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# BUILDING A CHARACTER

CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI



## THE ACTING TRILOGY

*An Actor Prepares* explores the inner preparation an actor must undergo in order to explore a role to the full. In this volume, Sir John Gielgud said, this great director “found time to explain a thousand things that have always troubled actors and fascinated students.”

*Building a Character* discusses the external techniques of acting: the use of the body, movement, diction, singing, expression, and control.

*Creating a Role* describes the preparation that precedes actual performance, with extensive discussions of Gogol’s *The Inspector General* and Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Sir Paul Scofield called *Creating a Role* “immeasurably important” for the actor.

These three volumes belong on any actor’s short shelf of essential books.

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CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI

BUILDING A CHARACTER



Translated by  
Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood

A Theatre Arts Book

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*An Actor must work all his life, cultivate his mind, train his talents systematically, develop his character; he may never despair and never relinquish this main purpose—to love his art with all his strength and love it unselfishly.*

CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI

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## Note by the Translator

AS FAR BACK as 1924 my husband, Norman Hapgood, and I discussed with Stanislavski the possibility of publishing the results of his experience as an actor and trainer of actors in the foremost acting company of this century. But in the years immediately following this first conversation various matters contributed to prevent this great innovator from carrying out his desire. He was too absorbed by the responsibilities of his work in the Moscow Art Theatre, of which he was not only co-founder and co-director, with Nemirovich-Danchenko, but also one of the principal actors. His own Opera Studio, where he was working out the application of his acting techniques to operatic performance with the object of achieving a complete union of the music, the words and the action, also took much of his time and energy. A third inhibiting factor was Stanislavski's own temperament. His creative and artistic genius was never fully satisfied; it urged him on to the very day of his death to search for, to test, to choose new approaches to the art of acting, so that he hesitated to sum up any conclusions as final. He always hoped to find a better path to his high goal. Moreover he was fearful lest his written record might assume the aspect of some unalterable grammar, of rigid rules, of a kind of Bible. The thing that finally persuaded him to share his results by means of the printed word with artists throughout the world was the argument that others might receive some stimulus from them to strike out into new paths of their own.

*Note by the Translator*

So in 1930, when Stanislavski, after a serious illness in Russia, had come to Southern France on a leave of absence from the Art Theatre to be near my husband and me, the time came to cast into final form the long prepared book. At that stage Norman Hapgood, who had been both an editor and a drama critic, urged him to put into one volume both aspects of his method—the inner preparations of an actor and the external technical means of bringing a character to life before an audience. In the first drafts worked out on the Riviera the two parts were side by side.

Subsequently Stanislavski returned to Russia to take up his work once more. He was no longer able to act, but he continued to direct new productions and he went on with his writing. Many months later he sent me a manuscript of book length. Because he had lacked the time and strength to edit all his material, and also because he believed its inclusion in one volume would further delay the book as well as make it too bulky, he had decided to limit it to the inner preparations of an actor—or of any artist dealing with the creation of a character. It was published by Theatre Arts, Inc., under the title *An Actor Prepares* in 1936—two years before it even appeared in Russia.

In letters to me and in the course of a visit to him in 1937 Stanislavski told me about the sequel to *An Actor Prepares* which is this present book. It would include, he said, the chapters drafted in Southern France and others which he showed me. He also let me look at his *Promptbook for Othello*, which he had written out in France in order to guide a production at the Art Theatre he was prevented from overseeing personally. He felt that this manuscript might likewise be of interest to the English-speaking theatre.

But neither of these manuscripts was at that time in a form satisfactory to him. He continued to work on them until his death the following year. Shortly afterward the Second World War intervened,

making communications more difficult even before Russia became involved in 1940. Although his family cabled me that manuscripts were on their way, only fragments appeared and it wasn't until considerably after the war was over that I received a bulk of the material in this volume. Last autumn Robert M. MacGregor, who had acquired the book publishing department of Theatre Arts which he formerly managed, planned to publish *Building a Character* as a part of the commemoration of the fiftieth Anniversary of the founding of the Moscow Art Theatre and the tenth of Stanislavski's death, but the news that more material and later versions were on their way caused him to delay publication. The postponement also allowed further editing which consisted mainly of choosing among the various versions of given chapters which had come to hand.

