

**STANISLAVSKI AND POSTMODERNISM**

**by**

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# Abstract

The dissertation considers the extent to which Stanislavski's 'System' is still useful to performers today, working in a postmodern context. It draws on textual sources and evidence from interviews to explore this question, and also considers Stanislavski's work in relation to four of his contemporaries – Vsevolod Meyerhold, Evgeny Vakhtangov, Mikhail Chekhov and Bertolt Brecht.

Philip Auslander's argument, drawing upon the ideas of Jacques Derrida, that Stanislavski's approach is logocentric is considered in detail, looking at questions of the Self, Identity, Memory and Imagination. Hans Theiss Lehmann's argument that contemporary theatre is 'postdramatic' is also explored, as are some of the ideas behind such contemporary practitioners as Willem Dafoe of The Wooster Group and Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment.

The dissertation argues that whilst certain aspects of the System may no longer be appropriate or useful for particular kinds of postmodern, or postdramatic work, there nevertheless is a basic coherence and integrity of approach within the System as a whole - the goal of which is what Stanislavski calls 'the Creative State' - which gives it the potential to transcend some of its apparent limitations and makes it still useful today.

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# **STANISLAVSKI AND POSTMODERNISM**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the 73 years since his death many aspects of the famous 'System', developed by Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) have become ubiquitous in theatre, film and television. As Jean Benedetti (discussing the System in its broadest sense, and acknowledging that over time various aspects have become 'much disputed') puts it, 'The production methods which Stanislavski and the Art Theatre pioneered have been absorbed into theatre practice world-wide and are now accepted as the norm.' (Benedetti, 1999: xiii). Burnet Hobgood credits him with having 'exerted a greater influence on modern practice and thought about acting than any other individual in Western theatre.' (Hobgood (1973), cited in Crohn Schmitt, 1990: 93).

At the same time, however, Stanislavski's approach has, of course, had its critics. In their respective quests to forge new theatre aesthetics appropriate to the Modernist era Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), Evgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922), Mikhail Chekhov (1891-1955) and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) all criticised Stanislavski, to varying degrees. The three Russians all had close and complex relationships with Stanislavski, beginning as his pupils and then later struggling to break free of what Vakhtangov described as Stanislavski's 'chains' (Malaev-Babel, 2011: 15). Despite their criticisms and frustrations they would all, however, have recognised Stanislavski as a crucial theatrical figure, to be challenged, even to be resisted, but impossible to ignore. Even

Brecht, often seen as far removed philosophically, politically and geographically from Stanislavski, came in his later years to acknowledge his importance, for example in 'Some of the Things that can be Learnt from Stanislavsky' (Willett, 1964: 236).

In the postmodern era, by contrast, Stanislavski and the System have often been ignored as (presumably) obsolete and irrelevant – as their absence from many books on postmodern or postdramatic theatre attest. The RADA prospectus for 2011-12 includes a postgraduate course – MA Theatre Lab – which it describes as basing its training on 'the work of practitioners in the post-Stanislavski era'. When Stanislavski and the System *are* considered, critics have argued that new developments and understandings in scientific and artistic philosophies and practices have, in effect, overtaken the System. Nancy Crohn Schmitt states that 'Stanislavski's acting techniques depend on a world view comparable to that in the traditional theatre – for which they were in fact designed – but... these techniques and new theatre are essentially antithetical... the system no longer has, and can no longer have, the authority it once did.' (Crohn Schmitt, 1990: 93-4).

Sharon Carnicke quotes the playwright David Mamet as describing the System as 'nonsense. It is not a technique out of the practice of which one develops a skill – it is a cult' (Mamet, 1996: 6, cited in Carnicke, 1999: 4). Carnicke notes that Mamet is, in fact, correct, but that he 'is not arguing with Stanislavski but with his statue' (Ibid: 4) – that it is his 'constructed image', rather than the approach itself which is the problem.

There is a perception amongst some critics and practitioners that Stanislavski and the System are overly cerebral. Shomit Mitter, for example – apparently taking it as axiomatic that the System has become redundant - opines that ‘The failure of the Stanislavski system is likely to have been a result of its cerebral approach to characterisation’ (Mitter, 1992: 15). He argues that for the Stanislavskian actor, ‘Feeling is the product of a privately perceived pattern of cerebral involvement with a play. In order to be, the actor must feel, and in order to feel, the actor must move from the self to the play via the mind.’ (Ibid: 11). He goes on: ‘the actor’s impulse to action is a product of analysis and deduction. A cerebral mastery of the temporal imperative in a drama provides the key to the manner of its spatial execution... For Stanislavski, conception preceded enactment. The mind determines a course of action which it is the responsibility of the body meticulously to follow.’ (Ibid: 12 - 14). Mitter does state that ‘very late in his career, Stanislavski attempted to work the somatic imperative back into his method of approaching roles’ (Ibid: 23). He quotes from ‘Creating A Role’: ‘[W]e evoke a series of physical actions interlaced with one another. Through them we try to understand the inner reasons that give rise to them. ... the logic and consistency of feelings in the Given Circumstances of the play. When we can discover that line, we are aware of the inner meaning of our physical actions.’ Mitter’s view of this later work, however, remains unconvinced as to whether Stanislavski had truly avoided the trap of separating and prioritising the intellectual, the cerebral, from the physical. He goes on: ‘Logic, consistency, Given Circumstances, line: the vocabulary here is dangerously close to that of



the cerebral system. Rehearsal is still a matter of 'coming to know, that is, to feel, a play'. Where feeling is associated with knowledge, somatic work must fail.' (Ibid: 24).

At times perhaps some of the criticism of Stanislavski may be unfounded in that some critics and performers may be critical of what they perceive to be 'Stanislavskian' approaches to acting but which may not in actuality be so. As noted above, this is precisely what Carnicke saw in Mamet's criticisms.

Perhaps this is not altogether a surprising phenomenon - as the director Katie Mitchell observes:

'When we talk about Stanislavski in our rehearsal rooms today, we are not always talking strictly about the work he developed. His exercises and ideas have been modified, challenged and updated over time as they have been chewed over and experimented with by different practitioners from Augusto Boal in Brazil to Sam Kogan in London. Sometimes what comes down to us is based on Stanislavski's own writings; sometimes it is, rather, Boal or Kogan's interpretation of Stanislavski. Little attempt is made to differentiate between the two sources of our understanding of Stanislavski – a situation that understandably leads to confusion.' (Mitchell, 2009: 225-6).

This potential for confusion is further compounded by a number of factors: the problems caused by Soviet censorship; (Carnicke, 1999: 192-3); delayed publication dates (thirteen years between 'An Actor Prepares' (1936) and 'Building A Character' (1949) which was intended by Stanislavski to be a single volume); mistranslations (Carnicke, 1999: 90-92; 131-2); the schism

between what Stanislavski was developing in Russia and what former pupils such as Richard Boleslavsky were teaching as being 'the System' in the United States, (which was developed in turn by Lee Strasberg into 'the Method'); and finally the fact that 'the theory, as outlined in Stanislavski's writings, was, as a result of the factors outlined above, seldom followed in teaching practices' (Malaev-Babel, 2011:6).

Stanislavski was philosophically a humanist, with an unquestioned view of human beings having a stable, centred, coherent Self. Within a study such as this, which is primarily concerned with theatrical rather than philosophical matters, there is not the space or scope to go into the implications of this in any particular depth, but 'Self' is used here to mean a human being which has traditionally been seen as having in religious terms a soul, and in secular terms can still be seen as having a sense of a unique and individual essence. It was this unique sense of Self that Stanislavski saw as the source of each actor's inspiration and material for performance. Whyman points out that 'Stanislavski asserted that the 'experiences which are analogous to the role belong to the artist, not the character... *you cannot get away from yourself* (my emphasis)... you kill the character if you do not use your own feelings'' (Whyman, 2008: 55). Since his death, however, fundamental assumptions about the Self - what it is to be human, let alone a human performer - have been called into question. Indeed, some now argue that we are living in 'post-human' age. In a letter addressed to delegates and participants in a symposium entitled 'Who Do We Think We Are? Representing the Human', held at The Centre for Creative Collaboration in London on 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2011,

Louise LePage, Eugenie Pastor and Jorge Perez Falconi wrote: 'We live in a world that is becoming increasingly technologically constructed. According to some, we are already cyborgs. But what does this mean? And what does it mean to say that we live in a period that is characterised by 'posts': we are postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial, postfeminist; people are becoming posthuman'. (LePage et al., 2011).

Elinor Fuchs' suggests 'that one of the meanings of 'postmodern' – its psychological formation, I would say now – was a dispersed idea of self, and that this dispersal was represented in many different ways in the contemporary alternative theatre.' (Fuchs, 1996:9). Dan Rebellato notes that 'many postmodernists' – he cites Donna Haraway, Judith Halberstram, Ira Livingstone, Foucault and Baudrillard - consider the 'humanist view of the body... was never adequate and is thankfully in decline, giving way to a recognition of the posthuman body. This is a body whose overlap with technology is evident, and has abandoned any claim to humanist uniqueness... The body is a zero, a mere site on which society (and other 'influential networks') can inscribe itself.' (D'Monte, R. and Saunders, G. (Eds), 2008: 195). Can the System still be of use to a twenty-first century performer, when the philosophical foundations upon which it was based have shifted so fundamentally?

It is the purpose of this study to examine these questions and criticisms and to attempt to evaluate the continuing relevance of the System in a twenty-first century context.

I will argue that whilst certain aspects of the System – and quite fundamental, key aspects at that (see p81) - may no longer be appropriate or useful for particular kinds of postmodern, or postdramatic work, there nevertheless is a basic coherence and integrity of approach within the System as a whole – to do with enhancing the creativity of the actor - which has the potential to transcend some of its apparent limitations and makes it still useful for a performer today.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **STANISLAVSKI IN HIS OWN TIME: THE PRE-MODERNIST AND MODERNIST ERAS**

#### **Stanislavski in context**

Any person is always inevitably a product of their own time. Stanislavski grew up and was formed in the pre-Modernist era, and came of age in the Modernist era.

Two of the key formative influences upon Stanislavski, as the product of a late nineteenth-century upbringing, were those of Leo Tolstoy, and associationist psychology. Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) is nowadays best known primarily as a novelist, but in his own time was hugely influential as a political and philosophical thinker. Drawing upon the anti-materialist writings of Schopenhauer together with some selective and literal interpretations of passages from The Bible, in particular 'The Sermon On The Mount', Tolstoy came to espouse a very ascetic philosophy of non-violence, vegetarianism, and simplicity, in which the lives of the peasants in Russia were seen as exemplary, built as they were around hard work and frugality. (See Whyman, 2010). This philosophy proved to be extremely popular in the uncertain social and political context of late nineteenth century Russia. His key work in terms of his artistic philosophy is 'What Is Art?', published in 1896. Stanislavski

knew this work well, and the basic aesthetic principles behind his account of acting are clearly derived from it. Hughes writes:

'Tolstoy gives an expressive account of art; he takes the essence of art to be the communication of feeling from artist to audience. He writes, and italicises, *Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by those feelings and also experience them.* (What Is Art?, p51) (Hughes, 1993:39)

This notion of the importance of 'feelings' which have been 'lived through' – experienced - is at the heart of Stanislavski's System with regard to the actor, along with, speaking of the connection between actor and audience, words like 'infection', 'communion', and 'transmission'. There was, for Tolstoy – and thus for Stanislavski – a moral and spiritual dimension to this transmission of feeling from artist to audience. He believed that the aim of art was 'to convey 'the loftiest and best feelings people have attained to in life', thus uniting people' (Whyman, 2008:14). Whyman goes on to say that 'Throughout his life, Stanislavski maintained both a view of the artist's task as sacred, and a reverential attitude to Tolstoy.' (Ibid:16).

Tolstoy's was by no means the only formative influence upon the young Stanislavski – Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Vissarion Belinsky and Nikolai Chernyshevsky are four others who should be acknowledged (Ibid: 2). It is, perhaps, Tolstoy's voice, however, which can be heard more than any other behind much of what Stanislavski wrote. For example:

'Let truth onstage be realistic, but let it be artistic, let it uplift us... We turn the role into something poetic, beautiful, harmonious, simple, comprehensible, ennobling, and purifying for the audience' (Stanislavski, 2008:192)

Postmodern views of art and beauty, as we shall see, can differ enormously from this – for example see Tim Etchells' comments in Helmer and Malzacher, (2004: 91-2), quoted on p67 below.

