

THE STANISLAVSKI SYSTEM

GROWTH AND METHODOLOGY

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SECOND EDITION

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Introduction

For this discussion of the *Stanislavski System*, Stanislavski's teachings during the later period of his life will be examined first. This is where he radically changed his earlier techniques in favor of what is now known as the Stanislavski System. The most important point of this radical shift is in the evolution of his 'Method of Physical Actions' which was formed in 1933, a few years before his death in 1938. This 'Method of Physical Actions' replaced his earlier techniques that were based heavily on 'Emotional Memory'¹ as well as on long readings and analysis of the text when rehearsing a production.

Stanislavski- The Early Years: A Brief Chronology

In June 1897 in Russia, Stanislavski and successful author-producer Nemirovich Danchenko decided to merge their acting companies and form the Moscow Art Theatre, popularly known as MAT. This was in response to the then current state of theatre that was, in Stanislavski's words, 'hopeless' with 'cliched traditions' and 'ham acting.'

In 1898 Chekhov allowed the MAT to produce his play, **Seagull**. Though this production turned out to be only a mediocre success, it became the precursor of reforms in actor training, leading to Stanislavski's famed 'inner technique.' The actors in **Seagull** brought out psychological depth and searched for 'inner truth' (Gray 138). This was a big shift from 'self obsessed' or 'audience obsessed' actors of that time. The same year, Stanislavski was influenced by French psychologist Theodule Ribot's concept 'Affective Memory.' This concept was renamed 'Emotional Memory' in Stanislavskian terms. Later it became the main subject of controversy regarding interpretations of Stanislavski's System in the American Theatre.

After trying to understand his own recent lifelessness on stage, Stanislavski wrote the first draft for his techniques in 1909. He observed creative and talented actors and tried to find common ground among them. From this, he started to formulate principles (including Emotional Memory) which he felt created these great performances.

The MAT actors were initially resistant, but on Danchenko's insistence, eventually agreed to apply some of Stanislavski's techniques to their performances. Stanislavski therefore formed the First Studio in 1911, which became a laboratory for his new experiments. Among others, the First Studio trained Eugene Vakhtangov (Stanislavski's brilliant pupil), Richard Boleslavsky (who first taught Stanislavski's methods in the United States) and Michael Chekhov.

For the next few years, Stanislavski continued to direct and work with his techniques on his actors, always trying to find the best methods of training for actors. After a while, even though the MAT was outwardly successful, Stanislavski felt a need to reformulate his techniques in order to renew the integrity of his System.

Stanislavski's Need for Change

Stanislavski's dissatisfaction with his earlier experiments in Emotional Memory, led him to develop a methodology that would change the way emotions were triggered. This methodology purported that emotions could be stimulated through simple physical actions. This was the basis of his new system. The suggestion by Stanislavski that there is a connection between internal experiences and their physical expression, has since been verified and substantiated by scientists such as Ivan Pavlov and I.M. Sechenov (Moore 17).

While searching for the ultimate training system for actors, Stanislavski noticed a gap between the physical and mental behavior of the actor on stage, as well as between the physical and mental preparation in the actor's work on the character. In other words, the actor spent long

days working internally and emotionally, and then tried to create a physicality in the character. By that time however, it was too late for organic physical work. This was due to the fact that the internal emotional choices of the actor had already found a physicality that was most likely to be small, unoriginal and lacking in theatrical form. Stanislavski realized that the physical life and psychological processes that the actor underwent, needed to be explored simultaneously, because they were *interdependent*. This led him to the simple, yet radical discovery that emotions could be stimulated through physical actions. This move from 'Emotional Memory' to his 'Method of Physical Actions' was an important shift in actor training at that time. It met with much resistance in Russia at the Moscow Art Theatre, and was resisted even more by acting students in the United States².

