

The eternal return... to Stanislavski. Some thoughts on the system's constitution, its transformations and its impact

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Abstract: *This article brings the creative personality of Konstantin S. Stanislavski back into the spotlight, pointing out some significant elements related to the constitution of the system, its transformations and applications, but also the reception and impact which the new ideas on actor training exerted on contemporary theatrical thinking. The idea of this article is that a revisiting of the Stanislavskian system is regularly necessary, to ensure that the system is intimated, meditated, understood and applied by those looking to redefine their work, as well as their artistic and pedagogical creed.*

Key-words: *Stanislavski; system; method; subconscious; superconscious; physical actions.*

1. Introduction. Some reasons which have distorted or hindered the reception of the Stanislavskian system

Stanislavski² is arguably the most often pronounced name in the world of theatrics. The system which he created has given rise to provocations and is still a cause for controversy. Even during his lifetime, Stanislavski, as a director, pedagogue and theorist, provoked strong backlash - he was appreciated, loved, revered or, on the contrary, denigrated, sabotaged and detracted. As an actor and as a director, Stanislavski experienced both triumphant successes and failures, but knew, in both cases, to systemise his observations and conclusions that later helped him crystallise or redefine the principles regarding the actor's play and the mise-en-scene. He was understood and appreciated by those who were very close to him, by those with whom he managed to establish a common language, with whom he discussed and shared his ideas.

The differences and disputes that arose from some contemporaries or the misunderstanding of his vision by the subsequent generations are almost natural. The reason for this can be explained with at least three reasons. One is that Stanislavski has not ceased to review and transform his system to continually improve it, both in terms of working with the actor and in terms of the very terms used, which he wanted as clear as possible. Until the last day of his life, Stanislavski was concerned with the process of transforming the actor through his daily work and finding the means by which the actor could remain faithful, in his stage interpretation, to the truth of life.

The second reason is due to the perversion of the system, a fact that already occurred in the years when he lived in retirement - due to his illness and his removal from the Art Theater, which occurred in 1935 - and then in the years when its politicized application led to popularization and dogmatization of his ideas. The Communists "sanctified" Stanislavsky, in order to use his name and authority against the tendencies they called "deviant." The very notion of "system" - seen by Stanislavski as a sum of guiding principles in the work of the actor, constantly subject to revision - seemed very appropriate for the new regime to control

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² Constantin Sergheievici Alexeev, also known as Stanislavski (1863-1938).

theatrical creation and transform the Art Theater into an institution of “model shows”, which promoted, again, a crude naturalistic aesthetic. Thus, already during his lifetime, the face of the great experimenter and visionary was disfigured, and his working method deformed.

The third reason is the fact that the theoretical notes of the Russian director were published truncated - many of his considerations not being in line with the ideology of the Soviet regime - and circulated, in other countries, incompletely and poorly translated. In the years of the so-called “thaw” in the USSR, from the eight volumes of the Stanislavskian works (published between 1954-1961) both the passages relating to the spiritual sciences and exercises which inspired Stanislavski in developing the actor's training method, as well as those regarding his disagreements with Vladimir Nemirovici-Dancenko (1858-1943), the co-founder of the Art Theater and his collaborator for forty-one years, were removed. Those disagreements risked to overshadow the “idyllic” image of this institution, which was to become a standard of revolutionary art.

To these three reasons that contributed to the distortion of the Stanislavskian system of working with the actor and, at the same time, of his reception, sometimes ambiguous or reluctant, a fourth can be added. This consists of an observation made by director Adolf Shapiro (b. 1939). In the preface to Maria Knebel's book *L'Analyse-Action*, published in French translation in 2006³, which he signs, he says that “no one is more dangerous to a master than his interpreters (...) for, beyond the desire to assimilate the method, the student's talent must also correspond to the artistic principle that underlies the methodology.”⁴

2. Objectives

However, it is necessary to consult the Stanislavskian works, as they have been restored and completed by researchers, on the basis of documents in the last 30 years, as well as the latest studies on the system.

The in-depth study of the system will be able to provide students and practitioners in the field of performing arts with basic, infallible tools for working with the actor and the singer.

3. Constitution and transmission of the system

The Stanislavskian system could be reconstructed from two sources: that of his writings and that of oral transmission by his disciples and then by their descendants. Both sources are valuable, but they contain ambiguities that the research of the last thirty years of stanislavskologists and specialists in the history of theater is trying to clarify.

The first book that Stanislavski writes is *My Life in Art*, in the years 1923-1924. He writes it for the American public, but being quite dissatisfied with this version, he will rework the text for the Russian edition of 1926. However, his ideas about the actor's art spread from the American edition, especially in the English-speaking world. In France, the book was translated after the Russian edition, but the publishers removed a series of passages which they considered difficult for the French public to understand. The full text of this book appeared in the French-speaking world only in 1980, at the L'Âge d'Homme publishing house in Lausanne, the translation, the notes and the preface being signed by Denise Yoccoz.

In Romanian, we still have only the 1958 edition, translated by I. Flavius and N. Negrea - an edition, of course amputated and shaped according to the ideological norms in force at that time. Thus, the Romanian public is widowed of the possibility of reading the full text of this book, which is not just an “autobiography”, as many consider it, but really the *first book*

³ Knebel, Maria. 2006. *L'Analyse-action*, adaptation d'Anatoli Vassiliev. Trad. Nicolas Struve, Sergueï Vladimirov et Stéphane Poliakov. Paris: Éditions Actes Sud.

