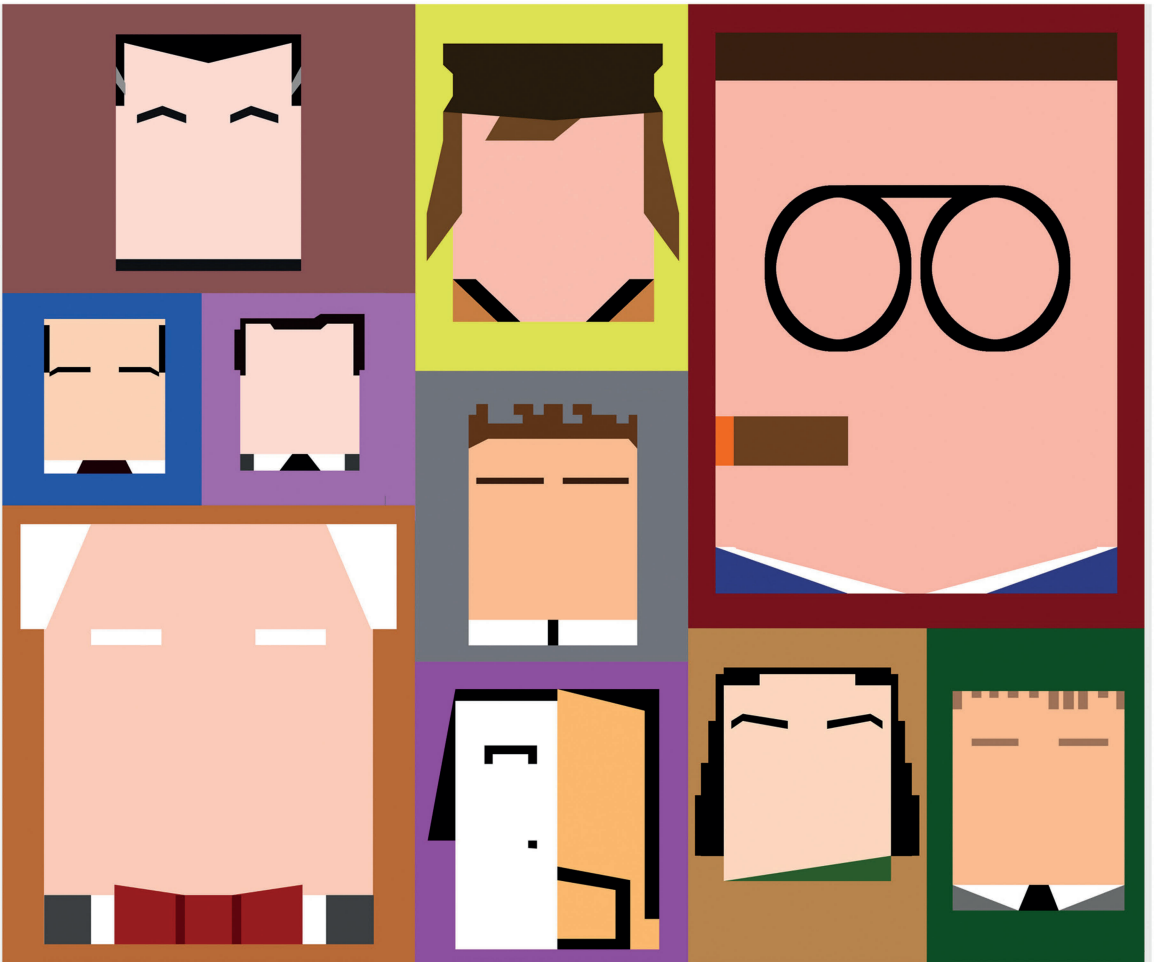


The Routledge Companion to Performance Practitioners

Volume One



Edited by Franc Chamberlain and Bernadette Sweeney

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO PERFORMANCE PRACTITIONERS

The Routledge Companion to Performance Practitioners collects the outstanding biographical and production overviews of key theatre practitioners first featured in the popular *Routledge Performance Practitioners* series of guidebooks.

Each of the chapters is written by an expert on a particular figure, from Stanislavsky and Brecht to Laban and Decroux, and places their work in its social and historical context. Summaries and analyses of their key productions indicate how each practitioner's theoretical approaches to performance and the performer were manifested in practice.

All 22 practitioners from the original series are represented, with this volume covering those born before the end of the First World War. This is the definitive first step for students, scholars and practitioners hoping to acquaint themselves with the leading names in performance, or deepen their knowledge of these seminal figures.

Franc Chamberlain is Professor of Drama, Theatre and Performance at the University of Huddersfield, UK and the series editor for *Routledge Performance Practitioners*.

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Volume One

*Edited by Franc Chamberlain
and Bernadette Sweeney*

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*For our families, those close by, those far away,
and in memory of those who are no longer with us.*



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INTRODUCTION

Franç Chamberlain and Bernadette Sweeney

The *Routledge Performance Practitioners* series was conceived, at the end of the last century, as a series of handbooks on key figures in twentieth-century performance practice some of whom would, of course, be still practicing into the new century. Each volume aimed to provide a basic theoretical and practical grasp of the practitioner's work and was structured around four major sections: (i) biography in social and artistic context, (ii) a summary and analysis of key writings (iii) description and analysis of a key production or productions and (iv) practical exercises. Each of these sections was framed by some guiding questions that were designed to keep the focus on the contemporary relevance of the practitioner's work. The aim was for the books to be useful in the studio and able to inform creative practice and for each volume to be written by a practitioner-academic, someone who was able to conduct the necessary scholarly research as well as having an understanding of how this material worked in practice. The working assumption was that someone who had an embodied understanding of a practitioner's working practices would have a better grasp of how the more theoretical aspects of the work could be understood *through* practice – but that brings with it another set of problems (see below).

Odd as it might seem, there wasn't a series of short, introductory texts on key performance practitioners in English at the turn of the twenty-first century. There was the excellent *Directors in Perspective* series from Cambridge University Press, but their emphasis was more of an historical rather than a practical one and so didn't address the aim of being useful in the studio processes of making performances. The books in the Cambridge series may have been written *about* exercises and devising or compositional techniques, but they didn't provide readers with material that they could try out in their own processes of performance making.

The first four volumes of the *Routledge Performance Practitioners* series appeared during 2003: Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Chekhov, and Lecoq. The volume on Michael Chekhov appeared in the autumn of 2003 but, as per the publisher's normal convention, 2004 is the date on the copyright page. The publication of Mary Richards' volume on Marina Abramović, the twenty-first to appear, brought the first iteration of the series to a close in 2010. In 2018 the twenty-one original books began to be reissued in bright new covers, some texts fully revised, and by mid-2019 the complete set was available. In 2018 a decision was made to re-open the series and start commissioning new volumes and adjusting the focus to include the work of ensembles. The initial series proposal had conceptually embraced the inclusion of ensembles but Routledge's decision at the time was to stay with individual figures. There has been a growing interest in the

work of ensembles in recent years, and the collection of essays and snapshots in the collection edited by Britton (2013) offers a good grounding in the field.

The exclusion of ensembles from the first twenty-one volumes of *Performance Practitioners* raises the question as to how the various practitioners were selected for inclusion. Given the explicit focus on performance practice and, perhaps more implicit emphases on processes of training and devising, it is not surprising that dramatists were ruled out.

As the series was focused on key practitioners (indeed, the first proposal referred to 'Key Performance Practitioners' as the series title) there was the notion that anyone who was proposed for inclusion would have a sufficiently high profile within the curriculum of Higher Education Institutions in the UK and the US. Stanislavsky was an obvious person to include, perhaps too obvious, and there was no shortage of books on his work. Bella Merlin, who authored the volume on Stanislavsky in the series, had already published a very useful handbook before beginning work on her book for the series. Meyerhold, on the other hand, was a practitioner with high name recognition in the field, but there was very little available that would provide an effective introduction to his practice in the studio.

In addition to Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, the big names were easy to call to mind: Grotowski, Lecoq, Artaud, Brecht, Graham, Laban, Copeau, Abramović, Wilson, Boal, Bausch, Brook. Making a case for inclusion on the basis of their prominence in the field, and consequently their marketability, was simple enough. From the very beginning of the commissioning process, it was clear that monographs would be sought on these luminaries. It is, of course, easy to argue that some of these figures are more important than others or to suggest that some should be replaced. Is Wilson more important than Kantor? Or Mnouchkine? What about Lee Strasberg or Stella Adler? Or Rachel Rosenthal and Liz LeCompte? Don't they belong in this company? Or Michael Chekhov? Shouldn't he be included at the top table? And they are mostly male and, with the exception of Ohno and Hijikata, of European heritage. Where are the practitioners with disabilities? Aren't they just as important?

Deciding who the most important practitioners are depends on the position from which the evaluation is made. Is it possible to imagine the history of mime over the past century without paying attention to the work of Decroux? No, Decroux must figure in any consideration of modern mime – but shouldn't Suzanne Bing also be there? What about a history of American dance without Martha Graham? Or Katherine Dunham? Why not Tadashi Suzuki?

The construction of a series such as *Routledge Performance Practitioners* provides material for these debates, but the debates themselves generate claims for the inclusion of other practitioners. The operational openness of the series (it was never intended to be a 'Top 21' but to continue growing) allows for the possibility of adaptation, of becoming more diverse as the field changes. But, as a series published by a major company, attention always has to be paid to the relative marketability of a book. That doesn't mean that only those already recognized as major figures can be published, but that a volume on a minor figure might need to be balanced by one on a major figure.

Sometimes the editors went in search of authors, and sometimes authors came with their own proposals; some proposals were so obscure or radical that it wasn't possible to enact them at that particular point in time. Perhaps some of these figures will be included in the new iteration of the series.

Some of the major figures mentioned above did not appear in the original series list: Lee Strasberg, Katherine Dunham, Peter Brook, Martha Graham, Suzanne Bing, Stella Adler, Rachel Rosenthal, Liz LeCompte, and Antonin Artaud. At some point these were all under consideration for inclusion, some were contracted but never completed, for others it proved difficult to find someone either suitable or interested to take on the task. Hopefully, in the future, these

omissions and absences will be addressed and new figures will come to the fore and be included. Some are already under contract.

One problem that occurred on more than one occasion was where the subject of a proposed volume was still alive and did not want to co-operate with the project. This could be where the author's first-hand knowledge of the practitioner's work could pose a problem. If the author were to go ahead and write the book anyway, and they would be perfectly entitled to do so, they might jeopardize their relationship with the practitioner and, in at least one instance, this led to the dropping of the project.

The series was never designed to be 'complete' or to represent a fixed canon but, by bringing together this collection of practitioners into a single volume it can appear that it is *these* twenty-two practitioners and no others who represent *the* key performance practitioners. That is not the intention at all. Each author makes a case for the importance and relevance of the individual practitioner and the significance of their work for contemporary practice without excluding the contributions of others.

It would not be practicable to bring together all twenty-one monographs into a single book, and the two volumes of *The Routledge Companion to Performance Practitioners* include roughly half of each title in the series comprising sections (i) biography in social and artistic context and (iii) description and analysis of a key production or productions.

Themes

The task of compiling the material in this volume has provided fresh opportunities for considering the relationships between the different practitioners. The architecture of the series, with each book following a similar pattern, facilitated comparisons and the recognition of some shared themes. True, there are many ways in which the work of these practitioners can be considered in isolation and an emphasis on what makes their work unique, but they inevitably reference the influences and legacies of other practitioners in the series. This is true even when Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, and Copeau are being considered; there is no original source, but practitioners who are constantly in dialogue with the work of each other. When these interactions are considered, a number of parallels in the experiences of theatre making, conceptualization and experimentation become apparent.

The chapters in this volume are listed in order of the practitioners' birth dates which can give a sense of who came first and offer some intimations of the lines of influence and transmission. This is a claim to treat with some suspicion, however, particularly when periods of activity cross, but it does seem possible to trace out meaningful lines of influence. The following chapters evidence how, for example, Halprin looks to Grotowski; Lepage looks to Halprin; Mnouchkine looks to Lecoq; Boal to Brecht, Barba to Grotowski, Kantor looked to Meyerhold and Wigman looked to and away from Laban. But this implied linearity can be deceiving – in many cases, over the course of their artistic careers, these practitioners have been influenced by those who followed, are younger and earlier in their career, or by political, social or artistic movements and moments that resonated or continue to resonate across artistic, geographical, and other boundaries.

The gathering of the material for this volume has brought into sharper focus a number of shared ambitions, themes, and ways of looking, with practitioners striving in different ways to solve the same problem, or innovate in similar ways. These shared concerns range from the broader political ones to more focused artistic issues and are evidenced in their biographies and in their productions.

It is interesting to note how many of these practitioners were revolutionary in some way – whether they were involved in fomenting explicit social revolution or were engaged in an artistic revolution that might shift the way in which the world is perceived. For some of these practitioners this seems more apparent, or familiar, than with others: Boal was looking to use theatre to rehearse for revolution; Brecht and Littlewood were looking to give agency to the audience so the audience could change what they considered to be possible or desirable and consequently enact social change; Abramović seems to have sought to incite change through risk, often to herself. But other names that have become synonymous with mainstream practice were revolutionary too – Stanislavsky would be the most obvious example here. Stanislavsky was looking to reinvigorate acting as an art and his series of approaches is well documented here and elsewhere. He is an example of a practitioner whose work became set and distributed in a certain phase (reliance on the emotion memory) because of its dissemination, and although he is one of the practitioners who learned from his students, these discoveries (more centred on the physical) were made later and didn't circulate as freely for a long time. Merlin (2018), in the second chapter of her book on Stanislavsky in the series, discusses the problems with the dissemination of Stanislavsky's work outside of Russia and the difficulties that have plagued English translations of his writings.

