

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Jean Benedetti

This book is neither a literal nor an academic translation but rather an attempt to follow Stanislavski's original intention: to provide an accessible account of the 'system' for actors in training without abstract theorizing. Hence the form he chose: a diary kept by a young student in which he describes the acting classes given by Tortsov (Stanislavski) and his own struggle, alongside his classmates, to master a new method.

An Actor's Work has always presented problems both to Russian- and non-Russian-speaking readers. First it is a work that is only half written. In 1888 when he was in his mid-twenties Stanislavski conceived the idea of a 'grammar' of acting. His first attempt, *A Draft Manual* dates from 1906 when the 'system' began. Thereafter he attempted formal exposition in the form of lectures and classes but came to the conclusion that actors did not respond to this kind of approach. He gave a series of talks at the Bolshoi school between 1919 and 1921, which represent the first tentative account of the 'system' but he never attempted to publish them. He then experimented with the novel form, *The Story of a Role*, *The Story of Production* both of which he abandoned. Finally, in the late 1920s, he decided upon a diary form, a journal kept by a student as he goes through the process of training, *An Actor's Work on Himself*.

He began work after his heart attack of 1928 which put an end to his acting career, drawing heavily on earlier incomplete articles and his Notebooks, so that much of the material dates from before the Revolution. Intended as a single volume, it outlined a two-year course of training in which the student first learns the process by which the inner life of a character is created and then how this is expressed in physical

and technical terms. The result is a unified, coherent psycho-physical technique.

The accidents of history, which I have discussed elsewhere, caused the two aspects of training to be separated out. A single volume to become two so that some thirteen years separate the Russian edition of Part One (1938) and Part Two (1953). Thus the unity of the psycho-physical technique was lost. Even Elizabeth Hapgood, Stanislavski's first translator, thought they were separate books and that Part Two represented a revision of the ideas contained in Part One. From the very beginning, Stanislavski had serious misgivings about dividing the book. He feared that the first volume, dealing with the psychological aspects of acting would be identified as the total 'system' itself, which would be identified as a form of 'ultranaturalism'. His fears were justified. Directors have seen the 'system' as purely 'psychological'. They are unaware of the enormous emphasis Stanislavski placed on physical and vocal technique and on a detailed analysis of the script. I have, therefore, attempted to restore the unity of Stanislavski's teaching concept by recreating a single volume as was originally intended.

One of the difficulties of presenting a readable account of Stanislavski's ideas is his style, which is at considerable variance with his other writings. He was haunted by the possibility that he would be misunderstood, as had so often been the case in the past, even by close associates. In consequence his tendency was to overwrite and over-explain, using several words where one or two would do, and repeating definitions like a mantra. His style all too often obscured his meaning. When his life-long friend and theatre historian, Lyubov Gurievich, saw Stanislavski's first draft chapters in 1929 she understood the problem. They were repetitive and verbose. She suggested to Stanislavski that he should complete the book and that then the two of them should edit and cut it into readable form.

Stanislavski had two other collaborators on the book, Norman and Elizabeth Hapgood. Mrs Hapgood spoke fluent Russian and had been Stanislavski's interpreter at a White House reception in 1923, while her husband, Norman, was an experienced publisher and editor.

In 1929 Stanislavski renewed his acquaintance with Mrs Hapgood in Nice, where he was convalescing after his heart attacks. They agreed to collaborate on an American translation. The first thing Norman Hapgood did was to take his blue pencil and edit down Stanislavski's partial draft while Elizabeth Hapgood suggested certain revisions that were then translated back into Russian. When Stanislavski returned to Russia, the book was still unfinished. Mrs Hapgood took the completed chapters back with her to America but did not receive the remaining chapters until 1935.

Stanislavski's task on his return to Moscow was to prepare the Soviet edition,¹ working once again with Mrs Gurievich. It is with this edition that we are now concerned. This edition was to differ substantially from the edition given to Mrs Hapgood; the reasons for this were two-fold.

First, Stanislavski would endlessly rewrite, whilst Mrs Gurievich used her 'blue pencil'. She would carefully edit his drafts and introduce an element of order. Unfortunately he would then revise and rewrite, re-introducing chaos. Finally, in despair, Mrs Gurievich had to give up the unequal struggle so that the final chapters of Part One are Stanislavski's alone and the deterioration in the writing is all too evident. Even after the proofs had been returned to the printers, he continued to draft sections for a possible second edition. Thus, even the Russian edition of 1938 was, in his mind, 'provisional'.

Second, he was locked in a bitter battle with pseudo-Marxist Soviet psychology, which was Behaviourist and did not recognize the existence either of the subconscious or of the Mind. Consequently, he substantially rewrote whole passages in an attempt to appease the authorities. Nowhere are the differences between the two editions more marked than in Chapters 14, 15 and 16.