Associationist psychology was introspective and observational – precisely the methodology Stanislavski preferred to use. It also formed the foundation for the work and theories of Theodule Ribot (1839-96), which was a crucial formative influence on Stanislavski's use of Emotion Memory or Affective memory. Whyman notes that associationist philosophy 'claimed that all mental activity including rational thought was no more than the association of ideas or sensations. The philosopher John Locke coined the phrase 'association of ideas' in the fourth edition of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1700).' (Whyman, 2008:52) It was concerned with the role of the unconscious, particularly in relation to emotion, but was developed before Freud's work was well known in Russia. It is important to note, therefore, that whilst Stanislavski was intensely interested in the unconscious, and whilst the System in many ways is all about finding ways of supposedly accessing the unconscious and stirring real emotions as a result, his understanding and terms of reference to do with the unconscious are therefore pre-Freudian. Associationist psychology was concerned with the physiological basis of emotion. This led to the work of Ivan Petrovich Pavlov and his famous

salivating dogs with their 'conditioned reflexes' – that is, that after repeated pairing or association of experiences, the experience of one thing (for example the ringing of the bell) leads to the effect of another (the anticipation of food leading to salivation). After the revolution Pavlov's theories, sanctioned by Stalin, became paradigmatic not only in the Soviet Union but for a time around the world, leading to the work of the American behaviourists J.B. Watson and B.F. Skinner. Pavlov's theories have since been somewhat discredited, particularly in their equating of animal with human behaviour, but were practically inescapable towards the end of Stanislavski's life. Whatever the shortcomings of Behaviourism, the simple point to be made here about Associationism and Stanislavski is that the human brain has associative capacities which an actor can draw upon as part of his or her creative process, and which forms a significant element of what Stanislavski called 'The Creative State', or the 'Creative Sense of the Self' – and it is the achievement of this 'Creative State' which is the ultimate aim of the Stanislavski System as a whole. Whyman describes this as developing 'the ability to pay attention and to be fully alive on stage, *experiencing*, in the present moment.' (Whyman, 2008: 29)

### **What is the System?**

The System was developed over a lifetime of practical experience of acting and directing plays, and was still developing during Stanislavski's last years when a combination of illness and the political conditions created by Stalin meant that it was both necessary and at times expedient for Stanislavski to be



confined to his house for much of the time. The seeds for what was to become the System were sown in the last years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century, in Stanislavski's formative experiences as an actor and director, including his work on Chekhov's major plays such as 'The Seagull' and 'The Cherry Orchard.' It is somewhat ironic, therefore, given that it is this work for which he is perhaps best known and associated, that precisely also this work caused him such dissatisfaction and inner turmoil that by 1906, following what to all intents and purposes had been an enormously successful foreign tour with the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski was 'functioning in the midst of an overwhelming personal crisis' (Benedetti, 1999: 166). He took a much-needed break in Finland, and it was during this time that he began to think through exactly why he was so dissatisfied with his work as it was, and to formulate what was to become the System.

Over time the particular emphases on different aspects of the System changed, from early work focussing more upon the inner acting processes – (imagination and emotion), through a period of detailed textual analysis, sometimes referred to as the table period or 'work around the table' (Gordon, 1987, p.191) to the later work on the Method of Physical Actions and what Maria Knebel, a member of Michael Chekhov's studio and later of the second studio, termed 'Active Analysis'. Throughout all these changes, however, the System always encompassed both the inner and outer elements of acting, a holistic approach which brought together the psychological, the emotional, and the physical, recognising that each element affects the other and cannot be taken entirely in isolation.

This means, of course, that Stanislavski himself would have utterly rejected the claim (for example by Mitter, cited earlier) of the System being essentially cerebral. He viewed the role of emotion, and the physical body, as central to his approach: 'Don't do it [artistic work] with the cold eye of the analyst, pencil in hand... In art you cannot use a cold approach. We need a certain degree of inner fire, we need sensory concentration.' (Stanislavski, 2008:115)

Jonathan Pitches makes clear that Stanislavski's aim was to overcome the Cartesian division of mind and body, which critics such as Mitter implicitly accuse Stanislavski of perpetuating.

'Stanislavski's whole system is predicated on the integration of mind and body. The actor is a psycho-physical being, whose work depends on both inner and outer training. These two sides of the actor's work are given consistent terms: *perezhivanie* and *voploschenie* respectively, and his acting volumes in both English and Russian reflect this duality... For Stanislavski, the separation of mind from body is analogous with the division of feeling from technique... Stanislavski makes a claim for a holistic view of the actor – the psycho-physical performer.' (Pitches, 1996:21-2).

The System has a number of key terms which I will refer to and which need to be understood in order to grasp the System as a whole – these include relaxation, concentration of attention, imagination, given circumstances, the magic if, bits and tasks, truth and belief, emotion memory, the through-line, and the superobjective. The two key aspects of the System I want to focus on

in this study, however, are the Creative State, and, linked to this, what Stanislavski called 'multi-level concentration'.

The Stanislavski System forms, as its name suggests, a *systematic* – that is to say a range of activities which are useful to an extent as discrete activities but which are most effective when working in conjunction with each other - approach to the performance of theatrical roles. The ultimate aim in using the System is the creation of what Stanislavski called 'The Creative State'.

'... learn to tone up all the elements of the creative state, inner and outer. Work on them separately at first and then put them all together. For example, combine muscular release with a sense of truth, objects of attention with transmitting, action with physical tasks, etc. You'll notice that when you bring two elements together properly, they create a third and the three of them produce a fourth and a fifth. Then comes a sixth, a tenth, etc.' (Stanislavski, 2008, p.587).

Bella Merlin quotes Stanislavski (cited by Popov in *Reminiscences*, p.86) thus:

'In my involvement with the new methods of inner technique, I sincerely believed that to express the *experience* [i.e. what the character goes through in the course of the play], the actor need only master the *creative state*, and that all the rest will follow.' (Merlin, 2007, p.49, her emphasis).

The essence of the System lies in the prioritising of the personal experience of the actor in the approach to the role, both in terms of drawing upon past

experience and the actor's experience in the moment of performing. This quality of 'experiencing' in the moment of performance – *perezhivanie* in Russian - is the entire aim and *raison d'être* of Stanislavski's System. It is the desired outcome of all the work and preparation, when everything comes together. It is not, however, easily described or defined - Carnicke describes it as 'Stanislavski's most elusive concept' (Carnicke, 2009: 129). She likens it to 'something akin to that of a yogi who has reached a higher state of consciousness... an 'oceanic joy,' and quotes Michael Chekhov:

Everything changes for him [the actor] at this happy moment. As the creator of his character, he becomes inwardly free of his own creation and becomes the observer of his own work. [...] He has given to his image his flesh and blood, his ability to move and speak, to feel, and now the image disappears from his mind's eye and exists within him and acts upon his means of expression from inside him (1991:155)

She then goes on to note: 'Contemporary jargon calls this state 'flow' a term coined by US psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who studies subjective accounts by athletes and artists at peak performance.' (Ibid: 130).

Carnicke also interestingly notes that Stanislavski drew his concept of *perezhivanie* from Tolstoy (in the sense that art is seen primarily as the communication of experience) and then uses this to make a crucial point, namely that 'Tolstoy's concept of *perezhivanie* ultimately leads Stanislavski to his paradoxical redefinition of 'truth' as 'theatricality'. (Ibid: 134). She notes that there are two recurring contexts in which Stanislavski uses the term 'experiencing':

'The first of these constructs a neat theoretical model. In it, having incorporated Tolstoy's notion of art as the communication of genuine personal experience, Stanislavski must logically reject Diderot's classical formulation of the actor's dual consciousness as inauthentic. In this context, which was adopted by the American Method, the actor seems indistinguishable from the character.

The second context places 'experiencing' into the messy, self-contradictory world of theatrical practice, where 'flow' often induces a sensation of watching oneself and where Stanislavski can thus embrace both Tolstoy and Diderot at the same time. In this context, the actor creates a character as a work of art distinguishable from the self. Philosopher R.I.G. Hughes observes that the term *perezhivanie* easily allows for the apparently contradictory premise, that 'Even when the artist and artwork both inhabit the same body, the distinction between them still persists.' (Ibid: 134-5).

Multi-layered concentration is a part of this creative state. The 'flow' which Carnicke refers to encompasses both the actor's immersion in the life of the role and, simultaneously, the ability to stand outside of, monitor and control his or her performance. Stanislavski notes that

'A juggler on horseback in a circus... has to balance his legs and body on the back of a horse, keep an eye on the stick placed on his forehead with a large rotating plate on top of it and, apart from that, he has to juggle with three or four balls. He has many objects at the same time. But he also finds it possible to call out jauntily to the horse.

The juggler can do all this because human beings possess *multi-level concentration* and one level does not interfere with another.' (Stanislavski, 2008: 111-2).

This human capacity to be able to concentrate on different things simultaneously he views as entirely positive, with one focus of concentration potentially aiding the others:

‘When he is performing, an actor is divided in two. Salvini said, ‘When I am acting, I live a double life, I laugh and weep and at the same time analyse my laughter and tears, so that they can touch the hearts of those I wish to move more deeply.’ As you can see, a double life doesn’t stop you being inspired. On the contrary! One helps the other... Remember, at the very beginning when I was explaining Tasks and the Through-action to you, I told you of two perspectives, running parallel to each other. One of them has to do with the role, the other with the actor, his life onstage, his psychotechnique as a performer. (Stanislavski, 2008:456).

In an earlier passage from ‘An Actor’s Work’ Stanislavski notes that the actor

‘has no difficulty in splitting himself in two, i.e. on the one hand he corrects something which is wrong, and, on the other, continues to live his role.

The actor lives, weeps, laughs onstage but weeping or laughing he observes his laughter and tears. And it is that double life, that balance between life and the role that art lies.’ (Ibid:302)

In summary, the Creative State, or the Creative Sense of Self, which includes multi-layered concentration, is a condition of total absorption into the creative process, moment by moment, alive and responsive to whatever is happening onstage (or, earlier, in rehearsal) *not* in any sense of the actor’s being ‘lost’ in the character but more in a state of heightened awareness and receptivity,

simultaneously playing / experiencing the role *and* standing outside of the role, monitoring and if necessary modifying the performance.

Having looked at the key elements of the System upon which I want to focus, I will turn now to consider some of the work and ideas of Stanislavski's contemporaries. The four key theatrical figures during Stanislavski's own lifetime to critique the System in various ways were Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov, and Brecht.

## **Meyerhold**

Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874 – 1940) graduated from the Moscow Philharmonic in 1898, and joined the fledgling Moscow Art Theatre that year. Meyerhold played a total of eighteen roles with the MAT over the following four years. One of the first roles in which Meyerhold was cast was that of Konstantin Treplev in Stanislavski's production of 'The Seagull' in October 1898, playing opposite Stanislavski himself as Trigorin. Jonathan Pitches notes that 'Critics have been quick to point out the uncanny similarities between the power dynamic at work in the MAT and that reflected in Chekhov's play, especially when you imagine these words being spoken by the young innovator, Meyerhold / Treplev: 'What we need are new artistic forms. And if we don't get new forms it would be better if we had nothing at all.' (Pitches, 2003: 8). The 'power dynamic' to which Pitches alludes refers of course to the growing frustration felt by Meyerhold with what he perceived to be the limitations of the

naturalistic approach to theatre being pioneered (in Russia) by Stanislavski at the turn of the century. Meyerhold himself was increasingly drawn to the new Symbolist dramas by dramatists such as Maeterlinck and Hauptmann, and was eager to explore whatever new approaches to acting and theatrical production these new plays demanded. It may also have been the case that Meyerhold's evolving acting style was at odds with that of the MAT. Whyman notes that "From the beginning of his career Meyerhold had an acting style that was particular to him. Braun suggests that when Meyerhold left the MAT in 1902 it resolved the problem that 'he was finding it difficult to reconcile his angular, grotesque style of acting with the muted naturalism demanded by Stanislavski.'" (cited in Whyman, 2008: 206).

The Moscow Art Theatre was reorganised in 1902, and Meyerhold was not invited to become a shareholder, as might have been expected. This effectively left him without a job, but as Robert Leach notes, 'By 1902 Meyerhold was clearly looking to enter a larger theatrical world than he felt Stanislavski's company could offer.' (Leach, 1989: 4). Meyerhold left Moscow, having already booked a theatre in the Ukraine, and threw himself into an astonishing frenzy of work over the next three years – 140 productions, with Meyerhold himself taking on 44 roles! He completely rejected Stanislavski's emphasis upon the importance of emotional truth and the subconscious, and of the harnessing of the actor's personal experience, all the 'inner' preparation. Meyerhold's mistrust of and antipathy towards this approach predated his time with Stanislavski (which evidently did nothing to assuage his doubts upon the subject). Leach dates this back to a specific



occasion: on 24<sup>th</sup> August, 1895, Meyerhold had performed A.N. Apukhtkin's monologue, 'The Madman', at a student gathering and had become so absorbed, 'I felt myself becoming mad.' From then, he had regarded this method as 'a narcotic' (Leach, 1989: 4). Instead of the 'inner' approach, then, Meyerhold concentrated on the 'outer' work – movement, rhythm, the body – and an embracing and exploring of popular theatrical traditions such as the fairground booth and, most particularly, *commedia dell'arte*, which Leach notes 'seemed the ideal antidote to the theatre of emotion and the naturalistic play, and it also spurred the actor towards physical, movement-based performance.' (Leach, 1989: 10).

By 1905 both Stanislavski and Nemirovich also felt that the MAT needed to explore new approaches. Stanislavski invited Meyerhold back to Moscow, to lead experimental work, free from the pressures of production, at the newly opened First Theatre Studio. Pitches makes the point that Stanislavski – ever open to new approaches – sounds more like Treplev than Trigorin when he wrote about this period in 'My Life Is Art', first published in 1924:

Like me, [Meyerhold] sought for something new in art, for something more contemporary and modern in spirit. The difference between us lay in the fact that I only strained toward the new, without knowing any of the ways for reaching and realising it, while Meyerhold thought that he had already found new ways and methods which he could not realise partly because of material conditions, and partly due to the weak personnel of the troupe... I decided to help Meyerhold in his new labours, which as it seemed to me then, agreed with many of my dreams at the time. (Pitches, 2003: 9).