⁴ Knebel, Maria. *op.cit.*, p. 34.

of the system. In the part preceding the founding of the Art Theater we find extremely important information, regarding the training of the young Stanislavski as an actor. In these searches and experiences, sometimes discouraging and torturous, are the germs of the future principles underlying his system. Here, too, the qualities of an extremely fine observer and an excellent pedagogue can be glimpsed, which will be revealed, later, in *An Actor Prepares and in Building a Character & Creating a role*. At the same time, within the lines of this book we can read the defeats, pains and disappointments that Stanislavsky experienced in the fight against the pride, self-sufficiency and thirst for cheap success of many actors, in an attempt to remedy his collaboration with Vladimir Nemirovici-Dancenko and other members of the Art Theater where he ended up feeling like a stranger or even “unemployed in his own home”, as he himself confesses. With his moral rigor and love for art, erasing offenses and disappointments, he always put his lifelong work above all else - the Art Theater and what he managed to do here: create a style in which everything on stage had to make sense, the birth of a teamwork spirit, of a theatrical community, instilling the need for truth in acting, stimulating the spectator to think.

What is very clear from this first book is that the system is not something finite, but a process, a journey and a history of becoming an actor, a kind of *Bildungsroman* - a “journal” of theoretical and practical training, reminiscent of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) and then *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* (1821), written by the father of this genre and one of the forerunners of modern directing, J. W. von Goethe (1749-1832), who would exert a considerable influence on Stanislavski.

It was not until 1930 that Stanislavski would write his second major book, *The Actor's Work on Himself*, which remained unfinished and which would have a history at least as sad as *My Life in Art*. On the one hand, already in the Russian edition, Soviet censorship imposed the replacement or suppression of terms such as *intuition, subconscious, superconscious, magic, spiritual, prana*, etc. and the removal of passages that could attest to Stanislavski's interest in religious rites, philosophical and spiritualist currents that inspired him to seek procedures for accessing the actor's subconscious. On the other hand, the Americans, in turn, removed passages that they considered inaccessible or “too Russian” to be understood. An adverse role was played, paradoxically, by the translator and curator of the English editions, Elisabeth Hapgood, who, in her capacity as “co-author”, granted at one point by Stanislavski's family, operated mutilations on the text. A devoted friend and an ardent admirer of the Russian director, she intervened in the author's text with the best of intentions, probably considering that by “remodeling” it, the text could be better received and understood. Then, because the Americans considered the book to be too bulky, they published, in the first edition of 1936, only its first part (*An actor prepares*), with the second part (*Building a Character & Creating a Role*) only being released in 1949. In French translation, these books were entitled *La formation de l'acteur and Construction du personnage*. Thus, the unity of the system and the coherence of Stanislavski's thinking suffered serious damage.

In Romanian, *The Actor's Work on Himself* (Munca actorului cu sine însuși) appeared, for the first time, in 1955, in the translation of Lucia Demetrius and Sonia Filip. Of course, this version was also censored. A second version, revised and augmented, appeared in 2013 and 2014, at Nemira Publishing House, in the new translation by Raluca Rădulescu, with a preface written by director Yuri Kordonsky, which makes a statement meant to clarify an essential aspect of the Stanislavskian conception. He warns us that “we must not confuse truth with realism. Unfortunately, the Stanislavski method is too often perceived as a method of realism, although it is, in fact, a method of interpreting “realistically” or, in other words true to the truth, in any kind of theater. Stanislavsky did not seek realism, but the truth.”⁵

⁵ Kordonski, Yuri. 2013. „Foreword, Munca actorului cu sine însuși în procesul de trăire. Jurnalul unui elev (An Actor's Prepares”. In K.S. Stanislavski. *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*, vol I., transl. by Raluca Rădulescu. Bucharest: Editura Nemira, p. 7.

Stanislavski Directs, a book written by Nikolai Gorceakov, a former assistant to Stanislavski and then to Yevgheni Vahtangov, translated into Romanian and published in 1955, brings a series of additional information on the development of the performance and how to work with the actor at the Art Theater and in the Studios later established next to it.

Another valuable document on working with the actor is Vasili Toporcov's book, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, translated into Romanian (*Stanislavski la repetiție*) and published in 1951. Of course, in both books the expression is tributary to the “jargon” of socialist realism, but valuable information can be “fished out” from their lines and capitalized.

Stanislavsky began to develop his system between 1898 and about 1904, within the Art Theater,⁶ which he co-founded with Vladimir Nemirovici-Dancenko in 1898.

Through his artistic and theoretical activity, Stanislavski will undertake a fundamental renewal of the theatrical conception, elaborating his own, original system of interpretation, a “grammar” of the actor's play whose necessity he had felt for a very long time. For Stanislavski, dramatic art is in line with the tradition of the Malâi Theater in Moscow, whose stars were Mikhail Shchepkin (1788-1863), Maria Ermolova (1853-1928) and Glikeria Fedotova (1846-1925). Their play fascinated him, but neither he nor they could explain, at the time, the processes behind their acting.

Starting from Gerhart Hauptmann's naturalism, moving to the synthetic realism of Chekhov's plays, Stanislavski progressively created his psychotechnical method. This method starts from the psychological analysis undertaken by the actor, in order to reach the character, to what Stanislavski will call the “seed of the character”.

The intensity of the impressions - recorded organically, unconsciously, physically and with the soul- which he correlates with the research of the psychologist Théodule Ribot (1839-1916) make Stanislavski pay, in a first phase, a special attention to the affective memory,⁷ which he considers one of the engines of the actors' play. From here, it becomes obvious to him that the reproduction of reality must be made on the basis of a very careful observation of one's self and the surrounding world; that any stage behavior must be psychologically justified by the events experienced by the character (biography of the character) and nurtured by the experience of the actor (affective memory). To this approach Stanislavski adds the improvisation, which he considers necessary to stimulate the actor's spontaneity.

We could say that, in a first phase, Stanislavski decides to go from the inside to the outside, considering that the inner actions are the ones that justify the contents of the words and the outer actions of the characters.

However, he observes that, often, the solutions found later turn into clichés and that the inspiration, inconstant by its nature, can play unpleasant tricks on the actor.