Many of the practitioners featured here lived through tumultuous times of one kind or another. Some were directly affected by this unrest, with a number going into exile such as Brecht, Boal, Laban, and Chekhov, while others like Wigman remained at risk under oppressive regimes, experiencing censorship, incarceration, torture or even, as was sadly the case with Meyerhold, execution, for their artistry, innovation, and resistance. Much of this work thus evolved in the shadow of tyranny and at great personal cost to the practitioners themselves. It is also interesting to note through this exercise how theatre functions as a global community: practitioners are not only influenced by each other, but look out for one another, as evidenced by the petition by international practitioners for Boal's release from prison when he was incarcerated and tortured by the Brazilian dictatorship in 1971. Another example of international solidarity was the theatre artist-led petition against the US State Department's refusal to permit Grotowski's *Teatr Laboratorium* to enter the country in 1968, which resulted in the company being allowed in in 1969. The playwright Arthur Miller was a signatory in both cases.

Freedom of movement can be viewed, historically, as a key generator of exchange and education for the artist and, when this is threatened, as some would argue it is right now in our current political moment, it endangers the generation of art, ideas, the philosophies of theatre making, and the dissemination of artistic knowledge.

Some of the practitioners featured here were more obviously affected by the politics of their day than others. Some brought their responses to bear in the content of their work, in its form, in how they developed their companies, ensembles, the hierarchies of organization, in their engagement with the audience or their arrangement and configuration of space. Some companies had more open and dialogical structures because of the authoritarian politics of their respective regimes. What the practitioners featured here share, however, is a focus on process and the work of the ensemble (however it may be formed), with the possible of exceptions of Hijikata and Ohno, and Abramović.

While Barba cultivated an ensemble with unknown, untrained actors, others like Kantor sought to work with established professionals; some like Halprin moved outside the mainstream and sought alternative collaborators. By contrast, Mnouchkine has maintained a company but renewed the membership over a long period of work. Someone like Lecoq was more focused on pedagogy while Grotowski's work moved outside of theatre altogether, and then returned.

Meyerhold was influential in his early efforts to reject psychological realism, and many of the others experimented with form as we see in Wigman's, Decroux's and Copeau's focus on the body. Other experimentations with form include Laban's and Bausch's work with Tanztheater, Wilson's work with an objective rather than subjective actor, Wilson's and Abramović's experimentation with duration, Boal's use of agency, and Lepage's work with split subjectivity and media. In a bid to reinvigorate their practices, a number of these practitioners looked back into the pasts of their own cultures to seek out abandoned or diminished forms. The interest of Meyerhold, Copeau, and Lecoq in *commedia dell'arte* is one example of this.

They simultaneously looked outwards to other cultures sharing a fascination with the performance forms of the various Asian cultures in particular (*inter alia*, Brecht, Wigman, Mnouchkine, Lepage, Grotowski, Barba). This courts the danger of an accusation of cultural appropriation. Other rituals and traditions, such as those of various cultures of Africa or Bali, can be found throughout in a reaching out beyond the borders of the 'West' to reinvigorate western practices. Looking to other cultures is a long held tradition across forms of performance, where it becomes problematic in the cases of appropriation rather than exchange – a fetishization of otherness for profit, ridicule or crude entertainment. Nonetheless the influences of non-western actors, practices, rituals and design recur across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. This interest in the 'other' poses questions: what were these practitioners looking for in these engagements and did they find it? Not just the artists featured here, but others, such as Brook, Gregory, Yeats and Craig were consistent in their search for a quality they felt lacking in European theatre – was it a deliberation, spirituality, stillness, simplicity, discipline? Obviously, it is reductive to search for a single answer, as the sources are as various as their impacts, but in much of the work that follows we see this fascination manifest, not just in the work as staged, but in the studio practices and rehearsal techniques. This was often used as a foundation for building the ensemble, alongside a sharing of personal stories, skills and music. Those non-western practitioners featured here such as Boal, or Hijikata and Ohno, have created specific relationships with western traditions, through opposition or absorption.

Practitioners were sometimes looking to bring some kind of spiritual experience to their practice and/or by extension, to their audience. A return or retreat to nature, was sometimes a pathway to an alternative spirituality, or a way of being in the world. Both Stanislavsky and Copeau took their actors out of the city and into the countryside, while Chekhov established his studio in the idyllic surroundings of Dartington Hall, and then of Ridgefield in Connecticut. Grotowski and Halprin engaged with the natural world in both their training and in the production of the work, in a way that resulted in the audience being participants rather than 'merely' spectators or observers. This move to the natural world could perhaps be equated with the search for non-western influences in a rejection of commercialism, capitalism, and the treatment of art and performance as commodities. This immersive experience in the natural world was perhaps a progression of efforts to rethink the audience experience within the formal theatre space – to reconfigure the space, treat the work as a ritual, and to reject the formal traditions of dramaturgy, psychological realism, and form.

Practitioners featured were actively looking to reinvigorate the imaginations of the actors and thus of the audience. Visual art, architecture, and design drives the work of Kantor, Wilson, and Lepage, for example, while rhythm and musicality were key to the work of the dance theatre practitioners like Wigman and Bausch. Song was significant in the work of Littlewood and Brecht, in slightly different ways. Some of these practitioners chose very controversial forms or subjects such as nudity, high risk, profanity, or unflinching challenges of accepted norms or histories: Halprin, Kantor, Abramović, Grotowski. While some looked to embrace life, the environment or

spirituality, others like Hijikata and Ohno, Kantor or Abramović went further to investigate the performance of darkness, death, and the subjugation of the self.

Many of these studies in the following chapters also cite Artaud as an influence, and given the lack of a specific method or practice left by Artaud to facilitate and deliver his extreme demands, it is intriguing to see the variety of practices that claim his influence. Lecoq cites Artaud and Copeau as key influences, Mnouchkine cites Artaud too, while Abramović's work could be a considered as an embodied engagement with his philosophies.

The *Routledge Performance Practitioners* series was formed to focus on practice, and these books evidence the sharing and perhaps demystification of these studio practices, and provide a look at how these practices can serve in the building of any performance ensemble. Living lineage informs creativity, but texts, video, and other documentation can solidify and extend this legacy. Of course the act of generating written texts on practice can be limiting and lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation – but can also lead to new departures and ways of working. One of the things that can evade documentation is the way performers learn through practice and pass on this living legacy through embodiment. Thus, many of us will have encountered these practices before without necessarily knowing their source.

Here we also encounter the gap between theory and practice – the ethics of work espoused can sometimes idealize our sense of the practitioner, or conversely construct a somber authoritarian figure far removed from the warm individual who might have been encountered live in the rehearsal room. None of these figures was living or working without the real human weaknesses, flaws, or follies of the rest of us, and much of their work was actually developed in a bid to counter the dangers of the ego. In his book *To the Actor*, Chekhov highlights this when he asks the reader for help – here he breaks down the fourth wall in a way, but in an appeal to the reader rather than the spectator. This gives agency to the reader, as he and others did for the audience member, but it also points to the openness in the work and a lack of completion that only the reader or audience member can resolve.

Perhaps this is our cue to reiterate Chekhov's appeal to the reader, you, to help us through your own practice to continue the relevance of the work and artistry of the theatre practitioners featured in this companion.

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1

STANISLAVSKY (1863–1938)

Bella Merlin

1.1 Biography in social and artistic context

Introduction

→Actor↗Director→Husband←Director↖Father→Actor↘Director↗Teacher↑

The challenge for anyone tracing Stanislavsky's biography is that the path isn't linear. Sometimes he ditched an idea only to pick it up again years later; at other times, the preoccupations of his mature life can be traced right back to his childhood. He was full of contradictions and experimentations, and he was often an artistic maverick. One thing's for sure: this is a man who was passionate about theatrical 'truth'. His evolution as a theatre practitioner can be divided into four broad sections: the amateur years, the director dictator, round-the-table analysis and the final legacies. There are times when the work of the *director* dominated, then for a while the *writer* became central, and at other times *actor training* was foregrounded. Added to all this, there were political events in Russia which influenced and censored his choice of vocabulary, and various artistic 'isms' (including Naturalism and Symbolism) also played their part in defining Stanislavsky's 'system'.

The amateur years: 1863–98

Kostya Alekseyev

Born in 1863 into one of Russia's wealthiest families, Konstantin Sergeyevich Alekseyev was the second of nine siblings. Along with four brothers and four sisters, his childhood was spent at the theatre, opera, circus and ballet: arts and entertainment formed the family's staple diet. It was no surprise when, in 1877, his father converted a room at their country house into a theatre, where the children produced plays for the guests' entertainment. Here, at the age of fourteen, Kostya began writing up these forays into drama; his youthful eagerness to analyse his own work would, later in his adulthood, inform his acting 'system'. By 1885 – aged twenty-two – his Notebooks were filled with increasingly sophisticated questions: 'What is the physiological aspect of the role? The psychic aspect of the role?' (Stanislavsky cited in Benedetti 1999: 23). Already he had made the vital connection between body and mind.

Kostya's young professional life was spent in the family textile business, although his passion for theatre soon hurled him into a series of ventures, not the least of which was the Alekseyev Circle, his family's highly acclaimed acting troupe. When the Circle folded in 1888, Kostya fuelled his love of performing by secretly appearing in a host of risqué amateur theatricals. To protect the family's reputation, he adopted the stage name, 'Stanislavsky', after a ballerina whom, as a young boy, he had lovingly adored from afar. Before long, the 'Stanislavsky' cover was blown, when his father discovered him cavorting in a lewd French farce and immediately prompted him to legitimise his acting. Thereupon, Stanislavsky undertook his next entrepreneurial project, the formation of the Moscow Amateur Music-Dramatic Circle. Within months, this had given way to the far more ambitious Society of Art and Literature, involving fellow collaborators, Fyodor Komissarzhevsky (an opera singer) (1832–1905) and Aleksandr Fedotov (a director) (1841–95). Working with theatre professionals provoked in Stanislavsky a serious need to question his own acting.

An early glimpse of a 'system'

His first major engagement with the Society was in 1888 taking the lead role in Pushkin's *The Miserly Knight*. The experience threw up three concerns: What were the differences between 'character' acting and 'personality' acting? How could actors stimulate their imaginations and therefore their 'creative will'? And how did actors 'get inside' the director's ideas?

The first concern arose because Stanislavsky envisaged himself as a dashing 'personality' actor, and the Miserly Knight as a romantic lead; Fedotov, however, saw the role as a decrepit old man. Given that Stanislavsky was only twenty-five, this was clearly a case of casting against 'type'. Not quite knowing what to do with the part, he adopted an externalised style of 'character' acting that he knew was really lacking 'something'. This gave rise to his second concern: how to stimulate the imagination? In an attempt to find the 'something' lacking, he spent a night locked in the cellar of a castle. This experiment was his first intuitive understanding of what he was later to call affective memory, whereby actors find an analogous situation from their own experience that mirrors the character's fictional life. In typical fervour, Stanislavsky went to an extreme. By setting up a real situation, he hoped that, once he returned to the rehearsal room, his memory of the gloomy experience would provide the elusive 'something' that was currently missing in his 'Knight'. He was wrong; all he got was a cold (and his imagination seemed none the sharper). The third difficulty in his rehearsal of *The Miserly Knight* was that Fedotov had very specific results that he wanted him to achieve. Yet Stanislavsky had no method for personalising those results, and all he could do was mimic them. Although it was frustrating, the seeds of his 'system' had been planted: how was he to move from external result to internal process?

A production of Krilov's *The Spoiled Darling* distracted him for a while that year. His leading lady was a charming actress, Maria Perevoshchikova (1866–1943), who also hid behind a stage name, that of 'Lilina'. They fell in love, were married in 1889, and spent the rest of their lives as partners and workmates.

The distraction of love didn't last forever. The internal/external acting dilemma arose again in 1896 when Stanislavsky played Othello. One of the biggest influences on his performance style was the great nineteenth-century actor, Mikhail Shchepkin (1788–1863). Shchepkin believed that the key to 'truthful' acting was to 'take your examples from real life'. Following Shchepkin's advice, Stanislavsky found a real-life 'image' upon which to base his interpretation of Othello – it was an Arab whom he met and befriended in Paris. He then set about crafting a 'mask' for himself based on the flesh-and-blood Arab acquaintance. The 'mask' was precise in its external detail, but inside there was nothing living, it was just an imitation. *Othello* threw up more concerns

for the ever-questioning Stanislavsky: When does an actor ‘become’ the character? And how does the actor observe life and then turn those observations into ‘creative will’, or ‘inspiration’? Stanislavsky had tried to incarnate a ‘truthful’, psychological portrait, and yet nothing emerged but a skilful sculpture.

But why was Stanislavsky so preoccupied with the psychology of acting? Turning to the state of Russian theatre at the time soon explains his heartfelt frustration.

The state of the arts

Theatrical repertoire in Russia towards the end of the nineteenth century was in a quagmire of stagnation. The Imperial theatres (those subsidised by the State) dominated Moscow and St Petersburg and, along with a smattering of privately owned venues, they operated under the beady eyes of Tsar Nicholas II’s censors. Their hawkish gaze kept a tight rein on any play whose subject matter might be deemed politically or personally subversive. ‘Safe’ theatrical fare consisted of melodramas and vaudevilles, hastily translated from the French and German originals, though occasionally an innovative piece of new writing surfaced. Describing his play, *The Last Will*, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858–1943) wrote that:

This play greatly pleased the actors. It was written as was said in those days, in soft tones; it did not offend anyone and revolutionised nothing; the chief thing about it was its excellent roles: big scenes with temperament and effective exits.

