

AFTERWORD BY ANATOLY SMELIANSKY

A FEW WORDS ABOUT STANISLAVSKI'S 'MAJOR BOOK' AND THE MAN HIMSELF'

The world of the theatre knows Stanislavski's book *An Actor Prepares* very well. It appeared in 1936 and since then has often been published in many languages and many lands. Paradoxically, it is least known in the author's own country. That requires some explanation. K.S. (that was what his friends called him behind his back at the Art Theatre) wrote his book at the behest of an American publisher and gave his translator, Elizabeth Hapgood, a totally free hand. The manuscript was cut and adapted to suit the tastes of the American reader, who wanted a kind of 'Beginners' Manual'. The translator accomplished her mission. The book found its place in the English-speaking world. It appeared in Russian two years later, after K.S.'s death but not in the form in which Elizabeth Hapgood had presented it. A great deal had been rewritten, expanded, rethought in as much as K.S. continued to work on his system in those two final years and many thoroughgoing decisions were taken, yet again. The idea of the Method of Physical Actions emerged. It painted the grammar of acting in a new light. Besides which, K.S. was fully aware that his book would come out in the Soviet Union of 1938, and that had to be taken seriously into account.

The Russian version evolved in an atmosphere of extremes. In August 1934 K.S. returned from France to Moscow after lengthy treatment, passing through Germany where the Nazis were already in overall control. Hitler in Berlin, Stalin in Moscow: this was the choice which K.S. faced, as

did most European artists. Publicly, K.S. preferred Stalin. In reality his choice was not so unambiguous. From the summer of 1934 to the end of his life, i.e. prior to 1938, K.S. did not set foot inside the Art Theatre he had founded, the Art Theatre, which now thought of him not in terms of his artistry but of his 'efficacy', i.e. as having nothing to do with major questions of art or of the development of that art. He worked at home with young actors and singers in the last of his studios, the Opera-Dramatic Studio. In reply to a question from Elizabeth Hapgood, he answered somewhat enigmatically, 'There is a rumour that I have quit the Art Theatre. It's a lie. The rumour stems from the fact that since my illness I have not been to the theatre, that is the reason. In winter, when there is ice and cold I can't leave the house. I have cardiac spasms (angina pectoris). In spring when I might be able to go and see my own and other people's productions, theatres like the Moscow Art Theatre and the opera are on tour. In the autumn, when performances begin again, I have to take a holiday. My work is conducted (for the all the theatres and the studios) only in my home in Leontievski Lane.'

Nature knows no such weather in which he could visit the Art Theatre of which he was head. But, of course, it was not a matter of ice and cold. Stanislavski did not set foot inside the theatre he ran for four years, it was a mark of general opposition, a voluntary rejection of it, which for various reasons served everyone. Condemned to a kind of house arrest, he made good use of it. He took no part in Soviet life, did not sign any group letters supporting the murder and torture of dissidents, did not stage propaganda plays. As far as was possible, he preserved his autonomy.

The period in which the Russian version of the book on acting was completed was the transition from 'vegetarianism' (as Anna Akhmatova put it) to 'the age of blood'. It should not be thought that Stanislavski was sheltered from the terror in his home as on a kind of island retreat. As early as June 1930 one of his favourite nephews had been arrested. Neither his status as a 'sacred cow' nor his pleas to the head of the secret police Heinrich Yagoda were of any help. Mikhail Alekseev died in jail. The only gesture of kindness that was made by the authorities was to hand his dead body over to his relatives. Other close relatives were arrested and K.S. took charge of their children. The word 'concentration camp' appears for the first time in his letters to mean imminent death.

Confined in his comfortable jail house in Leontievski Lane (the name was changed to Stanislavski Street in his lifetime), he decided to complete his 'great book', which, in Russian, would be called *The Actor's Work on Himself in the Creative Process of Experiencing*. The key word in this title is 'experiencing' which, like many of K.S.'s terms, defies adequate translation. This

actor-teacher's slang was adopted by Stanislavski's pupils but was obscure for those unacquainted with the general spirit of his understanding of acting. An edited version appeared in America. K.S. prepared a book for his contemporaries with its meaning uncut. This book is now being offered to the English-speaking reader. The problem of translation is the problem of a general understanding of the Stanislavski system. And so we must be mindful of the circumstances in which K.S. decided on two versions – one for the world at large and one for Russia – and that what we in Russia call the *system* in the English-speaking world is often called mistakenly the *method*.

2.