Stanislavski constantly shifted his views, always trying to find more efficient ways for the actor to perform. This is why he was hesitant to publish his work for a long time. If he were alive today, it is most likely that he would have continued to change his views. Thus, while understanding his System, it is important to refrain from fossilizing his ideas. The System can be viewed as a process in actor training, a learning tool for the actor, and not as a dogma to be followed with blind faith.

THE METHOD OF PHYSICAL ACTIONS (1934-1938)

Stanislavski's System proposed that a series of physical actions arranged in sequential order would trigger the necessary emotions in an actor's performance. These emotions were based in the unconscious (or subconscious) and could not otherwise directly come to surface when needed. They would have to be brought out through indirect means. Hence his search for the 'conscious means to the unconscious' led him to create this 'Method of Physical Actions,' a physical map plotted out for the actor. This 'conscious' physical map of action would then arouse and bring out the 'unconscious' emotions of the actor.

1. Units and Objectives

In order to create this map, Stanislavski developed points of reference for the actor, which are now generally known as *units* and *objectives*. A *unit* is a portion of a scene that contains one *objective* for an actor. In that sense, a *unit* changed every time a shift occurred in a scene. Every *unit* had an *objective* for each character. This *objective* was expressed through the use of an active and transitive verb; for example, *to seduce her* or *to annoy him*. This active (action driven) objective then had corresponding physical action(s) that would help to achieve the objective. The objective was directed towards another person in order to ensure interaction. For example, *to remember* or *to think* would not be valid objectives, because they could not be directed towards another person. This would result in introspective and self indulgent acting, rather than communication with others on stage.

2. Through line of Actions and the Superobjective

When objectives were strung together in a logical and coherent form, a through line of action was mapped out for the character. This was important in order to create a sense of the whole. Stanislavski developed the concept of the *Superobjective* that would carry this 'through line of action.' The *superobjective* could then be looked at as the 'spine' with the objectives as 'vertebrae.' For example, the superobjective of one character could be *to win back the love of the other character*. In order to achieve this superobjective, the first character would have successive unit objectives such as, *to tease her*, *to please her*, *to excite her*, *to provoke her* and *to placate her*. These objectives, when strung together, revealed the superobjective, the logical, coherent through line of action. Stanislavski called this *superobjective* the 'final goal of every performance' (Moore 49-50).

3. Analysis of Text through Action

In analyzing an action, the actor answered three questions, '*What do I (the character) do?*' '*Why do I (the character) do it?*' and '*How do I (the character) do it?*' This helped the actor understand the aim or main idea of the play. Earlier, Stanislavski would spend long months around the table with his actors, analyzing the text and breaking it into small parts. Later he changed this practice because he felt it led to a separation of emotion and behavior. Stanislavski, at this later time, started rehearsals almost immediately after discussing the main idea, analyzing the psycho-physical behavior of actors on stage *in action*.

4. Truth, Belief and the 'Magic If'

Stanislavski stated that truth on stage was different from truth in real life. This was an important factor in acting, especially so in realism where the aim of the actor was to create the appearance of reality or 'truth' on stage. In Stanislavskian technique³, as in most other theatre training techniques, an actor does not actually *believe* in the truth of the events on stage, only in the *imaginative creation* of them. Indeed, an actor who honestly believed himself to be **Hamlet** would be deeply deluded and in need of psychiatric help. This then posed the problem of creating the *appearance* of reality for the spectator. Stanislavski's answer to this problem was in the creation of the 'Magic If.' The actor tried to answer the question, "*If I were in Macbeth's position, what would I do?*"⁴ Thus, the character's objectives drove the actor's physical action choices. Through the stimulus of the powerful 'if,' an actor could make strong theatrical choices that would appear to the audience as real, true and believable. In Stanislavski's opinion, the actor who had the ability to make the audience believe in what he/she wanted them to believe, achieved 'scenic truth.' Stanislavski defined 'scenic truth' as that which originated 'on the plane of imaginative and artistic fiction.' This he differentiated from truth that was 'created automatically and on the plane of actual

fact' (Stanislavski, AAP 128). The success of this scenic truth, according to Stanislavski, then constituted 'art' on stage.