(Nemirovich-Danchenko 1937: 12)

Not only does Nemirovich admit here that the more timid the play, the more likely its success, but also he reveals the importance of the actors.

Russian theatre of the nineteenth century was actor-driven: the idea of a director shaping a production was unheard of. In fact, ‘The role of stage director was a very modest one; it had neither a creative nor a pedagogic content. Actors listened to him merely out of politeness’ (ibid.: 29). But there’s no need for a director when you already know what’s required of your acting. In a repertoire where melodrama predominated, actors were cast to a formulaic type known as an *emploi*. This meant that each performer specialised in a particular role, such as the romantic lover, the comic flunkey or the bumbling father, according to his or her personality and stature. This *emploi* then became the blueprint for any role that the actor played. The audience grew familiar with both the actor and the *emploi*, and began to expect it at every performance, regardless of the play. The result of the audience’s expectation was the development of a ‘star system’, as ‘actors lost their independence and went into the service of the crowd’ (Stanislavsky 1984: 105). The ‘big scenes with temperament and effective exits’ referred to by Nemirovich involved the star actors being ‘called out’ by the audience in the middle of a scene to come centre stage and receive wild applause. The remaining onstage cast froze, doll-like, until the adored actor had finished bowing, at which point the action of the play could resume. It was the playwright’s job to incorporate these moments into a script, and the more famous the actor the more effective exits would be required. Here, then, was no ensemble acting: here was a theatre dominated by a ‘star system’.

The situation was exacerbated by the frighteningly short rehearsal periods, which often resulted in actors simply not knowing their lines. And yet it was hardly their fault. At a time when leisure pursuits were limited, a rapid turnover of repertoire was a prerequisite of any business-minded theatre. Consequently, rehearsal time for a new production was a rarity, not a necessity. Quantity ruled over quality, leading to a situation where most performers had greater need of a prompter than a director. To save them from embarrassment, the prompt box was situated

Down-Stage-Centre and sunk into the floor. It was not uncommon for much of a play's action to be performed 'DSC', so that the actors could be prompted through their entire performance.

The 'star system' also impacted on the design of a show. Designers were still unusual in most theatres, and the rapidity of the repertoire's turnaround prohibited anything more ambitious than the recycling of old productions. Sets were dragged from the store, with stock canvas backdrops depicting dining rooms, gardens, or parlours, reappearing regardless of the genre or form of the play in question. As for costume design, this was determined by the leading actresses, each of whom was expected to supply her own wardrobe. Should the leading lady choose to wear crimson in the third act, then woe betide the female juvenile if she decided to wear red! An actress's acclaim lay in direct proportion to the voluptuousness of her wardrobe; therefore, money was vital and that often meant relying on a wealthy patron. As one actress of the time declared: 'How could you have a career without a wardrobe. What is an actress without costumes? She is a beggar; her route to the stage is cut off' (Velizarii cited in Schuler 1996: 31). Wealth and wardrobe swung an actress's fate; acting processes were the last consideration.

For all their influence, the professional acumen of the 'stars' was questionable. Before the monopoly of the Imperial theatres was abolished in 1882, actor-coaching was rare. Even when training programmes did become established, 'many actresses and actors firmly rejected the idea that acting was a learned skill' (ibid.: 39). So how did young actors acquire their craft? By imitating the great performers, of course! Even Stanislavsky confessed that his usual practice as an amateur was to copy blindly his favourite artist of the Imperial Maly Theatre. He memorised every bit of business in the great actor's interpretation of a role, learning the full range of his gestures and intonations, and leaving Stanislavsky's own directors with nothing to do. After all, he had already 'acquired' his performance, albeit second-hand. But how else could young actors learn when there was no written 'manual' that might help them? Thus, a type of performance evolved in which shouting, exaggerated gestures and simple characterisations were all 'larded with animal temperament' – and that was considered 'full-toned acting' (Stanislavsky 1984: 40). The artistic climate into which Stanislavsky emerged as a theatre practitioner was fairly bleak: a chaos devoid of coherent stage pictures, design concepts, directorial decisions, trained professionals and ensemble companies. Under these conditions, and without an acting 'A–Z', Stanislavsky began his process of 'revolution'.

The theatrical revolution

Stanislavsky's theatrical revolution began in earnest with his famously long conversation with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko on 22 June 1897. Nemirovich was an award-winning playwright and teacher at the Philharmonic School and, on his instigation, the two men met at the stylish Moscow haunt, the Slavyansky Bazaar. Having been struck by Stanislavsky's acting, and knowing of the family's wealth, Nemirovich invited him to discuss the prospects of founding a new theatre. His intention was to harness the talent of his own pupils with Stanislavsky's amateur colleagues; at the same time, he couldn't disguise the fact that he had an eye on those Alekseyev roubles. . . . The meeting lasted from 2 p.m. until 8 a.m. the following morning, during which time the two men heatedly debated artistic ideals, staging techniques, discipline and ethics, organisational strategies, future repertoire and their respective responsibilities. The only major hiccup was Stanislavsky's refusal to jeopardise his family's fortune. Nonetheless, the pioneering discussion forged an alliance and, by the summer of the following year, the first season of the fledgling Moscow Art Theatre was deep in rehearsal, with Stanislavsky serving as an actor and director.

His main artistic concern was that the new company should explode the emptiness of traditional theatre practice; instead, plays should be infused with psychological content. The

troublesome question was whose task was it to create that psychological content: the actors or the directors? Knowing no better, Stanislavsky began with the Director.

The director dictator: 1891–1906

Where the ideas came from

Stanislavsky's directing strategy involved a 'production plan', which he created by filling a play-text with a myriad of details that he thought out before rehearsals began. The details concerned every aspect of the play: how to move, how to act, where and when to change positions (a little like working out the 'blocking'), even the kind of voices that he thought the actors should use. Once the production plan was prepared, the actors then had to carry out his directions with total and unquestioning precision.

The summer of 1898 wasn't the first time Stanislavsky had used a production plan. He had in fact developed this practice out of two formative encounters with professional directors in his early career. The first of these was Fedotov of the Society of Art and Literature, whose directing style had revealed to Stanislavsky the value of preparing a careful and artistic plan. It wasn't always easy, however, to convert the plan – or *mise-en-scène* – into actual stage pictures. Fedotov often resorted to demonstrating for his actors the style or the physicality that he wanted them to use. The trouble was that their performances often consisted of nothing more than poor imitations of his exciting demonstrations. (Stanislavsky himself had fallen victim to this with his Miserly Knight in 1888.) A second major influence on Stanislavsky's directing style emerged in 1890, when the German Saxe-Meiningen players performed in Russia. Their director, Ludwig Chron-egk (1837–91), choreographed the company with a discipline so military that vast and dynamic crowd scenes could be incorporated into his productions. Stanislavsky was extremely impressed with the ensemble effects, as well as the details of lighting, scenery, costume and sound. It was the first time that he had seen authentic-looking sets and heard made-to-order soundscapes, and he was so bowled over that he attended all the performances, devoting an entire album to careful notes and drawings of each play.

With a combination of Chronegk's autocratic discipline and Fedotov's understanding of the 'blocking', or *mise-en-scène*, Stanislavsky began his first directing job for the Society of Art and Literature in 1891 with *The Fruits of Enlightenment* by Lev Tolstoy (1828–1910). By 1898, when the infant Moscow Art Theatre staged *The Seagull* in its opening season, Stanislavsky had had seven years to establish his particular directing style, which toppled dangerously towards dictatorship.

Putting it into practice

Although the history of *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) is discussed in greater detail in section 1.2, there are a number of important points to be raised here. *The Seagull* was unlike anything seen on the stage before. There were no traditional character 'types', nor any recognisable structural devices, such as exposition (the unravelling of the plot) and dénouement (the revelatory climax). Instead, Chekhov introduced 'inner activity' to the dramatic form, full of nuances and suggestions. These innovations were exceptionally challenging to actors and audience alike. In fact, the play's 1896 premiere at the Aleksandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg was a legendary 'failure'. Without the familiar conventions and formulae, the acting company floundered. Chekhov himself could hardly help: he was neither an actor nor a director and had no means of alerting them to the delicate style of playing. Robbed of their usual *emplois* (types), the actors had nothing to sustain them.

Enter Stanislavsky, two years later, to rise to the challenge with the Moscow Art Theatre. He immediately put his directing method into practice. Hiding in a study in the Ukraine, he beavered away diligently from 12 August until 20 September 1898 to construct the production plans. They included extensive character notes and detailed staging, from the barking of dogs to the croaking of frogs to create a realistic atmosphere. Although Stanislavsky didn't understand the play, the imaginative details of his *mises-en-scène* somehow unlocked the difficulties of Chekhov's psychological writing in a way that the Aleksandrinsky company had previously failed to do. As the plan of each act was completed, Stanislavsky sent the notes to Pushkino near Moscow, where Nemirovich-Danchenko rehearsed them with the newly formed acting company. The relay between Stanislavsky and Nemirovich was by no means satisfactory: it meant that Chekhov's intentions were filtered through two directors before the actors' interpretation was even considered. Not that it would have made much difference: Stanislavsky had yet to appreciate the personal contribution that actors themselves could make. Nonetheless, his choices as a director were so evocative that Chekhov honoured the production plans as 'amazing, the like of which have never been seen in Russia' (cited in Benedetti 1990: 79).

The pitfalls of the mise-en-scène

Stanislavsky's success in creating the *mises-en-scène* lay in his ability to turn the nuances of Chekhov's script into very specific directions for the actors. Unfortunately, the details that worked on paper in the Ukraine didn't always translate smoothly to the rehearsal room in Pushkino. Part of the problem was that, whether he knew it or not, Stanislavsky was setting in motion two revolutions at the same time. The first revolution concerned *theatre production* and the actual attention to detail on stage, and the second revolution focused on *acting styles* and the 'truthful' portrayal of what he called the life of the human spirit (Stanislavsky 1984: 171). In the summer of 1898, he possessed the tools with which to tackle only the first (the external form) and not the second (the inner content). Without addressing form and content together, he was in danger of exchanging one convention – demonstrational acting – for another convention – Naturalism.

Naturalism was introduced to the international literary scene in 1868 by the French writer, Émile Zola (1840–1902). The preoccupation of the Naturalists was to investigate 'man' as a product of his heredity (his genes) and his environment (his upbringing): are we simply born the way we are or can we do something about it? To examine this essentially scientific theory, Zola recreated in his novels a 'slice of life' – an imitation of the real world; a fictional 'crucible' in which human behaviour could be analysed and dissected.

Stanislavsky was clearly intrigued by the imitation of real life as his *Seagull* production plan illustrates (see section 1.2). However, he was so insistent on naturalistic detail that Chekhov's initial thrill with the production plan was completely wiped out. He grew incensed at the pedantic 'truth' that Stanislavsky demanded of the actors – 'But the theatre is art! . . . You forget, you don't have a fourth wall!' (Chekhov cited in Melchinger 1972: 4).

In Stanislavsky's defence, he struggled hard to penetrate the complex writing of Chekhov, whose new dramatic form was steeped in contradictions. The idiosyncrasies of the characters couldn't always be formulated intellectually on the pages of a production plan: they required

the breath of the live actors. Yet they were caught in a ‘catch-22’: the script needed the actors’ psychological-physical selves, but they had no psychological-physical acting vocabulary. At this stage in his career, Stanislavsky was really none the wiser, and all he could do was resort to the same level of whip-cracking that he had used with the Society of Art and Literature. He later confessed that:

I was helped by the despotism I had learned from Chronegk. I demanded obedience and I got it . . . I cared little for the inner emotions of the actor. I sincerely thought it was possible to order others to live and feel according to another’s will. I gave orders to all and for all places of the performance and these orders were binding for all.

(Stanislavsky 1984: 41, 43)

The subjugation of the actors

Of course it was impossible to ‘order others to live and feel according to another’s will’, and the Art Theatre actors were adrift in the whole process. They needed guidance as to how they might flood the externally imposed actions with their own inner life, but their director couldn’t give it. They were utterly frustrated. After all, the Moscow Art Theatre had been founded to revolutionise all aspects of the theatre, and yet here was Stanislavsky, blatantly denying one of its crucial components – the acting ensemble – its own creative freedom. As Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940), one of its dynamic young actors, complained:

Are we the cast really supposed to do *nothing but* act? We also want to *think* while we’re acting. We want to know *why* we are acting, *what* we are acting and who we are teaching or criticizing by our acting.

(cited in Benedetti 1991: 45)

Despite the cast’s complaints, Stanislavsky persisted with his autocratic directing for all of Chekhov’s successive works: *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1903). His insistence that they accept his production plans continued to cause grief among his actors, who felt robbed of their potential input. Working on *Uncle Vanya*, Olga Knipper (1868–1959), one of the Art Theatre’s founder members and Chekhov’s wife, was obliged to abandon her own characterisation of Elena before she had had the chance to develop it properly. Stanislavsky found her interpretation ‘boring’, and insisted that she adopt *his* concept instead, saying it was ‘essential for the play’. Knipper wrote to Chekhov, declaring that it was ‘awful to think of the future, of the work ahead, if I have to resist the director’s yoke again’ (cited in Benedetti 1991: 65). New rehearsal methods were becoming a matter of artistic urgency.

A taste of his own medicine

By 1902 – scarcely four years into its existence – the Moscow Art Theatre faced a potential crisis. It was widely accused of being too naturalistic, and disagreements between Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko over creative style had grown acute. Added to this, the ensemble was disrupted when the valued actor, Meyerhold, was deliberately omitted from the list of Art Theatre shareholders. He quit the company, taking with him a number of angry allies. There was a general state of artistic and internal turmoil. Stanislavsky’s faith in his own acting was cracking, and a series of collisions with Nemirovich-Danchenko fuelled his crisis of confidence. Referring to his interpretation of Satin in *The Lower Depths* (1902) by Maksim Gorky (1868–1936),

Nemirovich declared that Stanislavsky needed a new method of acting. He had worn out his old method, and it was time to show himself 'to be a different performer from the one that the Art Theatre had come to know' (Nemirovich-Danchenko cited in Benedetti 1991: 140).

