

# What Stanislavski Tells Us About Acting

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**Abstract**— Konstantin Stanislavski is one of the most influential acting theorists in the 21st century. In the Moscow Arts Theatre, Stanislavski and his disciples began to explore the nature and function of the actor's craft as to find the solution to the mystery of acting. Stanislavski was influenced by his contemporary psychology, physiology, Eastern somatic arts and many other disciplines. Stanislavski's works translated into English in early nineteenth century and widespread in Europe and America thereafter. However, his key ideas such as affective memory and emotionalism were highly influential to develop the American version of Method Acting. However, Stanislavski's later research works on psychophysical aspects of the actor's art have been marginalized and misinterpreted to serve different political and ideological agendas.

This paper therefore explores the fundamental nature of the actor's art through the lens of his later research works. It focuses on Stanislavski's key ideas of 'experiencing' (*perezshivanie*) and 'method of physical action' to show how these important ideas encapsulate the pragmatic nature of the actor's art. Stanislavski's lifelong struggle was to find the solution to the inner and outer dimension of the actor's art. Furthermore, he wanted to uplift the role of the actor as an independent creator of his own craft. Given these two ideas as the basis of this paper, I shall argue how it is possible to understand the actor's work as an embodied experience.

**Keywords**— Stanislavski, psychophysical acting, experiencing, method of physical action, embodiment

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Anyone who wishes to conduct a fruitful discussion about acting always undoubtedly refers to the legacy that Stanislavski has left behind decades ago (Stanislavski 1937; Stanislavsky 1952, 2000). He is the first master to dedicate his lifelong research to explore the mystery of the actor's work. Stanislavski was influential to develop the contemporary Western and European modern acting tradition. His thoughts and written works have directly and indirectly influenced to develop the psychophysical actor training tradition. However, Stanislavski's legacy has also created many controversies and difficulties among theatre scholars and practitioners who have tried to adapt and interpret Stanislavski's ideas for their own personal and political aims.

However, many actors and theatre practitioners in our performance scene often refer Stanislavski to mystify the work they do. The irony is that these utterances do not reflect what Stanislavski really said about acting; rather we have distorted and misinterpreted Stanislavski's valuable findings that he had been exploring throughout his life time. Stanislavski scholar, Sharon Marie Carnicke clearly argues, many theatre practitioners tend to categorize him as a 'tyrannical director and teacher, exclusively committed to realism as an aesthetic style and personal emotion as the primary wellspring of great acting' (Margolis & Renaud 2009, p. 15). But the fact is as Carnicke further asserts, Stanislavski saw the realism as one of many 'profound styles' that could be used in the theatre. Moreover, Stanislavski saw the idea of emotion memory as 'least effective' and marginal tool in the craft of acting (2009, p. 15).

Among those controversies and difficulties pertaining to Stanislavski's legacy of acting, the 'psychophysical tradition' of actor training has been a key stream of thought that has been passing down to generations, from Stanislavski's era to the present day. There are many theorists and researchers, who have been influenced and continue to be influenced by the psychophysical tradition of acting. Michael Chekhov for instance, as a pupil of Stanislavski, later developed his own version of the 'psychological gesture' of the actor, based on the notion of '*prāna*' (Breath) or the inner energy (Zarrilli 2012, p. 20). Bella Merlin has researched on the psychophysical development of Stanislavski's later teaching and has explored the possibilities of pragmatic approaches to acting<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, acting pedagogue Phillip B. Zarrilli's work and his approach to actor training derived from Kalaripayattu martial arts in Kerala, India has been widely discussed as a psychophysical actor training through an intercultural approach (Wallace 2012; Zarrilli & Library 2012). Polish director Jerzy Grotowski directly acknowledges that he

has many influences from Stanislavski (Richards 2004). He went to study directing and the craft of acting at the Lunacharski Institute of Theatre Arts (GITIS) in Moscow and studied Stanislavski, Meyerhold and Tairov (Romanska & Library 2012)<sup>2</sup>.

This paper thus explores the inner and outer dimensions of the actor's work as it is formulated by the Russian pedagogue, Konstantine Sergeevich Stanislavski (1863-1938). I will trace Stanislavski's most important concept of 'experiencing' (*perezhivanie*)<sup>3</sup> (Carnicke 1998) to show how his concept of 'method of physical action' and the idea of the 'active analysis' play a significant contribution to the interrelatedness of inner and outer involvement of the actor's craft.