What were Meyerhold's 'new ways and methods' which so intrigued his old teacher, and what were some of the sources of influence and inspiration for Meyerhold at this time? One influence – although it should be noted that Meyerhold was already developing his ideas independently before he came across them - was that of the Russian Futurist movement and Formalist critics such as Viktor Shklovsky. The Formalists actually showed little interest in theatre as such, being more concerned with literature, but Meyerhold was able to extrapolate from their approach useful ideas which strengthened his own developing theatre aesthetic. They aimed to use art in new ways, drawing attention to the *constructed* nature of any artistic creation, to the *artifice* inherent in the art, in order to make the audience see both the art object and any subject matter expressed as 'strange' – and thus to see it anew, with fresh eyes and a fresh response – what they called *ostranenie*. Working in this way, a painter would not only not attempt to hide the evidence of paint and brushstrokes but actively use them as part of the work. Similarly, in theatre terms, Meyerhold experimented with different forms of staging from the proscenium arch, with revealing the sources of light, with breaking the 'fourth wall', using direct audience address where appropriate, and most pertinently for Stanislavski with the physical and vocal technique and expression of the actors. Much of this work, as we shall see, foreshadows aspects of what Brecht would develop twenty years later (*ostranenie* is a clear precursor to Brecht's *verfremdung*), and even much of the aesthetics and concerns of what would come to be called, seventy years later, postmodernism. For example, writing about Meyerhold's exploring of the

grotesque, Whyman says: 'He [Meyerhold] influencing Vakhtangov saw as 'the struggle between content and form. The grotesque operates not only on the high and the low, but mingles the contrasts; deliberately creating sharp contradiction... the grotesque deepens daily life until it ceases to represent only that which is usual. The grotesque unites the essence of opposites into a synthesis and induces the spectator to attempt to solve the enigma of the incomprehensible. (Eugenio Barba and Nicholas Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: the Secret Art of the Performer*, tr. Richard Fowler London: Routledge, 1991, p.156. cited in Whyman, 2008: 211).

Meyerhold himself stated that the grotesque 'combines the most dissimilar elements by ignoring their details and relying on its own originality, borrowing from any source anything which satisfies its *joie de vivre* and its capricious, mocking attitude to life... This is the style which reveals the most wonderful horizons to the creative artist. 'I', my personal attitude to life, precedes all else. Everything which I take as material for my art corresponds not to the truth of reality but to the truth of *my* personal artistic whim.' (Braun, 1991: p.137).

So Meyerhold was not concerned with 'the truth of reality' in the way that Stanislavski clearly was. He accepted and embraced the fact that theatre is an artificial construct, and his goal became to achieve what Whyman calls 'a stylised theatricality; the rejection of what he said was Stanislavski's naturalism and the need to find another way to achieve the theatre of mood. He had a different approach to motion than that envisaged by Stanislavski's

emphasis on the *subconscious*, *emotional memory*, and the *feeling of truth*.

He wanted the actor to be a trained and conscious artist, rather than one hypnotising and hypnotised by feeling.’ (Whyman, 2008: 207).

Despite – or, rather, precisely *because of* these differences in approach, then, Stanislavski brought Meyerhold back to the MAT in 1905. The rapprochement was, however, short lived. Initially, in the summer, Stanislavski was impressed by Meyerhold’s early rehearsals for Maeterlinck’s ‘The Death of Tintagiles’, which he saw in a small rehearsal space. When, however, he saw it again for the dress rehearsal in the 700 seat Theatre Studio, in October 1905, the results were, in Stanislavski’s eyes, disastrous. What had worked well in an intimate setting – a low-lit, disembodied style suggestive of other worlds, with for example the words spoken not naturalistically but ‘coldly coined... free from the familiar break in the voice’ (Braun, 1991: p54) fell flat in the larger space. Jonathan Pitches also notes that ‘This was exacerbated by Stanislavski’s insistence that the lights be turned up, killing the symbolist aura of other-worldliness and revealing the holes in Meyerhold’s production.’ (Pitches, 2003: 11).

It was shortly after this episode (and Meyerhold’s final departure from the MAT as a result) that Meyerhold published his first article, ‘The Naturalistic Theatre and the Theatre of Mood (1906), which Pitches notes ‘is as much a criticism of his old boss Stanislavski as it is a tirade against Naturalism as a style.’ (Ibid: 47).

Meyerhold continued to develop his work throughout the following twenty years, honing a tightly controlled and rhythmic physical approach to performance, drawing upon the then fashionable time and motion studies of F.W. Taylor (1856 – 1915) which he came to call 'biomechanics'.

Biomechanics placed movement at the centre of the actor's practice. Any experience or emotion felt or conjured by the actor, Meyerhold believed, should come from this 'outer' approach, rather than the suspect (in Meyerhold's view, after his 'madness' experience in 1895) 'inner' process favoured by Stanislavski. In this respect Meyerhold was drawing upon the then fashionable James-Lange theory of emotion. This was a curiously counter-intuitive theory which argued that physical action was more likely to create emotion, rather than the reverse - James's formulation, 'I saw the bear, I ran, I became frightened', was taken as the model. Whyman, however, argues that Meyerhold was oversimplifying the theory – 'James said the emotion could not be divorced from the psychological state but did not claim that a physical movement would invoke an emotion.' (Whyman, 2008: 232). She also identifies a central contradiction at the heart of Meyerhold's approach:

'There is a contradiction between the rule which states 'the body is a machine, the actor is the machinist', and the rule stating that the actor is 'at one and the same time the material and the organiser of it'; the first statement exemplifies a split way of thinking and the second does not. The confusion permeates biomechanical theory.' (Ibid: 228)

In fact, Whyman asserts, Meyerhold 'made statements about emotion that are often contradictory' (Ibid: 232) and goes on to say that 'The revolutionary science he adopted may have brought about a conflict with his own practical experience.' (Ibid: 233). She cites a lecture Meyerhold gave in 1929 in which he said: 'I must portray on stage a person who is running from fright, running, frightened by the attack of a dog. So what must I do? Must I find in myself all the feelings of a person frightened by a dog's barking so then I will know how to run away from a dog well? No, I must evoke [them] in myself not before the moment when I run but when I run, the feelings of a frightened person are evoked in me.' (Ibid: 233). What Meyerhold leaves out of this account, however, is the crucial element of the actor's *imagination* in this process, without which the desired emotion will be unlikely to be evoked. And this, Whyman concludes, means that 'there is no necessary connection between action and emotion, and in this very clear statement of the way an actor engenders *emotion* in practice is in essence the same as Stanislavski's classic example of the girl looking for the brooch. The actor must use the *magic if* and *given circumstances*; that is, the actor must use the imagination to put themselves in the situation and take action accordingly.' (Ibid: 233).

There were then, it is clear, quite fundamental differences in the approaches of Stanislavski and Meyerhold – differences in political outlook, of the function of art, on their idea of what the acting experience should be, on the nature of character, the role of emotion, of the imagination, and of the relationship between the actor and the audience. What is striking, however, is that despite all of this, and notwithstanding some of Meyerhold's polemical articles which

were 'often written in a deliberately argumentative style' and occasionally 'full of bitter feelings towards Stanislavski' (Pitches, 2003: 44) what finally comes across is the hard-won respect the two men clearly had for each other.

Stanislavski could say of a Meyerhold production (of *The Mandate*, in 1925): 'Meyerhold had achieved... what I have only dreamed of' (Leach, 1989: 116).

And in his final months, in 1938, Stanislavski invited Meyerhold to work as his assistant at the Opera Theatre, possibly in a vain attempt to protect him from the dark forces of the Stalinist bureaucracy – vain in that Stanislavski died soon afterwards, and with his death it seems that any hope of Meyerhold escaping those forces died with him. He was murdered by Stalin's agents in 1940. Stanislavski is reputed to have said of Meyerhold, shortly before his death, 'Take care of Meyerhold. He is my only heir in the theatre – here or elsewhere.' (Leach, 1989: 29).

This respect was clearly mutual. Of Stanislavski, Meyerhold said: 'You who knew Stanislavski only in his old age can't possibly imagine what a powerful actor he was. If I have become somebody, it is only because of the years I spent alongside him. Mark this well. (Gladkov 1997: 149, cited in Pitches, 2003: 12).

Pitches also notes that 'Of all Meyerhold's creative relationships, his time with Stanislavski was the most influential, not because Meyerhold followed in his teacher's footsteps – he didn't – but because the two men shared a fundamental belief in the complete training of an actor and in the need to experiment continually.' (Ibid: 6).

## **Vakhtangov**

Vakhtangov joined the Moscow Art Theatre in March 1911. In his early work as a director Vakhtangov was noted for his scrupulous adherence to the System as he understood it, which not surprisingly given the work Stanislavski was doing at the time was focused primarily upon the inner processes of the actor, such as affective memory. In time, however, he grew to feel frustrated and confined by the System, and spoke of his 'tortuous attempt to break out of Stanislavski's chains' (Malaev-Babel, 2011: 15). Vakhtangov increasingly began to differentiate his approach from that of Stanislavski. He began to use a more improvisatory approach in rehearsal. He declared that 'theatre is a holiday', and developed the concept of what Whyman terms 'unconscious processing', that is, 'today's rehearsal is not for its own sake but for the sake of tomorrow's', which he said took away panic and strain in young actors.' (Whyman, 2008: 160).

An increased emphasis on imaginative work led to – and this idea was developed very much with and through Michael Chekhov also – the idea of the *image* as crucial to the actor's art. The actor had to develop an image of the character s/he was playing, and enjoy the interaction between him/herself and that image.

This, according to Zakhava, created the possibility of resolving contradictions within the System that Stanislavski himself had been unable to resolve. The Stanislavskian actor, playing Romeo and faced for example with an actor playing Juliet whom he found unattractive as a person (or vice versa) was



faced with a problem of self-deception, trying to coax an authentic experiential state of being attracted to this person whilst actually feeling nothing of the kind – effectively, almost trying to hallucinate. Vakhtangov reformulated the ‘problem’ so that the actor could look and see the ‘unattractive’ actor opposite, and not feel at all the need to pretend (inwardly) otherwise, and simultaneously respond in an artistic sense to the *image* of the beautiful Romeo / Juliet opposite. He came up with a formula: *‘I apprehend (see, hear, smell etc.) everything as it is given, I relate to everything as it is set.’* (Whyman, 2008: 161).

With this approach, then, the Vakhtangovian actor could actually enjoy the very same things that supposedly bedevilled the Stanislavskian actor. Juliet could see her hideous Romeo and take delight in resolving the contradiction between the actual actor opposite and the wonderful image, responding to the image. What the idea of the image, of consciously using the theatrical, artistic, imaginative situation enabled Vakhtangov to do was to, according to Whyman, ‘step... over Stanislavski’s theatre of *experiencing* and real life to assert the life of the image and art – the imaginative creation of the director, actor and writer.’ (Ibid: 165).

Like Meyerhold, Vakhtangov came to the conclusion that theatre needed to be openly and unapologetically *theatrical* – gloriously theatrical, able to draw attention to itself as an artistic construct. As a result, as well as the stylised movements, the use of masks, non-realistic make-up, theatrical freezes, dance and so on which Vakhtangov created with his actors during his final

productions, the actors also worked on playing simultaneously both the image of the character and their relationship to that image. As Vera Gottlieb put it, the actors had a sense of 'self as an actor creating, with other actors, a tableau, vision, image or symbol' (Gottlieb, 2005:268).

Stanislavski remained in regular contact with Vakhtangov through until his untimely death in 1922. Far from rejecting the new theatre approach, he was on the contrary very interested. The acting technique Vakhtangov developed was outwardly stylised but internally realistic. He has been described as a 'point of intersection between two artistic extremes which have always been at odds with each other... the 'realism' of Stanislavski at one end of the scale and the 'conventionalised theatre' represented by Meyerhold at the other' (Zakhava, and Worrall in Whyman, 2008: 171).

### **Michael Chekhov**

Mikhail Aleksandrovich – Michael - Chekhov, a nephew of the playwright whose work was so closely associated with that of Stanislavski, was auditioned by the latter in April 1912. Stanislavski immediately invited him to join the MAT, and noted to Sulerzhitsky that he considered the young actor to be 'one of the real hopes for the future' (Benedetti, 1988: 207). Chekhov, like Vakhtangov, began as an enthusiastic, if somewhat mischievous student of Stanislavski. Gordon cites a revealing story about the two men:

‘Asked by the teacher to enact a true dramatic situation as an exercise in Affective Memory, Chekhov recreated his wistful presence at his father’s funeral.

Overwhelmed by its fine detail and sense of truth, Stanislavski embraced Michael, thinking that this was yet another proof of the power of real Affective Memory for the actor. Unfortunately, Stanislavski later discovered that Chekhov’s ailing father was, in fact, still alive. Chekhov’s performance was based not on recapturing the experience, but on a feverish anticipation of the event. Reprimanded once again, Chekhov was dropped from the class due “to an overheated imagination.” (Gordon, 1987: 120-1)

This story goes to the heart of what became a dispute between the two men which continued right up to their final meeting together, in Berlin in 1928, and it centres upon the precise role of the imagination in the creative process of the actor, how the imagination works, and the relative importance or otherwise of the past personal experience of the actor.

Chekhov came to view Stanislavski’s emphasis on actual prior experience as a limiting factor, even a destructive one. Franc Chamberlain notes that:

It is after 1918 that Chekhov comes out most strongly against Stanislavski’s use of personal experience and emotion, arguing that this, in effect, binds the actor to the habits of the everyday self, which was not the way to liberate the actor’s creativity. Furthermore, Chekhov argued that the emphasis should be on the character’s feelings, not the actor’s – not ‘how would I feel’ but ‘ what does the character feel’- and that this would enable the actor to transform into the character rather than reducing the character to the personality of the actor... Chekhov gives a very good example of what he means by this. In a scene where a character’s child is ill, the

Stanislovskian actor will behave as if this were their own child. This adapts the character to the actor's life and patterns of feeling and behaviour. The Chekhovian actor, on the other hand, will focus on the character and observe how the character responds to the child and behave in that way. In this case the actor is adapting to the character. (Chamberlain 2004: 14-15).