Stanislavsky's personal dissatisfaction was exacerbated in 1903. He was working with Nemirovich on the role of Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, during which time, Nemirovich was evolving his own theory of the 'creative producer'. As the director of *Julius Caesar*, Nemirovich adopted a stance that was startlingly reminiscent of Stanislavsky's own dictatorial intransigence:

My production plan is a complete treatise. . . . I have prepared everything . . . with great care and intend to dragoon the cast into what I have written with conviction. . . . I see the tone and tempo of the second act, especially for Brutus, *absolutely* differently from you. . . . And I intend to follow my line without restraint.

(Nemirovich-Danchenko cited in Benedetti 1991: 155)

Stanislavsky felt straitjacketed by Nemirovich's direction, and suddenly he realised the fundamental problem with the production-plan technique. Because the ideas in the *mise-en-scène* were not the actors' own, but were forced upon them by the director, they struggled to find their own *inner justification* for their onstage actions. Without a real sense of inner justification, the *mise-en-scène* – however imaginative – was no more 'truthful' than the clichéd, representational acting from which Stanislavsky wanted to break. Once he understood this, he realised that supreme power had to be taken from the director. His unsettling experience on *Julius Caesar* convinced him that the production-plan technique was 'despotic'. Now he sought new strategies, in which directors studied their actors beforehand and depended on their contribution in rehearsal. That didn't mean that detailed research into the playscript wasn't essential. It was simply a question of how and by whom this work should be done. In his search to create the 'life of the human spirit', Stanislavsky turned his attention away from the *director's* interpretation of a play to the *company's* creative contributions.

Round-the-table analysis: 1906–early 1930s

What was it and why do it?

It was time to give the actors some power. Stanislavsky threw away the notion that he should devise the *mise-en-scène* on his own; instead, he gathered the acting company around the table, where together they unravelled a playtext and its characters. Their detective work took a variety of forms: they retold the content of the play, and made lists of all the facts, events, and given circumstances proposed by the playwright. They thought up questions and provided the answers. They studied the words and pauses between them. They invented past and future lives for the characters. They analysed the play's structure, breaking it into sections – or bits – and finding names for the characters' objectives – or tasks. There were discussions and debates, which sometimes focused on spatial relationships, sometimes on psychological motivations. All these differing practical methods were 'part of the single process of analysis, or coming to know the play and your parts' (Stanislavsky 2000b: 155).

The aim of Stanislavsky's round-the-table analysis was very specific: through discussing the play, the company could feel that they 'owned' the production, that they all had responsibility for the creation of their characters and atmospheres. So discussions weren't head-bound and intellectual, but imaginative and even emotional. Harnessing emotions was a key concern for Stanislavsky during this stage of his professional evolution. Thus, he developed the concept of

‘affective memory’, a term adopted from the French psychologist, Théodule Ribot (1839–1916). At its most simplistic, the sequence behind affective memory (or ‘emotion memory’) was easy: actors began by remembering from their own life an experience that was analogous to an event in the play. They then conjured up memories of all the physical and sensory details that were originally connected with that personal experience. Once these memories were sufficiently powerful, the actors related them to the given circumstances of their *characters’* situations, so that the fictional roles could be flooded with real emotional content. (Stanislavsky had hoped that this would happen with the night in the cellar and the Miserly Knight!)

The combination of imagination, emotional recollection and textual analysis certainly fuelled Stanislavsky’s rehearsal practices in the early 1900s. With his growing need to identify the tangible means of bringing to the stage ‘the life of the human spirit’, his round-the-table discussions extended from several hours to several months, as the actors became more and more involved.

Assailing actor training through the theatrical studio

If his actors were to become increasingly involved in the creative process, the very foundations of *actor training* would have to be reconsidered. It was all well and good experimenting in the rehearsal room, but what if the actors’ basic tools were rusty, or even dormant? Stanislavsky knew that he had to go right in at ground level – via the classroom. The attachment of a drama school to the Moscow Art Theatre had always been a significant part of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich’s plans and, from the moment the Theatre was founded, ongoing classes were an accepted part of the timetable. However, the acting disciplines at the Theatre’s school as it existed in 1902 were fairly traditional, with classes in diction, declamation, singing, recitation, dance and juggling. What was needed was an entirely new technique, in which the actors’ inner life was also considered.

Stanislavsky’s fascination with ‘inner life’ may well have been sparked by various stimuli – from his own practical research and from his reading all things scientific and philosophical. One such stimulus was a critical article entitled ‘Unnecessary Truth’, written in 1902 by Valery Bryusov (1873–1924), a leading exponent of the Russian Symbolist movement. For Bryusov, theatre production and the *art of the actor* were the same thing: one couldn’t exist without the other. This clearly sparked something in Stanislavsky’s thoughts about the nature of *actor training* on the one hand, and the nature of *theatrical performance* on the other. He was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the dominating style of psychological realism in the MAT, and so it was to Symbolism that he turned. During the 1904–5 season, he decided to stage three plays by the Belgian playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949). The content of these Symbolist dramas soon highlighted – even more than the naturalistic texts – that the live contribution of the performers was vital for exploring their ethereal, ‘spiritual’ quality. Unfortunately, his actors just weren’t equipped to balance the technical demands of performance with the esoteric content of the plays.

Symbolism thrived in the first two decades of the twentieth century. At its heart lay the desire to transcend the crude realities of everyday life that the Naturalist movement strove to imitate. Instead, the Symbolists explored the way in which supernatural and mystical reverberations impacted on ‘man’s’ existence. Bryusov’s article attacked naturalistic detail, arguing that the only ‘real’ thing on the stage was the actor’s physical body.

How then was Stanislavsky to train them? He understood through his work on the Symbolist plays that acting was a 'two-way street': inner life couldn't exist without the human 'casing' of a physical body, yet the outmoded representational school of acting had proved that physicality alone was shallow and boring without the actors' 'inner' connection. Stanislavsky recognised Bryusov's declaration that theatre was a *physical* medium; at the same time, he saw that his actors' bodies were fairly limited compared with ballet dancers or gymnasts. He was in another 'catch-22': he yearned for physically versatile performers, yet he had no means of training them. To help him in his dilemma, he turned to the 'new ways' that were being explored by former company member, Vsevolod Meyerhold. Meyerhold hungered for a performance medium that was physical, political and unashamedly theatrical. In response to the potential of Meyerhold's dynamic techniques, Stanislavsky set up an offshoot of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1905, and they called it the Theatrical Studio.

The Theatrical Studio proved to be Stanislavsky's first concrete step towards developing a psychophysical training ground in which the actors' psychology and physicality were equally important. It was 'neither a ready-made theatre nor a school for beginners, but a laboratory for more or less mature actors' (Stanislavsky 1982: 430). Stanislavsky was to fund it, while Meyerhold, whom he invited back into the fold after three years' absence, was given artistic and pedagogical freedom. The techniques proposed by Meyerhold in the Theatrical Studio were truly progressive. He abandoned discussion and focused on improvisation. (In many ways, his practices were precursors of those adopted by Stanislavsky almost thirty years later with his Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis.) Yet it quickly transpired with Meyerhold's production of Maeterlinck's *The Death of Tintagiles* that the Theatrical Studio was trying to run before it could walk. There was still no specific vocabulary with which to tackle an acting revolution. Neither Meyerhold's Biomechanics (a precise form of acrobatic-based training) nor Stanislavsky's 'system' had yet been formulated. Added to which there was an inherent contradiction between Stanislavsky's artistic ambitions and those held by Meyerhold. Meyerhold pursued the path of *physical* theatre, in which there was little room for psychology or emotion. Stanislavsky, on the other hand, was striving for a *psychophysical* theatre, where gesture was invested with *emotional* content, as well as theatrical expression. And so, in spite of – or perhaps because of – Meyerhold's innovative ideas, the Theatrical Studio closed after only five months. The political upheaval caused by the first Russian Revolution in 1905 might have been partially responsible for the Studio's demise. Unfortunately, it doesn't dispel the unavoidable dichotomy that existed between the two directors' idealistic visions and the reality of their pursuits. Nonetheless, the role of the Theatrical Studio as a pioneering forum for testing some kind of psychophysicality is profound.

The holiday in Finland

The following year – 1906 – proved to be a critical one in terms of the development of Stanislavsky's 'system'. The closure of the Theatrical Studio, along with Chekhov's death, the failure of the Symbolist plays, a dissatisfaction with the artistic ethos of the Moscow Art Theatre, political and social unrest throughout Russia, financial disaster and a growing despair with the inadequacies of his own craft forced Stanislavsky to reassess the basic mechanics of acting. His relationship with Nemirovich-Danchenko had been deteriorating for several years, and at various times both parties had threatened to quit the company. The cause of the disputes was complex, but at the heart of it lay the fact that Nemirovich was a *writer* and a *director*: the text and the final production were for him the critical elements. Stanislavsky, on the other hand, was

an investigator, an experimenter, as well as a director. He now believed that the *actor* was at the heart of the performance and, at this stage in his artistic credo, he didn't revere the writer. (He had even suggested during their 1904 production of *Ghosts* by the realist dramatist, Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), that he rewrite the opening lines, as the text didn't fit his physical actions.) It was, therefore, extremely depressing when, in 1906, while touring with the Art Theatre in Europe, Stanislavsky found that his own acting had become mechanical and empty. In a state of personal unrest, he took his family on a much-needed holiday to Finland. Once there, he hid away in a darkened room, smoked endlessly and surrounded himself with twenty years of notebooks, each filled with his scribbles on acting, rehearsing and directing. He began a complicated and soul-searching attempt to organise formally a practical acting 'system'.

Stanislavsky believed that his evolving 'system' was essentially a means of applying natural and biological laws to the conventions of the theatre. He took as his starting point moments in his own stage experiences and his observations of famous actors, when spontaneity seemed to take over and 'the life of the human spirit' appeared on the stage. He then tried to isolate those moments, analyse them and put them back together in a formalised way *via* his 'system', so that all actors at any time could tap into their own spontaneous inspiration. Although he took many years to develop it thoroughly, his 'system' had two distinct but parallel branches: (1) practical exercises to develop the actor's physical, vocal and emotional instrument (Actor Training or *the work on the self*); and (2) methods of round-the-table analysis to explore forensically the hidden mysteries of a script (Rehearsal Techniques or *the work on the role*).

The *work on the self* also had two (interdependent) prongs – inner and outer. (You could say that inner work trains actors to be imaginatively playful and outer work trains them to be technically adept.) In the course of time, Stanislavsky developed exercises to help inner preparation through meditation, relaxation, concentration and imagination (all of which were tools that he probably acquired through his reading of yoga books, as we'll see later). This inner work was paralleled with the outer preparation of the actor's raw materials. Those raw materials included a strong voice, perfect diction, plasticity of movement, a characterful face and expressive hands, a vivid imagination and 'an infectious stage charm' (Stanislavsky cited in Gorchakov 1985: 194). Because these tools were in a continual state of development, Stanislavsky believed that every actor should complement his or her professional stage work with lifelong training to accommodate those changes.

Work on the role consisted of round-the-table analysis, as well as entering into the character's psychology through historical research, imagination and affective memory. Stanislavsky's intention was that the 'bi-focal' preparation of *the self* and *the role* would help actors to dive into a 'creative state'. The 'creative state' was one in which they felt so physically, mentally and emotionally open that they could stimulate their 'creative will'. The 'creative will' was the dynamo for acting in a spontaneous, exciting and unexpected way.

Having begun the process of creating a 'system' in Finland, Stanislavsky then used the various studios that emerged alongside the Moscow Art Theatre's main house in the years between 1905 and 1927 as 'laboratories'. In these 'laboratories', he explored different genres of play, trying out numerous experiments to combine the two aspects of his 'system': Actor Training and Rehearsal Techniques. The most significant 'laboratory' was arguably the First Studio, formed in 1912 and devoted to theatrical adventures involving the genius actor, Mikhail Chekhov (1891–1955), and the pioneering director, Evgeny Vakhtangov (1883–1923). The Studio was headed by Leopold Sulerzhitsky (1872–1916), a striking individual who became a huge influence on Stanislavsky. . . .

THE IMPACT OF SULERZHITSKY

With an eclectic past as a singer, artist, fisherman, scholar, shepherd, sailor and political prisoner, 'Suler' was introduced to Stanislavsky in 1900 and he quickly became a respected friend. Suler was deeply spiritual and, when Stanislavsky became fascinated by the Symbolist plays with their exploration of the human soul or spirit, Suler's background and temperament were perfectly suited to assisting him. In fact, he was first officially employed by Stanislavsky as his personal assistant in 1906 – around the time he was beginning to formulate his 'system'. Suler remained his collaborator for many years despite the fact that Nemirovich was suspicious of his influence and refused to acknowledge him officially as a member of the MAT staff. Suler's most profound contribution to Stanislavsky's development was his introduction of Hatha yoga into the actor-training programme.

Hatha yoga dates back more than 5,000 years, the word 'yoga' meaning 'union, to join or yoke together'. The basic principle of Hatha yoga is that exercise (asana) combines with breathing (pranayama) to relax the body and integrate the mind and emotions. It's unlikely Stanislavsky knew the (now) familiar postures of yoga, but he certainly employed the connection between breath, relaxation and the creative state.