The reasons for the difficulties of Stanislavski's style go deeper than his personal foibles. His was a pioneering effort. He was attempting to define the actor's processes (mental, physical, intellectual and emotional) in a comprehensive way that had never been undertaken before. His problem was that there was no available language or terminology to which he could turn. Many concepts which we now take for granted such as non-verbal communication or body language did not exist. Even the notion of comprehensive, systematic training did not exist. Teaching in drama schools consisted mainly in students preparing scenes that were then reworked by the tutor. Sometimes a student would only prepare one or two scenes throughout his entire studies and would merely learn to copy his master's tricks. He had no coherent process, no 'grammar' of his own. Stanislavski wanted to develop the actor-creator. He was driven, therefore, to cobble together a 'jargon' that was unknown outside the Art Theatre. His experience of teaching the 'system' in the early years had made him wary of formal lecturing or of using scientific terminology. Actors either shied away from it or bandied technical terms about to give the impression that they understood, when in reality, they did not.

¹ For a full account of the writing, translating, editing and publication of the work and on the differences between the American 1936 edition and the Soviet 1938 edition see my *Stanislavski his Life and Art*, 3rd edition, 1999.

Stanislavski's 'jargon' is made up of disparate elements. Where possible he used ordinary, everyday words, what he called his 'home-grown' vocabulary. Thus when analyzing a play he did not talk about dividing it up into its component parts or sections, but of cutting it up into 'Bits' or pieces, as you would carve a lump of meat.² In defining their course of action, actors set themselves 'goals', gave themselves simple, practical direct 'Tasks', not high-flown philosophical or emotional purposes. For the rest, he took what he could where he could. When he came to discuss non-verbal communication, he drew on concepts drawn from yoga which he had studied in the early 1900s. Where there were technical, scientific definitions such as intellect, feeling and will, he used them. Sometimes he would adapt words to suit his own purpose. This is the case with his decision to use the French word *mise-en-scène*/*mises-en-scène* to denote the outer stage action which literally 'puts on stage' the inner action of the play either as a whole or at individual moments.³ The most significant example, perhaps, is his use of the key term *experiencing* (*perezhivanie*) which denotes the process by which an actor engages actively with the situation in each and every performance. He was sometimes obliged, particularly when dealing with the subconscious to create his own terms and definitions which are often highly convoluted and confusing. The reader has to come to terms with the 'jargon' just as the students do in the book. Indeed that is the book's purpose: for the reader to experience the students' learning process. As an aid, I have, as in previous books, given the major terms of 'system' initial capital letters to indicate their transformation from everyday words to technical definitions.

THE USA AND RUSSIA: A HISTORY OF PUBLICATION

An Actor Prepares

For commercial reasons, Part One, *An Actor Prepares* was reduced by Mrs Hapgood and Edith Isaacs, managing editor of Theatre Arts Books, to almost half its length. It loses its essential form as the diary of a first-year student, and becomes a straight narrative. Many of the lively classroom discussions where ideas are hammered out, not to mention the humour, disappeared. There is, in the original, no Director- enunciating principles in the abstract, but a rigorous and sympathetic teacher who guides students through a process of trial and error. Mrs Hapgood also decided not

² See Chapter 7.

³ See Glossary.

to use Stanislavski's home-grown terms but to replace them with rather more abstract words. Thus, 'Bit' becomes 'unit'.

Building A Character

Part Two, *Building a Character* again in the translation by Elizabeth Hapgood, presents much more serious editorial problems. Stanislavski did not live to complete Part Two. At his death in 1938 only one or two chapters, such as that on Speech existed in draft, although the overall contents of the book were clear. There were, in addition, a number of fragments of varying length that would have provided the basis for the completed manuscript.

Three versions of Part Two are available. The first, translated by Elizabeth Hapgood, which appeared in 1950, was based on material supplied by Stanislavski's son, Igor. Mrs Hapgood believed that this material represented Stanislavski's final thoughts. In 1955, Part Two appeared as Volume 3 in the 8-volume Soviet edition of Stanislavski's *Collected Works*. It included material from the archives unavailable to Mrs Hapgood. It was presented as a reconstruction. In 1990, a further expanded version appeared as Volume 3 of the new 9-volume edition of the *Selected Works* and was clearly marked *Material for a Book*.

Although the 1955 and 1990 editions were fully annotated, no editorial work was done on the body of the text. Close examination of the published Russian texts reveals how rough a state the material is in. Much of it is drawn, as internal evidence indicates, from earlier periods of Stanislavski's life, not from the mid-1930s. Many passages are variant versions of material that had already been used in Part One. Other material is repeated in more than one section. Even in apparently complete chapters there are repetitions. In the chapter on Speech, for example, punctuation, stress and pauses are discussed twice with slightly different examples. Some material in the section The General Creative State may well have been intended for Chapter 15 of Part One.

This is of interest to specialists and scholars, but if an attempt is to be made to produce a book which, in accordance with Stanislavski's wishes is to be of practical use in actor training, to be used in conjunction with Part One, a degree of editorial work is necessary.