In that final Berlin meeting Chekhov 'admonished Stanislavski for the harmfulness of his system, contending that its reliance on *emotional memory* led actors into uncontrolled hysteria. He told him to replace it with imagination.' (Whyman, 2008: 195).

Chekhov would have been in a better position than most, one would think, to know that Stanislavski's conception of the workings of the imagination would be rather more sophisticated and advanced than his detractors found useful to portray. It may be the case, however, that Chekhov might not have fully appreciated how Stanislavski's ideas had developed in the years since Chekhov had worked with him. Chekhov's most direct and intensive experience of working with Stanislavski was in the years just prior to the 1917 Revolution, when Stanislavski was using, perhaps crudely, Affective Memory and working with a more limited view of the working and creative potential of the imagination than he would later encompass. By 1928, as the following extract from a piece Stanislavski wrote for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* the following year shows, he was viewing the relationship between experience and imagination and creativity in much more sophisticated terms. The passage is of crucial importance, I would say, in understanding the

sophistication and complexity of Stanislavski's view, and as such is worth quoting from at some length:

'It is impossible to influence feelings directly, but it is possible to stir creative fantasy in oneself in the right direction and fantasy, as the observations of scientific psychology indicate, will excite our *affective memory* and, luring the elements of feelings experienced at some time from its hidden stores beyond the boundaries of consciousness, organises them again to correspond with the images which arise in us. In this way, the images of our fantasy, flaring up in us without any effort on our part find a response in our affective memory and evoke in it the sounds of corresponding feelings. This is why creative fantasy is the fundamental gift the actor needs...There is widespread published opinion that the method I practice in the artistic training of the actor, as it appeals to the stores of his / her affective memory; that is, his personal emotional experience, via the imagination, will by the same token result in reducing the range of his / her creativity to the limits of his / her personal experience and will not allow him / her to play roles which are dissimilar to him / her in terms of psychological mould. This opinion is based on a very simple misunderstanding, since those elements of actuality from which our fantasy shapes its imaginary creations are also drawn by it from our limited experience and the wealth and variety of these creations is achieved only through *combinations* of the elements drawn from experience. The musical scale has only seven basic tones; the spectrum of sunlight only seven basic colours but the combination of sounds in music and colours in art is infinite. The same thing must be said about the basic feelings which are preserved in our affective memory, just as the way in which images we apprehend from the outside world are preserved in our intellectual memory; the number of these basic feelings in the internal experience in each of us is limited, but shades and combinations are as numerous as the combinations created from the

elements of the external experience of the activity of the imagination (pp. 280-1, cited in Whyman, 2008: 196-7).

It is clear from this account, then, that Stanislavski valued 'creative fantasy' very highly, and rather than viewing prior experience as something to be reconstructed and used in any direct or literal sense, it was on the contrary to be seen as a creative act, the unconscious – consciously lured - combining and synthesising different elements of past experiences into a new, artistic creative state.

In speaking of acting, Chekhov (as did Meyerhold) tended to use the word '*obraz*', or image, as opposed to Stanislavski's '*geroi*', which can be translated as 'hero / heroine', or 'role' (not, interestingly and importantly, however, as 'character'. This is discussed in more detail later (p55). For Chekhov the process was a reaching outwards, mentally, emotionally and physically, towards what the imagination conjured up, and then attempting to imitate that image. Stanislavski's System is – in Chekhov's terms - more inward looking, drawing only upon the experience and understanding of the actor. For Stanislavski, however, as the Encyclopaedia Britannica entry showed, the imaginative process was a central and creative element in the System also and should, in theory, have been enough to provide the basis, potentially, for an actor to create and inhabit an infinite variety of roles, played in an infinite variety of dramatic styles or genres.

In practice this was not always the case. Why was this? Perhaps the answer might lie to some degree in that humanist psychological basis to the System, drawing upon the actor's personal experience, which whilst giving it much of its foundational strength and value, may also have prevented it from flying freely into the realms of fantasy and the grotesque – precisely the areas Vakhtangov and Chekhov felt the theatre needed to explore.

### **Brecht**

Outside of Russia perhaps the most well-known critic of Stanislavski amongst his contemporaries was the German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht. Brecht, lacking the opportunity to work directly with or observe Stanislavski's practice first hand (unlike Meyerhold, Vakhtangov and Michael Chekhov) was scathing in his writings throughout the 1930s about what he perceived to be Stanislavski's approach to theatre. The following extract from his poem *On Everyday Theatre*, leaves little doubt as to what type of performer Brecht has in his sights:

The mysterious transformation  
That allegedly goes on in your theatres  
Between dressing room and stage – an actor  
Leaves the dressing room, a king  
Appears on the stage: that magic  
Which I have often seen reduce the stagehands, beerbottles in hand  
To laughter –  
Does not occur here.

(Brecht, 1976: 178)

A less openly mocking and contemptuous, though no less critical account of the same approach can be found in 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', in which Brecht sums up the aim of the Stanislavskian actor as being 'complete conversion' into the character being played. 'This complete conversion operation', Brecht says, 'is extremely exhausting. Stanislavski puts forward a series of means – a complete system – by which what he calls 'creative mood' can repeatedly be manufactured afresh at every performance. For the actor cannot usually manage to feel for very long on end that he really is the other person; he soon gets exhausted and begins just to copy various superficialities of the other person's speech and hearing, whereupon the effect on the public drops off alarmingly.' (Willett, 1964: 93). Brecht then goes on to discuss why he thinks the process is, ultimately, doomed to fail: 'This is certainly due to the fact that the other person has been created by an 'intuitive' and accordingly murky process which takes place in the subconscious. The subconscious is not at all responsive to guidance; it has as it were a bad memory.' (Ibid: 94). Brecht, ever the rationalist, is clearly sceptical to say the least about Stanislavski's aim to try to tap into the subconscious of the actor – not only in terms of whether he thinks this is possible (which he clearly does not) but also in terms of whether it is necessary at all.

Brecht's assumption that the Stanislavskian actor aimed for 'complete conversion' shows that he was unaware of Stanislavski's stress on the need for multi-layered consciousness during performance. He also appeared to assume as defining characteristics of Stanislavski's practice an uncritical



espousal of Naturalism, and - absurdly - his use of Naturalism and empathy to *deliberately* dull the responses of audiences: 'What he [Stanislavski] cared about was naturalness, and as a result everything in his theatre seemed far too natural for anyone to pause and go into it thoroughly. You don't normally examine your own home or your own feeding habits, do you?' (Willett, 1964: 237) and 'The audience's sharp eye frightens him [Stanislavski]. He shuts it' (Ibid). Eric Bentley notes that 'Such passages remind us that *Brecht knew very little about Stanislavski* [emphasis in the original] and, like the rest of the world, thought of him as the lackey of one style of theatre. If the word 'Soviet' does not define Stanislavski's general outlook, neither do words like 'naturalistic' and 'empathetic' define his theatre as a whole.' (Bentley, 1964-65: 73-4). Meg Mumford also points out the 'limited sources of information available' to Brecht during the 1930s (the period of his most trenchant criticisms of Stanislavski) and that what little information there was 'tended to have as their focus theatre practice prior to the Revolution, which gave emphasis to the very psycho-technique abhorred by Brecht.' (Mumford, 1995: 243).

By the 1950's, however, the world, and Brecht's own circumstances, were radically changed, and Brecht found himself obliged to reassess the methods used by his old (in Brecht's eyes) adversary. The results were quite remarkable – he 'began to view himself more as Stanislavski's progressive successor than his staunch opponent.' (Ibid: 257). There were a number of factors involved in this change. On one level it can be seen cynically as wily old Brecht being politically expedient – a calculated bid for his and the Berliner

Ensemble's survival by attempting to be seen as being in step with the prevailing political and artistic orthodoxy under Stalin. In a double historical development of supreme irony, Stanislavski had become almost deified (and his System grossly distorted in the process) in the Soviet Union as the supposed foundational figure behind Socialist Realism, whilst Brecht was regarded as having dangerously Formalist tendencies – the very tendencies which, as we have seen, had led Meyerhold and many others not only to artistic exile but to the Gulag or to the death chamber. As Bentley notes, 'While it is ironic enough that Stanislavski should be the darling of a terrorist regime, it is doubly ironic that supporters of that regime should champion him against an artist who had gone out of his way to praise Stalinist terrorism.' (Bentley, 1964-65: 72). Mumford makes the same point: 'Brecht's anti-Stanislavski stance of the 'thirties, adopted in the name of the socialist cause, was regarded negatively by socialist realists of the 'fifties as a betrayal of their aesthetic and society.' (Mumford, 1995: 242). So political expediency would undoubtedly have played at least some part in Brecht's reassessment of Stanislavski.

The evidence shows, however, that this was not the only factor, and that in fact Brecht's new-found admiration for the System was not entirely cynical. Eric Bentley makes the point that in his early years Brecht worked with highly trained, professional actors. To a large degree he could take their skills for granted, and concentrate upon using them to realise his artistic vision through his plays. Bentley contrasts this with Stanislavski, who as a director brought the perspective of an *actor* (rather than a playwright like Brecht), and says:

‘Every director looks for clay to mould. For Stanislavski, the clay consisted of actors; for Brecht, of his own collected writings.’ (Bentley, 1964-65: 70).

When Brecht returned to the German Democratic Republic in 1949 to build the Berliner Ensemble, however, he could no longer rely on this pool of trained acting talent. The years of Nazism and the war had resulted in a generation which had not been able to train as previous generations had. Bentley again: ‘That he [Brecht] began to get interested in training young people after World War II represents... a change of situation in his country. It was not to a land of well-trained Weigels, Homolkas, and Granachs that he returned, and so in his latter days Brecht acquired an interest in what had been Stanislavski’s lifelong concern: the development of young people into actors. (Ibid: 71). Fortunately for him, this coincided with greater access to information about the approaches to acting which Stanislavski had actually developed, particularly in the years after the revolution. Mumford notes that Stanislavski’s later work ‘in some respects overlapped with Brecht’s theatre concepts. These included ensemble work, the double perspective of the actor, the through line and super-objective, and the method of physical actions.’ (Mumford, 1995: 243).

Brecht obviously had developed his own theatre practice not only independently of but actually, as we have seen, defining himself against (what he thought of as) Stanislavski’s work. Whilst he would have recognised these areas of overlap with his own practice, he also clearly laid different emphases upon different aspects of the work than Stanislavski would have. So, for

example, Brecht took Stanislavski's concept of the super-objective, which for Stanislavski represents the Ruling Idea of the play – what the play is essentially about, which then unites and guides the actors, helping them to work together in the service of a coherent and focused production – but then emphasised the distancing aspects of this process for the actors much more than Stanislavski himself would have done. Mumford notes that Brecht 'By the 'fifties... had become more aware of Stanislavski's use of the concept of the 'superobjective', which he interpreted as involving the subordination of everything to the central idea. For the actors to fulfil the superobjective they would have to maintain in rehearsal and performance a certain degree of critical distance from their characters. The implication is that perhaps Stanislavskian acting demanded not only an empathetic but also a critical and objective approach.' (Ibid: 244).

Reading accounts of Stanislavski's actual practice showed Brecht just how much he had misunderstood and misrepresented the System. For example, during a 1927 rehearsal for 'Days of the Turbins', Mumford again notes, Stanislavski, 'disgruntled with the actors' efforts... stopped the proceedings and asked:

What is false here? You have played your feelings, your suffering, and that is not right. I must see an event, I must see how people act in this event and not how they suffer and what they go through. In what you have done there is no logic, no truth. You carry the wounded in slowly and make an effort to show your deep spiritual suffering, but in reality you would have to storm into the room, after you took the wounded person with you in order to save him, for in the city the White Guards are

already being hunted down... Think first of what you should do with the seriously injured person who is losing blood. How should he be set down? How can you save him?’

[Mumford goes on] ‘The actors had neglected the fable, the heart of the play and production in Brecht’s opinion, and the physical actions which constitute it. He [Brecht] draws upon the description in order to support his own interpretation of the method of physical actions as not being simply the physical externalisation of the private inner life, but rather entailing the subordination of the characters’ emotions to the action of the play, which is itself ‘not directly dependent on the emotions.’ (Ibid: 244). A closer reading of Stanislavski’s intervention, however, reveals that what he is actually doing is not *subordinating* the characters’ emotions at all but rather getting at the believable *truth* of those emotions *in the context of the action of the play* – it is not a case of *either* emotions *or* story / action but the finding of the truth of the former in the context of the latter. This is an important distinction, because it gives the lie to the misconception shared by many, including Brecht, that Stanislavski’s approach is purely subjective and lacks any objective connection with external reality. For example, in ‘Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting’, Brecht wrote: ‘When the actor checks the truth of his performance (a necessary operation, which Stanislavski is much concerned with in his system) he is not just thrown back on his ‘natural sensibilities’, but can always be corrected by a comparison with reality (is that how an angry man really speaks? Is that how an offended man sits down?) and so from outside, by other people.’ (Willett, 1964: 95). This is, of course, exactly the kind of practice that Stanislavski is demonstrating in the 1927 rehearsal!

In the final analysis and with the benefit of hindsight we can see that there were some undoubted affinities between the practices of these two very different men. As with Meyerhold, however, one must be wary of overstating the degree to which Brecht's practice dovetailed with that of Stanislavski. Whilst he did come to appreciate significant aspects of the System, Brecht's radical views with regard to the actor / audience relationship, and the kind of provocation which art should offer – the conscious problematizing of the artistic experience which in many ways prefigured the postmodernist critiques of the following generation – meant that, for Brecht, Stanislavski's System alone was not an adequate means to create the kind of politicised theatre he desired.