Two key productions in the Moscow Art Theatre's main house were used to experiment and test out these new acting tools. They were the allegorical *The Drama of Life* (1907) by Nobel prize-winning Norwegian author, Knut Hamsun (1859–1952), and the more naturalistic drama, *A Month in the Country* (1909) by Ivan Turgenev (1818–83). In both productions, Stanislavsky served as director, as well as taking the role of Karenin in the first and Ratkin in the second.

The Drama of Life was the first production in which Stanislavsky consciously examined 'the inner character of the play and its roles' (Stanislavsky 1982: 474). The 'system' was still in its embryonic state, and he lacked the strategies to execute this work succinctly and effectively. Nonetheless, the particular experiment that he undertook in rehearsals focused on intangible levels of communication, that he called 'irradiation' or communion. Indeed, communion was a concept stemming from Suler's Eastern meditational practices.

One experiment with communion in rehearsals for *The Drama of Life* involved complete immobility. During this particular exercise, Stanislavsky forbade his actors to use any external means of presenting a character – neither gesture nor movement. Instead he wanted:

bodiless passion in its pure, naked form, both naturally and emanating directly from the soul of the actor. For the transmission of this . . . the artist needed only eyes, face and mime. So let him, in immobility, live through the emotion he has to transmit with the help of feeling and temperament.

(cited in Worrall 1996: 173)

Through the 'immobility' exercise, Stanislavsky wanted his actors to realise how powerful stillness and silence could be. He also wanted them to feel the resonances of their own emotional repertoires and the wealth of information that they could glean from each other just by allowing the space between them to be 'alive' [...].

Two years later – in 1909 – Stanislavsky's rehearsals for *A Month in the Country* involved an even stranger new practice. Up until now, he had adopted a predominantly cerebral approach as

a director, either through production plans (such as *The Seagull*) or round-the-table discussions. However, the more he experimented with psychophysical exercises involving the actors' bodies and imaginations, the more he questioned intellectual activities. Not quite daring to let go completely of the brain-based preparatory work, Stanislavsky came up with a curious blend of analysis and spirituality for *A Month in the Country*. As usual, the first rehearsals took place round the table. Rather than embarking on discussions of context or dramatic structure, Stanislavsky began to dictate, and the actors carefully noted down, 'the symbolic designations of the various emotions and inner states' suggested by the text (Koonen cited in Worrall 1996: 186). These 'symbolic designations' ranged from a question mark indicating 'surprise', or a question mark in brackets indicating 'hidden surprise', to a large dash denoting 'stage apathy', a cross denoting 'the creative state' and an upward-pointing arrow denoting 'the transition from apathy to the creative state'. The hieroglyphics littered the text to signpost the characters' emotional journeys, which the actors were then expected to experience. This was all very strange: to ask the actors to embody big emotional transitions at the points the director indicated was far more complex than Stanislavsky's former insistence on detailed, naturalistic *mises-en-scène*. As actress Alisa Koonen (1889–1974) declared: 'The exercises associated with the "system" turned out to be difficult all round. What was demanded was not simply the mechanical execution of the task, but also our inner participation' (cited in Worrall 1996: 186).

To some extent, Stanislavsky's bizarre exercises in immobility and hieroglyphics go to show that he knew that he was on to something exciting with the idea of 'inner life' and 'creative state'; he simply didn't know how to access them formally. There was a danger that the hieroglyphics were just another form of artistic straitjacketing, no better than a production plan. By 1910, however, Stanislavsky's rehearsal methods had been simplified: the actors were now asked to identify the rather more attainable 'bits' of a text (often translated as 'units') and 'tasks' of a character (often translated as 'objectives') [...]. This process combined and activated what Stanislavsky called the three inner motive forces (often translated as 'inner psychological drives') of thought, will and emotion. Through intellectual analysis (via the thought-centre), the actors determined what they were *doing* (in the action- or will-centre) and why they *wanted* to do it (through the emotion- or feeling-centre).

By 1910, the major components of bits, tasks, affective memory, inner motive forces and communion had been identified. Stanislavsky's 'system' was coming into focus [...].

The importance of yoga

For more than ten years, Stanislavsky continued to refine his 'system', supplementing his practical experiments by delving into books on psychology, philosophy and yoga. Indeed, he openly noted how he combined science, thought and metaphysics in the shaping of his actor training. And yet the real impact of this interdisciplinary research is only recently coming to light. Stanislavsky scholars and practitioners have acknowledged for some years the importance of Suler's collaboration with Stanislavsky. However, it's really only now that we're beginning to understand the profound impact of Eastern philosophy and yoga on the entirety of his evolving 'system'.

A key player was Nikolai Demidov (1884–1953). As a 25-year-old medical student and friend of Sulerzhitsky, Demidov was initially hired as the physical and moral educator of Stanislavsky's son, Igor. Over the next thirty years, Demidov became Stanislavsky's 'right-hand man', offering up insights into human behaviour, editing his writings and running the Fourth Studio at MAT between 1921 and 1925. As Stanislavsky was grappling with concrete terminology for his acting 'system', Demidov drew his attention to two books by Yogi Ramacharaka which had recently been translated into Russian: *Hatha Yoga, or the Yogi Tradition of Philosophical Well-Being* (1909) and

Raja Yoga, or Mental Development (1914). These books seem to have provided Stanislavsky with all manner of tools for his ‘system’.

First of all, we have the *structure*. In brief: one book, *Hatha Yoga*, provides exercises in physical postures, relaxation, breathing and inner rhythm. The other, *Raja Yoga*, aspires to inner-outer coordination and stillness of the mind. Inherent in yoga is the idea of centres (or *chakras*) of energy through the body. In other words, the physical and the psychological are both delineated and interwoven (like Stanislavsky’s *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*).

Then we have some *terminology*. Ramacharaka used words including tasks, bits of information, relaxation, concentration and wants, as well as highlighting the power of the breath. In fact, Demidov asked Stanislavsky why he was trying to invent exercises and names for things that had long ago been discovered in yogic practices – at which point he indeed turned his attention to Ramacharaka’s words. It’s exciting to understand that Stanislavsky combined his understanding of psychology (drawn largely from Ribot, with affective memory and his concept of radiating and emanating energy) with yogic thoughts. He wanted to find a ‘system’ that created a body-mind-spirit continuum for the actor both in the process of creating a role and working in an ensemble. It was the combination of science and ancient spiritual practices that helped him in that task.

Ramacharaka was one of the various names adopted by American lawyer and philosopher William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932). His two books *Hatha Yoga* (Russian publication 1909) and *Raja Yoga* (Russian publication 1914) focused on a modern Americanized version of self-improvement, with an emphasis on the power of the solar plexus and *prana* energy as the essence of authentic communication. *Prana* is mentioned many times by Stanislavsky in *An Actor Prepares* [...], though edited out of Benedetti’s 2008 translation, *An Actor’s Work*.

The state of ‘I am’

During this period of intense practical research, the double-pronged training of ‘work on the self’ and ‘work on the role’ led Stanislavsky to adjust his definition of what he had previously called ‘personality’ acting. He had come to believe that, if actors really wanted to stir their creative wills, they could only work from their own raw materials. Rather than donning a character like a cloak, they had to put themselves into the characters’ circumstances and ask themselves: ‘What would *I* do in this situation? What do *I want*? Where am *I going*?’ By stimulating these questions, the actors’ vibrant, living, breathing temperaments were directly linked to the circumstances of the play.

There was a significant difference between this new kind of ‘personality acting’ and the kind for which Stanislavsky had yearned in his vainglorious, swashbuckling youth as the Miserly Knight. Although actors might now *begin* with their own personality, they didn’t stop there: they stepped *beyond* their individual *emplois* into the character as written by the playwright. This transition provoked many questions for Stanislavsky about the relationship between actor and role and, in 1914, he altered his notion of the ‘creative state’ to the state of *I am*: ‘I am in this situation (albeit imaginary), so I will respond as truthfully as I can for the character’. (This is sometimes translated as ‘I am being’.)

What caused Stanislavsky to shift his understanding of acting in this way? Quite possibly it was his exploration of metaphysics: for Ramacharaka, full consciousness of being oneself – being

‘I’ – was the truth of human existence. Quite possibly it was Stanislavsky’s ongoing grappling with stage nerves: after all, in the state of ‘I am’, the actor is ideally so united with the role that any sense of physical awkwardness evaporates. Quite possibly it was the result of drastic international events as much as personal artistic probings that caused him to change his terminology. In 1914, the year in which the First World War broke out, Stanislavsky found himself caught in the Swiss frontier town of Immerstadt while travelling with some of his family and colleagues. Having been dragged from a train, accused of being a Russian spy and threatened with death at gunpoint, it’s hardly surprising that his mind had turned to questions of existence and ideas of who ‘I am’.

Some years later, in 1923–4, the Moscow Art Theatre embarked on two tours of America to ease the Theatre’s ailing finances. The Americans had gone wild for the Russian ‘psychological’ acting, and were hungry for lectures and lessons to help them achieve equally detailed performances themselves. By 1924, Stanislavsky provided an actual step-by-step guide into the state of ‘I am’, beginning with factual knowledge of the play and ending with heartfelt emotion of the role. At the heart of this guide lay the actor’s need to search for the ‘right bait’ (i.e. the right ‘actions’) to arouse their feelings. Then – having ‘caught the feeling’ – they had to learn how to control it: after all, inspirational acting depended on the fine balance between conscious control and subconscious spontaneity. (The fact that Stanislavsky placed ‘actions’ at the heart of the fourth stage signals that he was already moving towards the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis.)

Ultimately, the state of ‘I am’ is when the actor is as relaxed on stage as they are in real life so that everything they do operates according to the laws of human nature – despite the abnormal conditions of creating in public. ‘I am’ is really our natural state.

Dead Souls – a turning point

Stanislavsky’s ideas never remained static for very long, which was why he considered that his ‘system’ was simply a toolkit to assist actors when they had trouble with a role, and certainly not a gospel. So when Nemirovich-Danchenko unexpectedly announced in 1911 that the ‘system’ was to be adopted by all the Moscow Art Theatre practitioners, Stanislavsky was far from pleased.

Even less pleasing was Stalin’s own formalisation of the ‘system’ in 1934: this completely contradicted Stanislavsky’s own belief that ‘Nothing can be more harmful to art than the use of a method for its own sake’ (1990: 142). Added to which, Stanislavsky was always experimenting, always moving on. So how on earth could his ‘theories’ be set in stone? In fact, after years of variations on round-the-table research, he came to the conclusion in 1932 that analysis could be limiting. And the production that brought Stanislavsky to this conclusion was Nikolai Gogol’s (1809–52) *Dead Souls* (1846).

Four years before *Dead Souls*, in 1928, Stanislavsky had suffered a heart attack following a gala performance to celebrate the Art Theatre’s thirtieth anniversary. During the gala, he’d given a speech praising the wealthy capitalist, Savva Morozov, who had invested in the theatre in its early years. His speech provoked a vicious onslaught in the communist press, and a heart attack ensued. Thereon in, terror of the Soviet regime took its toll on Stanislavsky’s delicate health. He retired from acting and devoted his time to teaching and directing, including his production of *Dead Souls*.

To prepare for *Dead Souls*, his cast embarked on extensive research into Gogol’s letters, biography, works and portraiture. One of the leading actors, Vasily Toporkov (1889–1970), grumbled that, while they all found the visits to museums and galleries fascinating and the discussions stimulating, they couldn’t translate their intellectual investigations into anything

useful on stage. Toporkov wasn't the only one to question the rehearsal methods. Another very experienced actress had serious problems. She was Stanislavsky's wife, Lilina, who had been with the Moscow Art Theatre since its foundation. For some reason during the rehearsals of *Dead Souls*, she seemed to abandon all her intuitive responses to the part and embarked instead on 'a painstaking, corroding analysis, with unnecessary reflection and excessive self-control'. Stanislavsky's advice to her was wonderfully reassuring, declaring that: 'It is not necessary for you to understand everything in the scene. Meticulousness can be a plague for the actor; he starts to split hairs, [and] place a mass of unnecessary details between himself and his partner' (cited in Toporkov 1998: 133).

Obviously, Stanislavsky had become as wary of extensive round-the-table analysis as he was of his former directorial autocracy. He now rejected the practice of telling actors to:

'Go on stage, perform your roles and apply what you have learned during the past few months of work around the table.' With a swollen head and empty heart, the actors go on stage and are unable to play anything at all. They need many more months in order to discard the superfluous, to select and assimilate the necessary, in order to find themselves – even at moments – in the new role.

(Stanislavsky cited in Moore 1973: 31)

The experience of *Dead Souls* had taught Stanislavsky that actors have to 'let go of their home-work'. That doesn't mean they shouldn't do the preparation in the first place, but – just as a pianist stops thinking about digital dexterity when he's playing a concerto – so too should actors 'forget' their preparation at the point when it has served its purpose. Accurate research was no longer as interesting to Stanislavsky as unexpected interpretations and the possibility of inspiration.

How then might actors experience artistic inspiration? By now Stanislavsky knew that the answer lay in *action*: finding the right action was the challenge to which he turned his attention in his final voyage of discovery.

The final legacies: 1930s–1938 and beyond

The opera-dramatic studio

At the age of seventy-three, Stanislavsky knew that the only way he could conduct his final experimentations was away from the main house of the Moscow Art Theatre. By the 1930s, the Art Theatre had long ago ceased to be a hotbed of theatrical innovation. Since it had been declared a paradigm of cultural heritage in 1917, it had become little more than a museum shackled to Socialist rule. Therefore, in 1935, Stanislavsky and his sister, Zinaïda, drew together a circle of young and talented protégés to open his last 'satellite laboratory' – the Opera-Dramatic Studio. It was situated in his own apartment on 6, Leontievski Lane in Moscow, and here he remained locked away for the rest of his life.