## II. HISTORIES

Stanislavski's theatre practice at the Moscow Arts Theatre in nineteenth century Russia and his application of actor training is the most influential theory of acting that has changed the European and American theatre and actor training of the last century. During the cold war era, Stanislavski's thoughts and practices travelled to Europe and later to America through his close disciples such as Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya (Carnicke 1998). Simultaneously his key texts such as *My Life in Arts* and *An Actor Prepares*<sup>4</sup> also were published in the United States. Stanislavski himself also travelled to America twice with his theatre ensemble, the Moscow Arts Theatre. Since then, Stanislavski's ideas on systematic approaches to actor training and ethics have been influential in those continents and have been continuously re-interpreted within the development of cognitive sciences, psychoanalysis and phenomenology (Kemp 2012, Leach & Library 2013).

While psychological realism and its mental prominence within actor training has been the major element of acting practices in the American Actors Studio, Stanislavski's later research work pertaining to psychophysical chiasm of the actor's art was a continuous, yet hidden tradition in Moscow. Throughout this time, Stanislavski's teaching had been propagated through the political and ideological beliefs of the two continents. Recent researchers have explored the hidden aspects of his system in Moscow through re-reading of his unpublished manuscripts. (Carnicke 2009, Merlin 2007, Whyman 2007, 2008). Some researchers have explored the different meanings of his key terms by going back to the etymologies of such Russian words. Sharon Carnicke (1998), Bella Merlin (2001, 2007), Jean Benedetti (1990, 1998, 2004) and Rose Whyman (2008) have written much about Stanislavski's hidden legacy of the 'Method of Physical Action' and its importance in understanding the psychophysical nature of actor training. Many researchers have agreed that Stanislavski did not attempt to develop a cohesive system of actor training. His research project was to explore how the actor could minimize the correlation between her inner world and outer action to be able to 'live through' the character. He wanted actors to 'embody' and 'experiencing' (*perezhivanie*) the role they portray and stated that this blending is a 'rare moment' (Carnicke 1998 p.108) of the actor's performance experience.

Stanislavski's contentious approach to finding a solution to the problem of the actor was somewhat modernist project and manifested in his 'truth claim' of the actor's art. Stanislavski wanted his actors not to 'act' (*igrat*) but to 'live through' or 'experiencing' every truthful moment on the stage. Stanislavski always had a rivalry of the Russian word '*igrat*' as this word carries the meaning of 'acting out' or 'the exaggeration of human act' (Carnicke 1998). He believed that to be able to 'live through' in a given moment, the actor needs to behave on the stage as naturally as possible. His emphasis on the idea of the 'fourth wall' reflects this need of isolation and truthful commitment to the actor's embodiment in the theatre. He proposed and developed a systematic approach to solve the present problem in two modes: realizing the value of the habit in the human body, and agency, he advocated actors to 'incarnate' the physiological learning of the role. The correct physiological approach, as he believed, was the 'experiencing' of the given role. Stanislavski clearly stated this approach thus:

The physiological habit of the role arouses its psychology in the soul of the artist and the psychological experiencing of the feelings of the role engenders the physiological state of the body of the artist which is habitual for the role (Whyman 2007, p. 121). For Stanislavski, psychology and the physiology are the two sides of the same process he advocated through the term – habit. Habit formation of the actor's learning process as he saw is the essential task to capture the experiential life of the role. Stanislavski invites us to see the work of the actor as the combination of body and mind. It is worthwhile to note that he does not see the actor's work as a split of body and mind or psychological and physiological. The term habit offers the unification of psychophysical equilibrium of the actor's task (Whyman 2007, p. 121).

However, Stanislavski's contribution to acting is twofold. First he attempted to develop a system which could solve the fundamental bodymind problem of the actor. Secondly he wanted to emancipate the actor as an artist and an independent creator of his/her art. As Carnicke argues Stanislavski 'advanced the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis in the mid-1930s to make actors fully accountable for their craft' (Carnicke 1998, p. 162). Stanislavski's later project was directed towards this liberation of the actor as a creator of her art by giving the 'autonomy' and power in the process of learning and creating the role

on the sage. The method that Stanislavski suggested to give the autonomy of the actor is the 'Method of Physical Action' and 'Active Analysis' where the actor experiences how she creates the character through her psychophysical elements.