In 1955, only months before his death, and over thirty years after he had sniggered his way through the Moscow Art Theatre production of 'The Three Sisters' in Berlin, Brecht visited Russia and saw Stanislavski's production of 'The Ardent Heart' at the Moscow Art Theatre, still in repertoire seventeen years after his death in 1938. This time, Mumford notes, Brecht 'recognised affinities' with his own work, and 'some time after the performance he commented that now he had to say what many had said to him – 'that the theory contradicted the practice' and that 'Stanislavski's theory was obviously as misunderstood as his own.' (Ibid: 256).

For all their criticisms, then, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov and Michael Chekhov, along with Brecht in his later years, had no hesitation in acknowledging

Stanislavski as a towering figure on the theatrical scene throughout the Modernist era. I will now begin to consider Stanislavski in a Postmodern, some would say Postdramatic context.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **STANISLAVSKI IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT**

#### **What is postmodernism?**

Before going on to consider Stanislavski in a postmodern context, we ought first to consider the question – ‘What is postmodernism?’ Clearly in a study of this kind there is not the scope to explore this in any satisfactory detail – especially since this is a question virtually impossible to answer satisfactorily in any case! Whitmore, quoting Hassan, makes a useful point about the problem of differing or overlapping terminologies:

‘Postmodernism is difficult to define precisely... because it is usually contrasted with either modernism or the avant-garde. ‘Thus some critics mean by postmodernism what others call avant-gardism, while others still would call the same phenomenon simply modernism.’ (Hassan, in Whitmore, 1994:3)

One could argue, in fact, that it is in the very nature of postmodernism to be impossible to define. Nick Kaye argues that ‘Postmodernity... is a turning against modernity in a questioning of legitimacy which refuses to supplant that which is called into question with the *newly legitimate*.’ Kaye, 1994:2). Elinor Fuchs, in turn, speaks of a ‘legitimation crisis’ as part of the ‘cultural condition’ of postmodernism (Fuchs, 1996:3). This questioning of legitimacy is a key point of departure – a rupture – between modernism and postmodernism. Modernism questioned accepted orthodoxies, exploded accepted forms, and



modernists, in so far as one can group together such wildly disparate artists and thinkers, saw themselves as part of a teleological process, as part of a progressive movement over time, moving forward, breaking new ground and in their eyes *legitimately* so. In this sense, for many artists and thinkers, the modernist project still continues today. For post-modernists, however, a combination of factors have made the modernist sense of legitimacy impossible. These factors include the political horrors of the twentieth century, the failure of the left (thus far) to win over the masses and transform society for the better, and the philosophical writings of thinkers such as Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard, and many more. I will consider the ideas of Derrida in more detail below, but in essence he called into question the extent to which we can ever know anything – and therefore the extent to which we can claim legitimacy for anything. The notion or technique of deconstruction, which grew from Derrida's thinking, provided the tools for taking literally everything apart and questioning its meaning in an endless process which of course includes postmodernism itself – hence Kaye's point above that it is 'a questioning of legitimacy which refuses to supplant that which is called into question with the *newly legitimate*.'

To return to Kaye's formulation of postmodernism, he explains how of its very deconstructive nature it will always fundamentally question its own form and its own meaning –its own claim to legitimacy:

In so far as it critiques and upsets a 'modernist' striving towards foundation, the postmodern must occur as an anti-foundational disruption of precisely the move towards category and

definition that a general or prescriptive account of the 'forms' and 'meanings' of postmodern art would produce.' (Kaye, 1994:3)

He continues:

'One cannot, from this perspective and with consistency, it follows, begin a study of the postmodern in performance by setting out a prescriptive view of what 'postmodern theatre' *is*. One might much more appropriately say what postmodern theatre *is not*. Evidently this notion of the postmodern cannot readily be identified with 'conventional' theatre and drama. The forms of 'performance' considered here are 'wilfully' unconventional and 'experimental', acting, in one way or another, to upset or challenge the idea of what a painting, sculpture, dance or drama is.' (Ibid:3)

And also, clearly, to upset or challenge the idea of what 'acting' or 'performance' is.

I will consider the implications of this for the Stanislavskian actor in a postmodern context presently, but first I want to look more closely at Philip Auslander's questioning of Stanislavski's (and others) work in the light of Derrida's writings, and also Lehmann's notion of 'postdramatic theatre'.

### **Postmodern / Postdramatic Theatre and Acting**

Philip Auslander, in his essay "Just be your self: *Logocentrism* and *différance* in performance theory" (Auslander, 1997) takes two of the central observations and theories in the work of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and

applies them to performance theory – specifically the work of Stanislavski, Brecht and Grotowski. He concludes that despite the very different dramatic aims, approaches and objectives of these three practitioners they nevertheless all operate within the assumptions and confines of a logocentric discourse:

‘Theorists as diverse as Stanislavski, Brecht and Grotowski all implicitly designate the actor’s self as the *logos* of performance; all assume that the actor’s self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths... Although Stanislavski, Brecht and Grotowski all theorize the actor’s self differently, all posit the self as an autonomous foundation for acting. An examination of these theories of acting through the lens of deconstructive philosophy reveals that, in all three theorisations, the actorly self is, in fact, produced by the performance it supposedly grounds. (Auslander, 1997: 30).

Auslander furthermore points out– again, reporting Derrida –that ‘the theatre remains theological as long as it is logocentric’ (Auslander, 1997: 29).

This is not, perhaps, the place to go into a detailed discussion of the historical background of the philosophical concepts to do with logocentrism and theology, but it is worth noting that the basic idea can be traced back to the Stoics, who, as Thompson puts it ‘saw the universe as essentially a rational place, designed by and ordered by the *logos* (literally ‘word’, or reason). Their view of the universe, along with their moral principles, found parallels in the development of Christianity, where the world was seen to be ruled by a

rational deity, and where Christ was described as the *logos* made flesh.’  
(Thompson, 2001:17) Thompson contrasts this view with that of the Epicureans, who ‘developed the earlier work of the Atomists. For them the universe was essentially impersonal and determined by the material combination of atoms. The human observer was therefore liberated from any universal principle or authority, and was free to define his or her own goals.’ (Ibid:17) It is worth taking a moment to consider this distinction. The Epicurean view dispenses with the need for a theological ‘first cause’ – the *logos* – in order to understand and explain the world. The logic of their doing so, however, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that we cannot know anything about the world, cannot use language with some success (however imperfectly) to communicate that knowledge (however imperfect). The same would apply to our sense of Self. Dispensing with the *logos* merely dispenses with the idea that there is any divine or theological *cause* of the Self (and all other phenomena).

That said, in order to understand what Auslander, following Derrida, means by ‘theological’ in a dramatic context, and why this should be significant, we must consider further the central concepts he is dealing with in the work of Derrida – primarily logocentrism and *différance* of course, but also, consequently, presence and deconstruction. Clearly, there is not the space here to go into these concepts in detail, but I will attempt to outline some of the basic elements.

Derrida's main influences, the four foundation stones upon which he built his own theories, were Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Saussure.

From Nietzsche he took a profound scepticism towards the supposed truth claims of the Western philosophical and metaphysical tradition. As John Lechte puts it, Derrida shows a 'concern to reflect upon and undermine [the Western tradition of thought's] dependence on the logic of identity... [which presupposes] an essential reality – an origin' (Lechte, 1994: 106). In terms of Stanislavski's views on the importance of truth and belief, it is worth noting here that he uses the word 'truth' to mean simply that which feels believable for the actor on the stage. This is, of course, necessarily linked to 'real life' in that this is the reference point for the actor – 'Can / Do I believe in the truth of these particular actions onstage in the sense that I can believe that if this was real life then this is what this person might credibly do? The logic, however, remains circular, and contained entirely within the person of the actor in relation to the stage setting:

'When there is no reality onstage and you have acting, then the creation of truth and belief needs to be prepared in advance. That means that truth and belief first arise in the imagination, as an artistic fiction, which is then translated onto the stage... Truth is inseparable from belief, and belief from truth. They cannot exist without each other and without both there can be no experiencing or creative work.' (Stanislavski, 2008:153-4).

Nietzsche and Derrida are concerned with truth in a more objective sense, to do with the possibility or otherwise of any 'true' human connection with or understanding of – or even the existence of – external reality. Stanislavski does not appear to have been troubled by such questioning, and as such has no problem with truth as a concept).

From Freud's work, Derrida was drawn to the questioning of the supposed unity of the individual human psyche – how Freud probed the cracks and differences between, for example, the self and one's awareness of that self, of the conscious and subconscious mind, of the traces of past experience – some clearly recollected, some submerged within the subconscious – all of which could be said to divide the self from within, so that the 'self' is from the beginning, and fundamentally, marked by difference rather than unity.

Auslander points out that 'the actor's self, the basis for an unbroken line of characterization, is itself fragmented.' (Auslander, 1997:31) We will have occasion to return to the question of the nature of the Self in more detail presently, but for now it is just worth noting that Auslander goes on to make the point that Stanislavski himself divides the self into consciousness and the subconscious. He then goes on to contrast Derrida's view of the subconscious with that of Stanislavski. 'In his reading of Freud, Derrida asserts that the making conscious of unconscious materials is a process of creation, not retrieval... For the most part, Stanislavski treats the subconscious as what Derrida shows it is not: a repository of retrievable data, as in his famous metaphor of the house through which the actor searches for a tiny bead of a particular emotion memory.' (Ibid:31). Auslander, I would

argue here, may not perhaps fully appreciate the sophistication of Stanislavski's thinking – which, we must remember, was pre-Freudian - on this subject. As we saw earlier in considering Stanislavski's debate with Michael Chekhov over the nature and importance of imagination, as evidenced in his 1929 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry, he saw the relationship between memory and imagination as a fluid one. The subconscious in this respect is seen absolutely as one of creation, not retrieval. In fact, he even goes so far as to say explicitly that the 'retrieval' approach is not only difficult to the point of impossibility but also fundamentally misguided in that it is striving for something that is probably no longer resonant, alive for the actor – he refers to

'the archives of our memory. It has its cupboards, chests, large and small boxes. Some are accessible, others less so. How, among them, are you going to find the 'little bead' of recollected emotion...? ... Don't imagine you can return to yesterday's memory, be content with today's. Learn to accept memories that have come to life afresh. Then your heart will respond with renewed energy...give up the idea of hunting old beads.' (Stanislavski, 2008:207).

Auslander appears to have mistaken some of the method for the entire phenomenon, the method here being the conscious attempt to influence the subconscious – so, the searching for the bead, as it were, as if finding the bead would constitute success. Perhaps it is this misconception that accounts for his slightly puzzled tone immediately afterwards: 'He [Stanislavski] acknowledges, however, that memory distorts, that the information we retrieve is not the same as the data we store, adding that

distorted memories are of greater use to the actor than accurate ones because they are purified, universalised, and, therefore, aesthetic in nature.' (Ibid:31). Yet this is entirely the point of the exercise – creation, not retrieval. In *An Actor's Work*, Kostya says that he is confused about how and why his memory blurs together different incidents he has witnessed. He cites as an example an accident he saw in the Arbat, in which a beggar has been run over and horribly killed by a trolley car, and another incident some time before, in which he saw a Serb crouched over a dying monkey in the street, trying to feed the animal some sugarplum. Now, Kostya says, whenever he thinks of the incident in the Arbat, it is the image of the dead monkey and the Serb, not the unknown beggar which comes into his mind. Tortsov then explains:

'What happened to you... illustrates very well the process of crystallisation which takes place in our emotion memory. Everybody, in their time, sees not one but many tragic accidents. They are stored in the memory but not every detail, only the features which have made the most impact. All these traces of similar experiences and feelings are distilled into a single wider, deeper memory. There is nothing superfluous in it, only what is most essential. This is a synthesis of all like feelings. It is related not to the small, individual parts of the incident but to all similar cases. That is memory on the grand scale. It is clearer, deeper, denser, richer in content and sharper than reality itself.' (Stanislavski, 2008:206).

To return to Derrida, and his formative influences - widening the scope of his considerations to the material world and linking back to Nietzsche, Derrida took from Heidegger the concept of 'Destruktion' – the absolute questioning of



the nature of reality, of what can actually be said to 'be' with any sure foundation.

The fourth and final cornerstone of Derrida's influences was Saussure and his studies in structural linguistics – Structuralism. Saussure theorised that the meaning of individual parts in any given entity was not so important as the relationship between the parts – indeed the meaning actually arises out of that relationship. For example, in the case of traffic light colours, the actual colours red / amber / green are actually arbitrary. The association, or meaning of 'Stop' with red and 'Go' with green only exists because we agree it exists – objectively, the colours could be changed, if everyone agreed to the change. So the meaning resides only in the collective agreement and understanding given to those colours in that particular context and relationship, or structure. As Jim Powell points out, however, 'structuralism depends upon structures, and structures depend upon centers' (Powell, 1997: 19). In 1966, at a major international conference at the Johns Hopkins University, Derrida gave a paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," which called into question the very idea of a stable centre. The conference was a gathering of Structuralist thinkers from around the globe, but Derrida's contribution questioned fundamentally the very basis of Structuralist thought – indeed all Western thought. For those who accepted what Derrida was saying, the era of Poststructuralism had begun.

Derrida followed up his paper with a series of revolutionary books, principally *Writing and Difference*, and *Of Grammatology*. Jim Powell notes that 'Since

then, the intellectual movement he spawned, known as deconstruction, has gained both admirers and detractors worldwide, bringing about a global change in the way many thinkers think' (Powell, 1997: 8). But what is it, exactly, that Derrida was saying, and how does this have a bearing upon theatre practice, as Auslander has shown?