Joseph Stalin was elected general secretary of the Communist Party in 1922, from which position he defeated all major opponents, so that, five years after the death of Soviet leader, Lenin, in 1924, Stalin was in the position to become dictator of the USSR. His absolute – autocratic and cruel – Socialist power went unchallenged until his death from a stroke in 1953.

Politically, Stanislavsky was well informed, but naïve. Although he read the written words of the newspaper, he had a peculiar ignorance – or blindness – to their subtext and undercurrents. As he grew older and sicker, and immersed himself more deeply in his practical research, he was oblivious to the fact that he was essentially under house arrest. He was, in the words of Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), ‘isolated, but preserved’. All Stanislavsky’s meetings were surreptitiously controlled by his doctors (and maybe his assistants, too) who themselves were under the strictest orders ‘from above’. In secluded ignorance, Stanislavsky focused the Opera-Dramatic Studio on the process of training and rehearsal, without worrying about the results of a full-scale production.

The Method of Physical Actions

HOW IT CAME ABOUT

Stanislavsky’s lifelong search was for a rehearsal technique that would engage body, mind and emotions simultaneously. His youthful experiments had led him to predetermine a *mise-en-scène* and then analytically research a text. But, by 1935, he seriously questioned whether either of those rehearsal methods was any good in terms of its psychophysical possibilities. His work in the early 1900s had convinced Stanislavsky that real human feelings were a vital part of good acting, and that every gifted performer possessed the appropriate raw materials. It was just a matter of finding the ‘right bait’ to arouse them. Over the years, he had tried to find the ‘right bait’ through analysis, observation, affective memory and imagination. The tricky part was that, once actors’ emotions were aroused, they had to be able to stop them in an instant, and to change them as appropriate. Yet Stanislavsky recognised that the emotion-centre was highly capricious and, as such, almost impossible to manipulate consciously. The fascinating contradiction in the acting process, therefore, was how to arouse and then control something as teasingly uncontrollable as emotion.

Stanislavsky’s career had been devoted to unravelling this troublesome contradiction, and by the end of his life, he believed that he had discovered a possible solution to the emotion/experience dichotomy. Instead of true emotion being the *end*-product of an acting technique, he wanted to devise a rehearsal process of which emotion was a *by*-product. In other words, he sought a process in which emotions arose inevitably from the actions, rather than actors consciously trying to squeeze emotions out of themselves. After all, the emotion-centre was only one piece in the jigsaw: an actor’s intricate acting instrument also included the other two ‘inner motive forces’ of will and thought. Could it be that, if actors actively *did* something (will) and fully *believed* in what they were doing (thought), appropriate emotions might arise accordingly?

Action! Action! Action! became the focal point of Stanislavsky’s new technique and, in 1935, he addressed his Opera students, proclaiming that: ‘now we shall proceed differently. We shall create the line of physical action’ (cited in Magarshack 1950: 389). That was the crux of it: *the line of physical action*, and the shift of emphasis from inner emotion to onstage action was described by his young actor Toporkov as ‘one of Stanislavsky’s greatest discoveries’ (1998: 58).

‘Physical actions’ were small, achievable tasks that were directed towards the other actors on stage; the motives behind those actions were both practical and psychological. To illustrate what he meant, Stanislavsky took the example of the highly dramatic situation of the jealous composer, Salieri, plotting the murder of his archrival, Mozart. Salieri manages to poison Mozart by means of a series of simple physical actions: ‘first by choosing a wine glass, next by pouring the wine, next by dropping in the poison, and only then by handing the glass to his rival’ (Stanislavsky cited by Carnicke in Hodge 2010: 16). Through this kind of logical progression, actors found that

small, achievable tasks could encapsulate great psychological complexities. So these actions weren't an end in themselves, but rather they propelled the actor into 'complex psychological emotional experiences' (Chushkin in Foreword to Toporkov 1998: 17). At the same time, they were so simple and direct that actors could accomplish them without any emotional strain whatsoever.

REHEARSAL TECHNIQUE: FINDING THE 'SCORE OF PHYSICAL ACTIONS'

The main purpose of the Method of Physical Actions was for actors to find the precise and logical sequence of actions that would enable their characters to achieve their 'tasks'. The technique for doing this was in fact very simple, and Stanislavsky's challenge to his company was provocative: 'Without any reading, without any conferences on the play, the actors are asked to come to a rehearsal of it' (2000b: 213). How on earth could they do that? Well, the only way to rehearse a play with so little preparation had to be through improvisation. This wasn't a new idea: Meyerhold had used improvisations extensively in the 1905 Theatrical Studio, and Nemirovich-Danchenko had also been an advocate of improvisation in rehearsal. Now, in 1935, however, the improvisations had a very specific goal: if the actors were going to identify precise and truthful physical actions, they needed to pay as much attention to detail in their improvisations as they had done previously with their round-the-table analysis. The main difference was that they were no longer sitting at the table with their heads in their books and their pencils in their hands. They now did their research *on the stage*, looking into their own human lives for whatever information they needed to achieve their characters' 'tasks'.

To help actors find that information, Stanislavsky proposed four easy steps. Step 1 was as simple as possible: the actors read a scene. Step 2 involved a small amount of discussion to clarify what the scene was about, how it divided into 'bits' and what was its main 'action'. In Step 3, the actors got up and tried out the scene using improvisation. They often began with a '*silent étude*', in which they worked attentively – but silently – through 'the line of physical action', testing whether the actions they had chosen during the preliminary discussions were appropriate or not [...]. After the *étude*, further discussions (Step 4) identified which moments had worked in the improvisation and which ones had fractured the logical line of physical action. Then the actors went back to Step 1 and read the scene again. Little by little, words were introduced into the *études* starting with their own improvised text, each time drawing closer and closer to the playwright's actual script. Throughout the whole process, they returned to the simple, ongoing sequence of reading, discussing and improvising. Through these developing improvisations, the actors were able to fine-tune their actions and fix them to form the scene's 'skeleton', known as the 'score of physical actions'. This precise score could then be repeated until habit became easy and ease became beautiful [...].

THE 'CREATION OF THE LIVING WORD'

In many ways, the 'score of physical actions' wasn't very different from the early, predetermined plan of a *mise-en-scène*, except that the process of discovery was the complete opposite. Stanislavsky no longer provided a shopping list of actions as he had with *The Seagull*. Instead, the actors themselves unearthed the moments of 'truth' – in the characters and in the action – through their psychophysical experience of *doing* the scene. Another reason for improvising was to personalise the learning of a text. Stanislavsky believed that:

between our own words and those of another, the distance is of most immeasurable size. Our own words are the direct expression of our feelings, whereas the words of another are alien until we have made them our own, are nothing more than signs of future emotions which have not yet come to life inside us. Our own words are needed

in the first phase of physical embodiment of a part because they are best able to extract from within us live feelings, which have not yet found their outward expression.

(2000b: 100–101)

He even went as far as to forbid the deliberate memorising of the playwright's text in the early stages. If actors depended too heavily on a learned script, he believed it revealed their reluctance – or inability – to embody the character's life. 'It was considered the highest achievement if an actor could reveal the scheme of a scene by means of purely physical actions or with the minimum number of words' (Toporkov 1998: 160).

Of course, the time would come when the actors needed the actual text, at which point in rehearsals Stanislavsky fed them with the writer's words from the sidelines, like a football coach. They grabbed these words hungrily as – by this stage – the author's text expressed a thought or carried out a piece of action much better than their own made-up speeches. The result of this process was a seemingly effortless passage from (1) the actors' improvised text, through (2) the director's prompting from the sidelines, to (3) the actors finally knowing the lines because they wanted those very words, rather than because they had formally memorised them. If the actors followed this sequence, their spoken text became what Stanislavsky called the 'creation of the living word' (2000b: 262). Its roots ran deep into their psyches, emerging as the only way to express what was going on inside them. The truly exciting moment for an actor was when the playwright's text became *action* in its own right, the vital tool for really articulating the character's burning desires.

THE EMERGENCE OF CHARACTER

Because the emphasis of the early improvisations was on the actors' own words and real feelings, character was obviously not a major concern. In fact, 'character' was nothing more than the 'line of physical actions'. This in itself was joyously liberating. Because physical actions can come in an infinite variety of sequences and combinations, every actor had the potential to play a huge number of characters. Perhaps this was the greatest advantage of the Method of Physical Actions: it provided an easy means of expanding the actors' repertoires. No longer reliant on memories of previously experienced emotions, they could use physical actions to 'create experience where there [was] none to be remembered' (Mitter 1993: 20). In other words, murderous imaginings or analogous memories were no longer necessary for playing Macbeth. All the actor had to do was to establish a series of small achievable physical actions which by their very sequence revealed leadership, ambition, gullibility and the myriad of other qualities required for the part.

The Method of Physical Actions seemed to be a psychophysical 'cure-all'. Stanislavsky summarised it as the simultaneous creativity of all the intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical forces of human nature: 'this is not theoretical, but *practical research* for the sake of a genuine objective, which we attain through physical actions' (2000b: 239; my emphasis). Yet there was still another step to be taken. His understanding of 'practical research' would in fact fuel his ultimate experiment in acting practice, now known as Active Analysis.

Active analysis

KEDROV AND KNEBEL

In the early twenty-first century, there was some debate among international scholars as to whether a difference actually existed between the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis. And there's no doubt the overlaps are considerable. The confusion was due in part to the

fact that Stanislavsky was very old and sick when these experiments were in full throttle. He himself wrote down few of his findings, leaving his young actors, directors and teachers to hand down his 'lore' in his stead. Two individuals in particular were largely responsible for shaping his legacy: Mikhail Kedrov (1893–1972) and Maria Knebel (1898–1985). Kedrov and Knebel were both involved in Stanislavsky's last projects, and in 1948 they became directors of the Stanislavsky Drama Theatre, the venture born out of the Opera-Dramatic Studio.

Following Stanislavsky's death in 1938, Kedrov (who served as his assistant on *Tartuffe*, as well as playing the title role) pursued the idea of physical actions to extraordinary extremes. One of his students, the celebrated Russian actor, Albert Filozov (1937–2016), found that Kedrov's desire for the logic of 'Action! Action! Action!' was so dogmatic, that the Method of Physical Actions had 'in effect killed Russian theatre' (Filozov cited in Merlin 2001: 158). Kedrov's call for 'Action!' was undoubtedly influenced by Socialist Realism. In fact, it's thought that Kedrov might have been a government watchdog. He was certainly tasked with heading the Soviet commission to vet Stanislavsky's acting manuals (Carnicke in White 2014: 259). The Socialist Realists declared that there was nothing about 'man' that couldn't be changed by social reform. Reason ruled: emotion was out! With this in mind, it's clear to see how the logical sequence of the Method of Physical Actions, particularly as promoted by Kedrov, fell in line with the scientific, 'provable' aspect of Socialist Realism.

Maria Knebel, on the other hand, was far more interested in Stanislavsky's idea of 'analysis through action', or Active Analysis. Active Analysis was exactly what it said: the actors analysed their roles actively by using their bodies, imaginations, intuition and emotions on the rehearsal-room floor. So – just like the Method of Physical Actions – the detective work on a play was carried out by the actors using their entire beings and not just their intellects. Unlike the Method of Physical Actions, the 'logic' of physical actions, the 'scoring' of a role, was no longer such a big deal. Anything could provide the actors with valuable clues – the structure of a scene, the 'anatomy' of the play, the very *medium* of drama itself. So the logic of the sequence was less important than the experiential discoveries made through active research.

Socialist Realism was a literary movement that came to prominence in 1934. Mirroring some of the elements of nineteenth-century Naturalism, it studied the behavioural patterns of human conduct. Unlike the Naturalists, however, the emphasis was now on environment, to the exclusion of heredity: in other words, we are not victims of our parentage, we can be whatever society wants us to be.

THE REHEARSAL PROCESS

In spite of its apparently holistic appeal, the rehearsal technique still had to have a very clear process. In many ways, it echoes the stages of the Method of Physical Actions, and can be broken down into a fairly straightforward sequence (as Carnicke has so skilfully done in Hodge 2010: 19).

First of all, the actors read the scene. Second, they assess the facts of the scene. This involves asking questions such as: What is the event? What are the protagonist's inciting actions and the antagonist's resisting counteractions? What is the style of the piece? What language do the characters use in terms of images and rhythms? 'Assessing the facts' constitutes a serious piece of textual analysis, also involving the discussion of 'bits' of action. This is important to remember, as otherwise it might seem as if Active Analysis is merely about getting up and sloshing about in generalised impro. The psychophysical information that actors glean from experiencing the

scene through improvisation is undoubtedly vital. Yet it is only truly beneficial when the decisions that they make on the rehearsal-room floor are grounded in their detailed investigation of the script.

The third stage consists of the actors improvising the scene using their own words, incorporating any of the facts that they can remember. As with the Method of Physical Actions, they may start the improvisations with silent *études* to really bed their understanding of action, counter-action and event in their bodies and experiences.

Following the improvisation, the actors reread the scene and compare it with what they just experienced. They note which facts were retained and which were forgotten, and whether the inciting event took place. Rehearsing a play with Active Analysis consists of repeating this four-stage process of reading, discussing, improvising and discussing the improvisation. With each new improvisation, the actors strive to add more details of events, language and images.

The important shifting between table discussions and on-the-feet explorations ensures that the line of thought (what the character wants) and the line of action (how the character tries to get it) are first unlocked, and then interwoven. The analogy I always use is that the play is the trellis and the actors are the ivy. The director's task is to watch what unfurls in the improvisations and weave the ivy-actors round the trellis-play without disturbing the organic nature of the human process.

The fifth and final stage involves memorising the scene. It's important to realise that it isn't necessary to repeat improvisations *ad nauseam*. Once the heart of an encounter has been unpacked, the actors can then go away and learn the lines. In fact, if the improvisational work has been successful, they find that the scene virtually 'learns itself'.