In this continuation of *An Actor Prepares*, the scene is again the same dramatic school with its own auditorium and stage, a part of a permanently established theatre. Here are the same students, who represent a characteristic group of young actors—that argumentative young fellow Grisha; Sonya, who is both pretty and vain about it; her admirer, the clowning Vanya; Maria, with her woman's intuition; the introspective pair, Nicholas and Dasha; the well-coordinated, acrobatic Vasya; and above all Kostya, the ex-stenographer who because he knows shorthand can make a detailed record of the lessons in a sort of actor's diary. Ever searching, ever throwing himself ardently into any project that shows promise of further development, he is possibly a picture of Stanislavski himself many years before. The teacher is of course Stanislavski, the mature actor, thinly disguised as Tortsov, the director of the school and the theatre. He is assisted by Rakhmanov, who is full of inventiveness in driving home the points made by Tortsov, in dividing visual aids, in conducting drill.

*Note by the Translator*

The emphasis in this book, as in Stanislavski's *My Life in Art* (now also published by Mr. MacGregor) and *An Actor Prepares*, is on acting as an art and art as the highest expression of human nature. His continual return to the study of human nature is the Antean touch which distinguishes what has come to be known as the Stanislavski "system". It is the basis of all his theories and the reason they were always being modified slightly; with each return to the study of human beings something new was learned. As he says of his method in this book: "It is not a hand-me-down suit that you can put on and walk off in; or a cook book where all you need to find is the page and there is your recipe. No, it is a whole way of life."

Stanislavski makes no claim to have more than set down the principles all great actors have used consciously or unconsciously. He never intended that his statements be taken as rigid rules or his exercises be considered literally applicable to all situations or usable by all persons. In questions of diction and speech particularly, he wanted it understood that the primary purpose of the exercises was to challenge the imagination of the student of acting, to arouse in him a realization of his own needs, of the potentialities of the technical tools of his art.

The overall objective, however, is always the same. It is to help an actor to develop all his capacities—intellectual, physical, spiritual, emotional—so that he will be enabled to fill out his roles to the proportions of whole human beings, characters who will have the power to move the public to laughter, to tears, to unforgettable emotions.

ELIZABETH REYNOLDS HAPGOOD



# Toward a Physical Characterization



AT THE BEGINNING of our lesson I told Tortsov, the Director of our school and theatre, that I could comprehend with my mind the process of planting and training within myself the elements necessary to create character, but that it was still unclear to me how to achieve the building of that character in physical terms. Because, if you do not use your body, your voice, a manner of speaking, walking, moving, if you do not find a form of characterization which corresponds to the image, you probably cannot convey to others its inner, living spirit.

“Yes,” agreed Tortsov, “without an external form neither your inner characterization nor the spirit of your image will reach the public. The external characterization explains and illustrates and thereby conveys to your spectators the inner pattern of your part.”

“That’s it!” Paul and I exclaimed.

“But how do we achieve that external, physical characterization?” I asked.

“Most frequently, especially among talented actors, the physical materialization of a character to be created emerges of its own accord once the right inner values have been established,” explained Tortsov. “In *My Life in Art* there are many examples of this. One is the case of the part of Dr. Stockman in *An Enemy of the People* by Ibsen. As soon as the right spiritual form was fixed, as the right

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inner characterization was woven out of all the elements germane to the image, there appeared, no one knows from where, Stockman's nervous intensity, his jerky gait, his neck thrust forward and two jutting fingers, all earmarks of a man of action."

"But if we are not lucky enough to have such a spontaneous accident? What do you do then?" I asked Tortsov.

"What do you do? Do you remember in Ostrovski's play, *The Forest*, how Peter explains to Aksyusha the way to act so that the two will not be recognized on their flight? He says to her, 'You drop one lid—and it makes a squint-eyed person!' "

"Externally it is not difficult to disguise yourself. I once had something of the sort happen to me; I had an acquaintance I knew very well. He talked with a deep bass voice, wore his hair long, had a heavy beard and bushy moustache. Suddenly he had his hair cut and shaved off his whiskers. From underneath there emerged rather small features, a receding chin and ears that stuck out. I met him in this new guise at a family dinner, at the house of some friends. We sat across the table from one another and carried on a conversation. Whom does he remind me of? I kept saying to myself, never suspecting that he was reminding me of himself. In order to disguise his bass voice my friend used only high tones in speaking. This went on for half the meal and I talked with him as though he were a stranger.

"And here is another case. A very beautiful woman I knew was stung in the mouth by a bee. Her lip was swollen and her whole mouth was distorted. This not only changed her appearance so as to make her unrecognizable, it also altered her pronunciation. I met her accidentally and talked to her for several minutes before I realized that she was one of my close friends."