5. Imagination

Stanislavski likened the study of his 'Method of Physical Actions' to a study of the grammar of a language. He cautioned however, that just as knowledge of grammar alone does not guarantee beautiful writing, knowledge of his techniques was only useful to an actor if accompanied by a fertile imagination. Stanislavski reiterated the use of the 'theatrical' and 'imaginative' faculties rather than trying to copy reality by rote:

There is no such thing as actuality on the stage. Art is a product of the imagination, as the work of a dramatist should be. The aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality. In this process imagination plays by far the greatest part.
(AAP 54)

Obviously, all the different aspects of the Stanislavski System required the actor to possess a rich source of imagination. The more fertile the actor's imagination, the more interesting would be the choices made in terms of objectives, physical action and creating the given circumstances around the character.

6. Subtext

An important function served by imagination was to discover and fill in 'subtext.' Subtext referred to the meaning lying underneath the text/dialogue. This subtext would not be spoken, but rather, interpreted by the actor through intonation, gesture, body posture, pauses or choices in action. Thus, through the actor's imagination, the subtext 'spoke' to the audience. Stanislavski said: "Spectators come to the theatre to hear the subtext. They can read the text at home" (Moore 28). This reiterated the importance that subtext played in the Stanislavski System.

The Moscow Art Theatre's productions of Chekhov's plays used subtext extensively. In fact Chekhov's plays, known for their silences, lent themselves well to the use of subtext. For Stanislavski, subtext added texture and richness to an action. According to him, even a truthfully executed action would fall flat without subtext. The spectators would want to be involved in the causes of the character's behavior, emotions and thoughts.

There is a clear relationship between subtext and text/ dialogue and between subtext and objective. In order to examine this relationship, let us look at the scenario given below:

Jane accidentally runs into Tom, whom she finds extremely annoying. Social necessities oblige her to be pleasant to him, while underneath she wants to get as far away from him as possible.

Here, the text that contains polite and pleasant dialogue conflicts with what is going on underneath, which is the first character's objective, her desire to get away from the second character. The spectators see the duality of behavior in the first character. They see her performing pleasantries for the second character's benefit, and also see her discomfiture at being in the encounter. This discomfiture is conveyed to the spectators through body language, gestures,

intonation, glances or pauses in speech. This leads to another observation regarding subtext -- Subtext makes the audience complicit in the behavior of the actor displaying subtext. The spectator and the character share a secret that the other character in the scene does not. This increases the spectator's involvement, holding the spectator's interest much more than just a superficial interpretation of the text would. An important point to note is that subtext and text/dialogue may or may not be consistent with each other⁵, but subtext must always be consistent with the objective.

7. Motivation

Motivation or 'will', as Stanislavski called it, was part of a triumvirate, the other two members being 'feelings' and 'mind.' In his earlier techniques, he considered these three to be 'masters' or 'impelling movers in our psychic life' (Stanislavski, AAP 247). Stanislavski insisted that an actor was either driven by emotions or by the mind to choose physical actions. This in turn aroused the 'will' of the actor to perform the given actions. Thus, the 'will' became activated indirectly through either emotions or the mind.⁶ The implication here was that the 'will' or motivation was in the subconscious.

Richard Hornby, in distinguishing motivation from objective offers a plausible explanation. He posits that 'motivation' looks backwards into psychology and the past, while 'objective' looks forward towards an action. Motivation then becomes extremely important in psychological realism which is based on subtext and hidden meanings. Interestingly enough, theatrical styles before realism (and before psychology), Hornby notes, did not use motivation in characterization.(166). Shakespeare's characters, for instance, did not exist before the play, i.e., they had no history prior to the script. Hence, they did not use motivation. The same can be said for certain avant garde and post realistic drama. In Beckett, for instance, characters have no 'motives,' but they do have objectives. Motivation therefore, is a product of modern psychological influence in acting.

