Introduction

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The best Stanislavski story I know isn't about an actor at all but about a dog. An actor had a dog. This dog used to come to rehearsals and, being rather lazy, would sleep in the corner all day long. Strangely, every evening, just before the actors were to finish, the dog would already be at the door, leash in mouth, waiting to be taken home. What astounded Stanislavski was that the dog would wearily haul himself to his feet several minutes before his master called him. Regular as clockwork, come the end of every rehearsal, the dog would trot to the door and wait there patiently. Now how could a dog possibly know that the rehearsal was over before anyone moved to the door? Finally Stanislavski figured it out. The dog could hear when the actors started talking like normal human beings again. The difference between the fake and the living was just as sharp as Pavlov's bell.

Stanislavski was obsessed with life. When he uses the word 'art' it often reads as a code for 'life'. This fusion is clear even in the title of his autobiography *My Life in Art*. His absolute priority was that the stage should flow with life. He hated empty effects and loved genuine vitality. He abhorred hollow gestures that pretend to breathe. He sought that curious mixture of discipline and spontaneity that characterises all good art.

Presumably this is why he continues to inspire us. His own inspiration he drew from many sources. As a young man he was particularly impressed by the ensemble style of a German company on tour in Moscow, and also by Eleanora Duse, the great Italian star who seemed to efface her virtuosity in a struggle for the living moment. But of course he drew most of his inspiration from the life he saw ebbing and flowing around him.

In the first place, Stanislavski had a vision of a living theatre, a theatre that was not only a building or even a company, but a whole attitude to theatre itself.

Then the question he had to ask was: *'How can I do this? How can I make life flow on stage?'*

This is normally the moment when we all speed on to find out how he answered the question. *'What do I need to do, what exercises can I practice, to become a successful actor? Just show me the steps and I'll follow the plan!'* But it is precisely here that we need to slow right down. We need to remember what it is that Stanislavski first saw. Stanislavski saw, or had a vision of, a form of acting that brimmed with life. To his consternation he realised that the line between the sham and the authentic can be very narrow. Yes we can immediately see the gulf that seems to separate the terrible old ham from the sophisticated naturalism of the modern film star. But the sham often seems very real and the most perfectly natural performance can also be perfectly fake. In fact separating appearance from reality is one of our toughest struggles and being clever can make it harder. Sometimes it takes a dog to tell the difference.

Stanislavski saw that it is easier to give the audience a clever ride than a real experience. But his fundamental intuition was that acting is more than seeming to be real. Above all, he knew that acting and pretending are utterly different and that the distinction is both subtle and crucial. In a way, all his work helps to explain that difference.

And somehow that first intuition of Stanislavski can get squashed in our acceleration to learn the techniques and devices that he invented (and frequently discarded). The first step is not to ask *'How can I be a successful actor?'* The first question must always be *'What is good acting?'* And the answer will remain the same: *'When it is alive'*. Strangely we need to keep returning to this point of departure, otherwise we are forever lost.

A few days ago a foreigner approached me in the street and inquired in precise English: *'Excuse me please, but which way is Belsize Park?'* When I answered he looked at me carefully and asked with great emphasis: *'But how will I recognise it when I get there?'* It was a very good question. Learning to recognise when we get there is of vital importance in every field.

Learning to recognise things is of great importance to Stanislavski, for example, the actor must learn to see the constraints imposed on the character. Stanislavski gives great importance to the 'Given Circumstances'. The idea seems so obvious and yet it is so subtle. He understands that life is only possible within a context. That character and action are all dependent on the 'Given Circumstances', that we need to see the tiny realities that make up the world we live in. Our species is painfully

learning that its very survival depends on the health of the planet. We cannot exist in a vacuum.

Unfortunately Stanislavski has become a myth and this has done him a disservice. Like many great thinkers, Stanislavski articulates some of the eternal conflicts with such deceptive simplicity that we tend to imagine ourselves reflected back. Perhaps that is why he is so easily appropriated.

For example he understands that theatre will always be stretched between two poles – one of form, the other of content. Now although Stanislavski was fascinated by the inner workings of the actor, he was no theatre puritan. He adored his make up, wanted to parade Tuzenbach's body around the stage at the end of *Three Sisters*, and developed such a fad for sound effects that Chekhov threatened to begin his next play with the line, '*Isn't it incredible, such a hot summer and you can't hear a cicada anywhere!*' It wasn't theatrical gestures that Stanislavski hated – it was empty theatrical gestures.

A main theme of his early work does seem to be an escape from 'superficial' theatre into something more 'true'. This becomes counterbalanced by the understanding that in fact theatre needs both of these extremities to have any life. We need to be playful to live, but excessive playfulness starts to look like hysteria. Like many great artists, Stanislavski navigates between these eternal poles, profane and sacred, rough and holy, earth and clouds, showbiz and sacrament. Ignoring one pole may help us feel more comfortable in the short term, but ultimately leads to artistic suicide. To live fully we need to negotiate the narrow rim between order and chaos.

