

Getting Stanislavsky Wrong

By Charles Marowitz (January 14, 2010)

In 1923, all of New York was bowled over by the first visit of the Moscow Art Theatre to America. No one in this country had seen such synchronized ensemble-playing or a troupe of individual actors of such power and persuasiveness. When the company returned to Russia after a triumphant national tour, actors such as Maria Ouspenskaya stayed behind and, along with Richard Boleslavsky, an earlier drop-out, began instructing American actors in that strange doctrine known as the Stanislavsky System. One of Boleslavsky's most attentive students was Lee Strasberg. Both Strasberg and his close friend Harold Clurman were early converts to Stanislavsky as handed down by Boleslavsky.

The fact is many of the tenets of the system passed on by Boleslavsky had already been surpassed by Stanislavsky even as the System was being absorbed by the Group Theatre under Strasberg's aegis. After a visit from Stella Adler to Paris, where she received private instruction from Stanislavsky, it became clear that elements such as "emotional memory" had been virtually abandoned by Stanislavsky and a new and stronger emphasis placed on "playing actions." These unexpected developments caused severe upheavals within the Group, and there were some, like Robert Lewis, who believed it was this schism which eventually triggered Strasberg's resignation from the company and brought about the disintegration of the Group Theatre itself.

During the next six decades, the precepts derived from the Stanislavsky System became the prevailing mode of tuition for professional actors both in America and Europe and, in many countries, is still the official doctrine for people pursuing theatre studies.

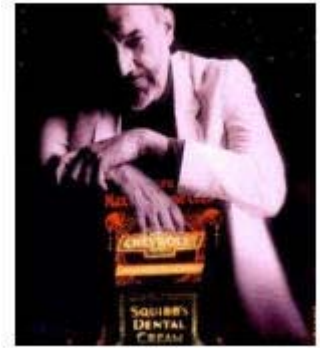
However, no dogma is so persuasive that it does not eventually create skeptics, apostates and even iconoclasts, and, in recent years, aspects of the Stanislavsky System have been seriously questioned and, in some instances, abandoned. Theorists like Michael Chekhov (who broke with Stanislavsky in the 1920's) and Bertolt Brecht (who found the System abhorrent) have fostered a whole series of alternative approaches inspired largely by a body of plays less naturalistic than those that stemmed from the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theatre. In some quarters, the very ethos of the Stanislavsky System has been attacked and its efficacy put into question.

The Stanislavskian practice most adhered to among students and professional actors is the formulation of "actions"- that is, a choice made about the central drive of a particular scene, what a character is going after. It is often the case that an actor in conjunction with a director can come up with three, four or even a half-dozen actions for a particular scene, the justification being that a character's action is never static but always changing. This approach often produces a series of impulses, each duly labeled in advance; these impulses are then assembled as if they were playing-cards, and then tossed out one after the other until the hand is played and the next round of the game begun.

What this tends to do is to divide a scene into a series of finite units with prescriptive action-titles, with actors proceeding on the assumption that these units cover all the minute changes that take place between characters in some dramatic interaction. What it actually does is over-systematize the actor's work and lead him or her into believing every moment of the scene should be strictly accounted for. What it does *not* do is allow the actor to organically adjust to the variation of circumstances as they unfold in what is supposed to be a spontaneous volley of behavior. In other words, it substitutes cognition for instinct.

In real life, we often go into a situation with a clear-cut objective in mind. Almost always, that objective encounters unexpected resistance or diversions from the people with whom it collides. Our "action" (i.e., fundamental "want") in the situation does not change, but it does alter according to unexpected pressures brought to bear upon it. In adjusting to these unexpected changes we, in a sense, improvise our way around obstacles as dictated by the overall objective that first placed us into those social circumstances. But if an actor has worked out every aspect of what is to come, every buffet, challenge or untoward development, he knows more than he should about his character's activity. He is robbed of the spontaneity that comes- as in life- from instinctively adjusting to whatever obstacles he may encounter in the pursuit of his objective.

CHARLES MAROWITZ



Email: winomar@mac.com

Recently, in Copenhagen, I was assisting a young director with what she referred to as her "game-plan." We had spoken loosely about the character's "want," but what she had formulated was an action for every vicissitude in the scene- a scene of about seven minutes' duration to which she had attached over a dozen banner headlines. "Why be so fastidious about every single nuance?" I asked. Reply: "Because I want the actor to understand all the minute adaptations he has to make in pursuing his objective, and therefore every moment has to be accounted for." But if the actor has a handle on what he fundamentally wants, won't he steer a course based on that original desire? That is, won't he logically equivocate or elude, camouflage or conceal, become wary, suspicious, insistent or frightened? Perhaps, said the young director, but this way he knows every twist and turn the scene will take and can prepare for it beforehand.

