

‘An Actor’s Work is finally done’

A response to the new Jean Benedetti translation of Stanislavski’s An Actor’s Work

Bella Merlin, January 2008

Many moons ago in 1946, the award-winning British actor Michael Redgrave wrote of Stanislavski’s *An Actor Prepares* saying:

Quite a few actors have, I know, read it and have found it immensely stimulating. Other actors have read it, and find it fairly frustrating. Some others again say they have read it when what they mean is that they have always meant to read it. Some have read it and will, frankly, have none of it. Some would sooner be seen dead than reading it. For all I know some may even have died reading it. Very few have read it again. (Redgrave, M., 1958: 172)

Michael Redgrave wrote that over sixty years ago, but I have a feeling little has changed. Although I don’t actually know of anyone who has died clutching the book in his hands, most of my actor-friends probably have a copy of *An Actor Prepares* sitting on their shelves somewhere (the spine unbroken...). Most of the students with whom I come into contact claim that they’ve read it and certainly blush if I suggest it would be pretty poor show to get to the end of a three-year drama programme without having read it. (After all, it is one of the most significant books in the history of modern actor training.) And yet it seems that few of them take real pleasure from the experience.

There’s no doubt, *An Actor Prepares* can be fairly obscure at times: it was heavily – often clumsily – edited by its 1930s’ translator and publisher, not to mention the translator’s husband. The semi-fictional storytelling device can be cloying at times. The language is sometimes archaic and alienating. And we don’t get a full picture of what the ‘system’ entails.

Yet help is at hand. After a decade of hard work and dedication, Stanislavski scholar, Jean Benedetti, has brought into the market place a new translation of *An Actor Prepares*. He has still had to undertake ‘a certain degree of editing, simplifying the text, reducing the number of words, in order to make the book readable to the average student’, as he

explains in his terrifically useful Foreword. Yet, opening with Stanislavski's own original draft Preface, which has never appeared in translation before, Benedetti has produced a meaty volume – of biblical dimensions – entitled *An Actor's Work*. The dimensions are hefty because, not only are we presented with *An Actor Prepares* (initially called *An Actor's Work on Himself in the Creative Process of Experience*), but also with *Building a Character* (initially called *An Actor's Work on Himself in the Creative Process of Physical Characterisation*).

Publishing the two books in one volume was always Stanislavski's intention. While the American publishers in the 1930s couldn't countenance printing such a mighty tome, Routledge have seized the nettle nearly a century later and taken on the challenge. And I believe – as an actor, a trainer of actors, and a writer on Stanislavski myself – this new translation has the potential to radically re-focus the way in which we use, teach and talk about the fundamentals of Stanislavski's 'system' in the English-speaking domain.

Why both books together?

Stanislavski's 'system' is entirely 'natural', in that all he did was put human behaviour under the microscope. He looked at how we pursue our wants; how our thoughts, feelings and actions interconnect; and how we usually only speak a small percentage of the inner monologue which endlessly chatters in our heads. He also examined the way in which our emotions are the outcome of our interactions with others, caused by the achievement or the blocking of our deepest desires.

Having broken down human behaviour like this, he then asked how we can piece it all back together within the artificial confines of a dramatic performance. He posed the major questions about why it is that everything we do so easily in everyday life suddenly becomes so stilted and tense when we know we're being watched. Because everything he did was so 'natural', I'm sure that if Stanislavski hadn't come up with his 'system', someone else would have asked the same questions before long, especially in light of the discoveries being made in science, art and literature as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth.

That said, the major concern Stanislavski placed at the heart of his 'system' was the constant dialogue between our physical (seeable) bodies and our inner (unseeable) psychologies. Humans are psycho-physical beings: our bodies give huge amounts of

information to our inner lives (i.e. our imaginations and our emotions), and at the same time, our inner lives can only convey themselves to the outside world through our bodies. If we didn't have a body, then we might have the most amazing ideas and emotional experiences, but nobody would ever know. So the more expressive and responsive our bodies can be, the more detailed and nuanced our portrayals of characters can be. And this is what made Stanislavski's actor-training programme so particular and precise: it addressed the actor's body and psychology at one and the same time.

And this is what makes the publishing of *An Actor's Work* so significant – and long overdue.

