process that we do naturally as human beings, but which we can’t delineate in specific detail. We can talk around it, but we can’t describe it directly...we must *do* it.

One can argue that, if this is true – that we can’t talk about imagining directly – then it is also true that we can’t teach a student how to imagine. Everyone can already do it, and we can only help them practice it and give them tools to get better at it. Further, if acting is based on using imagination, then the same argument can be made

about acting, at least in part. We can't teach a student the part of acting related to imagining (believing in imaginary circumstances), but we can help them develop and refine their inherent ability. With the understanding that we all already have the innate ability to engage our imaginations, we begin to apply it to acting methodology and our practice of "believing in and living through imaginary circumstances and actions."

In class, we begin this practice by creating a set of imaginary circumstances and "believing in and living through" them – otherwise known as improvisation. Often students carry a negative association with improvisation from high school. As students have repeatedly expressed in class, improvisation in high school often focuses on humour and quick wit and, as a result, students fear they aren't "funny" enough or fast enough. Beginning the course with improvisation requires reassuring them that we are truly focusing on our definition of "believing in and living through" the experience. Once they accept that there is no right or wrong way to live through the situation and that they will not be judged on their dexterity as a playwright, they are more willing to engage.

In pairs, students create their own imaginary circumstances. It doesn't matter what the imaginary circumstances are as long as their goal is to believe in and live through them (though circumstances closer to their personal experience are often more effective earlier in the process). At this point, I believe it's important to focus on engagement and enjoyment and leave judgement to the side. The students are learning to listen and respond and to connect with imaginary circumstances in front of their peers. Accomplishing this without pre-planning or a sense of "performing" is new for most of them. I want to encourage them to play honestly from their own experience – a key element of Active Analysis – and to follow Stanislavsky's advice which asks, "What would I do today, here, now in these given circumstances?"²⁶ This process also

fosters a sense that it is possible to trust that the relationship dynamic with their scene partner will provide everything they need for a successful scene. To this end, I generally ask that the improvisation last for at least five continuous minutes, which is initially very intimidating to them. This time limit ensures that they don't give up on the exercise too soon, or, if they've pre-planned the exercise to some extent, it ensures that the scene will last longer than their plan, leaving them with no alternative but to engage with their scene partner.

In the initial rounds of improvisations, students often create scenarios close to their own experience – roommate conflicts, student/teacher conflicts, or other relationship issues. In an unconscious attempt to avoid conflict, the students often default to scenes in which they are deciding something or teaching something – “where should we go to dinner?” or “let me show you how to bake a cake.” Based on my improv experience at Seydways Studios, I usually end up asking the students to avoid scenes about deciding or teaching, and to avoid the use of too many imaginary props (one pair of students wanted to work with a litter of imaginary puppies) in order to foster direct interaction between the students. Students can also be quite creative. One pair chose to be the right and left sides of a student's brain – one being logical and the other being emotional. Almost any scenario is useful as long as the students truly engage their belief in the situation and relate to their partner, and, in subsequent improvisations, I encourage them to create situations with higher stakes and deeper relationships.

As we practice the skills of belief through a series of student-created improvisations, we discuss what makes it easier to believe in the situation and to maintain that belief. Students usually instinctively know that specific details help with belief – specifics of the characters' relationships, specifics of the environment, specifics

of each character's goal, specifics of the relationship history, etc. For example, one student who played a doctor commented after her improvisation, "I guess I need to find out more about how a doctor actually does things." In this way, the students' experience of the events helps them to understand the usefulness of further research – the exact opposite of the process of "cognitive analysis," which places analysis first. This intuitive sense of the usefulness of specific details leads us to analyse the imaginary circumstances more deeply, and it is here that we use the set of questions laid out by Stanislavsky and popularized by Hagen (Who am I?, Where am I?, What surrounds me?, etc.).²⁷ What I would like to emphasise here is that these questions are not introduced while scoring the scene as part of an initial analysis of a script. Rather, in our class, the students are already actively exploring circumstances and therefore use the questions as tools for gaining a more specific understanding of them. In this way, the process of "action analysis" highlights the usefulness of the questions in a way that the process of "cognitive analysis" often misses.