8. Concentration

Stanislavski was concerned with actors getting distracted by the audience while performing on stage. He sought ways to counteract this distraction. He however did not advocate that the actor *forget* the audience, or tries to believe it did not exist. That, he felt, would be contradictory to the art of theatre, because the audience was an important 'co-creator' of the performance.

Stanislavski's main need was in finding a way to get the actor sufficiently interested in something (for example, an object) on stage so as to not find the presence of the audience a crippling factor. He felt that if his actors observed the object intensively enough, a desire would arise in them, to *do* something with it. This would, in turn intensify the observation and help develop an action with it.

Importantly, Stanislavski realized that actors lost control of their basic faculties on stage, and had to be re-taught how to achieve this in public. According to Sonia Moore, on stage an actor's 'natural psycho-physical union' is broken, causing 'paralysis of faculties' 30). This is especially apparent in beginning actors. Stanislavski realized this early on in his experiments:

All of our acts, even the simplest, which are so familiar to us in everyday life, become strained when we appear behind the footlights before a public of a thousand people. This is why it is necessary to correct ourselves and learn again how to walk, move about, sit or lie down. It is essential to re-educate ourselves to look and see, on the stage, to listen and to hear.

(AAP 77)

Believing rightly or wrongly that concentration was the key to 're-educating' the actor, Stanislavski created 'Circles of Concentration'(of attention). These circles varied in size and had different

purposes. The smallest circle of concentration was what he called 'Solitude in Public.' The actor, in the center of the small circle was secure within this circle, even before large audiences. This small circle could, then travel on stage with the actor, enveloping the actor 'like a snail in its shell' (AAP 82). As the circle grew larger, the actor learned to concentrate or focus on relatively larger areas of light, still excluding whatever was not in the circle.

Stanislavski differentiated between 'external' and 'inner attention' or concentration. External attention was directed to material or objects lying outside of the actor (as explained above). Inner attention was based on imaginary life created by the actor that was consistent with the given circumstances of the play. This inner attention incorporated all the five senses of the actor. Since by nature life on stage depended on imaginary circumstances, 'inner attention' became extremely important to the actor.

Stanislavski also made a distinction between intellectual and emotional attention. He felt that after intellectually observing an object, the actor needed to create imaginary circumstances around it. This would create a 'story' around it, thus emotionalizing the object, which would then set in motion the actor's creative apparatus.

9. Relaxation

Stanislavski's thoughts on relaxation were based on the premise that in order to achieve control of all motor and intellectual faculties, the actor needed to relax his muscles: 'Muscular tautness interferes with inner emotional experience' (AAP 96). However, his line of reasoning on this was somewhat unclear. On one hand he quite rightly identified muscular tautness as the cause for several constrictions in performance. Some of these constrictions could be loss of fullness of voice, a 'wooden' physical appearance, or the blockage of creativity. These concerns were valid because actors have been known to 'clam up' through muscular tension. However his suggestion that only when an actor was *totally* relaxed, could the performance be any good, is problematic.

Let us consider his statement for a moment, with regard to ballet, a highly disciplined art form. When ballerinas appear to effortlessly glide, leap, pirouette, they are not completely relaxed, but hold certain abdominal muscles tightly in. They also stretch or contract other muscles in order to achieve that fluidity of motion. In fact, if they were totally relaxed, they would lose energy, form and not be able to achieve their high level of artistry. Instead, an opposition in contraction and elongation of muscles helps achieve that look of effortlessness.

10. Communion

Communion for Stanislavski was communication with the audience indirectly through communion with other actors. Stanislavski called for the unbroken communion between actors which would hold the attention of the audience.

