

The Stanislavskian Schools

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Abstract: *The article tackles the great Stanislavskian schools and their pedagogical principles, which – though different – had the same goal: to view the actor as a creator and not as a simple interpreter. It starts with the Stanislavskian principles which state that acting is an inside out process, then moves to Michael Chekhov which views acting as an outside-in process and to Lee Strasberg with his relaxation, concentration and affective memory; it also touches upon Ion Cojar for whom acting is a specific logical mechanism, as well as on Meyerhold's physical training, aimed to reach a proper "embodiment" and a complete artistic act. The article scans the universe of acting built by these great theatre personalities and their schools that have given actors all over the world the means to practice their profession in the most brilliant way.*

Keywords: *theatre school; acting techniques; stage practice; sense of truth; communication means; theatrical conceptions; creation; spreading the system; American succession; self-discipline; logical thinking;*

• Introduction

Stanislavski devoted his entire existence to discovering the mystery of the artistic creation and the mechanisms of theatrical creativity, in order to identify and define the fundamental laws that govern the human creation in general. At the beginning, Stanislavsky wanted to prepare a practical handbook for actors, a sort of basic grammar of theatrical art. Starting from such a relatively modest objective, he widened his investigations, multiplied his conclusions deriving from a consistent and inspired practice and reached an impressive theoretical construction – the so-called “Stanislavsky system”. Stanislavsky scientifically underpins the theory and methodology of stage creation, which becomes possible to the extent that, irrespective of the various, infinite ways of acting, there are laws that govern the role creation, binding for all and arising from the very specific nature of the performing arts. More precisely, they must have a real logical basis. Stanislavski does not confine himself to noting, albeit systematically, results frequently obtained in stage practice. Rejecting empiricism, he investigates, discovers, defines the causality of the process of staging, explaining its genesis and development. That is why, for example, he is not content to simply observe how the actor's emotion manifests itself in the performance of one role or another, but is deeply interested in the inner logic that rules the production of emotion, in the spiritual coordinates of the character. Stanislavski was against formal conceptions of acting, which confine themselves to the outer expression of feelings. He supported the “art of living” as opposed – in general – to the “art of representing”. The actor should not represent the dramatic character on stage, but become the character, organically appropriating his thoughts and feelings. Stanislavski defines the stage action as a psychophysical – both inner and outer - process, involving intelligence, will, feelings, all the “elements of creation” – as he calls them – such as: imagination, attention, sense of rhythm technique of movement and speech. According to Stanislavski, the super objective

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(the supreme idea that led to the writing of the play) and the subtexts (the important meanings not always expressed in words, which are implied and need to be communicated, expressed by various stage means). The natural organic action provokes, awakens, by no means, the true honest feeling all the more so if the actor uses a good “bait”. Each stage of the “system” has brought a new stimulus for the emotional memory and recapitulative feelings. The magic “if”, the situations proposed, fabrications of the imagination, fragments and themes, objects of attention, the truth and belief in inner and outer actions have stimulated the affective memory in order to create a genuine stage act. To conclude, the natural state of mind, the action and feeling lead to an organic life on stage, embodied by the actor.