Once we've laid a foundation based on "belief" and a deeper understanding of the circumstances, we develop the process further by factoring in that we will need to apply our work to scripted material. The primary difference between an improvisation and scripted material is that a script contains a structured set of predetermined events which may be repeated multiple times in performance. As Gillett describes it, "an unpremeditated, spontaneous interaction, albeit within a planned production [...] is precisely what Stanislavski searched for."²⁸

To introduce this idea of structure into our process of "living truthfully," we create new sets of circumstances for improvisation. After an initial improvisation, we choose three major episodes which must happen during the scene and then improvise the scene again. While the scenario will still be freely improvised (based on the

students' knowledge of the specific, detailed circumstances), the three chosen major episodes become predetermined elements that must occur during the next iteration of the improvisation. By this point in the class we have spent several weeks working with improvised scenes, and we can easily add an element of structure without greatly undermining the students' sense of belief. It also offers the students a chance to experience simultaneously managing the scene from both the character's and the actor's point of view.

As actors we must always negotiate two worlds – the world of the play or character and the world of the performance. To forget that one is an actor playing a role is dangerous and comes close to hallucination or insanity. Imagine if an actor came to believe a sword fight was a real life-or-death event! *Perezhivanie* does not mean one must forget oneself. On the contrary, an actor must be able to experience as the character through belief in imaginary circumstances while simultaneously navigating the requirements of performance (blocking, projection, choreography, audience, etc.). Stanislavsky “describes the actor's ‘sense of self’ (*samochnuvstvie*) as comprising two equally important perspectives – being on stage and being within the role.”²⁹ The gradual addition of structure to the improvisations allows the beginning actors to acclimate to this necessity.

After improvising the scene with three pre-planned episodes, we further scaffold the process towards scripted material by adding another level of predetermination to the improvisation. Each of the three previous predetermined major episodes is further subdivided into three “sub-events” that must occur in order for each episode to take place in the next iteration. At this point, the students have a structure which includes detailed circumstances and three episodes composed of three events each – basically, a 9-point plan through the scene. The goal is to freely improvise the scene while following the

predetermined plan. In this set of improvisations, the students are balancing the concepts of listening and responding to their partner in the moment with the requirement that the scene happen in a loosely structured sequence.

By this point in the iterative process, the students have improvised these structured scenarios several times and have developed a somewhat regular pattern for the scene that takes their plan into account. As the final step on our path towards scripted material, the students take their structured improvisation and the pattern they've developed through repetition and turn it into a script of the scene. Now they will work with an actual script – albeit a script based on their own repeated, structured improvisations – but a script nonetheless. Students tend to find this scripted version of the scene straightforward and easy to accomplish because they have become so familiar with the circumstances and the plan of events. The lines come easily because the students created them through repeatedly embodying the situation. After having worked on scripted material created via this improvisational process, the students are ready to attempt a scripted scene from a published play using a more standard Active Analysis rehearsal process as delineated previously in Merlin's summary.

Scripted Scenes

The process from basic improvisation at the beginning of the class to the work on their scripted/improvised scene generally takes about half the semester, or 7 weeks (classes generally meet for 2 hours, twice a week). Through this progression, the students experience a process rooted in improvisation and become familiar with looking at a scene as a sequence of events. We now spend the second half of the semester reversing the process by starting with scripted scenes and breaking them into sequences of episodes which may be improvised. To facilitate this process, we pick a scene that we work on together as a class – I often use the scene from Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*

where George and Emily walk home from school and talk about their relationship. In preparing to improvise the events of the scene, we discuss the circumstances and relationships and flesh out the world of the play. Then, as Stanislavsky described, we divide the scene into episodes – at this point the episodes are larger “chunks” of the scene which contain enough action to be the basis for an improvised scenario. These “chunks” have no specified length, but students can usually agree where one major episode ends and another starts, with a simple scene containing a handful of primary episodes. I tend to refrain from rigid definitions of what constitutes a “chunk” so that students don’t become mired in dogmatic adherence to perceived rules. Rather, I encourage them to trust their own sense of what feels like an event or a section of text that may be improvised.