After the political and social unrests in Russia, which will culminate in the “Bloody Sunday” on 22 January 1905, from St. Petersburg, Stanislavski's band goes on a tour in Europe. Despite its success, Stanislavski feels some wear and tear on his play and that of the other actors in the band. Chekhov's death in 1904, his dissatisfaction with the failure of the performances with Maeterlinck's plays, the accumulated bitterness, the lack of perspective, the scattering in many directions make him feel disoriented. This is the state in which, in 1906, he went to spend his vacation in Finland, where he stayed for eight weeks. At the age of 43, he takes stock of his life and creative activity.⁸ He is concerned with the technical aspects of the actor's art and is troubled by three questions:

⁶ *The Art Theater became*, in 1919, the Moscow Academic Art Theater, then, in 1932, the Moscow Gorky Academic Art Theater, and in 1987 it split into the Gorky Moscow Academic Art Theater and the Chekhov Moscow Academic Art Theater.

⁷ Called “emotional memory” or “memory of feeling” in the censored Russian editions.

⁸ The event is described in the chapter “Discovering some well-known truths” from his book, *My Life in Art: Viata mea în artă*, 1955. Bucharest: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, pp. 349 - 362.

- How can an actor move from one role to another, night after night?
- Where will the actor find inspiration to do so?
- What can be done so that an actor's play will not degenerate into clichés?

Stanislavski reviews his roles, his shows, he reads. He realizes that inspiration can be stimulated. Thus, from 1906, he begins to systematically develop a real manual, a grammar of the actor's play, being concerned with finding a “key”, which once “twisted” would trigger a series of logical psychological mechanisms and actions. He conceives this “key” in the form of practical exercises that facilitate access to the psychological states that trigger inspiration. In this way the actor could access the superconscious level at which the creative inspiration for each role and performance is found.

Stanislavski returns to Moscow after a period of retreat and meditation in Finland, during which he discovered two fundamental laws:

- during the creative process, the actor must use his own life experience, which they must recreate on stage
- the actor must break down their role into fragments which, after being studied separately, will then be reassembled to form a whole.

Stanislavski is aware that the “system” means, on the one hand, the awareness of natural laws to be applied in the work of the actor, and on the other hand, the maintenance of a permanent state of vigilance and experimentation to prevent the play from becoming mechanic. He says the system could be focused on three principles:

1. the system does not offer recipes and does not fabricate “inspiration”, but is a path that leads to a natural state of mind, for which the actor must be physically free, be constantly attentive and know how to listen and watch, on scene, as in life, that is, to communicate with the partner;

2. physical actions are complementary to psychological actions; the unity of these two actions gives rise to the organic action on stage. Here, a very important role is played by the *circumstances* proposed by the playwright for the character, which helps the actor to start acting.

3. natural action produces the right feeling or the right scenic *self-sensation*; in this way the actor comes closest to the embodiment of the character.

What’s more, Stanislavski used to even say that there is no “system”, but that the system is, in fact, the laws of nature: in preparing the role, we must start from natural data, from our natural qualities and only, secondly, to conform to the laws of creation.”⁹ He pointed out that “if we form in ourselves the capacity to act according to the laws of nature, nothing will obstruct our subconscious. And then we will no longer need the System.”¹⁰

4. Transformations of the system

As we have shown before, Stanislavski will not stop rethinking his system, from 1906 until 1938, at his death. Political and social transformations, scientific discoveries (in the field of physics, physiology, psychology and psychoanalysis), the spread and fascination of the spiritualist / occult sciences on intellectual and artistic circles will, of course, have a notable influence on the evolution of the Stanislavskian system. At a time when many sciences had or were beginning to have methods to be studied and taught, Stanislavski wondered how an actor could be taught to play. How could an empirical approach be transformed into a coherent, even scientific, system of learning and training? How could quasi-inexpressible processes be called and described?

⁹ Toporcov, Vasili. 1951. *Stanislavski la repetiție* [Stanislavsky in Rehearsal]. Bucharest: Editura Cartea Rusă, p. 101.

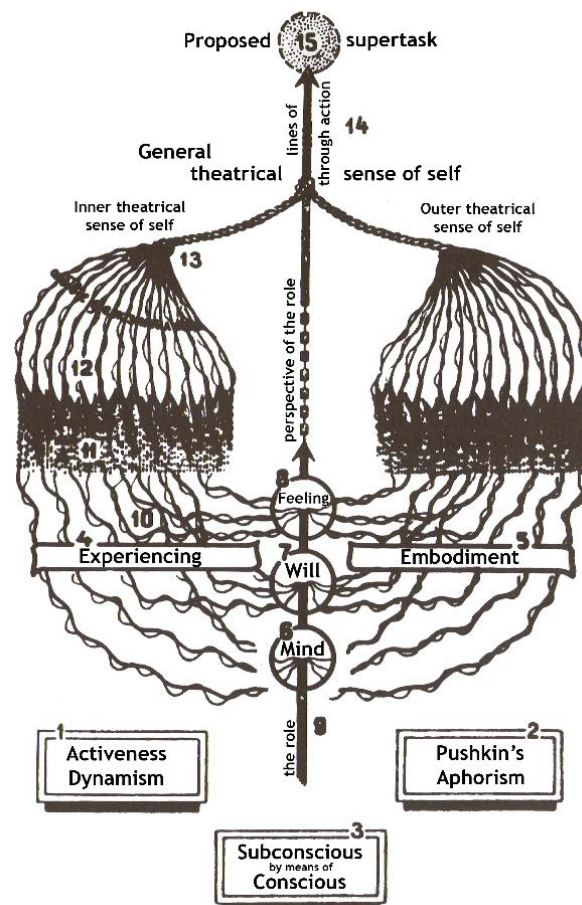
¹⁰ Autant-Mathieu, Marie-Christine. 2007. *La ligne des actions physiques. Répétitions et exercices de Stanislavski*, Montpellier: Éditions de L'Entretemps, collection Les Voies de l'acteur, p. 20.