As Tortsov was describing these personal experiences he squinted one eye almost imperceptibly, as though he were bothered with an

### *Toward a Physical Characterization*

incipient sty. Meantime he opened his other eye wide and raised the brow above it. All this was done so that it could be scarcely noticed even by those standing close to him. Yet even this slight change produced a strange effect. He was of course still Tortsov but he was different and you no longer had confidence in him. You sensed knavery, slyness, grossness, all qualities little related to his real self. It was only when he stopped acting with his eyes that he became once more our nice old Tortsov. But let him squint one eye—and there again was that mean little slyness, changing his whole personality.

“Are you aware,” he explained to us, “that inwardly I remain the same and speak in my own person regardless of whether my eye is squinted or open, whether my eyebrow is raised or lowered? If I were to acquire a twitch and that were causing my eye to squint I should also have remained unchanged in personality and continued normal and natural. Why should I change inwardly because of a slight squint in my eye? I am the same whether my eye is open or shut, whether my eyebrow is raised or lowered.

“Or, let us suppose, I am stung by a bee as was my beautiful friend and my mouth is distorted.”

Here Tortsov, with extraordinary realism, pulled his mouth to the right side so that his speech was completely altered.

“Does this external distortion not only of my face but of my speech,” he went on in his radically changed method of pronunciation, “impinge on my personality and natural reactions? Must I cease to be myself? Neither the sting of the bee nor the artificial distortion of my mouth should influence my inner life as a human being. And what about lameness (Here Tortsov limped) or paralysis of the arms (Instantly he lost all control over them) or a humped shoulder (His spine reacted correspondingly) or an exaggerated way of turning your feet in or out (Tortsov walked first one way and then the

other)? Or an incorrect position of the hands and arms holding them too far forward or too far back (He illustrated this)? Can all these external trifles have any bearing on my feelings, my relations to others or the physical aspect of my part?"

It was amazing with what ease, simplicity and naturalness Tortsov instantly demonstrated all the physical shortcomings he was describing—a limp, paralysis, a hump, various postures of legs and arms.

"And what remarkable external tricks, which completely transform the person playing a part, can be accomplished with the voice, with speech and pronunciation, especially of consonants! To be sure your voice has to be well placed and trained if you are to change it, for otherwise you cannot, for any length of time, speak either with your highest or your lowest tones. As for altering your pronunciation, especially that of consonants, this is done very simply: pull your tongue back, shorten it (Tortsov did it as he was speaking) and a special manner of speech, rather reminiscent of the English way of handling consonants, will result. Or lengthen your tongue, pushing it a little in advance of your teeth (Again he did what he was describing) and you will have an inane lisp, which with proper elaboration would be suitable for a role like that of the Idiot.

"Or else, try putting your mouth into unusual positions and you will get still other ways of talking. For example, take an Englishman who has a short upper lip and very long, rodent-like front teeth. Give yourself a short upper lip and show your teeth more."

"But how can you do that?" I said, trying it out on myself without success.

"How do I do it? Very simply," answered Tortsov, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket and rubbing his upper teeth and the inside of his upper lip until they were quite dry. Then under cover of his handkerchief he tucked in his upper lip which remained stuck to

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his dry gums, so that when he took his hand from his face we were amazed at the shortness of his upper lip and sharpness of his teeth.

This external artifice hid from us his ordinary, familiar personality; in front of us there stood the Englishman he had just mentioned. We were under the impression that everything about Tortsov was changed; his pronunciation, his voice were different, as well as his carriage, his talk, his hands and legs. Nor was that all. His whole psychology seemed transformed. And yet Tortsov had made no inner adjustment. In another second he had abandoned the trick with his upper lip and continued to speak in his own person, until he again put the handkerchief in his mouth, dried his lip and gums and, when he dropped his hand with the handkerchief, was at once changed again into his Englishman.

This happened intuitively. It was only when we worked it out and confirmed it that Tortsov admitted the phenomenon. It was not he who explained it to us but we who told him, how all the characteristics which intuitively came to the surface were appropriate to and filled out the portrait of the gentleman with a short upper lip and long teeth—and all the result of a simple external artifice.

After digging down into his own thoughts and taking account of what went on inside himself Tortsov remarked that even in his own psychology in spite of himself there had been an imperceptible impulse which he found difficult immediately to analyse.

It was, however, an undoubted fact that his inner faculties responded to the external image he had created, and adjusted to it, since the words he pronounced were not his words, although the thoughts he expressed were his very own.

In this lesson then Tortsov vividly demonstrated that external characterization can be achieved intuitively and also by means of purely technical, mechanical, simple external tricks.

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But how to find the right trick? Here was a fresh problem to intrigue and disturb me. Is this something to be learned, to be imagined, to be taken from life, or found accidentally, in books, by studying anatomy?