'HERE, TODAY, NOW'

The power of Active Analysis lies in its immediacy. It acknowledges the reality of the situation ('Okay, we're on stage, so what shall we do?') and combines it with a sense of playfulness ('But what would we do if . . . ?'). Stanislavsky called it 'Here, Today, Now'. The actors are starting from *themselves*, so they have as much information as they need to kick-start the creative process into action. Because it's so effortless, the very pleasure of acting and the excitement of live performance become valid emotions in themselves. Whatever the actors have – here, today, now – are the physical and emotional tools with which they work. This state of being has profound effects both in rehearsal and in performance. *In rehearsal*, the knowledge that the work is simply Active Analysis – in other words, trying out ideas in three dimensions, and not just intellectually – serves as a huge liberation for the actors, daring them to be brave in their research. After all: 'A mistake in an *étude* isn't so terrible. The *étude* is a test, a quest, a verification, it is a step towards the creation of a role. It is a rough draft' (Knebel 1981: 17). Actors are therefore free to try out ideas and to reject readily what they have just found out, because all the time their imaginations are working keenly and adaptively.

In performance, the sense of improvisation carries all the way through from first preview to last night. Because the research is always 'Here, Today, Now', the actors take stock of their personal frames of mind each night, noting how they feel – even if it's tired, preoccupied, ill, or just not in the mood. This state then serves as the first piece of information, from which the necessary adaptations can easily be made.

Just like the Method of Physical Actions, Active Analysis is based upon simple actions; therefore, it requires no creative 'force' or impossible demands. All the actors have to do is to carry out those simple actions carefully and, as Knebel described it, that action will become their own. Once one simple action (e.g. 'I enter the room') has been accomplished, the second ('I throw down my backpack') follows, then the third ('I nuzzle my dog'), then the fourth and so on. With

each action, the actors find that a familiar emotion flares up, and genuine feeling is awakened. It's an easy and effective osmosis from outer action to inner sensation, and back again.

THE REAL 'EXPERIENCING'

The emphasis on 'here, today, now' liberates us from the mythical belief as actors that we're supposed to feel what the character feels. But the character doesn't feel anything: it's just lines on a page. It's us – as living, breathing human beings – who feel. Not that that's always clear from Stanislavsky's own writing. One of the contradictions innate in his work – as he tried to evolve from a somewhat externalised actor in his youth to a more thin-skinned sensory performer – is his shift in defining what it means to 'experience' a role [...].

In Jean Benedetti's 2008 translation of *An Actor's Work*, Year One of the training programme is actually called 'Experiencing' (with Year Two focused on 'embodying'). In fact, Carnicke refers to *perezhivanie* ('living through' or 'experiencing') as Stanislavsky's 'lost term' (2009: 129–147). And it can really all be boiled down to the inescapable, beautiful *artificiality* of performing. The reality of being on stage or in front of a camera is that we commit to the given circumstances of the performance at the same time as wholly knowing that we *are* performing. To forget the latter would be a bold step *towards* madness and *away* from professionalism.

When Stanislavsky incites actors to 'experience' a role, he's ultimately inciting them towards the genuine act of *creating*. Create anew every night. Experience the actuality of what's going on every performance or every take. It's what he also calls being in a 'constant state of inner improvisation'. And the actor's organic sense of alternating between reality and fiction was, for Stanislavsky, necessary and healthy. In fact, we're at our most 'true' – our most 'real' – when our body, mind, spirit and whole natural organism exist within the actual framework of simultaneously pretending to be the character *and* acknowledging we're acting. That's the *real* experience. That's the experience in which we can know a genuine 'faith and a sense of truth' – because it actually exists, there's nothing fake about it. It is totally here-today-now.

And this is where Stanislavsky's 'system' and principles cross time and cultures and styles and intentions. A sense of vibrant presence can be as applicable to a toothpaste commercial, an episode of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a post-dramatic performance or *Pericles*. As Carnicke points out:

If genuine experiencing is indeed the experience of performance itself and if this creative state allows for the alternation of contradictory states of mind, then by recovering Stanislavsky's lost term we can easily revisit his System [*sic*] from a postmodern angle and bring renewed vigor and relevance to his techniques . . . Stanislavsky's redefinition of truth as whatever happens during performance can take the contemporary actor into any dramatic style, including those yet to be invented.

(Carnicke 2009: 147)

THE REAL STANISLAVSKY

For all the scholarship on Stanislavsky, the claims and counter-claims on what his 'system' really meant and how we should interpret it, it's actually through his letters that we truly come to know him.

It always seems a little prurient reading other people's letters, especially as so often they weren't intended for public consumption. Yet what emerges through those selected, translated and edited by Senelick (2014) is a fascinating insight into a man troubled with ill health, wracked by performance anxieties, tormented by personal fall-outs, fretting over rubles and budgets, wooing writers, massaging egos, diplomatically navigating government officials. And beyond

the professional actor and theatre executive, we find a deeply loving husband and father. ‘My dear precious boy,’ he writes to his sick son, Igor. ‘My dear and priceless clever-dick Kiryulya,’ he writes to his daughter, Kira. ‘Greetings, my bright, dove-grey-winged, tender, kind, clever, wonderful little angel!’ he writes to his wife, Lilina. And we see the romantic artist, showing his passionate but platonic feelings for Isadora Duncan: ‘I love you, I am in raptures over you and I respect you (forgive me!) – a great and admirable performer. Write me at least one little word, just so I know about your plans’ (cited in Senelick 2014: 237).

In 2012, I revisited the Stanislavsky House Museum in Moscow, having not been there for nearly twenty years. I was struck by the quality of playfulness that hung in the air. ‘Strange furniture from motley productions. Set models and stained glass. Photographs of Stanislavsky in various costumes and productions, including some in which he looked decidedly ham! One of the little curator ladies told me an amusing tale: one day, some visitors called upon Stanislavsky to find him (tall, aristocratic, shock of grey hair) crouching beneath the piano. “What are you doing?” they asked. “Finding out what it’s like to be a mouse,” he replied (no doubt those bright eyes twinkling from beneath his heavy brows)’ (Merlin 2014: xvi–vii).

After all the complexities of his theories and systems, it was actually while exploring the simple elegance of playfulness that Stanislavsky died in this house, Number 6, Leontievsky Lane, in 1938. Years of smoking and endless working finally took their toll, and on 2 August he suffered a heart attack amid the paraphernalia of the Opera–Dramatic Studio. Along with a devoted wife and an extended theatre family, Konstantin Stanislavsky left behind him a teasing quantity of probings into acting and directing, and a number of publications full of tantalising discoveries, more of which will reveal themselves no doubt in years to come.

1.2 Description and analysis of *The Seagull*

Introduction

The Seagull has long been considered to have launched the success of the Moscow Art Theatre – if not revolutionised the art of acting as we know it today. And yet revolutionary endeavours are often the result of chance rather than intention and, in many respects, this was the case with the 1898 production of *The Seagull*. When all the components are considered together, it’s almost remarkable that it became such a high point of modern theatre history, especially since the only person with any faith in the project was Nemirovich-Danchenko. So, what was it about the production that now renders it such a critical example of Stanislavsky’s theories in practice?

In the course of the following [pages], we shall see where the seeds of many principles explored in *An Actor Prepares* (and later in the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis) first took root. What also emerges is that, curiously, Stanislavsky often felt he had no idea what he was doing. Yet a detailed study of his ‘production plan’ reveals why *The Seagull* became so significant, as Stanislavsky smashed existing rehearsal practices and pioneered modern methods of theatre-making.

The Seagull’s flight path

Nemirovich-Danchenko’s influence

Although the ‘plan’ of *The Seagull* was undeniably insightful, it’s quite possible that Stanislavsky would never have chosen the play, had it not been for the literary taste and understanding of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. To appreciate his influence, let’s return to the night of 22 June 1897 and the haunts of the Slavyansky Bazaar. . . .

It was Nemirovich who initiated the eighteen-hour meeting, driven by his thoughts on actor training as he taught it at the Philharmonic School. Besides encouraging his student-performers to be daring, fascinating and confident, he wanted them to be aware of relevant social issues, as well as the psychological development of dramatic characters and how to merge the actor's craft with the playwright's voice. These were issues about which he felt so passionate that he had to share them with Stanislavsky on that night in June. However, actor training wasn't their only preoccupation. In the course of the Slavyansky encounter, the two men discussed their desire for theatre to be collaborative, believing that all the roles in a play, however small, must be treated with the appropriate 'creative attitude'. So, late into the night, their discussion threw up ideas of an ensemble-driven theatre, the kind that would later prove vital for getting inside Chekhov's unconventional writing.

Possibly the greatest influence exerted by Nemirovich at the Slavyansky meeting was on the repertoire. While Stanislavsky was an ardent admirer of comedies and classics, Nemirovich argued vehemently that new writing should form the kernel of their pioneering enterprise. He was attracted by all things daring, and he recognised in *The Seagull* a play that abolished the normal rules of dramatic form. However, he didn't just have to convince the rather inexperienced Stanislavsky to appreciate the play's merits, he also had to persuade the writer to surrender it up to the infant company in the first place. He knew that Chekhov would be reticent and that a compelling sales pitch was needed, so Nemirovich wrote to the playwright, declaring:

Only a literary man with taste would know how to present your plays, a man who knows how to appreciate the beauties of your works and who is, at the same time, an expert producer himself. Such a man I can truthfully claim to be.

(Nemirovich cited in Balukhaty 1952: 50–51)

Nemirovich's 'pitch' continued, exclaiming that this was the only modern play and Chekhov the only living writer 'to be of any interest to a theatre with a model repertoire' (ibid.: 52). Perhaps the deal-clincher for Chekhov was Nemirovich's astute awareness that there was something special in the author's writing, something that demanded 'bridges' over which the producer must lead the audience to help them understand the images conjured up. Without these 'bridges', the play would simply fall into the 'crude conventions' so popular with the late nineteenth-century theatre-goer. In other words, Nemirovich knew the play was a challenge to the spectator – it was no easy watch, and that was what made it exciting and attractive to him as a producer. It may well have been his awareness of this that twisted Chekhov's arm.

Once he had convinced Chekhov to hand over *The Seagull* to the Moscow Art Theatre, Nemirovich then had to elucidate its many qualities to Stanislavsky, who in the meantime was struggling hard to comprehend the play. The first stage in mounting the 1898 production involved Nemirovich patiently unlocking for Stanislavsky the reverberations and complexities of the writing. It would then be Stanislavsky's task to convert those essentially literary ideas into appropriate stage pictures. The early discussions weren't easy and, over the course of many evenings, Nemirovich 'hammered all the beauties of Chekhov's work' into Stanislavsky's head (Stanislavsky 1982: 321). Thereafter, Stanislavsky travelled to the Ukraine to come up with his detailed production plan. Thus, the staging of *The Seagull* was a complete team effort: without Nemirovich, Stanislavsky probably would have avoided the play. Without Stanislavsky's vivid imagination and understanding of stage pictures, the Moscow Art Theatre might never have found its 'house style' (a style which was to define its international identity – even to the extent of adopting a seagull as a logo). And without the Moscow Art Theatre, Chekhov might have disappeared into theatrical obscurity. This serendipitous meeting of minds might explain why

The Seagull hadn't successfully taken flight before. After all, 1898 was not the first year in which the play was staged.

The Aleksandrinsky 'duck'

The year 1897 had seen the premiere of *The Seagull* at the Aleksandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. The first night proved to be disastrous, although following performances gained in success. Under the direction of Yevtikhy Karpov, the rehearsal schedule included one read-through, five half-day rehearsals and two dress rehearsals: unbelievable under any circumstances, let alone the production of a daunting new play like *The Seagull*. Karpov's production copy shows a scattering of stage directions, such as 'Trigorin walks to the back of the stage, then comes out to the front from left' (cited in Balukhaty 1952: 25), and mentions several props, including cigarettes, matches and a few wood shavings. A handful of sketches indicate certain positionings for the actors. But that's about it! Chekhov was due to turn up to the first rehearsal, but failed to show, leaving the initial reading of the script to the poor stage manager, with the result that the actors had no means of penetrating the play's haunting 'half-tones'. They couldn't understand how their personal *emplois* fitted into the style, as proven by the fact that the leading actress, Maria Savina, changed from Nina to Arkadina to Masha, before pulling out of the production entirely – all within eight rehearsals!

The first-night audience arrived expecting their favourite comedienne, Elizaveta Levkeyeva, to be presenting them with a rip-roaring comedy. Instead, they were left baffled and confused by the opening act with the character Konstantin Trepliov's 'symbolist' play, leading to cat-calls and whoops of disappointment. An account of the second night gives some indication of what the first night must have been like:

what made all the difference and what distinguished the second performance from the first was that the actors had learnt their parts. They did not mouth their speeches any more, and that was why everybody got quite a different impression of the play.

(Tychinsky cited in Balukhaty 1952: 30)

In a letter to Chekhov, Nemirovich recalls the words of a friend, who had seen the fourth performance, saying that 'the play could not possibly have succeeded in view of such an incredibly bad performance by the cast and such an utter lack of understanding of the characters and their moods' (Nemirovich cited in *ibid.*: 31). The reviews endorsed the comments of the audience, declaring that 'The play is impossibly bad' and that 'From all points of view, whether of idea, literature or stage, Chekhov's play cannot even be called bad, but absolutely absurd' (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1937: 65). All this goes to prove just how great was the challenge that lay before Stanislavsky in preparing his production plan and, in retrospect, how extraordinary was the collective achievement of Chekhov, Nemirovich and Stanislavsky in producing the final result.