If we were to summarize in a few words the contents of the system in the way it is structured at the moment Stanislavsky writes *An actor prepares* we should first and foremost say it is a systematic approach to training actors, based on the “art of experiencing” rather than on the “art of representation”. It mobilises the actor's conscious thought and will in order to activate other, less-controllable psychological processes – such as emotional experience and subconscious behaviour – sympathetically and indirectly. In rehearsal, the actor searches for inner motives to justify action and the definition of what the character seeks to achieve at any given moment (a “task”).

Its structure can already be seen from the way in which Stanislavsky structured the order of the chapters in his book *An actor prepares*. Their contents can be synthesized and more easily visualised in a diagram made by the author (1934-1935), where the system is represented based on the respiratory system, as it can be seen in the image below.

As Stéphane Poliakov demonstrates, the entire Stanislavskian system can be seen as an “apparatus”.¹¹ This is made up by two other “apparatuses” – the external one (the voice, the body and the images) and the internal one which is made up by the elements that “organize the stage psychic life”.

The two levels are distinct, but, at the same time, they share a direct link, as it can be seen in the diagram.¹²



¹¹ Poliakov, Stéphane. 2019. *Quel appareil théâtral? 2. L'appareil de l'acteur*. Open Edition Journal, Édition électronique. Retrieved April 9, 2020, from <http://journals.openedition.org/appareil/3213>.

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanslavski%27s_system

The bases of the system consist in:

- the principle of action and efficiency (1), meaning that the actor must act in conformity with the images and the passions/emotions of the role;
- the so-called Pushkin afforism, (2), the truth of the passions/feelings, which seem true in the given circumstances;
- the stimulation of the subconscious by means of the conscious.

The steps the actor takes on the road from the subconscious to the superconscious, and from the “seed” of the character to the inner and outer theatrical sense of self (13) and the accomplishing of the superobjective (15) is accomplished through the line of actions (14). It can be observed how the aspects of interior exploration of the role (4), as well as the external ones, of incarnation (5), unite in order to accomplish the character’s superobjective, all of them being animated by mind (6), will (7), and feeling (8), which are considered to be the engines of the psychic life.

All these elements are part of “a technique that Stanislavsky calls «the psychotechnique» and which is a polarized and organized system, whose elements are in a constant evolution.”¹³

Stanislavski was removed from the Art Theater in 1935, but he created a lyrical-dramatic studio in which he would put into practice the latest discoveries of his system. Here, he will develop a new type of role approach, through what he will call the “line of physical actions.” He now encouraged an “active representative “, in which the sequence of dramatic situations are improvised. Stanislavski used to say that he best analysis of a play is to take action in the given circumstances. At this studio, Stanislavski works on both the dramatic repertoire (*Cherry Orchard*, *Three Sisters*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*) and the opera (*Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by Otto Nicolai and the *Darvadza Gorge / The Darvadza Canyon* by Lev Stepanov).

Stanislavski realized that the line of physical actions opens to the actor / singer a new, simpler, shorter, easier way to reach the character. He was always concerned with the physical training of the actor, bodily expressiveness and the fairness of physical actions. The process itself is not new, but Stanislavski will use it differently, in a different context. Maria Knebel offers a series of explanations, which determined Stanislavski to change his usual way of organizing rehearsals.

At the Art Theater, work on a show invariably began with the table reading of the play. Improving his system, however, Stanislavski noticed a number of shortcomings due to this mode of rehearsal. There was an increase in the passivity of the actors, an increasing responsibility of the director to the detriment of the actors’ responsibility. The actors began to leave more and more on the director's shoulders the finding of solutions that could open the way to the role. However, Stanislavski's most intense desire, “the red thread of his life” was, as Maria Knebel points out, “the formation of the conscious, creative actor, able to understand the plays himself and to act in the circumstances proposed by them.”¹⁴

If in a first stage of his work Stanislavski wanted to obtain the physical-psychological malleability of the actor, he realized that this very malleability made them indulge in the role of “tools” in the hands of the director, and play out of inertia.

Stanislavski also realized that during the reading at the table - a stage in which he insisted on discovering the inner motives of the feelings and actions of the characters - there was a risk of an artificial rupture between the mental and physical side of the performer. However, there is an indissoluble link between the physical action and the cause that generates it.

¹³ Stéphane Poliakov. *op.cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Knebel, Maria. *op.cit.*, p. 42.

Based on these findings, Stanislavski will propose a new form of repetition, called *Étude* (study), in which reading at the table was alternated with improvisation. The problem that troubled Stanislavski was how one could arrive at an organic assumption of the author's text and intentions, how the actor could reach, organically, the character he was playing.

A rehearsal through *étude* puts the actor in front of the need to remain anchored in the present, to live, physically, a given episode. Of course, several phases had been completed before such a study began. If we were to summarize how such an *étude* works, we could say that it consists of four important steps:

1. an intellectual exploration work (an analysis of the objectives that the characters have to fulfill, of their aspirations, of the relationships between them, of the main and secondary events through which they have to pass, etc.);

2. the narration by each actor of the role line;

3. the actor puts himself in the place of the character he spoke about and acts (the actions of the character become his actions); it is the moment when the actor improvises the text in a given situation. M. Knebel states that "it does not matter what words the interpreter uses. What matters is that they be dictated by the author's thought and correspond to the passage on which the *étude* is made."¹⁵

4. return to the table, to check, with the help of the text, whether the actor acted on behalf of the author and whether the objectives were met.

The purpose of an *étude* is to lead the actor as close as possible to the text, to help him perceive the playwright's conception correctly, to penetrate the essence of a work. In this way an actor will be able to feel how the author's words are born organically in his mouth.

An *étude* is only a stage in the process of analysis and discovery of the roles of the play, but it will help the actor to do the actions in the spirit of the play.