"The answer is—in all those ways," explained Tortsov. "Each person evolves an external characterization out of himself, from others, takes it from real or imaginary life, according to his intuition, his observation of himself and others. He draws it from his own experience of life or that of his friends, from pictures, engravings, drawings, books, stories, novels, or from some simple incident—it makes no difference. The only proviso is that while he is making this external research he must not lose his inner self. Now I'll tell you what we shall do. For our next lesson we'll have a masquerade."

This proposal produced general astonishment.

"Each student will prepare an external characterization and mask himself in it."

"A masquerade? An external characterization of what kind?"

"No matter what kind. Choose anything you like—a merchant, a Persian, a soldier, a Spaniard, an aristocrat, a mosquito, a frog—whatever and whoever appeals to you. The costumes and the make-up facilities of the theatre will be at your disposal. Go and choose clothes, wigs, make-up."

His announcement at first caused consternation, then discussion and curiosity, and finally general interest and excitement. Each one of us began to think of something, to imagine something, make notes, secret drawings, preparing his choice of a portrait, costume and make-up.

Only Grisha remained, as usual, indifferent and cool to the whole idea.

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## Dressing a Character



TODAY OUR WHOLE class went to the great costume storerooms of the theatre, one of which is up above the foyer and the other in the basement under the auditorium.

In less than fifteen minutes Grisha had chosen what he wanted and left. Some of the others, too, did not take long. Only Sonya and I could not arrive at a definite choice.

Being a flirtatious young woman, she found her eyes distracted and her head in a whirl from seeing so many lovely gowns. As for me, I still was uncertain about what I wanted to portray and was trusting to a lucky inspiration.

In examining carefully everything that was shown me I hoped to happen on a costume which would suggest an appealing image to me.

My attention was drawn to a simple old morning coat. It was made of some remarkable material I had never seen before—a kind of sand-coloured, greenish, greyish stuff, which seemed faded and covered with spots and dust mixed with ashes. I had the feeling that a man dressed in that coat would look like a ghost. An almost imperceptible squeamishness but at the same time a slightly terrifying sense of fatefulness stirred in me as I gazed at that old morning coat.

If one matched it with a hat, gloves, dusty foot-gear, and prepared a make-up and wig in the same colour and tones as the material—all greyish, yellowish, greenish, faded and shadowy, one would get a

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sinister, yet somehow familiar effect. Exactly what that effect was I could not yet determine.

The wardrobe attendants laid aside the coat I had chosen and promised to look for accessories to match—shoes, gloves, a high hat, as well as a wig and beard. But I was not satisfied and went on hunting up to the very last minute when the amiable mistress of the wardrobe finally told me that she had to get ready for the evening performance.

There was nothing for me to do but leave without having arrived at a definite decision and with only the spotted morning coat held in reserve for me.

Excited, disturbed, I left the costume rooms carrying away with me the riddle: what was the personality I should put on when I dressed myself in that decayed old morning coat?

From that moment on and right up to the time of the masquerade, which was set for three days later, something was going on inside of me: I was not I, in the sense of my usual consciousness of myself. Or, to be more precise, I was not alone but with someone whom I sought in myself and could not find.

I existed, I went on with my usual life, yet something inhibited me from giving myself up to it fully; something was disturbing my usual existence. I seemed divided in two. Although I looked at whatever caught my attention I did not see it to its fullest extent, but only in vague terms, without plumbing its depths. I did some thinking but without thinking things through, I listened but with only half an ear, I smelled things but only partially. Half of my energy and human capability had somehow vanished and that loss sapped my strength and power and attention. I did not finish anything I undertook. I felt that it was necessary for me to accomplish something of the utmost importance. But then a cloud settled on my consciousness,

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I no longer understood the next step, I was distracted and divided. It was a fatiguing and tormenting state in which to be! It never left me for three whole days and in the course of that time the question of whom I was to play at the masquerade remained unanswered.

Finally in the night I suddenly woke up and everything was clear. That second life which I had been leading parallel to my usual one was a secret, subconscious life. In it there was going on the work of searching for that mildewed man whose clothes I had accidentally found.

However, the clarification did not last long. It melted away again and I tossed around in my bed sleepless and irresolute. It was as though I had forgotten something, could neither recall nor find it. It was a painful state and yet if a magician had offered to blot it out I am not at all sure that I should have let him.