For many years the system existed in oral form, as a kind of theatrical folklore. It changed according to those who taught it, to those who 'narrated' it. Repeated attempts to set forth Stanislavski's teaching in his place produced resistance from the author. This was even the case when the system was expounded by as intelligent a pupil as Michael Chekhov. That was the case when, let us say, the Art Theatre director Ilya Sudakov did the same (at the beginning of the 30s). In this last case K.S. went into a fury: 'It is not a matter of an author's pride,' he wrote to Tamantsova on 1 February 1934, 'but the fact that the thing I love most, to which I have dedicated my life, has been cynically violated and given over to the judgement of the crowd in mutilated form.'

We need to understand not only the emotional but the substantive reason why he was unwilling for so long to start a book on 'his precious creation' – the system – and generally pin it down in words. In his letters to Elizabeth Hapgood in 1936 he partially reveals the secret of his actor-writer laboratory. 'What does it mean, writing a book about the system? It does not mean writing down something that is already cut and dried. The system lives in me but it has no form. It is only when you try to find a form for it that the real system is created and defined. In other words, the system is created in the very process of being written down.'

The book had been written for America but K.S. was worried by a possible reaction in Russia. The views of his editor, Lyubov Gurievich, who had been one of the first to read the manuscript, confirmed his worst forebodings. His friend as well as his editor, whom he trusted absolutely, explained clearly and directly to him that his book with all its examples and ideals that stemmed from a pre-revolutionary view of an actor's life were doomed in the new Russia. She suggested that K.S. was completely out of touch with the new historical situation, that his favourite examples

about precious jewels would be wide of the mark and even offensive. 'Dear Konstantin Sergeevich don't talk to the poor and starving about jewels and investments because it will only provoke bitter irritation in some and a brooding sense of resentment in others,' she admonished this white-haired child of a prophet on 1 April 1929.

Mrs Gurievich was not just speaking for herself but for 95 per cent of the 'ordinary, underprivileged intellectuals'. She suggested that he bring his book into line with contemporary life and adapt it to the needs of new post-revolutionary generations. She used basic concepts of the system as arguments, "Contact" with life and "adaptation" to his times – adaptation in the purest, noblest sense of the word, not some tawdry camouflage or compromise, is an artist's duty if he wishes to be effective. This "adaptation" requires great mental effort which you, given your way of life, have never had an opportunity to follow through. Almost every page of your book is revelatory in that regard.'

Broken in spirit, this woman soon wrote a special 'Memo' in which she presented Stanislavski with a plan for completing the system and 'adapting' it to contemporary life, both Soviet and American. The greatest difficulty in completing the manuscript, in the editor's opinion, was the fact that the tastes, ideas, moods of Russian and foreign society had never been further apart than at the present moment. Two worlds stood opposite each other as though prepared for armed conflict. The life, habits, domestic customs of our own pre-revolutionary life and the present Western way of life were inimical to the 'Soviet people' . . . as belonging to the capitalist system. And so, everything in the book that dated from an earlier life, literary descriptions, modes, examples that would draw a Western reader to it would be greeted with hostility by the Soviet people. The demands of home and abroad are irreconcilable.

In her second point, Mrs Gurievich sets out a list of ideological postulates that could not but frighten an author living, as it were, in another period. She knew his weak spots. The most dangerous offence was his beloved 'neutrality' which, she reminded him, 'would be equated by the party as being reactionary or counter-revolutionary'. She warned K.S. that he must be prepared for 'massive accusations of a similar kind' and so he had to address the burning questions of a new era. Not to do so would have 'fateful consequences for the book'.

This was the programme for 'conforming to the contemporary situation' of which K.S. ticked every point with a Yes. Had he followed all these points through it would undoubtedly have meant the death of his forthcoming book and of his life's work.

The agonising years of 'work on himself' began. But he just could not

adapt. His genius would not allow it. Broken in spirit and law-abiding he started to baulk. 'If I work in even one of the examples you have found for our young contemporaries,' he wrote in a draft letter to Mrs Gurievich, 'I can say in all confidence that not only will my book never be published but I will never be allowed into America.' That was not included in the letter he sent. What was included was much more forthright in its expression. 'The book . . . speaks of the art of an older era, which was not created under the Bolsheviks. That is why the examples are bourgeois.'

Despite his usual display of political naivety, as he started work he could define absolutely precisely points that could be censored. 'To my mind, the greatest danger of the book is "the creation of the life of the human spirit" (you are not allowed to speak about the spirit). Another danger: the subconscious, transmission and reception, the word *soul*. Wouldn't that be a reason to ban the book.'