As we divide the scene, we give each episode a name, as Stanislavsky suggested.³⁰ In giving the episodes titles, the goal is to create an evocative phrase which entices the students to act it out – something active and (hopefully) fun. For some students these titles are very literal; for others, they are more metaphorical. The important thing is that they are simple phrases that inspire the students to enact the episode. As with every element of the process, I try to avoid dogma, instead encouraging the students to use phrases that engage them rather than phrases they think are “correct.” For the *Our Town* scene, one class came up with episode names like “George tests the water,” “George leaps,” and “George and Emily swim” to indicate the progression of their relationship. While these titles are metaphorical, the students felt they were enticing titles and expressive of the action of the episodes. The same class created a visual diagram of the relationship between the episodes instead of using a more standard outline approach. In a similar way, as a group, each class creates a high-

level plan of the episodes of the scene, a map of the general forest rather than the specific trees, so to speak.

The next step is for the students to improvise the action of the episodes, largely in their own words. As before, I am not dogmatic about avoiding the playwright's words. If words or phrases from the script come to the students naturally during the improvisation, they are free to use them. The main goal is to improvise the scene rather than focusing on remembering the lines or getting them right. Afterwards, we compare the results of the improvisation with the text of the scripted scene to see where the action was the same and where it differed. The points of difference provide valuable information regarding places where our understanding of the scene needs to be more specific, so we discuss why the scripted scene was indeed different from the improvised version. To further the search for specificity, we break the episodes down into a series of smaller events that compose each episode. The smaller events that comprise each episode contain more specific elements of action that add up to the overall action of the episode. For example, the episode named "George tests the water" in *Our Town* may be composed of events like "George asks a favour" and "Emily agrees to write." Again, these phrases are chosen collectively by the students to express their understanding of the scene. In fact, the phrases tend to evolve as their understanding of the scene deepens through the exploration.

To find similar specificity in the language, the students also compare the words they used in the improvisation with the dialogue created by the playwright. As with the events, the points of difference provide useful information about the ideas being communicated and areas which may need additional clarification. To achieve this clarity, we discuss why the characters' ideas may have been phrased in the exact manner used by the playwright rather than the phrasing used in the improv. The students

continue this iterative process of improvising the sequence of episodes/events and comparing the result to the script until they are performing the scene with accuracy of action and dialogue. With everyone working on the same scene, the students have a chance to watch numerous improvised versions of the scene and to participate in numerous discussions of the episodes, events, and points of difference. Because of the high number of repetitions, the group tends to learn the scene rather quickly.

After a couple of weeks of working in this way as a group, the students are ready to work on individual scenes to refine their personal process of identifying episodes, improvising them, and comparing them to the script to find specificity. By working in this way, they learn to recognize elements of action, describe them in evocative terms, and work towards a specific embodiment of the scene which is based in a sense of engagement, listening, and improvisational freedom.

Results and Conclusion

Basing actor training in improvisational practice and the use of Active Analysis yields many benefits. At the start, without a script in hand or the responsibility of exact lines, the actors find it easier to listen and respond to their scene partner and to focus on what's happening between them in the scene. One student observed in class: "We know what we're doing and what the character wanted and we could play with it in a way we couldn't if we had scripts in our hands." In addition, framing the scenes as "improvisations" lessens the pressure to get it "right" – there's no such thing as a wrong improvisation – so the actors are more physically relaxed and less self-conscious about their work. These elements of relaxation and responsiveness are valuable for beginning actors yet often hard to achieve when working in conventional ways.