Of course, when we talk about the action analysis of a play, we understand this in the context of all the elements of the Stanislavskian system which are the proposed circumstances, events, evaluation of facts, superobjective, transversal action, background, inner monologue, vision, atmosphere, etc.

It should also be noted here that when talking about action, Stanislavski refers not only to the physical, but also to the verbal. He considered the verb (the word generating action) to be the beginning and the end point of the actor's creative process.

By following the line of physical actions, Stanislavski stimulates actors to think and be present in every moment of their work. In this way, he determines the actors to be not only creative, but creators; to find themselves and through themselves the path to the character. In this last stage of Stanislavski's life and work, the two guidelines of his system come together and appear very clearly: the work of the actor on himself and the work of the actor on the role.

The choice of physical actions and the composition of the line of physical actions are the basis of the organic construction of the character and the secret of their incarnation lies in the fact that the actor knows every moment what, why and how - due to his mental motivations - the character does something.

Thus, the director no longer has to impose his own vision, but only to guide his actors, to "coax" them, as Stanislavski liked to say, so that they can "give birth" to themselves. the characters.

5. Impact of the system

In January 1906, the ensemble of the Art Theater undertakes its first tour abroad, in Berlin. In spite of the advertisement made by the critic Wilhelm von Sholz in the press, the members of

¹⁵ Knebel, Maria. *op. cit.*, p. 78.

the ensemble, as “Russian actors”, will not enjoy a very warm welcome from the theater staff, who took them as circus artists or music-hall singers. After the first performance with *Tsar Feodor*, which enjoyed great success, the praiseful reviews brought increasing public attention to the ensemble, which continued its performances with Chekhov, Ibsen and Gorki. Due to the presence at the shows and the interest expressed by the Emperor Wilhelm himself towards the actors of the Art Theater, the tour, which lasted almost six weeks, turned into an artistic and financial success. From Berlin, the Art Theater ensemble was supposed to leave for Paris, but the plan could not materialize due to the impossibility of finding a theater suitable for the shows in the French capital. The Paris tour will only take place in 1922 and will be a real triumph, despite the crisis that the Art Theater was undergoing at the time and the simplified decorations in which the ensemble played. The tour removed the artists of the Art Theater from the attacks they had begun to be subjected to by the representatives of the recently installed regime.

In Paris, the actors of the Art Theater played the *Cherry Blossom*, *Tsar Feodor* and the *Night Asylum*. The actor and director Lugué-Poe, who had also seen them in Berlin in 1906, would write an article about “a true revelation produced by what could be called the soul of the theater”, about the “benefits” that the Russian actors' plays on the Parisian theatrical life and on the fact that the public could discover in them the “mysterious Slavic sensitivity”. The unity of the ensemble, its discipline and ethics are highly appreciated, and Stanislavski receives highly praiseful articles.

However, the tour that would establish Stanislavski abroad would be the one in America, undertaken between January 1923 - May 1924, which resulted in a true triumph. The immense success of the shows would contribute to the crediting and dissemination of Stanislavski's system, who is perceived as a messianic personality. He will be asked to write a book about his method of work and thus *My Life in Art* would appear.

Two of Stanislavski's disciples, members of the First Studio of the Art Theater, would remain in the United States and contribute to the implementation and success of his system: Richard Boleslavski¹⁶ and Maria Uspenskaia. With Stanislavski's approval, Boleslavski gave a series of lectures on the actor's training, and in 1926, he created the Theater Art Institute, which would later become The American Laboratory Theatre and in 1933 he would write the book *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, which became a cornerstone for American actors and directors alike. Both Boleslavsky and Maria Uspenskaya would rigorously apply the Stanislavskian system, emphasizing the “exercises of the soul” and those related to the stimulation of affective memory.

One of the first students of Boleslavski's school was Lee Strasberg. He will be joined by Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crafford. In 1931, the three would go on to found the Group Theatre, where a new generation of actors would be formed in the spirit of the system. Lee Strasberg emphasized improvisation, imagination stimulation, the need for “proposed circumstances”, relaxation and concentration exercises and those of stimulating emotional memory, through which the actor could extract from life the emotions appropriate to the expression of a character. Only when the character was perfectly felt and understood from within did Lee Strasberg allow the actors to approach the text, which they could thus learn organically and not mechanically. Certain dissensions related to the application of the method, which were felt as early as 1934, and later, other administrative misunderstandings would lead to the dissolution of the Group Theatre in 1941.

¹⁶ Richard Boleslavski had already emigrated in 1919. Between 1919 and 1920 he moved from Poland to Prague and then to Berlin, and in 1922 he left for the United States where he would meet Stanislavski again. Stanislavski did not fancy Boleslavski precisely because he had emigrated, but ended up allowing him to hold a series of conferences on his system.

Harold Clurman had been “the grey eminence of the group, Lee Strasberg's work had focused on working with actors and directing, and Cheryl Crawford had played an important role in selecting the plays they played and she had also taken on the role of producer.

After the dissolution of the Group Theatre, everyone continued their activity on their own. Cheryl Crawford, along with actress Eva Le Gallienne, founded the American Repertory Theater in 1946, and in 1947, along with other former members of the Group Theatre, such as Elia Kazan and Robert Lewis, they founded The Actors' Studio, which would become “A kind of new Mecca”¹⁷ - the most important nursery of American theater and film actors. Marlon Brando, James Dean, Paul Newman, Marilyn Monroe, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman, Jane Fonda, Harvey Keitel, Jack Nicholson and many others were trained here. As Professor Gérard Abensour points out, an important aspect during this period is the fact that at Actor's Studio, the Stanislavskian “system” will be transformed into the “Lee Strasberg method.”¹⁸

Harold Clurman continued to give lectures, advocating the idea that text, acting, lighting and directing should converge, in a show, towards the crystallization and communication of a coherent message. A former disciple of Richard Boleslavski, Clurman argued for the importance of using active, trigger verbs that could help actors define what they were playing, as well as the need to study the technique to help the actor identify the “seed” of action and role, a notion and process on which Stanislavski had insisted, especially in the last period of his work. Clurman was an important leader of opinion, contributing substantially to the crystallization of a new theatrical conception. As a theater critic, he encouraged the new approach based on the application of the Stanislavskian system, as well as the assertion of young playwrights and directors.