That may be true, but such an approach siphons off much of the spontaneity that would occur if the actor was not so totally conscious of every emotional change he was expected to make. What the actor gains in certainty, he loses in spontaneity. Having already decided precisely what his reactions are supposed to be, he merely posits them- rather than allowing them to evolve organically from the stimuli of the given circumstances.

It may seem like splitting hairs, but the underlying object of all acting is to create and sustain a spontaneity which, we all know, is rooted in a priori choices. But if the central thrust of a scene is clearly understood, and its overriding action correctly selected, all of those meticulously prescribed reactions take care of themselves- and in so doing, retain some of the surprise that life is always handing us just when we are expecting something different.

Overloading the actor with minute actions rather than permitting him to fend for himself in the hurly-burly of changing circumstances is only one of the many Stanislavsky postulates that need overhauling. The notion that all an actor needs do is determine his "action" in a particular scene or formulate a super-objective for the entire play is based on the fallacy that all one ever wants in life is the fulfillment of one overriding conscious desire. Hamlet wants to revenge the death of his father, we are told; Katherine wants to assert her independence from male domination; Macbeth plots and plans to acquire the crown which he believes has been supernaturally promised him. These are time-honored generalizations and, like all generalizations, may be either confirmed or contradicted. Hamlet can just as readily want to do everything he can to avoid revenging his father a) because he is never entirely sure that the "ghost" he saw was a benevolent or malignant spirit; b) because he has scruples about regicide or endangering his mother's status after her hasty remarriage; c) because he recognizes that he will never be the man his father was and therefore could never possibly rule the Kingdom of Denmark, a position he would be obliged to undertake as the natural heir to the throne. Conceivably, Katherine, rather than confirming her desire for independence, may secretly be longing to relinquish it because she has met her match in Petruchio but is now stuck with a fiery and belligerent persona which she cannot shake off. Macbeth, conscious of his indecisive nature, may be terrified by a prophecy which is beyond his true station, and he may sense that the Witches' prediction may be a snare to bring him down rather than raise him up.

Stanislavsky-based actors frequently base their choices on textual considerations rather than subtextual ones. What is apparent in the words a character speaks in a play often has no bearing on what is essentially motivating him- which is why we can and do have innumerable interpretations of what, at the outset, appears to be self-evident material. Actions based on professed sentiments almost always produce stale and repetitive theatre. It's only when an actor comes up with a new and previously unconsidered objective- one that had never occurred to us before- that we experience the frisson of a fresh interpretation.

The other and more perilous Stanislavsky fallacy is the assumption that a character can only want one thing at a time- the care- fully analyzed "action" that he gleans from a reading of the text or is dogmatically handed him by a director.

But as we know from our own psychological experience, one can simultaneously have multiple goals and mixed feelings. In the first court scene under the aegis of the newly anointed King Claudius, Hamlet may want to show his contempt toward the ruler because of the incestuous union with Gertrude; he may be squirmingly aware of the fact that there are people at court who recognize that his position as the heir-apparent has been usurped and he has to brazen out his humiliation in public. He may be yearning for a show of solidarity from his mother, whom he may believe was coerced into marrying Claudius; he may be scotching down his contempt for Laertes who is being given leave to go to France, whereas he is not being allowed to go back to Wittenberg; he may be feeling utterly helpless in a court where there is not one person he can call friend. The list of possible moods and mood-changes is endless, and each one of them dictates a

different "action," and each action, a different mode of behavior. How can one, in light of all those possibilities, single out a single "action" and say resolutely, this is how Hamlet "feels" and this is precisely what he "wants"?

In the 20th century we learned a lot about the psychology of acting from Stanislavsky, and much of it still applies, but not all of it. In the decades that followed his earliest work, the theories of Michael Chekhov have provided a useful corrective to many of the tenets of the System that had previously gone unchallenged. Acting theory has been evolving since Quintilian (and probably before), and the drama has gone from artifice to naturalism to psychological realism, expressionism, magic realism and the discontinuous demands of performance art. Acting technique has gone from "rules" to assumptions about behavior and widely differing notions of interior reality; from clashes between Diderot to Strasberg to theoretical differences stemming from Jung and Freud. If we revise or even discard certain basic Stanislavsky precepts, we are not dishonoring the Father of Psychological Realism but acknowledging his own belief that in art, the only constant is change.