The Seagull flies

Stanislavsky's method

Stanislavsky's first reaction to the play was one of complete incomprehension. He himself admitted that, as soon as he was left alone with the script, he felt bored! Yet little by little as he sat in his brother's study in Kharkov, he fell under the play's spell. His reaction was entirely instinctive, as – intellectually – he could hardly grasp what the play was about. Maybe the very fact that he

didn't have an intellectual grasp enabled him to operate on a deeper, more intuitive level, and he began to experience the life of *The Seagull* with his 'inner eye and ear' (Stanislavsky cited in Balukhaty 1952: 54). The resulting production plan left Nemirovich amazed at Stanislavsky's fiery and highly gifted imagination. As Stanislavsky completed the plan of each scene, he sent it to Nemirovich, who began the initial rehearsal with a four-hour discussion of the first two acts. He then passed on to the actors the gestures, movements, rhythmic choices and interpretations made by Stanislavsky (and tweaked by himself). Of the twenty-six rehearsals, Nemirovich led fifteen and Stanislavsky nine; including three dress rehearsals, a total of eighty hours was spent rehearsing *The Seagull* with all its nuances and textures. Although the cast was so nervous on the first night, most of them were sedated and 'Stanislavsky's leg developed a nervous twitch during the play-within-the-play scene' (Senelick 2014: 116), the production was a colossal success – and theatre history was made!

Act 1

THE FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Stanislavsky's production plan looks very much like a traditional prompt copy, in the sense that the script appears on the left, with numerically ordered notes on the right-hand page indicating where and how the characters move and talk. Accompanying the notes are a myriad of sketches. Perhaps one of the most striking features of the first page is the highly detailed ground plan of the set for Act 1. Hot-houses, a lake, a stream, a bridge, bushes and sunflowers mark out the landscape, along with various paths and trees. A rocking bench is placed directly at the front of the stage, signalling that, at some point, the actors will break a major theatrical convention and sit with their backs to the audience, as indeed they do during Konstantin's play. Although the detail of the ground plan is startling enough in itself, its sense of perspective is fascinating: as spectators, we are invited to feel that what we see on the stage is only a 'slice' of the life that actually exists in the play. We are encouraged to imagine that, when the actors exit the scene, they don't return to their dressing rooms to sip coffee and smoke cigarettes, but, rather, they continue the lives of their characters beyond the boundaries of the stage. In other words, a highly elaborate invitation to 'realism' is presented to the audience simply from the first visual image of the set.

Then once we start reading the production plan, we discover that, even before the curtain is raised, a whole atmospheric (almost cinematic) lighting and soundscape has been designed to conjure up the play's inner life:

The dim light of a lantern on top of a lamp-post, distant sounds of a drunkard's song, distant howling of a dog, the croaking of frogs, the crake of a landrail, the slow tolling of a distant church-bell – help the audience to get the feel of the sad monotonous life of the characters. Flashes of lightning, faint rumbling of *thunder* in the distance. After the raising of the curtain a pause of ten seconds.

(Stanislavsky cited in Balukhaty 1952: 139)

[...] Stanislavsky has often been (wrongly) accused of inviting actors to ignore their audiences, and to focus all their attention behind the imaginary fourth wall. Yet straight away in the production plan, we see that he wants to weave a spell over the audience, through their senses as well as their intellects. The fact that he requires a ten-second pause once the curtain has been raised indicates his desire to create a sense of suspense, as if we should count the seconds between the flash of lightning and the crash of thunder to see how close the storm is coming. The use of 'pathetic

fallacy' (whereby the weather reflects the inner life of characters) is prevalent throughout the production plan, adding to the subtle levels upon which the play operates. The ten-second pause as the curtain rises would also have given the original spectators a chance to absorb the details of a set that Stanislavsky knew would challenge their usual expectations of painted stock canvases.

MASHA AND MEDVEDENKO

Stanislavsky's understanding of psychophysical behaviour is immediately revealed with the arrival of the first two characters – Masha and the schoolteacher, Medvedenko. Throughout the play, Masha is seen to be earthy and noisy: she does solid physical things. She slurps her tea loudly, she sniffs snuff and, here, she cracks nuts. As we shall see, her noisy behaviour is often placed at exactly the point where she can gain attention, or 'pull focus'. She is a needy character, in an environment where there are far more interesting and beautiful females whose needs will be served more swiftly. Medvedenko smokes heavily during the whole play. In other words, he surrounds himself in a cloud of impenetrable dinge, preventing himself from seeing what is really going on in front of his very nose with Masha and her affections. By giving actors simple physical activities, Stanislavsky is able to touch upon deeper psychological implications. Although the audience may not consciously pick up on the reverberations, he has provided his actors with wonderful nuances with which to inform their characterisations.

Perpetuating the illusion that the life of the characters goes beyond the confines of the stage, Stanislavsky ignores Chekhov's stage direction that Masha and Medvedenko sit down (Chekhov 1990: 1). Instead, he uses their two-page dialogue to zigzag on and off the stage, as if they are taking an after-dinner walk. These aren't two characters who have come here to present a piece of dialogue to an eagerly attentive audience: instead, we as spectators are encouraged to feel as if we are eavesdropping on a conversation that is taking place almost casually. (Just as we might if this were film.) Stanislavsky breaks their dialogue into sections as they exit the stage and return, rather like a pendulum. This gives us the sense of life passing in its usual way, but also that this life is fateful – its course is unalterable; what happens between Masha and Medvedenko is inevitable. In the brief pause in their dialogue (specified by Chekhov, *ibid.*: 2), during which they momentarily exit, the hammering of the workmen grows louder. Once more, the soundscape is used to create a sense of tension, of imminent foreboding.

ENTER SORIN AND KONSTANTIN

Realism leaps to the fore with the arrival of Konstantin (Kostya) and Sorin. Where Chekhov has '*Enter right, SORIN and KONSTANTIN*' (*ibid.*), Stanislavsky describes how they 'walk through some bushes on to the path, pushing the branches out of their way, bending down, climbing over garden seats' (Stanislavsky cited in Balukhaty 1952: 141).

Instantly we have a sense that we are in a part of the garden not used very often. There is a feeling of awkwardness, and even of subterfuge when, some lines later, Masha and Medvedenko 'emerge from behind a bush' (*ibid.*). Maybe all will not be what it seems. . . .

The combination of Masha, Medvedenko, Sorin and Konstantin sets up a fascinating cobweb of tempo-rhythms. When Konstantin requests that they leave: 'Medvedenko begins to walk away obediently. Masha remains standing, deep in thought. Sorin sits down on the rocking bench, swaying up and down' (*ibid.*: 143). This juxtaposition of images illustrates Stanislavsky's musicality – in terms of rhythm and stage pictures. At the same time, it reveals his intuitive understanding of what he would later call in *An Actor Prepares* the 'inner motive forces': thought, feeling and action [...]. Medvedenko has a linear path: he is action-orientated. He does what he is told: his sense of etiquette and manners is acute. Masha has no path at all: she is static. Her

thought-centre governs her at this moment. Sorin strikes up a miniature pendulum motion, not dissimilar to the bigger pendulum created by Masha and Medvedenko walking from one side of the stage to the other. Sorin's path has movement, but goes nowhere, just like his whole life. We discover during the course of the play that he has big dreams and desires, but no longer the physical stamina to activate them. In the middle of these three constrained tempo-rhythms, we see Konstantin, utterly driven by his over-stimulated emotion-centre. Masha is torn between two lovers – the methodical, action-based schoolteacher and the imaginative, emotion-based writer. But she knows with whom her destiny lies: as if 'awakening from a reverie' (Stanislavsky cited in Balukhaty 1952: 143) she follows Medvedenko out.

A COMPLEX DIALOGUE!

The dialogue between Sorin and Kostya is very complex, as it involves working with a prop, inner actions versus outer activities, inner/outer tempo-rhythms, central and peripheral actions, and tiny details versus the bigger picture. Let's unpack all these.

Props were an important part of Stanislavsky's growing awareness of psychophysicality, so it is not by chance that Konstantin arrives carrying a bundle containing Nina's outfit for his play. The relationship between an actor and a prop can access deep psychological information and add unconscious layers to the spectators' perception of events. There is an intimacy evoked by Konstantin handling Nina's costume, as well as establishing him as the director of his play. He is forming and shaping not only her performance but also the experience that he wants his audience (particularly his mother and her writer-lover) to undergo. The image becomes startlingly clear when, some time later in Act 1, Nina arrives and Konstantin 'starts unfolding Nina's costume. . . . During this scene, Nina undoes her hair and drapes herself in a sheet. Konstantin is assisting her, pinning her stage costume for her here and there' (ibid.: 153). There is a naive eroticism attached to them mutually preparing her to be exhibited before the man (Trigorin) who ends up becoming her lover. Certainly, when Stanislavsky eventually sets up the scene for Konstantin's play, there is a significant sense of sexual awareness, as the prop evolves from inanimate bundle to revealing adornment: '[Nina] is draped in a white sheet, her hair hangs loosely down her back, the sheet, as it falls down her arms, forms something that resembles a pair of wings, through which Nina's bust and arms are faintly outlined' (ibid.: 159). Here, with Sorin, however, the prop is used to reveal the underlying tension. Konstantin tries to balance the bundle against the side of the table and, on failing, throws it down on the ground. His action is performed without comment as an accompaniment to the dialogue, and yet, through the bundle's 'lack of cooperation', we see Konstantin's frustration that he can't control Nina. And she's late! The physical activity reverberates with psychological metaphor. There is a similar effect with the rocking bench: Sorin constantly tries to stabilise it, while Konstantin unsettles it every time he leaps up and down.

The contradiction between inner action and outer activity is cleverly encapsulated in Stanislavsky's stage directions for Konstantin's long speeches that rail against his mother and art. Stanislavsky specifies that Konstantin remains lying on the bench for the duration of the dialogue. He then juxtaposes the stillness of the posture with sudden outbursts of excitability – Kostya puffs a cigarette, shakes off the ash, tears up flowers and grass-stalks, abruptly sits up and then lies down again. This sequence reveals the conflict within Kostya's inner motive forces: by lying still, his body (action-centre) is trying to contain the explosiveness of his emotion- and thought-centres, which every so often get the better of him through these abrupt physical actions. It is all very clever, as a dynamic tension is created between Kostya's inner and outer tempo-rhythms. Added to this, Kostya's actions become more *central*, as he becomes more agitated. In other words, the tearing of the flower or the shaking of ash are actions at the *periphery*

of his body, whereas ‘slapping his leg nervously’ and ‘beating his breast in agitation’ (ibid.: 147) reveal how his intensifying frustration becomes directed towards himself rather than the physical objects around him.

With regard to visual pictures, Stanislavsky develops the tension between inner feeling and outer expression in the changing spatial relationships between Sorin and Kostya. At the start of the dialogue, Kostya lies on the bench with his head in his hand: it’s casual and devil-may-care. As the tension rises, he changes to sit looking out front, before the final – more confessional or confrontational – posture in which he straddles the bench face to face with Sorin. Throughout these changing images, Sorin remains grounded and still: he yawns, hums and whistles – his tempo-rhythm is legato. Konstantin paces, smokes and tears things – his tempo-rhythm is staccato. There is a musicality in the stage pictures as a whole and in the individual gestures of the two characters. A moment of comedy is reached at the end of the dialogue, when Nina arrives, Kostya leaps up from the bench and Sorin almost falls off, having clung on for dear life throughout the exchange. As Kostya loses his emotional balance, Sorin almost loses his physical balance.

DANCING AND MUSIC

The arrival of Nina is illustrated in Stanislavsky’s production plan with a flurry of small drawings, as Nina, Sorin and Kostya almost dance around each other – age and ill health encounter youth and hopeful love. Following Sorin’s departure, the text between Kostya and Nina is quite sparse – leading, of course, to the kiss lasting ‘five seconds’ (ibid.: 153). Littered around this dialogue are numerous stage directions with specific details for almost every line and pause: this is clearly an early kind of a Method of Physical Actions. Twice Kostya seizes Nina’s hand, twice she pulls it away, the second time ‘running off rapidly’ (ibid.) to sit elsewhere. Taken as a whole, the stage picture consists of Konstantin trying to tie Nina down with kisses, while she constantly flies away – like a seagull? Their objectives vividly contradict each other, creating – as a result – exciting, detailed action.

By contrast, the exchange between Dorn and Polina, which follows Kostya and Nina’s encounter, has very few directions. It is the same in Act 2, when Trigorin has his long speeches to Nina about playwriting. This may be because Stanislavsky was going to play Dorn at one point and then he took the part of Trigorin. Perhaps he considered it unnecessary to give himself stage directions. The ensemble interactions surrounding Konstantin’s play, however, are extremely detailed, revealing Stanislavsky’s great understanding of how the musicality of the collective voices could be drawn out. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than with the estate manager, Shamrayev, who is evidently the ‘bass’ instrument. Inspired by Shamrayev’s tale of the famous singer, Silva, Stanislavsky creates a repeating motif, a kind of psychological gesture for the actor to integrate into his characterisation. Shamrayev becomes a bassoon-like buffoon, who, at inappropriate moments, honks the bass notes. One example follows the collapse of Kostya’s play, when ethereal singing is heard across the lake. In the pause during which the other characters listen, somewhat haunted, Shamrayev leaps on a tree stump and starts conducting. Cleverly, Stanislavsky allows a moment of melancholy stillness – obviously intended by Chekhov, who inserted a pause (Chekhov 1990: 14) – but he instantly undercuts the latent sentimentality with the brusque humour of the estate manager.

SOUNDSCAPES

The moment of the singing also introduces another vital component into the production plan, again prefiguring filmic devices: that of underscoring the action with soundscapes. This effect not only creates atmosphere but also takes the spectator on a particular emotional journey. In the