And here is another strange thing that I noted in myself: I seemed convinced that I should not find the image of the person I sought. Nevertheless the search went on. It was not in vain that during those days I never passed by a photographer's shop without examining the portraits in the window and attempting to understand who the originals were. You may ask: Why did I not walk into the shop and examine the stacks of photographs lying around there? At a second-hand dealer's one might find even greater piles of grimy, dusty old photos. Why did I not make use of that material? Why did I not go through it all? But I indolently looked over only the smallest packet of them and nonchalantly ignored the rest for fear of soiling my hands.

What was the matter? How can one explain this inertia or this sense of a split personality? I think that it came from an unconscious but firm conviction inside me that the dusty gentleman with the mildewed clothes would sooner or later come to life and rescue me.

"It's no use looking, it's better not to find the mildewed man"—was probably the unconscious prompting of an inner voice.

And then there were strange moments which repeated themselves two or three times: I would be walking along the street and everything would suddenly be clear to me, I would stop short in order to try to grasp to the fullest extent what had happened to me . . . one second passed, then another and I seemed able to fathom some depths . . . then seconds passed and what had risen to the surface in me plunged out of sight again and I found myself once more filled with perplexity.

Another time I caught myself walking in an uncertain, un-rhythmic gait, quite foreign to me, and of which I could not immediately rid myself.

And at night, when I was sleepless, I began to rub my palms together in a peculiar way. "Who rubs his hands like that?" I asked myself but could not recall. I only know that whoever does it has little, narrow, cold, perspiring hands but red, red palms. It is most unpleasant to shake a hand of this kind, all mushy and boneless. . . . Who is he? Who is he?

I was still in this state of inner division, uncertainty and ceaseless search for something I could not find, when I went into the general dressing-room where we would all have to put on our costumes and make-up together instead of by ourselves. The buzz and racket of the conversation made it difficult to concentrate. And yet I felt that this moment of my first investiture in that mildewed morning coat, as well as the putting on of the yellowish grey wig, beard, and the rest, was one of extreme importance to me. Only those material things could prompt me to find what I had subconsciously been searching for. On this moment I had pinned my last hope.

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But everything around me was disturbing. Grisha, who sat next to me, was already made up as Mephistopheles. He had already dressed himself in a gorgeous black Spanish costume and was causing groans of envy on the part of all who saw him. Others were doubled up with laughter as they looked at Vanya, who, in order to turn himself into an old man, had covered his child-like face with so many lines and dots that it looked like a map. Paul riled me inwardly because he had been content to put on the banal costume and general appearance of a dandy.

To be sure the result was surprising because no one had hitherto suspected that inside his customarily baggy clothes he hid a well-shaped figure with fine straight legs. Leo amused us by his new attempt to make an aristocrat out of himself. Of course he was not able to do it this time either but one could not fail to give him credit for his perseverance. His make-up, with a carefully trimmed beard, his shoes with high heels, increasing his stature, made him appear slimmer and gave him an impressive air. His careful gait, resulting no doubt from the high heels, lent a grace not usual to him in ordinary life. Vasya also made us laugh and won our approval by his unexpected boldness. He, the agile acrobat, the ballet dancer, the operatic orator, had conceived the idea of concealing his personality under the long skirted coat of a Moscow merchant, with broad lapels, flowered waistcoat, rotund belly, his beard and hair cut "*à la russe*".

Our dressing-room resounded with exclamations, just as though the occasion were some ordinary amateur performance.

"Why, I'd never know you!"—"Don't tell me that's you?"—"Amazing!"—"Good work, I didn't think you had it in you!"—and so on indefinitely.

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These exclamations drove me wild, and the remarks, tinged with doubt and dissatisfaction which fell to my share, quite disheartened me.

“Something is wrong . . . I don’t know just what it is . . . who is he?” “I don’t understand, who are you supposed to be?”

How awful it was for me to listen to these remarks and questions when I had nothing to reply!

Who was I trying to represent? How did I know? If I had been able to guess I should have been the first to tell who I was.

And I heartily wished the make-up man in the nether regions. Until he had come along and transformed my face into that of a routine pallid theatrical blond I had felt that I was on the track of discovering my secret identity. A light shiver went through me as I slowly dressed myself in the old suit, fitted the wig and pasted on the beard and moustache. Had I been alone in the room, away from all the distracting surroundings, I should surely have understood who the mysterious stranger inside me was. But the hum and chatter prevented my withdrawing into myself and kept me from penetrating that inscrutable thing going on inside me.