1.1. The Russian Succession (Meyerhold, Tairov, Vahtangov) Meyerhold and his “biomechanics”

As a reaction against naturalism – most often mistakenly viewed as realism – Meyerhold, Tairov and Vahtangov create a new stage convention, opening a new direction both in the theatre school, and in the 20th century theatre. Without denying or disregarding the “Stanislavsky system”, which represented the background of their professional education, all three of them blame it for competing with life and for the fact that, in such a theatre, the beholder was the victim of an illusion. Thus, from now on, natural manifestations of life cease to exist on stage, while the attention focuses on the actor himself, and not on the literary character. The actor ceases to serve the character, who is viewed as a visual moving element. They seek a new language, summarized by the word “play”. The various communication means of the actor become extremely important. Of the three, Meyerhold was the most vehement opponent of the reality in the theatre; his purpose was the conventional, the theatricality of the theatre. Meyerhold’s theatrical thought and practice led to numerous controversies during his life and after his death. As most directors, Meyerhold was also an actor, a noble profession he especially cherished. He strongly and constantly despised naturalistic theatre, which – in his writings – often becomes the enemy of the theatre in general. He fought against those who took art for reality, associating realism with naturalism “The laws of life and the laws of art are not identical.”² Such convictions made Meyerhold plead for the *theatricality* of the performance, for respecting and stimulating the specific language of the theatre, against naturalistic conventions regarding the basic identity between art and reality. The organic fusion of the real and the theatrical, the detection of the real substance of the theatre and of the latent theatrical values of the real led to the most authentic values of the contemporary performing art. Thus, Meyerhold himself defines his preference for „stylized theatre” in association with realism. Comparing the stage art with the harmony of sounds, he shows that: “Unlike listening to music, the naturalistic theatre seems to deny the audience the ability to dream and participate”.³ We come to the idea that the naturalistic theatre underestimates the viewers, by limiting their contribution that is necessary to fulfil the theatre performance. For Meyerhold it is the actor that has the pivotal role in the theatre performance, and not the author, thus contradicting all those who diminish the performer’s personality. The respect for the theatre actor, his actual importance in acting as a whole are completed with thorough training, which skilfully and constantly adds to the actor’s talent. This training pays special attention to movement, which Meyerhold believes it “is the strongest means of expression in a performance”.⁴ He believes that the dramatic work implies two dialogues: the outer dialogue, that we can hear during the

² Meyerhold, Vsevolod, Emilievici. 2015. *On Theatre*. Vol. I. București: Editura Cheiron. p. 32.

³ Idem. p. 34.

⁴ Ibidem;

performance, and the inner dialogue, which the viewer can understand not from dialogues, but from breaks, not from shouting, but from silence, not from tirades, but from the music of plastic movement. Thus, his vision reveals a whole philosophy of movement, full of deep meanings and poetic values that he called “biomechanics”. Meyerhold tries to define the biomechanics as simply as possible, through one of its features: “the fundamental law of biomechanics is very simple: the whole body takes part in each of our movements”.⁵ Biomechanics should be understood, above all, as a complex training of the actor, aimed to eventually allow him to consciously and completely master the expressive mechanism of his body movements. The actor must acquire a very good technique of expression for his whole body, able to usefully complement the expressivity of his face, accepted and employed in any theatre forms and conceptions. The theatre conception of the great director is essentially characterized by the expressive movement, which faithfully accompanies the idea. And the performance, in his vision, acquires its values directly proportional to the means. Yet his preference for the synthetic director - which is also an actor and maybe a playwright like Aeschylus, Molière, Shakespeare, Goldoni, Goethe - and his wish to reach the synthetic actor - who sings, dances, does acrobatics and skilfully masters the language of gestures on stage – remain obvious. Meyerhold left indelible traces in the history of contemporary directing by employing new stage means, such as „cinefication - the use of film fragments in the performance, the vertical constructions, turntables or the ingenious use of practicals”⁶.

1.2. Tairov and the unchained theatre

Paraphrasing Gordon Craig and his *über-marionette* (or super-puppet)⁷, Tairov tackles the super-actor – a man acting actively – because the essence of the theatre is the action performed by the actor and not the active will of the puppeteer. In Tairov’s vision, the actor is an idol and not the dilettante he had become. Comparing the art of acting with other arts, Tairov draws the attention to the complexity of theatrical art, in which both the creative personality and the material are one and the same object: “in any other art, the creator, the material, the tool and the work of art itself – the result of the whole process of creation – are separated from one another; besides, the last three of them are outside of the creative personality. It is only the art of acting that gathers together the creative personality and the material, the tool and the work of art in one and the same object; organically they cannot be separated from one another”.⁸ Tairov brings into question the need for many years of study, accompanied by permanent and ceaseless training, especially if we take into account the nature of the actor, so changing and unpredictable, in a continuous transformation. Tairov deplores the fate of the actor who can never part from his work in order to analyse it in peace, while waiting for his inspiration to give him a new impetus to continue and perfect his creation. Tairov even speaks about the actor’s lack of freedom as he belongs to a team and, therefore he takes part in a collective process that he cannot avoid as he pleases, waiting for the creative emotion. In Tairov’s opinion, at least two techniques underlie the theatrical art: an outer technique and an inner technique. Tairov acknowledges the outstanding importance of the inner technique, which was highlighted and developed by the naturalistic theatre, whose core work was the so-called *feeling*. Tairov agrees that acting has to be real, as the artistic emotion itself is real. But he believes that the emotion

⁵ Meyerhold, Vsevolod, Emilievici. 2015. *On Theatre*. Vol. I. București: Editura Cheiron. p. 45.