### III. WORDPLAY

As most researchers agree, the experiencing (*perezhivanie*) is the most elusive term that Stanislavski has used in his writings (Carnicke 1998, Whyman 2008). As many other terms Stanislavski has used inconsistently in his books, the term 'experiencing' also has many nuances and meanings. First, Stanislavski has adapted this term 'experiencing' from the famous novelist and moralist Tolstoy. In his book *What is Art*, Tolstoy uses the term 'experience' to denote how the artist shares their felt experiences through their practice of art rather than accumulating knowledge (Carnicke 1998, p. 110). For Tolstoy, knowledge accumulation does not play a central role in his theory of art but the felt emotions. He contended that the artist communicates felt emotions through experiencing them. The Russian word for experiencing is the word '*perezhivanie*'. Going back to the etymology of this word, Carnicke says that it implies the ontological existence of the actor and the 'repetitive mode' of the actor's task. Stanislavski also emphasised the importance of the iteration of the actor's bodily apparatuses in actor training. The Russian prefix of 'pere' presents 're' or repetition. The infinitive of the Russian word *zhivanie* is the *zhit* (to live). Carnicke further suggests that this *perezhivanie* could be translated as 're-living' or generally 'performing'. Previous translators of Stanislavski's texts such as J.J. Robbins and Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood have been targeted by contemporary critiques of being incorrectly translated this important term into English as 'living the part' (Carnicke 1998, pp.110-111). Instead, Carnicke and Whyman suggest a 're-living the part' or just 'experiencing' the part for the substitution of the word '*pereshzivanie*.'

The dispute between the 'living the part' and the 'experiencing the role' is that whether the actor lives 'in a character' that is fictional or the actor 'experiencing' the character with the actor's own affective and expressive modes. When the emphasis adds to the 'living the part,' it is suggested that the actor psychologically empathises with the role and is immersed within the role by leaving the actor's self behind. Stanislavski expert, Jean Benedetti argues that Stanislavski never uses the term 'impersonation' to depict the relationship between the actor and the role. He insists that the term 'impersonation' is an 'American (mis) interpretation' (Stanislavski and the Russian Theatre/<http://www.routledgeperformancearchive.com>.) of what Stanislavski meant by the word *perezhivanie* or 're-living'. 'Re-living' and 'living the part' are two different approaches of acting. He further says that Stanislavski sees the relationship between the actor and the character as 'actor-character' relationship. In contrast to the term 'living', the notion of 'experiencing' provides the actor to experience the role she plays not only as the player of this particular role but as an 'observer' of her own task. This twist emphasises the importance of the usage of the term 'experiencing' when talking about Stanislavski's system. It is thus important to further understand how Stanislavski's notion of *perezhivanie* encapsulates the 'embodied experience' of the actor's art which allows the actor to become an observer of his art.

### IV. EXPERIENCING (*Perezhivanie*)

Stanislavski's primary understanding of 'experiencing' is described as 'an actor's deep concentration on stage and absorption in the events of the play during performance' (Carnicke 1998, p.110). Stanislavski further observes that when the actor is "totally gripped by the play" then the experience is "natural" (*estestvennoe*) and "correct" (*pravilnoe*) (ibid). It is a particular 'creative mood', inspiration and the 'activation of the subconscious' (Hodge 2000) that Stanislavski wanted to refer to. Stanislavski here introduces the actor's body/mind experience as a dual, inter-subjective relation between the actor's body and the score. On the other hand, the actor is fully immersed in the experiencing when she is totally attuned with the physical score. On the other hand, this 'experiencing' is fully truthful and embodied when the actor's body is "gripped" by the physical score. Phillip Zarrilli refers how Stanislavski wrote about this relationship between the actor's body and the physical score. Once the actor learns the score, she goes beyond the "mechanical execution" to a deeper level of experience which 'is rounded out with new feelings and .... become[s], one might say, psychophysical in quality' (Zarrilli & Library 2012, p. 14). When Stanislavski refers to this key term of his system, he invites us to understand this idea as his basis of the theory of acting. He suggests the actor's embodied approach to actor's learning process is the culmination of the embodied consciousness exemplified through the notion of 'experiencing.' It is a state of 'being and doing' that is generated through the actor's bodymind equilibrium and it's intertwined with the world (score).