I have removed as far as possible redundant passages or material which has been used in Part One. I have also removed the sections in the chapter on Speech which discuss the correct pronunciation of Russian consonants and which have little meaning for non-Russian speakers. Technical training in voice and body have advanced considerably in theatre schools and conservatoires since the 1930s so that some of Stanislavski's ideas, which

were pioneering at the time, are now of only historic interest. I have, therefore, edited and conflated two original chapters, Singing and Diction and Speech and its Laws into one, Voice and Speech. In the final chapters, Basics of the System and How to use the System, I have omitted almost entirely since they are fragmentary and largely summarize material from earlier sections. The revisions to Part One which he intended for a second edition appear as Appendices at the end of the book, as do the practical exercises he suggested.

I have included Stanislavski's original draft Preface, which has never been translated before. It was reconstructed by the editors of the current 9-volume from entries in Stanislavski's *Notebooks* of the early 1930s. The original drafts set out his intentions much more clearly. The Preface to the 1938 Russian edition is essentially a political statement, a defence against criticisms he had received. I have also included in the Appendices the drafts Stanislavski made after the book had gone to the printer for a possible second edition.

THE 'SYSTEM' AND THE METHOD

One major obstacle to the proper understanding of Stanislavski's teaching has been the widespread confusion between the 'system' and the Method as defined by Lee Strasberg at the Actors' Studio in New York. Strasberg was perfectly aware of the differences between his teaching and Stanislavski's, which centred on the role of Emotion Memory.⁴ In the 'system' the primary emphasis is on action, interaction and the dramatic situation which result in feeling with Emotion Memory as a secondary, ancillary technique. In the Method, Emotion Memory is placed at the very centre; the actor consciously evokes personal feelings that correspond to the character, a technique which Stanislavski expressly rejected. Whereas in the 'system' each section of the play contains something an actor has to *do*, in the Method it contains something he has to *feel*. Strasberg's main concern was to enable the actor to unblock his emotions. There is little or no textual or dramaturgical analysis.

In the early 1950s, Strasberg took charge of the Actors' Studio. The original founders, Elia Kazan, Robert Lewis and Stella Adler were generally proponents of the 'system' in its late form. Adler spent six weeks in Paris in 1934 working with Stanislavski on the Method of Physical Action, which Strasberg categorically and angrily rejected when she explained it to him. A bitter dispute broke out among the teachers at the Studio.

⁴ See Chapter 9.

Strasberg was initially engaged exclusively as a teacher of theatre history and was not allowed to take acting classes since he was not trusted. It was with the departure of Elia Kazan to Hollywood that an opportunity arose for him to take over. He then refashioned the Studio in his own image. Indeed, he became the Studio; its teachings were his. It was in fact thanks to the impact of the films of Elia Kazan, and a series of commanding performances by actors such as Marlon Brando (taught by Stella Adler not Strasberg) that the Method achieved worldwide fame and was identified with the 'system'. This was made possible because most actors and directors, as Stanislavski had feared, thought that *An Actor Prepares*, a cut version of half a book, was the complete 'system'. The 'system' meant subjectivity and emotion.⁵ To compound the confusion, the term *perezhivanie* (experiencing) was commonly translated as 'emotional identification'.

In the 1950s only one or two schools in the UK taught the 'system' as laid down by Stanislavski himself. Again the 'system' was identified with the Method, which was generally derided by successful professionals. Only Michael Redgrave, among the leading actors of his time had any real understanding of Stanislavski. It is only in the last thirty years that Stanislavski's authentic teachings have become known in university drama departments and theatre schools. Yet even comparatively well-informed people still confuse the 'system' and the Method, hence the importance of reaffirming the integrity of Stanislavski's thought.

THE CHARACTERS IN THE BOOK

A note should be added about the names of the characters in the book. Stanislavski followed a tradition by which characters were given names that reflected the essential nature of their personalities. Stanislavski becomes Tortsov, which derives from the word for creator. Tortsov is a combination of the mature Stanislavski and his mentor, the leading tenor of the Bolshoi, Fyodor Komissarzhevski. The student keeping the diary is Nazvanov, meaning the chosen one. He is a combination of the young Stanislavski, with the same first name Kostya (Konstantin) and Stanislavski's favourite pupil, Vakhtangov, who first came to Stanislavski's attention as a stenographer. Other students are called Brainy, Fatty, Prettyface, Big-mouth, Youngster, Happy, Showy. These linguistic niceties are lost on non-Russian speakers. Indeed, the simple pronunciation of Russian names presents difficulties which can be a barrier to understanding.

⁵ For a detailed analysis of the problem, see Richard Horby, *The End of Acting*, Applause Books, 2000.

Mrs Hapgood wisely, and probably with Stanislavski's agreement, gave each of the students first names and I, like translators into other languages, have followed her example.

The pupils

Darya Dymkova
Grisha Govorkov
Marya Maloletkova
Konstantin (Kostya) Nazvanov
Leo Pushchin
Pavel (Pasha) Shustov
Nikolai Umnovikh
Varya Veliaminova
Igor Veselovski
Ivan (Vanya) Viuntsov

The teachers

Ivan Rakhmanov
Arkady Tortsov

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Jean Benedetti
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