He differentiated between being in communion with a real partner and in communion with an imaginary person. With a real partner, to be in communion, one had to be aware of the other's presence, see images and actively transmit them through spoken words with energy. To strive to

obtain a definite physical result in the partner, for instance, a laugh, a shrug, would stir the imagination and create strong communion. With an imaginary, unreal, nonexistent object, Stanislavski felt it was futile to delude oneself into thinking that one could really see it. Instead, the actor had to ask the question, '*What if (--) were really here?*'

Stanislavski offered an interesting image in discussing communion during the performance of a soliloquy. Borrowing from Yoga, he identified a vital energy, called *Prana* by the Hindus. This *Prana* was located in the solar plexus and was a radiating center of energy. Stanislavski suggested that this energy center or the seat of emotion could commune with the brain, (which is generally accepted as the nerve and psychic center of our being.) So during a soliloquy, the brain held 'intercourse with feelings, thus providing a 'subject' and 'object' that could be in communion with each other.

Stanislavski stressed the importance of external equipment for communion. To illuminate this importance, Stanislavski, as an experiment bound successively, the hands, feet and torso of a student. Then he asked the student which part he would like back so that he could express himself. Surely enough, the student could not decide which physical part was more important because he realized he needed all parts in order to effectively communicate. This reiterated the importance of physical apparatus of the actor in achieving communion and stressed the importance of *training* this apparatus.

11. Adaptation

Adaptation required the actor to answer the questions ‘*What*’ (action), ‘*Why*’ (aim) and ‘*How*’ (adaptation) with respect to an action problem. The problems of action and aim might be addressed during analysis of a play text, but the problem of adaptation would depend on the actor’s interaction with others and the adjustments that would have to be made.

Another way to look at adaptation was the overcoming of physical obstacles that would constantly need adjustments in order for the actor to achieve a goal. Adaptation was really dependent on communion because the actor needed to be completely aware of the other actor in order to make adjustments.

An important function of adaptation was that it allowed the actor to transmit ‘invisible messages’ that could not be put into words. In that respect, adaptation could be employed to communicate subtext. Stanislavski felt that an actor of limited emotional range could produce a greater impact through the power of adjustments, than an actor who felt deep emotions but could not express them adequately.

12. Tempo-Rhythm

Tempo-rhythm can act as a powerful bridge between the inner experience and its physical expression (Moore 41). For Stanislavski, tempo-rhythm was both inner and outer. Emotions to him, had a distinctive pulse and pattern to them. ‘Tempo’ referred to the *speed* of an action or an emotion. The tempo could be fast, medium or slow. ‘Rhythm’ was, internally, the *intensity* of the emotional experience. Externally, it was the *pattern* of gestures, movements and actions (Benedetti 48).

Stanislavski believed that tempo-rhythm was extremely vital in order to execute physical actions in a concrete and truthful manner. His research on tempo-rhythm must have begun from his frustration with opera singers⁷:

Why is it that opera singers have not grasped this simple truth? Most of them sing in one rhythm, in a certain tempo, walk in another, move their arms in a third and live their emotions in a fourth. Can harmony, without which there is no music and which has a fundamental need for order be created out of this disparity? (Stanislavski BAC)

As early as 1918, Stanislavski understood the importance of physically and emotionally giving richness to a character through the understanding and creation of tempo-rhythm. He likened the tempo-rhythms of action to those of music. Just as music had various movements like legato, staccato, andante or allegro in a continuous line, so should stage action and speech. This would not only make the action organic, but also help stir the actor's emotions.

13. The Physical Apparatus

The quality of the actor's performance depended on, not just the creation of 'inner life' but also the 'physical embodiment' of it (Moore 52). An actor's body and voice were, in Stanislavski's opinion, the physical apparatus that were needed in order for the actor to fully express every nuance and subtle shade of character. Stanislavski saw the body and voice as 'instruments' that could be trained and could help the actor give shape to an action.

Stanislavski expressed impatience for actors with incomprehensible speech. He felt they showed disrespect for the audience who would find this speech tiresome. He insisted on training the actor's voice just like that of a singer's, identifying 'resonators' located in the 'masque.'

The body needed to be trained, to improve posture, and make movements supple and graceful. There was no room for mechanical gestures or mannerisms in the theatre. For Stanislavski, a gesture needed to reflect inner experience. It then became purposeful, logical and truthful. The physical technique, he felt, would train an actor's feelings for truth and form.