The contemporary development of cognitive science and psychology also investigate this 'state of being' of the individual. These studies provide evidences to understand the process of the performer's experience of being immersed in a given theatrical moment. Particularly, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has conducted experiments into this particular area of study and revealed how the experience of 'flow' occurs in daily human activities. As Csikszentmihalyi describes, this state of consciousness is a 'flow' or an 'optimal experience' that the individual experiences when s/he is deeply engaged with body

activities with highly 'structured deep involvement, absorption and enjoyment' (Fave, Massimini & Bassi 2011). As Csikszentmihalyi shows, (1988, 1975, 1990 and Nikamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009) there are some key factors governing an individual's optimal experience: 1.) Intense and focus concentration on the present moment, 2.) Merging of action and awareness, 3.) Loss of self-reflective self-consciousness, 4.) Alteration of temporal experience, 5.) Sense of control over one's action (Fave, Massimini & Bassi 2011, p. 44). Each of them is relevant to the actor who experiences a creative act on stage. During such a flow of experience, it is observed that the individual 'loses awareness of herself as separate from the world around her and a feeling of union with the environment arises' (ibid, pp. 44-45). Another exciting factor which is similar to what Stanislavski has mentioned is the 'sense of control' over the action. The optimal experience of the individual is not a psychophysically blind spot for the doer but a conscious control activity. This conscious control awareness is vital for the performer to observe and correct her bodily comportment in the process of performing. This process further allows the individual to 'keeping things under control' (ibid, p. 45). Bodymind consciousness operates at the pre-reflective level and the actor's body is controlled through the autonomy of the body. As Stanislavski has mentioned elsewhere, that this moment of experiencing the bodymind consciousness is a rare asset and a 'happy moment' for the actor. He asserts: 'Everything changes for him at this happy moment. As the creator of this character, he becomes inwardly free of his own creation and becomes the observer of his own' (Cited in Carnicke 1998, p. 108).

The question is how could the actor be an observer of her own act? When Stanislavski identifies the importance of this concept of experiencing, he undoubtedly relates to the French philosopher Denis Diderot's idea of dual-consciousness. Denis Diderot has been a long standing proponent of the physiognomy of the actor and her autonomy of the bodily automatism. In his book *Eléments de Physiologie* Diderot describes a musician who plays a concert on his harpsichord while conversing with his neighbour. He demonstrates how this player is completely immersed in the playing activity and forgets his playing yet not missing any single note while talking to another person (Roach, 1993 p. 149). As Roach points out, Diderot names this ability as the 'animal function' of the human body (Ibid, p. 149). When this thesis is applied to the theatrical performance, Stanislavski applies the notion of 'experiencing' to denote that the actor's body is central to be able to access to her consciousness. Body and the consciousness are interrelated phenomena; consciousness germinates through the actor's activation of sensory motor networking with the world<sup>5</sup>. Stanislavski states: 'the actor creates the life of the human spirit of the role from his living soul and he further explains, incarnates it in his own living body' (Carnicke 1998, p. 111). Experiencing as the ultimate experience of bodymind equilibrium is thus celebrated in the Stanislavski's theory of acting. The way the actor experiences this particular 'being' of unified bodymind consciousness as Stanislavski believes, achieves through the rehearsal method that he postulates in the later part of his theatre legacy. He founded this system as the 'method of physical action' and 'active analysis' as a psychophysical approach to acting.

## V. ACTOR AS A DOER

This new revolutionary physical approach encourages actors to activate their bodies rather than sitting and discussing about the mental and psychological construction of the character. This shift from 'round-the-table' discussion to the 'method of physical action' marks the shift from the actor as a 'thinking being' to the actor as a 'pragmatic being'. It primarily focuses on the actor not as a 'thinker' but as a 'doer' who integrates her body and mind to encourage the 'experiencing.' The experiencing is thus a rare moment of bodymind (experience) which is achieved through the culmination of the method of physical actions.

Stanislavski's early writings suggest that he rejected the Russian word for acting known as '*igrat*' (to act, to play). Stanislavski rejected this word because he did not want to describe the actor's work as theatrical artificiality or the exaggeration of somatic acts. Instead, he encouraged the word *deistvovat* (to behave, to take action) to denote the actor's work on the stage (Carnicke 1998, pp.147-148). It implies that the actor's work on the stage is not a 'theatrical artificiality of body' but 'take action' via which she achieves the effect of experiencing. Bella Merlin argues that Stanislavski's turn towards the physical action and active analysis emphasises that he does not reject the affective life of the performer but that he was concerned with how the affective life and the physicality of the actor is intertwined and embodied in the process of experiencing. For instance, the investigation into the root of the word 'emotion' demonstrates that it is etymologically related to the Latin word *motere*. This Latin word *motere* means 'to move' and the prefix 'e' suggests 'to move away' (Merlin 2001). Merlin further suggests that emotion therefore invites the actor to 'move' and to 'take action' (ibid). Phenomenologically speaking, what Stanislavski's approach of the method of physical action and active analysis suggests is to pay our attention to the actor's bodily intentionality and the motility embedded in the human body. This is what Merleau-Ponty understood as body-subject. Our bodies move and relate to other bodies and object through the 'intentional arc' (Merleau-Ponty 1962). It is a way of 'moving' and pre-reflective understanding of the living world. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone also postulates that the bodily 'movements' are the primordial learning of the living beings (Sheets-Johnstone 1981, 2010, 2011). She argues: 'we are not simply bodies, morphological forms having such and such parts, but dynamically moving and dynamically attentive creatures' (Sheets-Johnstone 2010) Stanislavski also came to realize that the actor's body is not a mere thinking substance which stagnates in the rehearsal room, but a 'moving