Jim Powell notes that 'deconstruction often involves a way of reading that concerns itself with decentering – with unmasking the problematic nature of all centers [and that] according to Derrida, all Western thought is based on the idea of a center – an origin, a Truth, an Ideal Form, a Fixed Point, an Immovable Mover, an Essence, a God, a Presence, which... guarantees all meaning' (Powell, 1998: 100). As Auslander has shown,

'Theorists as diverse as Stanislavski, Brecht and Grotowski all implicitly designate the actor's self as the *logos* of performance; all assume that the actor's self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths... Although Stanislavski, Brecht and Grotowski all theorize the actor's self differently, all posit the self as an autonomous foundation for acting...

Stanislavski's discourse on acting is inscribed firmly within logocentrism: he insists on the need for logic, coherence, and unity – the "unbroken line" – in acting and invokes the authority of such theological conceptions as soul and spirit in his writings.' (Auslander, 1997:30).

There are at least three related concepts which need teasing out here: Firstly the conception of the actor's self as a point of origin, which as we have noted Stanislavski would have conceived of as a given whole, albeit divided between conscious and subconscious. (He also at times talks as though there is a split between mind and body, but at other times he sees them as unified, writing about what we might call the 'psycho-physical'). Derrida and Auslander, on the other hand, question the very idea of the 'Self'. Perhaps it is worth remembering here also Elinor Fuchs' suggestion 'that one of the meanings of 'postmodern' – its psychological formation, I would say now – was a dispersed idea of self, and that this dispersal was represented in many different ways in the contemporary alternative theatre.' (Fuchs, 1996:9). Fuchs explains that, amongst other sources, she was drawing upon 'a set of related ideas derived from the world of French critical, psychoanalytic, and feminist theory: Lacan's insight into the symbolic construction of subjectivity, Foucault's announcement of the 'end of man,' Derrida's attack on the 'metaphysics of presence,' [...] the exposures by Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva of masculinist philosophical and psychoanalytic constructions, often in the foregoing theoreticians themselves. This poststructuralist theory, in the aggregate, was the chief articulator of the 'crisis of representation' (Ibid: 1-2). Fuchs does not mention, but it may be useful to refer here to Althusser's (1971) notion of interpellation, which McDougall (2006: 200) defines as 'The misrecognition of oneself in a media text...for example, women recognising a sense of their gender which was not their construction.' The net effect of all these influences and ideas, Fuchs suggests, which she sees as the 'great unifying trait' of postmodernism, was a sense of 'desubstantiation' – a dispersed sense of self.

Secondly, as noted earlier, there is the differing uses of the word 'truth' for Stanislavski and for the more philosophically rigorous Derrida.

Thirdly, this has implications for the notion of the role for the actor, in that just as if the stability, essence, fixedness etc of the self of the actor is being called into question, then of course so must that of the 'character' s/he is playing. What is interesting to note here, however, is, as I indicated briefly earlier (p33) that Stanislavski himself does not tend to talk about character as such but '*gero*', which can be translated as hero / heroine, or role. Carnicke notes that Stanislavski 'rarely uses the word "character" in Russian, preferring either "image" (*obraz*, the common Russian word for character) or "role" (by which he means the words that serve as a "score" for the actor's performance, in the same way that notes provide a "score" for musicians).' (Carnicke, 2009: 4). This is a crucial point: the word 'character' carries connotations of fixedness, of there being an 'ideal', an essence to strive for in performance – at worst, a 'right' way to play the role. Now, there may be many 'wrong' ways to play a role, which can be found and modified in rehearsal, but it is surely not helpful for any actor to have the pressure of striving for a single 'correct' portrayal. Hughes puts the Stanislavskian approach to a role like this:

'The actor is not presented with an independently existing being, 'the character'; rather, he is invited to collaborate in the character's creation.' (Hughes, 1993:43). Just as a musician works with the score in order to create the music, so the actor works with the role in order to create a living, feeling

being onstage – a being unique to that particular combination of actor and role. Another actor working with the same role must necessarily result in a different creation – it is a different combination of elements. This is part of the creative possibilities inherent in the theatrical process. But then not only does theatre allow for a new creation each time a new actor plays a role, it also allows for - indeed Stanislavski would have said demands – new creation *with each new performance*. This is what the System, in attempting to bring the actor to the creative state, is ultimately about. Stanislavski's generic and neutral 'role / hero / heroine' formulation does not attempt to fix the actor's performance into any preordained mould. In this sense it allows for a sense of free play, a deferral of any final meaning, which opens up the actor's possibilities for continued creativity and also puts Stanislavski's approach in this sense into an area which works with, not against, the grain of postmodernist thought. So with each new performance the actor, if s/he has attained the creative state, will create the role afresh. The performance, the character, will not be fixed but will develop and evolve, alert and responsive to the differences in the way the actor is thinking and feeling and also to what his or her fellow actors are doing onstage. Of course the changes are likely to be so small and subtle as to be almost imperceptible most of the time – it would be unlikely that a performance would change radically from night to night in any overt manner – but the net difference in terms of effect on the audience of a living performance as opposed to a mechanical one can be huge. Also, whilst the actor must commit to the performance in the moment of performance – i.e. must make a definite action of some kind, the 'objective', controlling part of him/herself (as part of that multi-layered attention, all part of

the creative state) is making a judgement of sorts, moment by moment ('Yes, that feels right, truthful, believable' or 'No, that's not right...' etc), and it is this sense of free-play, of provisionality, of nothing being fixed which 'fits' with a postmodern sensibility. We can link this also to Derrida's concept of 'différance'.

Derrida, following Saussure, argued that all language, all words are essentially arbitrary, so that for example one can look up 'cow / vache' etc in dictionaries but when we do so we only find more lists of signifiers, sounds, so that we never actually arrive at a stable signified, and stable meaning – which therefore becomes endlessly deferred.

It follows, therefore, that there is always a divide between a given material entity and the human attempt to define and capture that entity through language. There is a **difference** between these two things, and any attempt to close that gap, to fix the two is ultimately, endlessly **deferred**. It is out of these two words that Derrida coined his famous ***différance***.

As noted earlier, Jim Powell (talking about logocentrism) makes the point that 'according to Derrida, all Western thought is based on the idea of a center – an origin, a Truth, an Ideal Form, a Fixed Point, an Immovable Mover, an Essence, a God, a Presence, which... guarantees all meaning' (Powell, 1998: 100).

For Derrida, however, meaning is always going to be endlessly deferred, there is always going to be some element of difference between any

supposed, alleged centre and human understanding and experience of that centre.

As Peter Barry points out, Structuralism, being essentially a linguistic theory, was possessed of a 'confident positivism' and was therefore comfortable with its discovery of binary polarities as a 'structure of contradictory elements which structuralists see as fundamental to the human way of perceiving and organising reality' (Barry, 2002: 50). With Derrida and Poststructuralism, however, this linguistic theory was taken to a more philosophical level. Now there was a profound scepticism at work with regard to the relationship between sign and concept (or signifier and signified), a linguistic anxiety, and as a consequence of this a distrust of Reason and a questioning of the nature of the Self. The Self was now seen as a dissolved or constructed subject, a 'tissue of textualities rather than an individual person' (Barry, 2002: 63). (This takes us back to Elinor Fuchs' 'dispersed idea of self').

Having attempted to clarify the nature, context and limitations of logocentrism and *différance* we can now begin to usefully turn to questions of Identity, the Self, and Presence in the light of Derrida.

John McGowan very usefully points out that 'Derrida does not claim that the subject does not exist, only "that there is no subject who is agent, author and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity – like objectivity – is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*" (Derrida, quoted in McGowan, 1991:

120). In other words, Derrida is not denying that people are individuals, with a sense of self, but he is questioning any assumption that any individual self is somehow unique in any *a priori* sense, or has any ultimate control or ability to stand outside of the essential unknowability and indeterminacy of existence.

Similarly Lechte notes that

'If discipline and genre boundaries *are* conventions with quite specific histories – that is, by implication, if they are only set up on the basis of a kind of trust – it becomes possible to subvert them. What is then being subverted is in fact a relatively fragile working principle, and not some deeply entrenched, essential truth of some kind... *Because identities are constructed, and not essential, they are inevitably fragile, but no less important for all that* [my emphasis]' (Lechte, 1994: 108).

This point about identity – i.e. the self – being constructed rather than essential, and therefore fragile, but still important, is a crucial one. Auslander, following Derrida, questioned the idea of the actor's self as a basis – or logos – for performance. As we have seen earlier, however, if we take the Atomist / Epicurean philosophic approach (as opposed to the Stoic), which dispenses with the need for a First Cause or Logos, then a constructed self as opposed to an essential self, along with constructed and shared (and flawed / incomplete / provisional etc) human knowledge (human truths) can then be viewed as entirely valid. If one takes this viewpoint, then even within Derridaian terms, where 'texts previously regarded as unified artistic artefacts are shown to be fragmented, self-divided, and centreless' (Barry, 2002: 68) –



for 'texts' read 'identity', or 'self' – these things are (as Lechte says above) still important subjects which can function as the potential foundation for creative work. In this sense creative work involves using 'the self as an autonomous foundation for acting.' (Auslander, 1997: 30). I would question the extent to which the actor's self can be seen as entirely 'autonomous' here, in the sense that theatre making and performance is usually a collaborative process in which the actor is constantly creatively modifying what s/he does in relation to what the director and other actors (and others) are doing around them, all engaged in the same creative enterprise of putting together the production, of whatever kind.

Also, whilst I am being critical of Auslander's own critical view of the role of the actor's self as the foundation for performance outlined above, I do think his point about 'the actorly self [being] in fact produced by the performance it supposedly grounds' is an interesting and useful one. I would agree wholeheartedly that an actor's self, in performance, in the creative state, is being produced by that performance – that the performing self is a construction built out of the actor drawing upon his or her life experience and understanding, inhabiting the role and simultaneously standing outside of, monitoring and controlling the performance.

Now, in the light of what we have learned from Derrida, we can begin to consider Stanislavski and his relevance in a postmodern context more deeply.

John McGowan, citing Jonathan Arac, has argued that the early work of Derrida has been misread due to its being interpreted through a Modernist, rather than postmodernist lens:

‘What Derrida’s early work argued was that representation could not be anchored, its truth could not be guaranteed, by reference to some thing-in-itself to which it corresponded. Derrida showed that that thing-in-itself was always absent and thus could not be called in as a witness to the representation’s validity. This absence, however, does not mean that Derrida thought of the representation (the signifier) either as now utterly discredited (a mere fiction) or as floating free in some utopian space of freedom. The notion of a free, abstract signifier is modernist through and through, and utterly at odds with Derrida’s notion of the signifier’s being embedded within a system of signifiers, of **traces**. ... As Arac puts it, “the inescapability of representation is Derrida’s deconstructive point against the metaphysical fantasy of pure presence” (McGowan, 1991: 25).

There are a number of crucially important points made here. Arac describes the idea of ‘pure presence’ as a ‘metaphysical fantasy’, but if we can accept that human beings can have access to an impure, partial presence based on traces then there is the basis for an acceptance of a link between the Self and the Other, however limited and potentially misleading this may be. I take the term ‘traces’ here to mean incomplete, perhaps vague, perhaps inadequate and misleading but nonetheless still direct links between the Other, external, objective reality, and the human perception of that reality. Mel Thompson identifies the philosopher Kant’s categories of noumena and phenomena as particularly useful in considering this relationship: ‘His [Kant’s] distinction

between the things we observe (phenomena) and things as they are in themselves (noumena) is of fundamental importance... especially for defining the relationship between the experiences one has and the actual reality which gives rise to such experiences.’ (Thompson, 2003: 4). It is, I would argue, this shared human capacity to pick up upon traces of the objective world which enables the possibility of communication (again admittedly flawed, constrained by language and so on but nevertheless possessed of the quality of connection between Self and Other and thus allowing for testable, arguable human shared experience – a ‘sense of truth’ as Stanislavski would have understood it). McGowan again:

‘It is crucial for Derrida that we recognise that representation, the very functioning of our discursive system, is based on this appropriation of a part of the other coupled with the suppression of that part of the other which is most radically different.’ (McGowan, 1991: 93).

Representation - and by extension Realist - forms of art, including Drama, far from being discredited therefore, can now be seen as a positive, deconstructive tool, which both acknowledges *différance* and uses ‘traces’ creatively. (‘Representation’ here is used in the sense of re-presenting, creating in an artistic form, recognisable phenomena from the ‘real’ world, and not in the perjorative sense Stanislavski often uses it, to mean superficial, external acting with no inner drive or life).

The notion of 'traces', of links between the material world and human experience and understanding, must be seen as part of an infinitely complex system of signifiers. These signifiers can never be fully apprehended by the human – *différance* will always (not) be there - but nevertheless they still place the human in a direct relationship with materiality, with the Other. This is, I will argue, a crucial element in recognising that the Stanislavski approach to acting, far from being outmoded by a postmodern perspective, can actually be confirmed and strengthened in some ways by that perspective.