EMOTIONAL MEMORY (1911-1916)

The term 'Emotional Memory' has been subject to much controversy and raises many heated arguments amongst theorists and practitioners in the United States where it is most popular. Quite simply, this term was espoused by Stanislavski during his earlier teaching experiments at the First Studio in Moscow (1911-1916). In his later years, he rejected 'Emotional Memory' in favor of the 'Method of Physical Actions' discussed earlier in this chapter. However, in the United States, different interpretations of emotional memory prevailed and have become the mainstay of what has come to be known as the American 'Method.'

The phenomenon of the 'Method' came into the United States through various Russian émigrés. Two such émigrés, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya who had studied with Stanislavski during his First Studio days started teaching Stanislavski's 'Method' in New York at the American Laboratory Theatre in 1925. It was this 'Method' that used 'Emotional Memory' as the basis of its technique back in early twentieth century Russia that was transported to the United States. One of Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya's students was Lee Strasberg, who subsequently built his entire (Stanislavskian) actor training method based primarily on Emotional Memory. This occurred, ironically, long after it had been rejected by Stanislavski himself. In fact, Strasberg's 'Affective Memory'⁸ taught later at the Actor's Studio in 1949 was very similar to Stanislavski's teachings in Russia in 1911 with some distortions. Strasberg ignored major contributions and changes made later by Stanislavski in actor training in the mid thirties. Hence there is confusion because though the 'American Method' in its evolved form is mainly Strasbergian, it is mistaken for Stanislavski's teachings by many American acting students.

In order to facilitate the discussion of Emotional Memory, I have divided it in three areas. The first area examines how it was discovered and practiced by Stanislavski from 1911-1916. The second area examines Stanislavski's rejection of Emotional Memory due to its limitations and impracticality. The third is a brief chronology of the evolution of the 'Method' with its emphasis on Affective Memory.

Phase 1: Emotional Memory-- 1911-1916

In his pursuit of discovering all facets of man's inner life, Stanislavski conferred with various intellectuals and scientists in specialized fields. He was particularly influenced by the works of French psychologist Theodule Armand Ribot (1839-1916) who coined the term 'Affective Memory' adopted by Stanislavski. Later Stanislavski changed the term to 'Emotional Memory.'

What is Emotional Memory?

Emotional Memory requires that an actor recreate an event from the distant past in order to regenerate the 'feelings' experienced at that time. These feelings thus regenerated are then used in the current acting situation in order to fill out the role with 'human depth and personal involvement' (Benedetti 66). The necessity of the event being from the distant rather than recent past is because Stanislavski felt (at that time) that time distilled events and feelings, acting as a 'splendid filter for remembered feelings.' Stanislavski believed that the quality of the actor's performance depended upon the sincerity of his experience. This sincere experience went through a 'time filter' that transformed the quality of the experience into a 'poetic reflection of life's experience' (Stanislavski quoted. in Moore 42).

On stage the actor lived, not a real life, but a true stage experience. From this, one can gather that stage emotion is not the same as emotion in life, because as Stanislavski put it, on

stage it is a 'repeated' experience, not a 'primary' one. The actor can stir the needed emotion in him/ herself by remembering a parallel situation having a similar emotion. This emotion would then need to be brought out at the exact moment when called for on stage. This 'evoking' of past experience was called 'Emotional Recall.' Thus, through rehearsal and training techniques, the actor developed a conditioned reflex.

Phase 2: Limitations of Emotional Memory

Stanislavski's techniques underwent a radical change in the last five years of his life (1934-1938). Even though outwardly successful with his System, Stanislavski felt that the System was losing integrity and needed to be re-established. The technique of emotional memory that had been the mainstay of his earlier System, was now felt to be too exhausting for actors, producing negative results like tension and hysteria. The 'unconscious' refused to be commanded, the mind often closing up rather than giving out its secrets. Stanislavski realized that unconscious feelings needed to be coaxed, 'lured' and 'enticed' gently, rather than forced out. This pushed Stanislavski to look elsewhere for ways to explore a role, and he found a solution in the body -- an 'instrument' that would respond to the actor's wishes without the 'fickleness of emotions' or 'inhibitions of intellect' (Benedetti 67). This led him to develop the 'Method of Physical Actions' discussed earlier in this chapter.