Finally they all went off to the school stage to be inspected by Tortsov. I sat alone in the dressing-room, completely prostrated, helplessly gazing in the mirror at my featureless theatrical face. Inwardly I was already convinced of my failure. I decided not to present myself to the Director but to take off my costume and remove my make-up with the aid of some horrid looking greenish cream which stood before me. I had already put one finger in it and begun to rub it on my face. And . . . I went on rubbing. All the other colours blurred, like water-colour which has fallen into some liquid. My face turned greenish-greyish-yellowish, like some counterpart to my costume. It was difficult to distinguish where my nose was, or my

eyes, or my lips. I smeared some of the same cream on my beard and moustache and then finally all over my wig. Some of the hair clotted into lumps . . . and then, almost as though I were in some delirium, I trembled, my heart pounded, I did away with my eyebrows, powdered myself at random, smeared the back of my hands with a greenish colour and the palms with light pink. I straightened my coat, and gave a tug to my cravat. I did this all with a quick, sure touch, for this time I knew who I was representing and what kind of a fellow he was!

With my high hat on at a slightly rakish angle I was suddenly aware of the style of my full-cut and once stylish trousers, which were now so worn and threadbare. I made my legs fit the crease which had formed in them by turning my toes sharply in. This gave me ridiculous legs. Have you ever noticed how ridiculous the legs of some people are? I have always had a sense of aversion towards such people. As a result of this unusual posture of my legs, I seemed shorter and my gait was quite changed. For some reason my whole body was slightly inclined to the right side. All I needed was a cane. One was lying nearby so I picked it up although it did not exactly fit the picture of what I had in mind. Now all I lacked was a quill pen to stick behind my ear or hold in my teeth. I sent a call boy for one and while waiting for his return paced up and down the room, feeling how all the parts of my body, features, facial lines, fell into their proper places and established themselves. After walking around the room two or three times, with an uncertain, uneven gait I glanced in the mirror and did not recognize myself. Since I had looked into it the last time a fresh transformation had taken place in me.

"It is he, it is he!" I exclaimed, unable to repress the joy that was suffocating me. If only that quill would come, then I could go up to the stage.

I heard footsteps in the corridor. Evidently it was the call boy bringing me the quill. I rushed to meet him and at the door ran straight into Rakhmanov.

"What a fright you gave me!" burst from him. "My dear fellow, who on earth is this? What a get-up! Is it Dostoyevski? The Eternal Husband? Can it be you—Kostya? What are you supposed to be?"

"A critic!" I answered in a hoarse voice, and with sharp diction.

"What critic, my boy?" Rakhmanov continued his query, somewhat taken aback by my bold and penetrating glance.

I felt like a leech clinging to him.

"What critic?" I retorted with obvious intent to insult him. "The fault-finding critic who lives inside of Kostya Nazvanov. I live in him in order to interfere with his work. That is my great joy. That is the purpose of my existence."

I was myself amazed at the brazen, unpleasant tone and the fixed, cynical, rude stare which accompanied it, and with which I addressed Rakhmanov. My tone of voice and self-confidence upset him. He did not know how to find a new angle of approach and therefore was at a loss to know what to say to me. He was quite disconcerted.

"Let's go," he finally said rather uncertainly. "The others have long since begun."

"Let's go, then, since they have long since begun," I mimicked his words and did not budge but continued to stare brazenly at my disconcerted instructor.

An awkward pause ensued. Neither of us moved. It was obvious that Rakhmanov wanted to get this incident over with as quickly as possible but did not know how to go about it. Fortunately for him at this moment the call boy came running in with the goose quill. I snatched it from his hand and stuck it between my lips. This narrowed my mouth into a straight, angry line. The sharpened point

on one side of my lips and the broad flare of feathers on the other underscored the corrosive expression of my face.

“Let’s go,” repeated Rakhmanov in a low, almost shy voice.

“Let’s go!” My mimicking tone was caustic and brazen.

We walked onto the stage but meantime Rakhmanov tried to avoid meeting my look. To begin with I kept out of sight behind the large grey tile stove, a part of the set that happened to be on the stage, only occasionally allowing my top hat to come into view, or my profile.

During this time Tortsov was trying out Leo and Paul—the aristocrat and the dandy—who had just been “introduced” to each other and were talking nonsense because there was little else, given the intellectual calibre of the characters they represented, that they could talk.

“What’s that? Who’s that?” I suddenly heard Tortsov exclaim. “I seem to have the impression someone is sitting around back of the stove? Who the devil is it . . . I’ve already seen all of you, who is this? . . . Kostya? No, it isn’t.”

“Who are you?” Tortsov addressed me directly and was obviously much intrigued.

“I am the Critic,” I introduced myself and came forward. As I did this, quite unexpectedly my twisted leg came out in advance of me and this threw my body more to the right. I removed my top hat with careful exaggeration and executed a polite bow. After which I again retired to my seat partly out of sight behind the stove which my clothing matched in faded colouring.