Stanislavski recognised and was fascinated by the idea of the tantalising traces of experience, memory and imagination which human beings carry around, and much of his System was designed with the aim of attempting to coax, to gain deeper access to, to strengthen and to follow those traces. (I am not of course suggesting that Stanislavski was thinking at all in Derridian terms as such, here, merely that the System is in many ways predicated upon the idea of picking up and trying to follow these wisps of memory and imagination and feeling and thought and intuition which form possible links to a deeper sense of truth and reality, and which I am arguing are analogous in some ways to Derrida's 'traces' which link human perception and objective reality). Furthermore, he also recognised that there is no direct route to facilitate this, no possibility of forcing anything, and that the only possible ways to create the possibility of gaining further access to these traces was to facilitate the 'creative state' which involves playfulness, openness and receptivity to the various stimuli within and without our selves. This creative state is precisely that – a *creative*, not a *re-creative* state. In other words it is not about trying to simply reproduce something, whether it be a past emotion

or an observed, remembered action, but rather to use the traces of those past emotions or remembered actions in the artistic, creative context of the rehearsal room or stage. This – as we have already seen in our consideration of Stanislavski and the creative role of memory, imagination, and the unconscious - has striking parallels with some of what Derrida wrote.

If we return to that strand of thought in Derrida which examined the idea of each human Self being inscribed within language, with language to some extent replacing or standing in for reality – though, as we have seen, not totally, as language will carry at least the concept of traces of reality – Derrida writes:

'The writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper systems, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*.'

(Derrida, 1974: 158)

Commenting upon this passage, Peter Barry notes:

'Reading and interpretation, then, are not just *reproducing* what the writer thought and expressed in the text. This inadequate notion of interpretation Derrida calls a 'doubling commentary', since it tries to reconstruct a pre-existing, non-textual reality (of what the writer did or thought) to lay alongside the text. Instead, critical reading must *produce* the text, since there is nothing behind it for us to reconstruct. Thus, the reading has to be *deconstructive* rather than *reconstructive* in this sense.' (Barry, 2002: 69).

This is very interesting to consider with regard to Stanislavski's approach to acting. Stanislavski was not simply trying to reproduce an emotion or action, but to *produce* an artistic performance, something new and unique in every performance, and in this sense the System is clearly much more of a creative than a simply reconstructive approach. The emphasis is always on the creation of the living, new moment of performance. The actor will, as part of his or her rehearsal and preparation process draw upon his or her life experiences and memories, and may even as part of that process go some way towards reconstructing particular moments from the past. This could be either through improvisations or simply in terms of letting his or her mind search back through the storehouse of memory. This, however, is only ever a means to an end. The object of the exercise, finally, is not to reconstruct anything but to create something new. As noted earlier in this chapter, Stanislavski was well aware that memory distorts, but viewed this as ultimately a positive thing, a creative and imaginative distillation of experience which an artist uses to move forward, not backwards – part of the creative state which is the ultimate aim of the entire System.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **POSTMODERN ACTING AND STANISLAVSKI**

Philip Auslander gives the third chapter of his book *Acting and Performance* (1997) the title “Just be your self” – that deceptively simple-seeming piece of advice familiar to modern actors in the West, and particularly in the United States, where the Method is so influential as an approach to acting. As we have seen earlier in the section on Derrida, the nature of the self in a postmodernist / poststructuralist context – constructed, fragmented, self-divided (as the Self has been seen since the Modernist era) and lacking any centre or essence (the postmodernist twist) – can nonetheless still be considered as a valid phenomenon, and as a conscious part of the material world is capable of apprehending traces of that world (however imperfectly) and using those traces creatively to communicate (however imperfectly) and to make art.

It is, however, precisely this sense of the self as problematised, as not *given*, and also the problematic nature of human communication that marks out much of the terrain of the postmodern. In terms of theatre this manifests itself as a profound mistrust of the realist and illusionist elements in the Western dramatic tradition. What kind of ‘self’ is being presented onstage? If we have doubts about our own sense of self in the world, to what extent can we be sure of what a ‘character’ onstage is, and what should be our relationship to it? Is the fact that some performers are possessed of a certain charisma, or

presence, something we should celebrate and embrace, or reject? What should be our attitude to the willing suspension of disbelief? These are not new questions – they have been around at least as far back as Brecht and Pirandello – but they have a new forcefulness and urgency in our postmodern age. Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment says:

‘I am not interested in un-self-conscious, or non-critical uses of theatrical or performative language to produce effects – that’s Hollywood or the television news. That is mostly what beautiful theatre or beautiful dance is: seductive, and not questioning the rhetorics of its own power. And so I think (or I hope) that when there is anything beautiful in our own work then it is made in a way that problematises the theatrical language and process that produced it.’ (Helmer and Malzacher, 2004: 91-2).

This questioning of what is beautiful, indeed suspicion of beauty itself, would appear to contrast sharply with the Tolstoyan notions of art espoused by Stanislavski – ‘In art we need, above all, to find and understand what is beautiful.’ (Stanislavski, 2008: 16). These differences, however, may not be quite as great as they first seem. Stanislavski was himself critical of what might be called seductive, uncritical forms of so-called ‘beautiful’ performance: ‘This kind of acting has beauty but no depth. It is effective rather than deep. Form is more interesting than content. It acts on the eyes and the ears rather than on the heart and, in consequence, more readily delights than disturbs.’ (Ibid: 27) Stanislavski here shows that he is concerned with a more profound sense of beauty, which may disturb as much or more than delight, and a suspicion of the more seductive, manipulative forms of beauty. At such



moments he and contemporary artists such as Etchells do not seem so far apart.

Hans Theiss Lehmann has characterised contemporary theatre as *postdramatic*. In her introduction to his book *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006), Karen Jurs-Munby writes:

‘post’ here is to be understood neither as an epochal category, nor simply as a chronological ‘after’ drama, a ‘forgetting’ of the dramatic ‘past’, but rather as a rupture and a beyond that continue to entertain relationships with drama and are in many ways an analysis and ‘anamnesis’ of drama. To call theatre ‘postdramatic’ involves subjecting the traditional relationship of theatre to drama to deconstruction.

(Lehmann, 2006: 2).

Lehmann’s thesis is that the dominant paradigm of European theatre has been that of representation, which he defines as ‘the ‘making present’ of speeches and deeds on stage through mimetic dramatic play.’ (Lehmann, 2006: 21). He goes on to say that:

‘dramatic theatre was the formation of illusion. It wanted to construct a *fictional* *cosmos* and let all the stage represent – be – a world... Wholeness, illusion and world representation are inherent in the model ‘drama’; conversely, through its very form, dramatic theatre proclaims wholeness as the *model* of the real. Dramatic theatre ends when these elements are no longer the regulating principle but merely one variant of theatrical art.’ (Lehmann, 2006: 22).

Representation, mimesis, illusion – these are for Lehmann the core problematic elements of drama. In addition, for him, there is the problem of the primacy of the written text:

‘Dramatic theatre is subordinated to the primacy of the text. In the theatre of modern times, the staging largely consisted of the declamation and illustration of written drama.’ (Lehmann, 2006: 21).

In postdramatic theatre the written text, if there is one at all, becomes only one element in both the theatrical process and the performance. In the absence of a single defining vision from a writer – or indeed director or designer - in favour of a more fluid, diffused creative process, Lehmann argues that one of the results is the breaking of the logocentricity of the work. (Lehmann’s argument perhaps underestimates the degree to which much of even the most conventional theatre work is in fact often already a diffused, collaborative process, between directors, performers, designers, technicians and so on, but the main thrust of his argument is that the postdramatic theatre not only does not aspire to any coherent, consistent, artistic ‘wholeness’ but actively rejects it). Lehmann again:

‘the discourse model, with its duality of point of view and vanishing point, omnipotent director here and solipsistic viewer there, preserves the classical ordering model of perspective that was characteristic of drama. The ‘polylogue’ (Kristeva) of the new theatre, however, often breaks away from such an order centred on *one* logos. A *disposition of spaces of meaning and sound-spaces* develops which is open to

multiple uses and which can no longer be simply ascribed to a single organiser or organon – be it an individual or a collective...’ (Lehmann, 2006: 32).

Lehmann’s central thesis is that there is something fundamentally new about postdramatic theatre, and that this forms a, absolute break, a ‘rupture’, from the dramatic theatre tradition (which for Lehmann includes the work of Brecht and Artaud also):

‘We cannot speak of a ‘continuation’ of absurdist or epic theatre in the new theatre but must name the rupture: that epic as much as absurdist theatre, though through different means, clings to the presentation of a fictive and simulated text-cosmos as a dominant, while postdramatic theatre no longer does so... the theatre takes on a fragmentary and partial character. It renounces the long incontestable criteria of unity and synthesis and abandons itself to the chance (and risk) of trusting individual impulses, fragments and microstructures of texts in order to become a new kind of practice.’ (Lehmann, 2006: 55-6).

This ‘new kind of practice’ is precisely what Auslander, drawing upon the work of Josette Feral and Chantal Pontbriand, cites as evidence of the postmodern within a theatre context. The terms he uses differ from those of Lehmann – whereas Lehmann favours ‘theatre’ over ‘drama,’ Auslander (via Feral and Pontbriand) favours ‘performance’ over ‘theatre’ (or ‘acting’). He writes:

‘Drawing their examples chiefly from the 1970s work of such conceptual performance artists as Vito Acconci and Elizabeth Chitty, and such theatre directors as Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson, Pontbriand and Feral propose what they call

“performance” can be seen as deconstructing “theatre”. They suggest that performance exists in an antagonistic relationship with theatre, emphasising that performance specifically deconstructs theatre’s essential features: “Performance rejects all illusion” (Feral 1982: 171); it “presents; it does not represent” (Pontbriand 1982: 155). Both claim that performance is characterised by fragmentation and discontinuity (rather than theatrical coherence) in narrative, in the use of the body and performance space, and in the performance / audience relationship. Thus understood, performance deconstructs and demystifies theatre: “Performance explores the under-side of theatre, giving the audience a glimpse of its inside, its reverse side, its hidden face” (Feral 1982: 176).’ (Auslander 1997: 54).

This ‘under-side of theatre’ inhabited by ‘performance’ as opposed to ‘acting’ is that aspect of theatre performance and acting inherent in the process / performance which traditionally performers and directors have sought to eliminate or minimise or disguise as far as is possible – namely the simultaneous presence of the real alongside the represented. The real human being of the actor(s), the real stage, furniture, props, audience, and performance situation. Lehmann puts it like this:

An especially long pause in speech may be due to an actor involuntarily ‘drying’ (at the level of the real) or it may be intentional (at the level of the staging)... The postdramatic theatre is the first to turn the level of the real explicitly into a ‘co-player’ – and this on a practical and not just theoretical level.’ (Lehmann, 2006:100).

This element of uncertainty as to what exactly is real and what is being acted or represented is exactly what Auslander is referring to in his analysis of the Wooster Group's performances:

'The Wooster Group's personae occupy an ambiguous territory, neither "non-matrixed performing" (Kirby 1995 [1972] ) nor characterisation. This ambiguity was exemplified in *Hula* by the audience's uncertainty as to whether it was watching a group of New York avant-garde performers doing hula dances for reasons of their own or whether there was , in fact, a kind of scenario being played out... who was smiling: Dafoe, enjoying the dance, or a dancer played by Dafoe, or both?' (Auslander, 1997: 40-41).

Lehmann makes clear, however, that there is a purpose to creating this uncertainty:

'In the postdramatic theatre of the real the main point is not the assertion of the real as such (as is the case in the... sensationalist products of the porn industry) but the unsettling that occurs through the *indecidability* whether one is dealing with reality or fiction. The theatrical effect and the effect on consciousness both emanate from this ambiguity.' (Lehmann, 2006: 101).

It is the reality of the performance situation itself, as opposed to any rehearsed or represented fictive world or characterisation which Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment is drawn to:

'I am very attracted to things that are what they are, and I am very attracted to moments where what's happening is what's happening. (Laughs.) A certain kind of 'it is what it is'. For me, there's an inherent ugliness in theatre because it is always trying to do something to you. It wants something. So I would use the word theatrical in a derogatory sense: something that is trying too hard to affect you and is distorting itself by doing this. I am very attracted to theatrical practice where things are given the time, the space, and the place to be what they are, and not forced beyond a certain point. There is a kind of beauty in this work that interests me. I'm thinking of Jerome Bel, or of Edit Kaldor's *Or Press* etc, or of Richard Maxwell's plays even. There's a kind of dramaturgy of anti-dramatics.' (Helmer and Malzacher, 2004: 90-1)

What, then, does this 'dramaturgy of anti-dramatics', this 'new kind of practice', this 'under-side of theatre' mean for the actor / performer? What is 'postmodern performance'? And what, if anything, can the Stanislavski system offer?

Philip Auslander describes the work of the Wooster Group as adopting 'a set of performance personae adopted by its members, roughly comparable to the "lines" in a Renaissance theatre troupe. These personae, while not fixed, recur from piece to piece and reflect to some extent the personalities and interactions of the collectives' members.' (Auslander, 1997: 39-40). As noted earlier there is here a blurring of the distinction between actor and role, an ambiguity as to what is 'real' and what is not. Lehmann notes that 'The actor of postdramatic theatre is often no longer the actor of a role but of a performer offering his/her presence on stage for contemplation.' (Lehmann

2006: 135). This echoes what Willem Dafoe describes in talking about his performance in the Wooster Group's production of *LSD*:

'I'm not presenting anything; I'm feeling my way through. If you were acting something, if you were very conscious of acting a character, somewhere you would close it down, you'd present it. You'd finish it. In this stuff, you never know.'  
(Auslander, 1997: 43).