⁶ Robert, Leach. 1993. *Vsevolod Meyerhold*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. p. 155.

⁷ Edward, Gordon, Craig, 2012. *A vision of theatre*. București: Editura Cheiron. p. 76.

⁸ Bernstein, Elvin. 1973. *The Uninterrupted Dialogue of theatre in the XXth century*. vol. I. București: Editura Minerva. p. 89.

on stage does not stem from the real life of the actor or of any other person; it comes from that life that the actor has to create out of his phantasy. The scenic creation is a synthesis of the emotion and form, born out of the creation imagined by the actor.

1.3. Vahtangov, on the borderline between Stanislavski's veracity and Meyerhold's conventionality

Vahtangov was concerned with the synthesis between the veracity of Stanislavskian acting and the theatrical convention in Meyerhold's staging. Comparing the two great directors, Vahtangov said that Stanislavsky brought the naturalistic truth on the stage, as he was concerned with the truth and fought against vulgarity in the theatre, labelled as "theatrical", a word which had become an insult in the Art Theatre. Vahtangov sought contemporary means in the theatre in order to give the performance a shape that looks theatrical. He named his search „fantastic realism" or rather „theatrical realism". For what he called "fantastic realism" the forms and means of the stage resolution, which had to be theatrical, were imperative. Vahtangov believed it was very difficult to find a shape that would match the content and be presented with proper means. The means can be learned, but the shape has to be created, it has to be fantasized. He concludes that there should be fantastic realism in the theatre, and not naturalism or realism. The stage represented for Vahtangov the place of the actor's action, the greatest reality, and - at the same time - a place where everything is conventional. Vahtangov remained in the memory of his students especially due to one of his most current principles: the search, which is indispensable to any creator. Whether we talk about a contemporary topic or about a classical one, we should never stop our search, we should never be satisfied with what we have found at a certain point in our work and we should open the way to new challenges. The vivid and passionate search of an original way to great feelings endows Vahtangov's theatre with enduring features for the challenges of the 20th century, the artistic ideal or the producers, for the spirit of innovation and a more precise technique of the staging.

2.1. The American Succession: Michael Chekhov

Michael Chekhov promoted Stanislavski's ideas regarding the art of acting, thus contributing to the spread of the "system" beyond the Russian borders. Stanislavski's psycho-technique was represented in the best way and fulfilled in Michael Chekhov's work. Stanislavski acknowledged Chekhov as the most brilliant student and one of the greatest actors of the 20th century. In his work "On the art of acting", published in 1942 and presented as a technique of the dramatic art, Chekhov presented his working method, which was followed by great world actors (Gregory Peck, Ingrid Bergman). Above all, M. Chekhov believes the actor should strive to reach a complete harmony between physical and psyche: "The actor should consider his body a tool for expressing creative ideas on stage."⁹ Thus, the actor's body should be shaped and recreated from the inside. "The hand takes the tactile sense out of its passive responsiveness, and organizes it for experience and action. It teaches the man to master the spatial surface, weight, density, and proportion. It creates a unique universe, which leaves its imprint everywhere. Educating the man, the hand multiplies him in space and time; with the hands, the man gets in contact with the rigour of thinking. The thinking shapes the hand, and, in its turn, the hand shapes the thinking. The creative gesture exerts a continuous action on the inner life."¹⁰ The second request is the very richness of the psyche. A sensitive body and a rich

⁹ Cehov, Michael. 2014. *On acting*. București: Caietele Bibliotecii U.N.A.T.C. vol. 16. Nr. 2. p. 12.