“The Critic?” said Tortsov, somewhat bewildered.

“Yes, and a mean one,” I explained in a rasping voice. “See this quill? It’s all chewed . . . from my being in a rage . . . I bite it like this, in the middle, it cracks and quivers.”

## *Building a Character*

Here to my complete surprise I let out a shrill squeak instead of a guffaw. I was quite taken aback myself, it was so unexpected. Evidently too it had quite an effect on Tortsov.

“What the—” he began to exclaim, then added, “You come over here, closer to the footlights.”

I moved over in a sinister, ambling gait.

“What critic are you?” asked Tortsov, probing me with his eyes as if he did not recognize me. “Critic of what?”

“Of the person I live with,” I rasped.

“Who is that?” pursued Tortsov.

“Kostya,” I said.

“Have you gotten under his skin?” Tortsov knew just the right cues to give me.

“Indeed, yes!”

“Who let you do it?”

“He did.”

At that my squeaking laugh again began to choke me. I had to get myself under control before I could continue:

“He did. Actors like the people who praise them. But a Critic. . . .”

A fresh outburst of shrill sniggering interrupted me. I dropped to one knee so that I could look straight at Tortsov.

“Whom can you criticize? You’re nothing but an ignoramus,” objected Tortsov.

“Ignoramuses are the ones who do criticize most,” I retorted.

“You don’t understand anything and you don’t know how to do anything,” Tortsov continued to provoke me.

“It’s the very person who does not know anything himself who teaches,” said I as I mincingly sat down on the floor of the stage by the footlights beyond which Tortsov was standing.

"It's not true that you are a critic—you're just a fault-finder! A leech, a louse! Your bite is not dangerous, but it makes life unbearable."

"I'll wear you down . . . by degrees . . . unrelentingly . . .," I rasped.

"You vermin!" exploded Tortsov with frank annoyance.

"Dear me, what a way to talk!" I leaned low over the footlights, angling for Tortsov's attention. "What lack of self-control!"

"You filthy vermin!" Tortsov was almost bellowing now.

"Good, good, very good!" I gleefully pressed my insinuations now relentlessly. "You can't brush off a leech. Where there's a leech there's a lake . . . and in lakes there are more leeches. . . . You can't get rid of them . . . nor of me. . . ."

After a moment's hesitation Tortsov suddenly reached across the footlights and gave me an affectionate hug.

"Good work, young man!"

Whereupon, realizing that I had smeared him with the grease paint dripping from my face, I added:

"Oh, mind what you're doing! Now you certainly can't brush me off!"

The others rushed to repair the damage but I was in such a state of ecstasy over having thus been given a token of the Director's approval that I jumped up, cut a few capers and then, to the clamour of general applause, ran off the stage in my normal gait.

As I turned I saw Tortsov, handkerchief in hand, stop cleaning off the grease paint long enough to follow me at a distance with admiration.

I was truly happy. But my state was not that of any ordinary satisfaction. It was a joy which stemmed directly from creative, artistic achievement.

## *Building a Character*

As I walked home I caught myself repeating the gestures and gait of the character whose image I had created.

But that was not all. During dinner with my landlady and the other boarders I was captious, scoffing and irritable—unlike myself but very like my carping Critic. Even my landlady noticed this.

“What’s the matter with you today?” she remarked. “Aren’t you being rather overbearing . . .?”

This delighted me.

I was happy because I had realized how to live another person’s life, what it meant to immerse myself in a characterization.

This is a most important asset for an actor.

As I was taking my bath I recalled the fact that while I was playing the part of the Critic I still did not lose the sense of being myself. The reason, I concluded, was that while I was acting I felt exceptionally pleased as I followed my own transformation. Actually I was my own observer at the same time that another part of me was being a faultfinding, critical creature.

Yet can I really say that that creature is not a part of me? I derived him from my own nature. I divided myself, as it were, into two personalities. One continued as an actor, the other was an observer.

Strangely enough this duality not only did not impede, it actually promoted my creative work. It encouraged and lent impetus to it.

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# Characters and Types



## 1

OUR WORK TODAY was devoted to a critical analysis of our “masquerade” performance.

Tortsov turned to Sonya and said:

“There are actors and especially actresses who do not feel the need of preparing characterizations or transforming themselves into other characters because they adapt all roles to their own personal appeal. They build all their success exclusively on that quality. Without it they are as helpless as Samson shorn of his locks.

“There is a great difference between searching for and choosing in oneself emotions related to a part and altering the part to suit one’s more facile resources.