Historic change swept through the life of the Art Theatre. It was canonized. It was decided to create an academy alongside it, 'a forge for a creative workforce'. Model 'socialist' textbooks were required. The system took on a new direction. It ceased to be an actor's personal work and exploits. K.S. followed the government's superedicts. A special committee was set up to verify Stanislavski's writings from the point of view of the latest scientific advances. Particular alarm was caused by the draft of the final and most difficult chapter, 'On the Threshold of the Subconscious', which quintessentially defined his conception of the actor's art. The correspondence with a party official Aleksei Angarov reveals the direction in which they tried to steer Stanislavski in this matter, in an attempt, in exactly the same spirit as the 'black séance' in Bulgakov's *Master and Marguerita*, to unmask 'his mystical terminology'. (The irony of this story is that the official who kindly allowed K.S. to use his favourite concepts was very soon arrested and liquidated.)

Lyubov Gurievich stopped work as his editor. She could not endure K.S.'s endless corrections, changes, and obstinacy. 'An old friend was not unfaithful but forced by fate was invalidated out like a wounded soldier' (from one of her valedictory letters to K.S.).

In the Russian version he was reaching out to the future. *An Actor's Work on Himself* came out a few weeks after Stanislavski's death.

The pressure of the given circumstances can be felt in his last book. There is not the same freedom with which he wrote *My Life in Art*. The first book is a book of major questions. The second is a book of answers. *My Life in Art* is confessional, *An Actor's Work on Himself* is professional. The attitude of an omniscient teacher and a genuflecting pupil are the principal 'psychological gestures' of the book and unconsciously reflect the dominant

'gesture' of the time. The majority of the omissions in the book are concerned with matters that he would not explicitly declare or explain. But he did not renounce the heart of the system, that is, his own heart. Fundamentally, his 'grammar' of acting is full of heroic acts of rejection. Antiquated in its machinery, Stanislavski's book managed to evoke the spirit 'not of contemporary but of the *old, eternal, immutable art of the actor-craftsman* and not of the actor-activist.

He did not allow the actor-activist in his home. Within the confines of his 'great book' as in his house in Leontievski Lane, there was not the least hint of the real Soviet world within which it was completed and refined. In both there was an almost museum-like clinical purity. Evidently, as far as possible, the book preserved what Osip Mandelstam described as 'stolen air', that is the air of another culture and other beliefs.

3.

And, finally, a few comments relating to the daily life of the system in contemporary Russian theatre. There the problem is not to translate from Russian into English but the equally complex problem of translating from Russian into Russian. The approach to the system and the way it is interpreted changed endlessly after K.S.'s death, countries changed and the understanding of the actor's art changed. With the rehabilitation and reinstatement of K.S.'s major opponents, who had been liquidated by the Soviet regime, it became clear that the system had to be placed within the broad context of Russian and world theatre. Account had to be taken of the changes made by Meyerhold and Brecht, Michael Chekhov, Vakhtangov, Tairov and Grotowski. New generations of Russian actors and directors undertook the enormous labour, often unbeknown to those abroad, of talking through the system and its basic terms. They tried to understand the system beyond the barriers to understanding. I will give just a few examples.

A few years ago, the actor Oleg Borisov's diaries were published posthumously. Borisov was probably one of the most important actors of post-Stalinist Russia. He graduated from the Studio-School of the Moscow Art Theatre, having imbibed the Stanislavski system with his mother's milk, he worked with Tostonogov, played in Dostoevski's *Krotkii* directed by Lev Dodin, spent many years at the Art Theatre. If we are to look for an actor to symbolize the Russian school of acting and what we understand by the system, that man is Oleg Borisov, as in his time was Michael Chekhov, possibly one of the first candidates for that vacancy.

In his diaries, the actor recounts how he adapted K.S.'s system to his

own 'immune system'. He started from the fact that much had changed since K.S. had died and his system had been introduced into Russian schools 'blood boiled, overflowed and how they drank it!' Highly significant ideas underwent revision. The actor knows that the most important element in the system is to discover a conscious path to the unconscious, 'to switch off the brain entirely, to become a blank sheet of paper and move into the unconscious in a neutral state'. The problem is to know which technique will work. It all begins with the script. The actor removes all the punctuation marks ('once the first sign of life appears then you can feel a pulse – then you can draw the first line'). He followed K.S. in not trusting words, only deeds, but he refused to deal with them according to the system. He, essentially, rejected the 'throughaction', at least in the way that it was taught in school. 'First, set up a series of complete actions, then choose the most important of them. A mosaic is formed with no "threads", no through-action or the usual transitions. These must then be conveyed to the audience . . . Let everything in man's character be unexpected. The unexpected is the most precious feature in art. But what are we to do in the pauses, in other scenes? Disappear into the shadows. Give a breather. Only shoot at the right moment. Arrhythmia, unpredictability, that is what it is for. Of course, even unpredictability has to be structured, to avoid being meaningless. The actor makes friends with the eminent coaches and football-players of his time and he derives the idea of arrhythmia from new unexpected ways of playing football.' I offer this example so that the reader may understand how the Stanislavski system changed and survived in Russian theatre.