As we have seen, however, if the goal of the actor is to reach the Creative state, then 'acting a character' does not necessarily have to be the closed down, fixed entity that Dafoe describes above (cf p24-5). On the contrary, Stanislavski's aspiration in performance to find new, fresh ways of keeping a performance alive, seems closely aligned to Dafoe's aim of 'feeling [his] way through.' It is also interesting to note Dafoe's formulation about the undesirability of being 'very conscious of acting a character'. Stanislavski may well have agreed with him – he said that 'Genuine, living characterisation arises of itself in such a way that you will know nothing about it... As soon as you start thinking about the character, you cannot refrain from overacting and representation. So, beware.' (Stanislavski, 2010:86) This brings us back again to the creative state, which could be described exactly in Dafoe's terms – not presenting, feeling your way through, not being closed down, not being finished, staying open to new possibilities ('you never know').

Let us now concentrate upon this notion of 'presence' and the kind of performance Dafoe (and Auslander) are presenting as a supposedly more open-ended, implicitly more edgy and creative alternative. It is performance

freed from any attempt to create illusion. When Dafoe needs to appear to cry in one section of *LSD* he openly puts glycerine in his eyes. As he puts it:

‘Once you show the audience you’re putting it in, it takes the curse off it. Then it takes away, “Oh, what a fabulous, virtuoso performer he is, oh, he’s crying!” That’s something I could do. But [using the drops] makes things vibrate a little more...’ (Auslander, 1997: 42).

Dafoe is a fine actor. There is no reason to disbelieve his claim that he could cry, in character, if he wanted to. For him, however, in the context of Wooster Group performance, such realistic, ‘believable’ acting is not only unnecessary but would produce an effect which would run directly counter to what he is trying to achieve. He is not trying to play a character as such. He is using the performing persona to demystify and deconstruct the acting process.

Auslander draws an analogy with Derrida’s ‘writing under erasure’, describing it as ‘acting under erasure’. Whereas for Derrida writing under erasure deconstructs the writing process, ‘using language bound up in the metaphysics of presence and crossing it out’, the Wooster Group ‘simultaneously use the vocabularies of conventional acting methods and styles and undermine them.’ (Auslander, 1997: 38).

This is a more complex , problematic view of presence than that put forward by Lehmann, who asserts that ‘Since the 1970s performance and theatre practitioners have found the meaning of theatre work in giving preference to *presence* over representation, in as much as it is about the communication of



*personal experience.*' (Lehmann, 2006: 109). Stanislavski's approach to acting is, of course, also about the communication of personal experience, albeit through the performance of a dramatic role rather than the (arguably) unmediated personal expression Lehmann is referring to.

Auslander cites Joseph Chaikin's *The Presence of the Actor* (1972), which 'suggests that the actor's presence before an audience is the essence of theatre and that the use any particular theatre makes of that presence defines its ideology.' (Auslander, 1997: 62). He in turn relates presence to charisma, the attraction for an audience to the psycho-physical being of the performer, and the consequent potential vulnerability of that audience to suggestion and manipulation by political and / or media forces in positions of power.

Postmodern theatre, Auslander argues, is characterised by a 'suspicion of presence... In theatre, presence is the matrix of power; the postmodern theatre of resistance must therefore expose both the collusion of presence with authority and resist such collusion by refusing to establish itself as the charismatic Other.' (Auslander, 1997: 63).

It may be argued, of course, that charisma may adhere to the presence of a performer despite – or even perhaps because of, for a particular audience – the deconstructive strategies employed. For some, the experience of being in the same room as Willem Dafoe as he puts in the glycerine will no doubt have been a thrilling one, precisely because of the presence of Dafoe - regardless of what he did. This, perhaps, is however beyond the scope of the argument under consideration here.

What *is* relevant is that the postmodern awareness of, and attempt to undermine presence does represent an additional layering of the acting experience – much like that which Brecht demanded from his actors when he had them try to simultaneously play the character with a quality of demonstrating and at the same time attempt to show an attitude towards that character. Stanislavski, by comparison, was solely concerned with the actor playing the role with a sense of truth and in a manner which suited the production.

If we view the System as concerned solely with the creation of a fixed ‘character’, with the ultimate aim being the charismatic performance of that character, filled with presence, then it could be argued that for a postmodern actor the System could only ever be at best partially useful. If, however, we view the System as primarily being concerned with the goal of the actor’s achieving a creative state of being in which the actor’s performing persona brings together everything that the actor has to offer – in terms of life experience, thoughts, emotions, skills, training and so on – in the service of the performance, be it classical, melodramatic, naturalistic, symbolist, Brechtian, postmodern, or whatever – then the System will still have a great deal to offer. Individual practitioners may take the System and modify it to suit their own particular purposes – as in the cases of Vakhtangov and Michael Chekhov, for example – but its basic fundamental utility remains.

I want to turn now to consider some particular examples of postmodern or postdramatic theatre in which the Stanislavski System might seem to be least useful, to the point where it might actually prove counter-productive. Some of Stanislavski's pronouncements about art, it has to be said, show the kind of thinking, no doubt born out of the pre-modernist era which shaped him, which probably led to some of his difficulties with younger practitioners such as Meyerhold, Vakhtangov and Michael Chekhov later on, and certainly put him into direct conflict with postmodernist approaches:

'Art... is born at the moment when an unbroken, sustained line, sound, voice, movement is created. While there are only individual sounds, scrapings, notes, cries instead of music or individual short lines and points instead of drawing, or individual, spasmodic jerks instead of movement there can be no question of music or singing, of drawing, of portraiture, of dance, of architecture, of sculpture, or, finally, of the art of the theatre.' (Stanislavski, 2008:368).

Pronouncements such as these have to be put aside, seen for the anachronisms they have become. The question is, has the System itself become anachronistic?

There are, it must be said, some instances where a Stanislavskian approach seems impossible, especially (ironically) for a trained actor. Whitmore notes that

'Some directors, such as Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson, often use nonperformers... Part of the thinking here is that nontrained performers break the

audience's normal horizon of expectations and force them to experience a performance that is not filled with elegant voices, gracious movement, and overly charismatic people. Audiences are asked to rethink the role of the performer. They are asked to listen to words spoken by an amateur, to watch people who may be physically graceless and awkward onstage. (Whitmore, 1994:70)

It is difficult to see how the highly trained Stanislavskian actor could contribute genuinely to this kind of project. They could *play* such a role, as a role, but not actually *be* an untrained performer. (Interestingly, on the subject of using untrained, 'real' people onstage alongside actors, there is a telling story in *My Life In Art* where Stanislavski describes using a genuine peasant woman, playing a 'peasant woman' alongside the actors – the production was undermined because what she was doing made the actors seem inauthentic!).

There are, however, other instances of contemporary performance practice where although at first glance Stanislavski's System might seem equally unsuitable, there may be a place for it, albeit in ways Stanislavski himself could never have envisaged. Kaye, describing Richard Foreman's 'Pandering to the Masses: A Misrepresentation' (1975) noted that 'Speaking unemotionally and with a variety of inflections, the performers drain their behaviour of the emotional' (Kaye, 1994:50). Writing about a collaboration between Robert Wilson and Heiner Muller, Whitmore notes that it

'produced a desire to have dialogue read in a flat or deemphasised way.

'Dismissing every theory of modern acting with a sweep of the hand, Muller told the student actors, 'Just read it as if it didn't matter.' As with *CIVIL wars*

Wilson urged on the cast a cool, flat manner of delivery ('too expressive' was a criticism they were to hear again and again).... Wilson believes that this seemingly contradictory mode of presentation enhances rather than diminishes their impact: 'When you've got a hot text and you want it to be really hot, you have to be very cold. If you perform it in a hot way, what you're going to get is... nothing.' (Shyer, L. 1989, *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators* New York: Theatre Communications Group p131, quoted in Whitmore, 1994:79).

The above examples reflect strands of contemporary theatre practice to do with the actor's voice which would have been challenges unknown and probably unfathomable to Stanislavski in his own time. The use of voice, however, is not the only aspect of performance which is being increasingly tested. Richard Foreman sets his actors physical challenges in which 'unexpected gestures [act] as one of the chief means by which to bring the audience into a new mode of perception.

'I frequently give the performers positions that put the body in a state of tension. Or I do the opposite; I give them positions that suggest a degree of relaxation inappropriate to the situation. Both options break through the shell of normal behaviour' (Richard Foreman, quoted in Whitmore, 1994:98).

Another example might be that cited by Phillip Zarilli when he was directing a production of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, in which an actor had to chop wood. Zarilli expressly refused to give the actor any psychological motivation for his action, as he said that 'were the actor to have insisted on having a

psychologically based motivation, his relationship to the action would have had a behavioural inflection giving the action a different signification than what I wanted: a decided act of chopping wood.’ (Zarilli, 1995:17).

I have said that within these practices there may still be some room for a Stanislavskian approach to the performance. How can this be? Clearly it can *not* be the standard Stanislavskian model of psychologically based, logical and coherent characterisation, based upon naturalistically recognisable human behaviour. The System as Stanislavski developed it, with all the parts working together systematically towards a given, humanistic end, can not and will not work under these conditions. As Zarilli said, if his aim in *Hippolytus* was simply to have the actor, out of role, physically chop wood, then any attempt to provide any kind of psychological and /or emotional context and purpose for himself to chop the wood *other than the fact that he as a performer had been directed to do so*, would have worked against Zarilli’s intention. To use Kirby’s formulation, the actor’s performance had to remain non-matrixed. There was no *dramatic* action to be played, in the sense of any fictive context or plot, no formation of illusion, no mimesis, no representation (in any sense of the word).

Under these conditions, therefore, the actor has no need for the ‘Magic If’, or to concern him/herself with any notion of purposeful action, or call upon their imagination, or have need for any emotion memory, or have any need to develop any sense of truth and belief – all key aspects of the System! What is left? Well, actually still quite a lot.

The actor still needs to be focused and effective onstage, in a creative state. Many of the System's elements to do with preparation could still facilitate this. Relaxation and concentration of attention are still needed as a foundation. The objects of concentration might be different from those Stanislavski envisaged, but the level of concentration would be just as important. The actor would still need to pay attention to the Given Circumstances. These may not at times be of a fictive, dramatic nature, but they will involve the action, the performance space, the other performers, the audience etc. There is also likely to be a number of tasks of some kind involved in the performance, and the actor would still benefit from finding their appeal and being excited about performing them. In the example given above, of Zarilli's actor chopping wood, the task was simply to do just that – as the performer, chop the wood. Not to *perform* the act of chopping wood, simply to chop wood! This is not, however, such a simple act as one might think!

Stanislavski notes in *An Actor's Work*, with reference to simply walking onstage, that too many actors 'resort to all manner of contrivances, when they go onstage, to control their deficiencies... They don't walk, they process across the stage.' An actor must, he goes on to say, 'start learning to walk onstage from scratch, just as we do in life.' (Stanislavski, 2008: 372). It is, surely, this kind of unaffected, natural simplicity in the execution of a given task which Zarilli was after.

Finally there is the Supertask to be kept in mind. This might not, perhaps, be the logical, unbroken line which Stanislavski envisaged – in a postmodern

work it is much more likely to be illogical, contradictory, fragmented, unpredictable and indeterminate – yet still the director and the performers will have a vision of some kind by which they will, after the performance, judge its success or otherwise.



## **CONCLUSION**

The ultimate goal of the System for an actor is the creative state. Stanislavski wrote that 'In exceptional moments... the actor's whole creative apparatus, all its separate parts, all its, so to speak, internal 'springs' and 'knobs' and 'pedals' function superbly, almost the same as, or better than, life.

That's the kind of creative state we need to the maximum when we are onstage, since only then can genuine creative work be done... How fortunate we are to have a psychotechnique which can, at our behest, produce the creative state, which used to come to us by chance.' (Stanislavski, 2008:295)

Bella Merlin is in no doubt that goal of achieving the creative state is the essence of the Stanislavski System:

'Were you to distil the basic learning outcome of Stanislavsky's actor-training down to one particular element, it would probably be this: to encourage you as an actor to develop an INNER CREATIVE STATE of body and mind, a state in which you almost don't give a damn. You're not censoring yourself. You're not judging yourself. You're not worried about whether or not you're giving the director what he or she wants. You're just responding and playing.' (Merlin, 2007, p.5).

In this study I have tried to show that throughout the turbulent changes of the twentieth century and into our own time, through the modernist and postmodernist eras, the Stanislavski System has remained a potentially useful approach to acting for any performer wishing to apply it. After his time with Stanislavski Meyerhold chose to take a very different path from his old

teacher, but over the course of their working lifetimes each continued to stimulate and influence the other so that in the end Stanislavski could refer to the younger man as his only real heir in the theatre. Vakhtangov and Michael Chekhov were able to use the System as a foundation for their own practice, building upon and challenging some of its central tenets. Brecht had very different aims and concerns much of the time from Stanislavski, but nevertheless came to appreciate and use aspects of the System in his final years. Auslander's analysis of Stanislavski, through the prism of Derridian deconstructive theory, was both useful and provocative, and Lehmann, Dafoe and Zarilli have proved to be challenging critics and artist / performers in a postmodern context.

I will leave the final word to the director Katie Mitchell, who is very clear that Stanislavski's techniques are still useful to contemporary performers working in any style of performance.

'Many people think that the exercises of a nineteenth-century Russian can only be used when working on a nineteenth-century Russian play. This is not the case. You can use Stanislavski's techniques regardless of the style or genre of play or project you are working on. [She cites as examples Greek plays, Martin Crimp, Samuel Beckett, and opera] Remember that Stanislavski did not only direct Realist plays. He also worked on Shakespeare, Jean Racine and symbolist plays like Knut Hamsun's 'The Drama of Life' and Leonid Andreyev's 'The Life of Man'. His work remains relevant whenever you find yourself directing a play containing characters who are members of the human race, regardless of the time period they inhabit or the style of play they belong to.' (Mitchell, 2009:227).

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