In 1940, Clurman married Stella Adler (1901-1992), a charismatic actress, who had met Stanislavski in 1934, just as he was reviewing his system. After several weeks of intense study with Stanislavski, Stella Adler returned to the United States where she began to put into practice the revised principles of working with the actor, with increasing emphasis on stimulating the creative imagination and the importance of the circumstances proposed by the text. The actor's emotional experience was no longer stimulated, mainly, by resorting to their own emotional memory (which is implicit in the process), but by imagining the circumstances offered / present in a certain scene. This remains the reason that made Stella Adler to insist on the training of the sensory imagination and on a training mainly physical and vocal that would increase the expressiveness and spontaneity of reaction of the actor's body language. In 1949, she founded the Stella Adler Conservatory of Theater, which became the Stella Adler Studio of Acting,¹⁹ now run by her nephew, Tom Oppenheim. She subsequently taught at the New School and Yale School of Drama. Stella Adler talks about the origins of the acting training method and her pedagogical experience in her book *The Technique of Acting*, published in 1988. Among the actors trained at her school are Judy Garland, Elisabeth Taylor, Dolores del Rio, Lena Horne, Martin Sheen, Melanie Griffith etc.

Among those present in the Group Theater was Sanford Meisner (1905-1997), an actor, and the one who would become, along with Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, one of the most famous and influential American drama teachers, whose technique of teaching and interpretation also had its origins in the Stanislavskian system. Unlike Lee Strasberg's method, which focuses on the techniques of sensory and emotional recollection dating back to the first period of Stanislavski's theatrical experiments, Meisner's method²⁰ insists on developing the

¹⁷ Abensour, Gérard. 2008. *K.S. Stanislavskij*, în *Revue des études slaves*, tome 79, fascicule 4, p. 583.

¹⁸ Abensour, Gérard. *op.cit.*, p. 583.

¹⁹ This school has two branches: Stella Adler Studio of Acting, in New York and another, Arts of Acting Studio, in Los Angeles.

²⁰ Meisner, Sanford; Longwell, Dennis. 1987. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, New York: published by Vintage.

actor's spontaneity through improvisation and relating to playmates. The main exercises of this method are based on what he calls the "mechanical repetition exercise" that is done in pairs. The two actors, who are facing each other, looking at each other very carefully, repeat twenty, thirty times phrases inspired by their partner's observation. According to the German director Thomas Ostermeier (b. 1968), who introduced the exercise in his working method, this approach helps the actors "to immerse themselves in the present moment and in listening to their partner, because they have no way of knowing what will happen in two moments."²¹ On the other hand, the development of attention towards the partner makes the actor understand that the source of his creativity lies in the other, in the one in front of them.

This exercise made the play of the actors trained by Meisner gain an even greater internalization and depth. The purpose of the play technique practiced by Meisner and inspired directly from the Russian one, was to free the actors from the rule of their mentality and to make them more receptive to the impulses coming from their subconscious. Among the former students of Meisner's school, The Neighborhood Playhouse, we can mention here the actors: Steve McQueen, Robert Duvall, Gregory Peck, Diane Keaton, Jeff Goldblum, Tony Randall, Sydney Pollack, David Mamet, Connie Britton, Brian Geraghty, Allison Janney, Jennifer Gray, Ashlie Atkinson, Christopher Meloni, Alex Cole Taylor etc.

Thus, it can be said that the Stanislavskian "system", taken over, applied and passed on through Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner - who grafted it with personal contributions, borne of the artistic and pedagogical creativity of each of them, transforming it into their own "methods" of working with actors - is the basis of a radical change that could be observed in the American theater and cinema of the 1950's. It was a real revolution of acting, produced by both actors and directors, based on a new way of feeling, expressing and managing emotion. All attention was now directed to the actor, whose purpose was no longer naturalistic illustration or representation, but to experience emotion and express it honestly and truthfully. The impulses of the subconscious, capitalized by the art of constructing the subtext, by listening carefully to the partner and the spontaneous responses to the partner and circumstances became the main drivers of the acting game. An era began in American theater and cinema in which the quality of the show or film was given by the truth of the emotions that the actors could convey.

Today, we may wonder why the Stanislavskian system was so successful in the United States. Researcher Elena Galtsova,²² citing Tatiana Boutrova's study,²³ shows that enthusiasm for the "new type" of actors' training system can have two causes. One would be the lack, at that time, of an American theater school. The other could be explained by the coagulation of the American social ideal in which the value and importance given to each individual was increasing. Stanislavski's research, the "work of the actor on himself" thus came to offer a model, a way not only to actors, but, in general, to Americans extremely concerned with self-identification and achievement.

In Europe, the influence of the Stanislavskian system spread through other disciples of the Russian director. In this respect, a very important role was played in the tour undertaken in 1921 by Mikhail Chekhov (1891-1955) - one of Stanislavski's most brilliant students - in Latvia, Estonia, Germany (Berlin and Wiesbaden) and then in Prague. In fact, this was the first theatrical tour undertaken abroad, after the Revolution of 1917, and it paved the way for

²¹ Ostermeier, Thomas. 2016. *Teatrul și frica* [Le Théâtre et la peur]. Bucharest: Editura Nemira, p. 107.

²² Galtsova, Elena. 2006. *Charisme et déshérence: du théâtre d'Art de Moscou à la galaxie Stanislavski*, Éditions de Minuit «Critique», 2006/10 no. 713, pp. 815 - 826.