Phase 3: The American Method and Affective Memory: A Brief Chronology

'Affective Memory' occupies a large portion of what is known as the 'American Method.' Following in the footsteps of Boleslavski and Ouspenskaya, two of their American students, Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman got together with Cheryl Crawford and formed the Group Theatre in 1930. This was the first group of American actors to adopt Emotional Memory in their training. They changed the term 'Emotional Memory' to 'Affective Memory.' Stanislavski's book, **An Actor Prepares**, with its focus on internal work that was first published in 1936 helped reinforce the internal work taught popularly at the Group Theatre. However, differences of opinion amongst Group Theatre members, especially with Strasberg, caused their fortunes to waver. Compounded with this was Group Theatre member Stella Adler's visit to Paris in 1934 where she met and studied with Stanislavski for a month. When Adler brought back reports on Stanislavski's later 'Method of Physical Actions,' she was greeted enthusiastically by most members except Strasberg, who opposed 'slavish imitation of Stanislavski' (Gray 158). Later friction caused the Group Theatre to disband in 1941.

In 1947, Robert Lewis, Cheryl Crawford and Elia Kazan formed the Actor's Studio in New York city. When Lewis left the Actor's Studio in 1949, a new instructor was sought. Strasberg was brought in as the new instructor, though not without some opposition from studio members.⁹

Strasberg therefore started teaching at the Actor's Studio and made 'Affective Memory' the mainstay of his teaching methods, 'making his mistakes all over again' in the opinion of some Group Theatre members. His teaching seemed to lend itself to the psycho-sexuality of realistic playwrights like Tennessee Williams and William Inge who had become staples in American

theatre. This was the major cause of his popularity. Today the American 'Method' is mainly Strasbergian, due to his major influence on American acting for a large part of this century.

Strasberg's 'Affective Memory' was defined by Edward Dwight Easty, his student, in the following way:

[Affective Memory] is the conscious creation of remembered emotions which have occurred in the actor's own past life and then their application to the character being portrayed on stage.(52)

In this respect, *Affective Memory* was not too different from Stanislavski's *Emotional Memory* of 1911. What is noteworthy is that while Stanislavski realized the flaws of Emotional Memory, and discarded it as ineffective and even potentially dangerous, Strasberg and his followers embraced it, disproportionately building a major part of their training methods on this technique.

The result of this form of distortion of the Stanislavski System was seen in a generation of American actors whose only emphasis was on 'internal work based on personal experience,' ignoring the contributions of a valid physical technique. By the time Stanislavski's book **Building a Character**, a sequel to **An Actor Prepares** was published in 1949, the damage was done.

Building a Character, part II of the Stanislavski System came too late into American consciousness to effect any valid change. Paul Gray conjectured, that had this book appeared five years sooner, American Theatre history might have been different (Munk 158). American theatre practitioners had become entrenched in the bastardized 'Method,' a technique that overstressed personal experience, reducing all acting to the level of everyday life.

The popularity of the American 'Method' brought in its wake, a cult of 'Method' teachers proliferating in the late 1950's. These were fifth, sixth or seventh generation teachers who distorted Stanislavski's teachings even further. Richard Hornby comments that Stanislavski's (purported) techniques became more distorted the further one got from him.