Through their use of Active Analysis, the actors' specific understanding of the circumstances and the sequence of episodes/events in the scene gives them a clear map

to follow, which they find easier to remember. This makes them less worried about forgetting their lines or not knowing what happens next. Merlin addresses this concept in her book on stage fright:

When we break down a text into bits of action, what we're basically doing is 'bundling' sections of text together [...which] bundles information into meaningful wholes. Rather than having a whole heap of individual items strung together on a string of our short-term memory – or one big blob of text that we're trying to line-cram – we now have globules of connected ideas that we can pattern and link. Dividing our lines into [these] 'bundles' (so to speak) makes them much easier to remember.³¹

Students regularly express their lack of fear of forgetting their lines because they know deeply what happens in the scene, and they feel the lack of fear makes it easier to listen and respond naturally to their partner. Additionally, as they gain experience in looking at scenes as sequences of episodes/events, students find it easier to identify and play the actions of any scene they work on because they are familiar with the sensation of embodied action. It's no longer an intellectual concept.

Finally, experience has shown that grounding the scene work in improvisation leads actors to use their voices and bodies more naturally. Since they are embodying action from the beginning of rehearsal rather than waiting until they've learned their lines and blocking, they typically show more vocal variety and dynamics because the words are being used to communicate and are in response to their scene partner rather than simply being recited from rote memorization. A student commented, "you have to listen and respond to what is actually happening rather than just going on with the lines." I also find that actors working with this process help create much of their blocking because they have a clear relationship to the environment, to each other, and to

what is happening. The process of Active Analysis supports the actor in being as vocally and physically vibrant in a scene as they are in daily life.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight the words of UK theatre teacher and director Paul Christie about how, in life, experience precedes words:

We experience and then we speak. This is the way of things. Experience leads to words. In the theatre, when rehearsing a play we have the words already, the playwright has given them to us, but we do not have the experience that leads to them yet. We have a wealth of words and a poverty of experience. This is our starting point.³²

My goal in the THEA 1033 Beginning Acting class is to teach beginning acting in a way that addresses this fundamental understanding about life and acting – experience precedes words – and which scaffolds to Active Analysis as a rehearsal method.

Through improvisation, Stanislavsky's process of Active Analysis provides a way to focus on an experience of action first, with the playwright's words coming later. It is this experience of action that creates the need for the words, leading to a fuller understanding of both action and words. In this way, I believe we can more effectively teach clear concepts of acting which draw on the actor's innate creativity and which transfer directly into a rehearsal process.

Notes

1. The definition of acting as “living truthfully in imaginary circumstances” is generally attributed to noted acting teacher Sanford Meisner.
2. Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 346.
3. Hagen, *Respect for Acting*, 79. In addition to this text, other typical examples of introductory texts might include *Acting One* by R. Cohen and *Acting is Believing* by K. Stilson.
4. The graduate acting programme at New York University – one of the top training programs in the country – offers courses of study in the Lee Strasberg Institute, the Stella Adler School, and the Meisner Studio.
5. Carnicke, “Stanislavsky’s System,” 23. For an in-depth analysis regarding actor training in the US and Stanislavsky’s influence, see Zazzali, *Acting in the Academy*, including 27, 29, 41, 43, and 47.
6. Carnicke, “Belief through Knowledge,” 19–31.
7. Stanislavski, *An Actor’s Work on a Role*, 149.
8. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 134.
9. *Ibid.*, 126 and 277.
10. *Ibid.*, 132.
11. Knebel, *Active Analysis*, 106.
12. Hagen, *Respect for Acting*, 82.
13. Stanislavski, *An Actor’s Work*, 148.
14. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 226.
15. Stanislavski, *An Actor’s Work*, 135 and Shevtsova, “Music, singing, word, action,” 16.
16. Stanislavski, *An Actor’s Work on a Role*, 138.
17. *Ibid.*, 45-46.
18. Quoted in Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 154.
19. Shevtsova, “Music, singing, word, action,” 8
20. In Thomas, *A Director’s Guide*, 83.
21. Merlin, “Stanislavski (1863-1938),” 27.
22. Merlin, “Here, Today, Now,” 325.
23. Gillett, *Acting Stanislavski*, xii-xiv.
24. *Ibid.*, xv.
25. Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, 279.
26. Knebel, *Active Analysis*, 53.
27. See note 12 above.
28. Gillett, *Acting Stanislavski*, 56.
29. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 142.
30. See note 10 above.
31. Merlin, “Facing the Fear,” 185.
32. Christie, “The What Happened of Experience,” 1.

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