²³ Boutrova, Tatiana. 2005. „Les disciples américains: du Système à la Méthode de Stanislavski”. In *Le Théâtre d'Art de Moscou. Ramifications, voyages*, Ouvrage collectif sous la dir. de Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu. Paris: Éditions du CNRS, coll. Arts du spectacle, série Spectacles, Histoire, Société, novembre.

future tours of the Art Theater that we talked about earlier. Of course, the peoples and cultures of Slavic origin in Eastern Europe were fertile ground for ideas from Russia, and Prague was considered at that time the “capital of Russia in exile.”²⁴ The actors who did not return home after the 1921 tour formed the so-called Prague Group of the Art Theater, with Maria Nicolaevna Ghermanova (1884-1940) as their main guide. She had been formed by V. Nemirovici-Dancenko and C. Stanislavski, and was one of the main actresses of the Art Theater. In 1929-1930, she would join Richard Boleslavski at the Theater Laboratory, helping to spread Stanislavski's ideas.

In 1930, Mikhail Chekhov, who wished to establish his own theater here, would stop in Prague on his way to the West.

In Bulgaria, a role similar to that of Maria Ghermanova was played by the actor Nikolai Osipovich Masalitinov (1880-1961). He was part of the Prague Group, then, in 1925, left for Bulgaria, where he became a famous director and pedagogue whose work was grafted on the principles of the Stanislavskian system. The Plovdiv Theater bears his name today.

As for the opera, Stanislavski did not make a clear distinction between theater actors and singers, considering that dramatic and lyrical art are the two sides of the same art. His ideal was for an actor to understand and apply the musical principles, so necessary in the stage play (rhythm, tempo, intonation, melody, fluidity, etc.), and for a singer to be, necessarily, an actor. It is interesting to note that this Stanislavskian ideal is very close to the French theatrical ideal of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, according to which an actor had to possess the art of declamation (perceived as the science of expressive modeling of speech and verbal action) and a singer (acteur-chantant) had to not only sing, but be able to embody a character and play. Perhaps we can read here a nostalgia that Stanislavski manifested in his youth towards the classical French art of the actor, whose disappearance he regretted. As early as the seventeenth century, there was a desire of the actor / singer to be autonomous and creative, but the methodical way to achieve this will begin to exist with the development of the Stanislavskian system.

The directing books for the works he edited, but especially his classes at the Bolchoi Studio, located right in his house on Karietni Street, between 1918-1922, are a testament to the intense concern that Stanislavski had for the singing actor's play, as well as for the unity and renewal of the opera performance.²⁵

Nikolai Vasilievich Demidov (1884-1953) was one of the collaborators to whom Stanislavski was very grateful for the information, materials and books he made available to him and who helped him write his book *The Actor's Work on Himself*. As M.-Ch. Autant-Mathieu²⁶ shows, Demidov attended Stanislavski's classes for fifteen years, studied the system, taught it at a school near the Art Theater between 1922-1926, and in 1928 set up a program to teach the system at the Conservatory of Music and at the Opera Theater Studio where he was a teacher and director. N. Demidov's work, deeply inspired by Stanislavskian principles, was a basis and a source of inspiration for the opera directors who followed him and who carried out their artistic activity at the Bolshoi Theater or other opera houses in Russia or Europe.

²⁴ Abensour, Gérard. *op.cit.*, p. 584.

²⁵ See Stanislavski, C. S. 2012. *Entretiens au studio du Bolchoï & L'Éthique*. Paris: Les Éditions Circé.

²⁶ Autant-Mathieu, Marie-Christine. 2007. „L'Inconscient créateur dans le Système de Stanislavski”, in *Revue Russe*, no. 29, *Du spirituel au théâtre et au cinéma*, p. 22.

6. Conclusions

Therefore, we can conclude that the vision and the Stanislavskian method of working with the actor have considerably influenced, for more than 100 years, both the theater and the opera, as well as European and American cinema. In other words, it has no age ... The effectiveness of its system has been verified both by the memorable performances of great theater and film actors, as well as by the generations of remarkable actors and directors that the Russian theatrical school has given and continues to give. Let us remind here the plethora of directors raised at the Central Children's Theater,²⁷ in the 1950s-'60s, under the protection and inspiration of Maria Knebel, the directors Anatoli Efros, Gheorghe Tovstonogov, Oleg Efremov, who, in their turn, became great directors, educators and managers of important theaters in Russia.

Let us mention here two important figures of the contemporary Russian theater: Lev Dodin, director and manager of the Malâi Theater in Saint Petersburg and Anatoli Vasiliev, creator, in 1987, of the theater called "School of Dramatic Art", in Moscow. Both were disciples of Stanislavski's students. Lev Dodin had Boris Sohn (1898-1966) at the Theater Institute in former Leningrad, who had studied for a few years with Stanislavski, and also Matvei Dubrovin (1911-1974), who had studied in the 1930s, with Meyerhold, as teachers. Anatoli Vasilev was the student of Alexei Popov (1891-1961) and then of Maria Knebel (1898-1985), at Gitis (today, Rati), one of the four major Institutes of Theater Art in Moscow. Lev Dodin's performances mirror the perfect fusion between Meyerholdian theatricality and the liveliness and fluidity that flow from applying the Stanislavskian principles in the work with the actors. The influence of the latter is preponderant, because, as Maria Shevtsova,²⁸ a world-renowned personality in the theater world notes, "Stanislavski is behind the explorations of the physical actions that led Dodin to the psychosomatic forces of the action (...). The focus he permanently places on the "truthfulness" of the scenes and on the "liveliness" of the actors is the consequence of the development of Stanislavski's research on physical action and its connection with the actor's emotional and imaginative resources."²⁹

Anatoli Vasiliev, an "enfant-terrible", a nonconformist, an explorer and a visionary, is looking for "another theater", in which the redefinition of the creative process for the actor is the main concern. For him - as for Stanislavski - the stake is not the result, but that of making an experience. His school is one of awareness and science. Here, according to him, "happy actors" are formed, that is, conscious actors whose other perceptual faculties are opened and developed and whose spontaneity, naturalness and freshness are cultivated, starting - paradoxically - from precise laws, as Vasiliev, like his master, whose work he continues, is animated by the desire to see a live process on stage.