Several 'sins' were committed in the name of 'Method' training. Not all of these sins can be ascribed to Strasberg. Even he might have been embarrassed by what went on under the umbrella of the 'Method.' Actors disrobed in class in an experiment called 'Private Moments.'¹⁰ This was a distortion of Stanislavski's 'Public Solitude.'¹¹ Stories circulated of how psychiatrists had to be called routinely to class to help students out of shock and hallucinations from 'Affective Memory' experiments taken too far. Some unscrupulous male acting teachers demanded sexual intercourse from unsuspecting female students, in order to 'arouse *feelings*' in them.¹² In the opinion of Mme. Bulgakov, a MAT actor, actors used to feel a sense of 'personal freedom' during MAT days. Now, 'Method' actors felt 'personal suffering' as all acting was supposed to be highly personalized. This was because the importance given to the 'true experience' of the actor, required them to dredge out experiences from their past, and use emotions drawn from them as 'substitutes' on stage.

Elia Kazan aptly pinpointed the problems at the Actor's Studio and at other 'Method' schools. In doing so, he drew attention to the gradual degeneration of Stanislavski's ideology through distortion:

Most Method teaching is corrupt... it is not connected with a theatre. Stanislavski himself was connected with a theatre - always. It's a racket. Since they have to make money they work the racket. They become showhorses of authority in order to establish the reputation necessary to draw students. (Gray 174)

Some Assumptions of the American Method

1. The actor is expected to 'borrow' emotions from the past through the technique of emotional recall¹³, an aspect of Emotional /Affective Memory. This emotion is then 'substituted' into the present acting scene. Hence, the emotion is always 'repeated,' never 'fresh.' This leads to actors, over the years building a 'card file of emotions' available on cue. The irony is that though 'Method' aficionados lay so much importance on 'sincerity,' the 'repeated' nature of their emotions questions the very 'sincerity' of them.

2. The actor is expected to give a highly personalized performance. This puts a premium on the actor's life experience rather than on the imaginative ability to create a character. Hence actors mold all characters to their own personal givens. This leads to acting that is small, naturalistic and untheatrical, pulling art down to the level of ordinary, everyday life.

3. Actors are encouraged to 'play themselves.' This is a distortion of Stanislavski's 'Play *from yourself*' which became 'Play *yourself*' in the Method. Characterizations that require the actor to stretch their imagination are looked down upon as false and exaggerated. Hence, acting becomes generic, and again small and untheatrical.

4. Any vocal or physical training is considered unnecessary. The actor's 'inner life' is supposed to somehow carry the performance. Faulty speech patterns are accepted under the garb of 'natural' speech. This is what gives 'Method' actors the reputation of being 'mumbly.' Any kind of physical or verbal technique is relegated to being a 'mere external' at best and an 'artifice' to be avoided at all costs.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See pg 15. Also see Moore 41, Stanislavski, AAP 163.

² When Stanislavski's sequel to 'An Actor Prepares,' 'Building a Character' was published in 1949, it was largely ignored by American acting professionals. See pg 20.

³ Stanislavski maintained that his techniques transcended style. His company the MAT performed many different styles, from Moliere to Shakespeare. In America however, he is mainly associated with psychological realism.

⁴ Later interpretations varied. In the American 'Method' at some stage, the question changed to 'What would I do if I were in this position?'

In order to avoid confusion, the sentence could be better worded as:

As an actor playing Macbeth, what would be the most appropriate choices of action I make to fulfill the character's objectives.

⁵ In the above example they are *not* consistent with each other.

⁶ In his later 'Method of Physical Actions, he reversed the roles played by emotions vis a vis actions. In this new technique, *emotions* were triggered through physical actions.

⁷ In 1918, Stanislavski was invited to teach acting at the Opera Studio and develop his ideas.

⁸ Strasberg changed the term 'Emotional Memory' to 'Affective Memory.'

⁹ Robert Lewis recalls how Kazan was against the idea of Strasberg teaching at the Actor's Studio, and tried, without much success, to get Sanford Meisner or Joshua Logan instead. See Munk pg 159.

¹⁰ In 'Private Moments', the actor would perform actions which were not normally acceptable in public.

¹¹ See pg 15.

¹² See Hornby pg 33.

¹³ See pg 25