being' which allows her to experience the dynamic psychosomatic impulses of the motion of the actor's body. By promoting his method as a radical shift from the emotional centred approach to a body/agency centred approach, Stanislavski shifted his method from 'I think' to the method of 'I cans' (Dewey 1896, Merleau-Ponty 1962, Polanyi 1967, Dreyfus 1991) in actor training.

In the later part of his life, Stanislavski was fully committed to explore his approach of the method of physical action. Writing a letter to his son, he explained:

I am setting a new device (priem) in motion now, a new approach to the role. It involves the reading of 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 (Cited in Carnicke 1998, p.154).

This passage reflects the new method of 'doing acting' rather than 'thinking' about acting. As he summoned up with a few words, the new approach seemed straight forward and 'tangible' to the actor learner.

Once the method of physical action is achieved, one could lead to a conclusion that the actor is fully equipped with the tools she needs to perform a successful act on stage. Further one would misunderstand that Stanislavski suggests a system where the actor's bodily autonomy would fulfil the overall need of the actor's art. Once the actor finds her autonomy of the body through the physical score, she is capable of delivering an exciting performance in the first place. But this is not the case. Stanislavski continuously opposed to such a mechanical act and 'actorish performance' that the actor could be trapped through incorrect approach. He contends:

The moment you introduce some wrong elements or other into a true creative state, all the other elements are changed, either all together, or gradually. Truth turns to convention and to technical tricks, belief in the real nature of one's experience and action into belief in one's own stock-in-trade, reflex action (Stanislavsky & Benedetti 2010, p. 297).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Stanislavski repeatedly argued that actors need to cultivate the 'inner creative state' which should be transparent and truthful (Stanislavsky & Benedetti 2010). The actor's 'inner creative state' is the fundamental core of the actor's experiencing. Stanislavski tirelessly worked to identify the importance of the inner state of consciousness of the actor and its truthful relation to the actor's bodily work. He saw this inner state as the 'invisible creative life' of the actor and believed that this inner creative life could be externalized and 'visible' through actor's physical action (ibid). The whole assumption of Stanislavski's method of physical action was that he believed that by manipulating the actor's physical action and movements, the inner life of the actor could be revitalized. He once wrote: 'External incarnation is important as it transmits the "internal life of human spirit".....the voice and the body of the artist must be cultivated on the basis of nature itself' (cited in Whyman 2007, p. 115). He further notes that the actor's 'unconscious' and 'intuition' offer the best creative techniques which the actor should embody through his physicality. When the actor is fully committed and attentive to the task she performs, the body/mind split is diminished. This is the 'rare' and 'happy moment' (Carnicke 1998, p. 108) that Stanislavski discussed as the experiencing of the actor.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bella Merlin has written numerous books such as *The Complete Stanislavski Tool Kit (2007)*, and *Beyond Stanislavski: Psychophysical Approach to Actor Training (2001)*.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Wolford also argues how contemporary experimental theatre practitioners have wrongly polarised Grotowski's approach to acting from that of Stanislavski. She exclaims that despite their differences in the aesthetic applications, Grotowski has extended Stanislavski's conceptions and thoughts in his theatre project ([Hodge 2000, p. 193](#)).

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<sup>3</sup> The infinitive of the Russian word ПЕРЕЖИВАНИЕ (*perezhivanie*) is ПЕРЕЖИВАТ (*perezhivat*) which means 're-living' or 'performing'.

<sup>4</sup> Stanislavski's key texts such as '*An Actor Prepares*', and '*Building a Character*' were first translated into English by his American colleague Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. These books were titled in Russian as *The Actor's Work on him/Herself Part One: Work on the Self in the Creative Process of Experiencing* and *Part Two: Work on the Self in the Creative Process of Incarnation*.

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary cognitive neuroscience and phenomenology argue that the human consciousness is a result of the continuous networking of one's sensorimotor activities with the world. Consciousness is defined as an embodied consciousness which is inseparable from the bodily functions. Cognition and the action is a single process (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991).