One of the reasons that prompted us to bring back to the discussion the figure of the great theatre man, who was Stanislavski, and the method of working with the actor, which he developed during his lifetime of passionate and laborious work, is also that even today, there are still voices that consider him "outdated", "obsolete" and inappropriate for a new way of doing theatre. Tastes, opinions, preferences can naturally be different. Of course, a new vision of the performance has always, necessarily, required the existence of an actor capable of supporting, contributing to the realization of this vision. Adjusting and renewing the actor's art is a continuous process and will last as long as theatre itself. But it cannot be disputed that,

²⁷ A theatre founded in Moscow, in 1921, by the actress, director, writer and dramatic arts teacher Natalia Satz (1903-1993), daughter of composer Ilia Satz; the theatre received this name in 1937 and is known as the Youth Theatre today.

²⁸ <https://www.gold.ac.uk/theatre-performance/staff/m-shevtsova/>

²⁹ Șevțova, Maria. 2008. *Calea aspre performanță. Dodin și Teatrul Malâi (Dodin and Maly Drama Theatre. Process to performance)*. Bucharest: Fundația Culturală „Camil Petrescu”, Revista Teatrul Azi (supliment), pp. 53 - 54.

regardless of the type of theater they would do, an actor who approaches - with interest, discipline, effort, seriousness and patience - the Stanislavskian working method, will be able to notice a substantial transformation in their evolution. Their performance will surely gain sincerity, depth and truth. The critic and professor at the University of Strasbourg, Michel Cieutat, remarked that the method was not explicitly imposed in France, despite the extreme enthusiasm with which Stanislavski was met by French theatre people. And this, because the French actors are either “too logical (Louis Jouvet), or too natural (Jean Gabin), or too tributary to the classical manner (Gérard Philipe), or instinctive (Gérard Depardieu) or simply ... lazy.”³⁰ On the other hand, Gérard Abensour³¹ notes that in the 1940s, a convergence of Stanislavski's work with that of Louis Jouvet can be observed, which also seeks to stimulate and develop the actor's creative imagination through which they can have a vivid play and will be able to convince the spectators. Given this fact, it was natural for the French to get closer to Jouvet than to Stanislavsky.

I think that, before challenging Stanislavski, but also in order to understand him and be able to make even better use of his precious legacy, we should, first of all, read his work in full - even in Russian, if possible - in order to be as close as possible not only to the letter, but to the context and spirit of his work. We should strive to apply his principles, to practice what Stanislavsky says in his writings, which are not only sterile theories, but - fortunately - the palpable trace of his experience, intertwined with that of exceptional collaborators. We should also look at the results of the schools and the level at which the performances of some creators, who valued and capitalized on the Stanislavskian heritage, rise.

Secondly, we should consider the number of articles, studies and books that have been dedicated to him and each represent, in part, an attempt to better understand the complex personality of this theatre creator, to penetrate the mysteries of his method, which still contains so many unknowns. Beyond the large number of biographers, actors, Russian theatre people who dealt with Stanislavski's creative personality (Nicolai Gorceakov, Vasili Toporcov, Iuri Zavadtiski, Irina Vinogradskaja, Elena Poliakova, Galina Brodskaja, Olga Radishcheva, Irina Gutkin, Arkadi Ostrovski, Sergei Cerkaski, Anatoli Smelianski,³² etc.) it is enough to focus our attention towards the impressive number of books and articles dedicated, more recently, to the Russian theater and, in particular, to the Stanislavskian work of the French researcher Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu,³³ towards the books published by American and English authors (Andrew Withe, Sharon M. Carnicke, Phillip Zarrilli) or towards the Stanislavskian study volumes (*Stanislavski Studies*), published by The Stanislavski Center at Rose Bruford College (London) in collaboration with the St. Petersburg Academic Art Theater, to give us an idea of the prestige and irradiation power that the great Russian director exerts to this day. All this makes us think and hope that Stanislavski's true worth is just beginning to be understood and to gain the true place he deserves not only in the history of universal theater, but even in the history of creative thinking, which he helped spur at the beginning of the twentieth century. The eternal return to Stanislavski is thus inevitable, as it proves to be the matrix of a new theater practice and theory, which has inspired all the great theatre people who have succeeded him. Elena Galtsova points out that “the Stanislavskian system, this manna from which so many theaters still feed today, is a world myth.”

³⁰ Cieutat. Michel. 2006. „De la Méthode: origines et conséquences”. In *Études théâtrales* no. 35, l'Harmattan, pp. 58 - 67.

³¹ Abensour. Gérard. *op. cit.*, p. 587.

³² Between the years 1988-1999, Anatoli Smelianski led a team of researchers, aiming to re-edit the nine volumes of Stanislavski's works (*Sobranie socinenii v deviatii tomah*).

³³ <https://cv.archives-ouvertes.fr/marie-christine-autant-mathieu>

The label of “obsolete” sometimes arrogantly and superficially attached to the one who unquestionably revolutionized the actor's art and theatrical thinking, at the beginning of the twentieth century, leads me to another great creator, this time of the eighteenth century: Johann Sebastian Bach was considered “outdated” and “obsolete” - of course, with respectful condescendence - by his own sons, whom he had also taught to compose. It would be interesting, however, to make a statistical study - not too difficult - to see in which proportion the works of Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, Johann Christian Bach, Wilhelm Friedmann Bach, etc., generically referred to as “Bach's sons” are still sung today, versus the works of Johann Sebastian Bach.

This statistical study would confirm to us, once again, that value needs time to be indisputably confirmed, but that it also transcends time.

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