In his book, Valery Galendejev, a well-known teacher and comrade-in-arms of Lev Dodin, comes across, like Dodin, as one of the most powerful of Stanislavski's successors in contemporary Russian theatre, adapting K.S.'s system to himself. He invented his own slang in parallel to Stanislavski's. Dodin did not use the word 'concept' but replaced it with the idea of an *agreement*, as in *to come to an agreement*. These cautious words mean a level of mutual understanding between the participants, to counterbalance the director's own individual ideas as he approaches the other members of the rehearsal with his 'concept'. Dodin did not use the term through-action, fearing, like Borisov, to coarsen the very material the actor was using, and to lose the unforeseen in what he did onstage. 'I use the idea of action and counteraction instead,' the director said to me, 'that stops the actor from creating one line for a role out of one through-concept, that oversimplifies the acting.'

Anatoly Efros, another outstanding director and teacher of the post-Stalinist period, developed the so-called improvisatory method. Efros

(following in the footsteps of his teacher, Marya Knebbel, a direct pupil of Stanislavski) tried once more to discover a basis which would enable the actor to use the improvisatory method of rehearsal, i.e. an endless attempt to test out and get into the play. This method has its origins in Stanislavski's final ideas but places the actor's improvisations at the centre of a given play. Efros invented his own slang, in which the unwelcome notion of throughaction was close to a cardiogram, in which there was a flat line (indicating death). For Efros the proper way to build a role recalled a 'curve', a real cardiogram, with its proper peaks and troughs and arrhythmia, etc.

Oleg Efremov, with whom I was fortunate enough to work for many years at the Art Theatre (he ran it for thirty years), attempted to translate from Russian into Russian Stanislavski's highly important notion of the term *perezhivanie*, 'experiencing', which we now find highly obscure. In his mouth it almost always seemed to sound like 'living in' by which was understood the actor's ability to penetrate and fill every moment of his life onstage with vibrant material at times to create life, at others to complete an action. Living in means remaining alive in every second of the stage action, which moves ahead as a non-stop, complex process. This living process (experiencing for K.S.) is confronted each time by another kind of acting, which K.S. called *representation* and which Grotowski called the art of composition.

I had the occasion to hear another modification to the Stanislavski system from another director and teacher, Piotr Fomenko. The actor, Stanislavski suggested, must first of all understand what the character wants at any given moment, what drives his behaviour. But, Fomenko objects, quite often the actor, like anyone, does not know what he wants and in strict terms his action consists of trying to figure out what it is he really wants (incidentally, this mood is highly characteristic of many of Chekhov's heroes).

Anatoly Vasiliev, in the 80s, was involved in a sharp polemic with a French Stanislavski scholar (in Paris at a symposium devoted to Stanislavski). The well-known Russian director was aghast at the primitive interpretation (in fact a straight translation) of K.S.'s classroom slang as rigid formulae, a terminology that had lost all living sense. There is a whole section in the system called 'bits and tasks'. So the word *task* which K.S. used, means in the theatre not so much the process of setting ultimate goals for the actor, as the process of planting a seed, teasing the actor with something emotionally enticing, subtleties that provoke him into action, into the creative act. If you translate the word *task* literally, the director suggested at this symposium, it means you reduce it to something

primitive, you kill the actor's living soul along with the living soul of the system.

I have mentioned one or two modifications to the system by contemporary Russian teachers and directors which stand alongside the classic modifications to it in the course of the last century made to it by Stanislavski's contemporaries and pupils and his major opponents. We should not forget that even when the Russian version of *An Actor's Work on Himself* was completed, Stanislavski asked Meyerhold to teach Biomechanics in the last of his studios. When Meyerhold's theatre was destroyed, he was unemployed but K.S. not only stretched out a helping hand to the condemned man, he set up a meeting between creative minds. He compared their coming together to digging a tunnel from opposite ends so that they should finally meet in the middle.

The meeting did not last long. In August 1938 Stanislavski died. Within a year Meyerhold was arrested, tortured in the cellars of the Lubyanka and shot. Discussions on the system were cut short for decades.

This discussion has come alive again at another level. The 'great book', its Russian version, remains, in its thinking, a significant and provocative monument in the culture of world theatre. It is fought with, it is modified in all sorts of ways, but no one seriously concerned with teaching theatre across the world can refuse to acknowledge K.S.'s work, just as no one interested in chemistry can refuse to acknowledge the periodic table created by Dmitri Mendeleiev. The comparison may not be entirely appropriate, but it seems to me essentially true.

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