¹⁰ Focillon Henri. 1989. *Life of Forms*. New York: Zone Books. p. 140.

psyche are complementary and create that harmony so necessary in order to reach the professional goal of the actor. M. Chekhov invites actors to read historical plays or history books in order to live or appropriate the psychology of people from other epochs. They have to try to understand their thinking without imposing any modern point of view, moral conceptions, social principles or anything of a personal nature. The actor must try to understand the life of the character and the inner support of the existence: "It is pathetic when an actor on stage does not listen to what is being said or - if he is in a hurry - interrupts his partner who is talking to him. Unfortunately, that is the case when actors tell their lines automatically, without any subtext, without thinking. It is the subtext, that is the life of the human spirit, that makes us tell the text. Only when the whole subtext line is infused with feelings, the main action of the play and of the role is created".¹¹

M. Chekhov also invited actors to penetrate the psychology of various works, trying to define their specific character, their inner psychological features. Then, actors should understand the psychology of the people around them, trying to find good, positive features in those they do not like, things they would not have noticed before and trying to live as these people do, to understand why they feel the way they do and why they act the way they do. At last, the third request of the acting profession is the total subordination of the body and psyche to the actor. He must become his own master, the master of his profession and that is why he has to exclude the accidental from his profession in order to create a solid basis for his talent. The actor must also refuse to play his own role (as Stanislavski requested – „me under given circumstances”) or to resort to *clichés*. The “psychological gesture” remains typical of M. Chekhov’s method. If feelings can be “lured”, stirred by certain indirect means, the will can be triggered by the force of movement: “the kind of movement that awakens a corresponding, defined desire in us and the quality of the same movement reveals the feelings”.¹² Michael Chekhov exemplifies various positions that can be reached following a movement which must represent a human topic or character. Studying and practising the movement and the final position, the actor will experiment its influence over the psyche. Michael Chekhov stressed that the movements and their interpretations described in his textbook, „On the art of acting”, are only a few examples of possible situations that he calls „psychological gestures”. As opposed to Stanislavski – for whom the inner process to be embodied was crucial in creating a character, after the thorough understanding of all the aspects pertaining to the character’s inner life -, for M. Chekhov the final picture is important, embodied in a movement which matches the character and – at the same time – proposes a certain type of character. However, both of them admit that in the embodiment of a character one cannot separate the body and the psyche and the two have to be in harmony.

2.2. The Strasberg Method

Great artists have left the result of their work in museums, video and audio recordings, etc. Thus, future generations can benefit from their genius. As for Lee Strasberg, many actors and professors that have studied with him passed on both his work method, and recordings of his lessons at Actor’s Studio. Strasberg believed that an actor can function at full capacity only in a state of relaxation. He thought that tension is the actor’s most serious illness and if there is tension, an actor cannot think or feel. He also thought that actors should not follow rules as creativity does not follow predetermined formulas. Strasberg’s method also refers to concentration and affective memory, a key-element of his method. His pedagogical genius lied

¹¹Stanislavski, Konstantin. 1952. *An Actor’s Work*. București: Editura Cartea Rusă. p. 127.

¹²Cehov, Michael. 2014. *On acting*. București: Caietele Bibliotecii U.N.A.T.C. vol. 16. Nr. 2. p. 14.

in the ability to focus the attention on a detailed inventory of the actor's tools. The trick was to find a way to initiate the creative process or to allow it to emerge. He used acting exercises with flexibility. Strasberg believed that if actors can accept criticism, they will certainly develop. He wanted the actors to have solid historical and artistic knowledge: history of painting, sculpture, music, history of styles, the individuality of each great painter, etc. Strasberg felt the theatre must contribute to the spiritual life of the nation. He wanted the actors to be part of a "profession". He started his quest for the truth by explaining realism or naturalism in the art of acting. It was crucial for the actor to rely on an exercise of rationality: to discover the experience and behaviour behind the words, to enliven them with the illusion they are told for the first time. Strasberg spent more than 50 years of his life inspiring actors and giving them the tools that would help them more genuine and more "alive". Because "there is no greater torment than the torment of creation. You feel permanently that your part lacks something. It is haunting you, it is there, in your proximity or inside you and you only have to grab it. But when you reach out your hand to grab it, it completely disappears. With an empty heart, devoid of any spiritual content, you are in a difficult moment of your part and in such circumstances, there is nothing else you can do but set free your acting powers".¹³