So Stanislavski is not one thing. Like any great thinker he is a bundle of contradictions. For example, he was an amateur who yearned to be truly 'professional'. Although contemporaries agreed that he was a gifted actor, somewhere in his heart he always felt untrained. Certainly his writings erupt with this struggle, which was not just to train his student actors, but also to become 'professional' in himself. It is this humility that makes Stanislavski truly remarkable. He was wise precisely because he knew that he didn't *know*.

As a director Stanislavski saw a group of actors acting. And he understood that his job as director was to help the actors to act together and to bring the acting level of the weakest actor up to that of the strongest. Throughout his life he invented exercises to help actors act better. Nothing more than that – and nothing less than that. He had no grandiose plan. He knew that he was permanently reacting to the circumstances that surrounded him – his own 'Given Circumstances'. And all given

circumstances change, apart from the one that says that everything must change. That is one reason why his body of theatre writing is the most systematic, enduring and revolutionary, precisely because he knew that any fail-proof system is doomed to failure.

He often changed his mind and had a whim of steel. Prey to enthusiasms and fads, like Toad of Toad Hall, suddenly all his students would have to be equipped with a certain notebook to write down observations and then, just as suddenly, all this would be forgotten.

Over the years, and particularly after the revolution, his students separated, each of them bearing a memory of their teacher's thinking. But these memories rarely amounted to more than a snapshot – a photograph of Konstantin Sergeevich's thinking at any given time, the temporary truce in his conflicting thoughts. That is why so many of his disciples have so seriously disagreed. Konstantin Sergeevich would probably have agreed with most of them! But he is unlikely to have agreed with any of the disciples who claimed that their way was the only true way.

The last century saw forces within both superpowers convert Stanislavski to their own ideological uses. Of course first they both had to erase his inconvenient humanity of proportion. The Soviet Union dreaded the ambivalence of metaphor, so certain apparatchiks contorted his theories into a loudspeaker for the dreariest Stalinist naturalism. But across the planet another fate befell him. One of Stanislavski's enduring tenets was that actors had to be present in the moment enabling them to adapt and react spontaneously with their partners. But in the United States some prised him away from this essentially ensemble context and forced him to testify for the individualist star who prepares the great role well away from the prying eyes of colleagues. Thus for much of the last century Stanislavski was communised and capitalised to taste.

Rising fundamentalism of the present century threatens to rival the totalitarian horrors of the last. And Stanislavski is threatened by fundamentalism too. Great spiritual leaders stress that when there is a conflict between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, then, without exception, it is the spirit that must prevail. The problem with all fundamentalists is that they are never quite fundamental enough. A scripture which was written to help people can easily be used as an instrument to control or even to punish them.

Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski never intended his words to become scripture. He never sought to create a 'system'. Unlike Freud he never wanted to invent a science. Above all he would be at pains to say that where there is true life on stage, leave well alone!

The growing desire of students to acquire skills may be fair enough, but sometimes it is important to remember that there is more to learning than a stashing of qualifications and information. It is also important to be open to a teacher's spirit, which cannot be quantified, or even described. Some of us are lucky enough to have great teachers, but they are great not because they have access to secret information, or because they are clever at getting their point across, but because they imbue their pupils with confidence. They fill their pupils with a passion for their subject and infuse them with a sense that they *can*, rather than with a sense that they *cannot*. They empower their pupils to go on after them. Ultimately they can even enable their pupils to disagree with them and to break free.

Meyerhold was a pupil of Stanislavski. Stanislavski enabled the young man to start his own studio. The two disagreed, sometimes quite violently. Meyerhold is occasionally held up as some sort of antidote to his teacher, as if they were the Danton and Robespierre of theatrical theory. But Meyerhold took the spirit of Stanislavski and converted it – just as Stanislavski, years before, was struck by the ensemble spirit of the touring German company, breathed in that spirit and breathed it out again, transformed. Indeed Stanislavski said that he regarded Meyerhold as his true heir and was the last person to give him a job directing before his pupil was murdered in the Lyubyanka. Clearly Meyerhold absorbed a lot more from Stanislavski than a few exercises – his system of biomechanics is utterly infused with his teacher's insatiable thirst for life.

But the current consumerist tendency in education which prizes only the acquisition of visible skills is not as worrying as the increasing clamour for certainty. We want to know how to be a success, we want results fast – and no frills. Now it would be great if there existed a step-by-step fail-proof process to act well or make good theatre, but there simply isn't – just as no religion with a first-you-do-this-then-you-do-that system can guarantee redemption. Sure there are exercises that can help. Sure there are procedures that may help life flow. But sometimes they don't work, and Stanislavski was at pains to point this out. His frustration often boils over.

Why does he continue to inspire so many actors and theatre makers, including those who seem to be so far from his tradition? Because life is all he wanted. Life is what he struggled to let flow through the actors, between the actors, between the actors and the audience. His words are a fascinating and moving account of this struggle. His writing is important because it helps us come into contact with his great spirit. He was

revolutionary because he helped us to see that there is more to acting than mere pretending, to sense that beyond the trivial there is something toweringly alive that is worth the struggle.

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October 2007

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