“Anything that might screen their own human, native individualities from their audience seems to alarm such actors.

“If their good looks affect their public they parade them. If their charm lies in their eyes, face, voice, mannerisms, they beam it to the audience the way you, Sonya, did.

“Why should we change into another character when we shall be less attractive in it than in real life? You see, you really love yourself in the part more than you love the part in yourself. That is a mistake. You have capabilities. You can show not only yourself but a role created by you.

## *Building a Character*

“There are many actors who believe in and rely on their charm. They show that to their audience. Take Dasha and Nicholas. They believe that their attraction lies in the depth of their feelings and the nervous intensity with which they experience them. They do each part on that basis, larding it with their own strongest, native attributes.

“Whereas you, Sonya, are in love with your own external attributes, the other two are not indifferent to their inner qualities.

“Why bother with costumes and make-up—they are only in your way!

“This too is a mistake from which you must free yourselves. Learn to love your role in yourself. You have the creative capacities to build it.

“Now there are actors of still another type. Do not look around. You have not had the time to develop into this kind. These actors hold the public through their original ways, their finely wrought special variety of acting clichés. They appear on the stage for the sole purpose of exhibiting them to their spectators. Why should they bother to transform themselves into other characters since this would not give them the opportunity to show off their forte?

“A third category of false actors are the ones who are strong in technique and clichés but who did not work these out for themselves, they merely have acquired them from other actors of other times and countries. These characterizations are based on a highly conventional ritual. They know how every role in a world-embracing repertory should be played. For such actors all roles have been permanently cut in an accepted stencil. Were it not for this they could never play nearly three hundred and sixty-five roles a year, each one after a single rehearsal, as is done in some cities in the provinces.

"I trust that those of you who feel inclined to follow this dangerous path of least resistance will be warned in time.

"Take your case, Grisha. Do not think that by a careful choice of make-up and costume for our last lesson you created an image of Mephistopheles, that you transformed yourself into him or even hid inside him. No, that was your mistake. You remained the same good-looking fellow that you are. You merely took on a new exterior and a fresh set of ready-made mannerisms, this time culled from the list of Gothic or Medieval character clichés, as we call them in our jargon.

"In *The Taming of the Shrew* we saw you in the very same outfit, except that it was adapted to comic rather than tragic purposes.

"We know, too, your modern-dress routine for contemporary comedies, for dramas in verse or prose. But no matter what the make-up on your face or the costume on your body, no matter what mannerisms or habits you put on you cannot get away from 'Grisha Govorkov, the Actor' while you are on the stage. On the contrary, all the methods you use only bring you back to him more closely.

"Yet—and this is not altogether true—your stereotyped ways do not blind you to 'Grisha Govorkov, the Actor' but to all actors of all times of the same type.

"You may think that your gestures, your way of walking, and talking are your own. But they're not, they are universal, generalized mannerisms cast in iron-clad permanent form by actors who have exchanged art for business. Now if it would ever occur to you to show us on the stage something we have never seen, if you would show us yourself as you are in real life—not the 'actor' Grisha Govorkov but the man—that would be splendid because the human being that you are is far more interesting and talented than the actor.

## *Building a Character*

Let us see him because the actor Govorkov is someone we have seen all our lives in all theatres.

"It is my conviction that Grisha the man will be the father of a whole generation of character parts. But the actor Grisha will never bring forth anything because the gamut of rubber-stamp business on the stage is astonishingly limited and worn down to the last layer."

After Grisha, Tortsov took up Vanya's performance. It is obvious that the Director is growing increasingly severe with him. No doubt he does this in order to break him of his slovenly habits, and this is both healthy and good for him.

"What you offered us," said Tortsov, "was not an image but a misunderstanding. It was neither a man nor a monkey but a chimney sweep. He had no face, only a dirty rag to wipe brushes on.

"And what of your manners, movements, actions? What were they, a kind of St. Vitus' dance? You wished to conceal yourself behind the external characterization of an old man but you did not succeed. On the contrary, you revealed more obviously and vividly than ever the actor Vanya Vyuntsov because all your antics were typical, not of the old man you were supposed to portray but only of yourself.

"Your method of overacting only brought you yourself more powerfully into evidence; it belonged only to you and at no point did it reflect the old man you wished to portray.

"Such a characterization is not a true mutation! It only betrays you and offers an opportunity for contortions.

"You do not like the idea of true characterization, of putting yourself into your character's skin. You do not even know what it is or feel the need of it, and one can scarcely discuss seriously what you offered us in its stead. It was something that never under any circumstances should be seen on any stage.