3.1. Ion Cojar

Ion Cojar is the only representative of the Romanian theatre school that has proposed a method. Though an adept of Stanislavski, Cojar believes that acting is a specific logical mechanism, based on versatile thinking. Cojar notes that thinking has been reduced to an instrumental component, a means or a simple tool. Based on Denis Diderot's „Paradox of acting” – one of the most important theoretical works on acting – reason is considered to be a term of the dichotomy reason-feeling and can be replaced by „something” at least equally valuable. Reason and feeling have always been opposed. According to the principle of classical binary logic, only one of the two terms can lie at the basis of acting: either reason, or feeling, but never both of them at the same time. Hence, acting is either reason, or feeling and a third solution is impossible, so it does not exist: “Tertium non datur”. Due to scientific developments something that used to be considered absurd is logical nowadays: acting can certainly be more things at the same time. There are logical mechanisms whose principles accept that a thing can be „something” and „something else” at the same time. That is, two or many things at the same time, contrary to binary logic. Definitely, acting means reason and feeling at the same time. The actor, as a genuine creator, is a person with two or more identities. The actor is the artist and the work at the same time, the artist and the character, citizen x and character y. While acting, the actor is both a natural person, and Hamlet, Richard, etc, whose ways of thinking he has appropriated. Hence, acting is – above all – a way of thinking, a specific logical mechanism and then a way of doing things, says professor Ion Cojar.

- **Conclusions**

Stanislavski is the first teacher-director that created a scientific, realistic, theory of acting, a method of acting – the so-called system that generated the major trends of the contemporary theatre. All theatre schools in the 20th century had links with Stanislavski's system, which they embraced, completed or even rejected. The system laid the basis for solid acting techniques and numerous theoretical debates. It created, influenced and defined great theatre and film actors

¹³ Stanislavski, Konstantin. 1951. *My Life in Art*. București: Editura Cartea rusă. p. 228.

and directors. From the Actor's Studio – where Lee Strasberg cherished Stanislavski's teachings, to Stela Adler Acting Studio – established by the only actress that studied with the master in Paris – going to the Laboratory Theatre of Maria Uspenskaia and Richard Boleslavski, two Russian actors, messengers of Stanislavski's technique on the American continent, Stanislavski's spirit reached the Brazilian and Argentinian soil, and even the Japanese theatre. "The system remains Stanislavski's most important heritage, the result of a complex artistic experience, marked by success, discovery, failure and doubt".¹⁴ Throughout Stanislavski's activity, each rehearsal or exercise conducted for youth pleaded for realism and fought against formalism in the theatre. All in all, "the great reformer of the theatre" (as Gorki called Stanislavski) introduced a new methodology of the realist creation in the theatre and discovered the laws of the organic birth of the scenic images. He also defined the process of the actor's identification with the dramatic character, stressing – from the ideological perspective of creation – the need to know the super-objective, the action and the subtexts thoroughly.

He underlined the obligation to build a judicious physical life associated with the psyche that the actor reveals on stage. Stanislavski, as all great people, had doubts regarding the veracity of his system, the topicality of the work method. Yet, he never lost his faith. The other acting schools have consistently built on Stanislavskian research, fostering the actor's perfectionism and appeal to new stage dimensions. The system represents a real revolution in the history of acting, which has led to the birth of the modern actor, with complex interpretation abilities from ancient to contemporary drama, from Shakespeare to the theatre of the absurd, from Chekhov to Brecht. All the Stanislavskian schools mentioned in this article encourage the actor to master both Stanislavski's psycho-technique, and Meyerhold's physical training in order to reach a proper "embodiment" and a complete artistic act. We have gone through the world of acting built by these great theatre professionals and their schools, which have provided actors from all over the world with means that allow them to exercise their profession in the best possible way. Though based on different principles, they had only one purpose: to acknowledge the actor as a creator and not as a mere interpreter.

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¹⁴ Bernstein, Elvin. 1973. *The Uninterrupted Dialogue of theatre in the XXth century. vol. I.* București: Editura Minerva. p. 45.