Part of the reason Stanislavski was so insistent that the first American publishers should print the contents of the psychological work (*An Actor Prepares*) in the same volume as the contents of the physical work (*Building a Character*) was down to a big fear. He was terrified that actors and directors would read one book without the other, and in so doing, develop an unbalanced picture of the 'system'. They would either see it as an internal, emotionally driven method (if they only read *An Actor Prepares*), or as a technical, externalised method with little reference to inner life (if they only read *Building a Character*). He finally agreed to the separation of these two aspects on the condition that he wrote an overview of the whole 'system' to be included in the first publication. Sadly, he never wrote that overview, and the very thing he feared did indeed happen. Up until now, many of us who are unable to read the original Russian texts, have had the impression that *An Actor Prepares* is the heart of the 'system', so not all of us go on to read the partner piece, *Building a Character*. Even those of us who do read both probably don't have a wholly clear sense of just how intricately they interconnect.

So publishing the two books in one volume is a major development, but of course there are details of translation which are also evolutionary.

The nuances of translation

Right from the first sentence, we get a sense of the subtleties involved in these new translations. *An Actor Prepares* begins:

We were excited as we waited for our first lesson with the Director, Tortsov, today. But he came into our class only to make the unexpected announcement that in order to become better acquainted with us, he wished us to give a

performance in which we should act bits from plays chosen by us.

(Stanislavski, trans. Hapgood, 1937: 1)

An Actor's Work begins:

Today we waited for our first class with Arkadi Tortsov, not a little scared. But all he did was come in and make an astonishing announcement. He has arranged a showing for us in which we are to present extracts from plays of our own choice. (Stanislavski, trans. Benedetti, 2008: 5)

Jean Benedetti's knowledge of acting, as well as of Russian language, has enabled him to enter into the realm and the heads of student actors. Working with Katya Kamotskaia (a native Russian actress of wonderful sensitivity, as well as being an extraordinary teacher of acting – she currently tutors at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama), Benedetti has chosen 'not a little scared' instead of 'excited'. In other words, we're instantly plunged into the atmosphere and world of the student actors and their nervous trepidation. But this is just one nuance.

Bearing in mind Stanislavski's passion for 'tempo-rhythm', Benedetti has also given us a far snappier, contemporary rhythm. Where the original translator, Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, provides us a second sentence with a rather clunky subclause (beginning 'in order to become better acquainted'), Benedetti splits the sentence into two, making the content more accessible and the situation much clearer. It's these kinds of subtle updates which set the reader on a sharper, more accessible journey.

Added to which, of course, a number of specific tools in the kit are given new names, most of which make them immediately more implementable and understandable. That said, there are a couple with which I have certain reservations – and I think that's a good thing: it's important that the new translations cause discussion and debate. Besides, it would be mad to think that overnight we're all going to start using new terminology, when we've been so used to other words for the best part of a century.

Before we take a look at the new names for the tools, let's see how *An Actor's Work* marks out the architecture of the 'system' by setting out a Year 1 and a Year 2.

Year 1 of Stanislavski's actor-training

An Actor's Work leads us very clearly through the curriculum of the first two years of a four-year programme. Although Stanislavski is a little inconsistent in his marking out of

what constitutes Year 1 and what constitutes Year 2, in general we have a much stronger understanding of the progression of the actor-training.

Arguably one of the most important aspects of this progression is that the students aren't encouraged to do any solid technical work on 'Physical embodiment' or 'Voice and Speech' until their second year. And it's not just the technical work: 'Emotion memory' isn't touched on explicitly until Year 2. This is quite a significant departure from *An Actor Prepares* in which Chapter 9 on 'Emotion Memory' comes halfway through the book as if it's part of the first year of training.

'Emotion Memory' is one of the thornier issues in Stanislavski's 'system', largely due to the emphasis on emotional recall in the American Method, which evolved in the US after the Moscow Art Theatre visited the States in the 1920s. There can be a tendency – particularly among young actors – to seize on 'Emotion Memory' as one of the juicier parts of Stanislavski's 'system': after all, there's something wonderfully therapeutic and cathartic to find yourself weeping and wailing in a workshop, having spent much of your social life keeping your stronger emotions under wraps. Therefore, it's intriguing to see in *An Actor's Work* that this tool forms part of a *second* year of training, to be explored only once the fundamentals have been laid down in the first year.

The acting fundamentals

Those first year fundamentals are very clearly set out. They include: 'Action', the 'Magic "If"', 'Given Circumstances', 'Imagination', 'Concentration and Attention' and 'Muscular Relief'.

By placing 'Action' at the beginning, we immediately understand that acting is about *doing* things, rather than *being* or *remembering*. Unless you have a clear sense of what you're doing onstage, then everything else will be formal and dull.

Then it's about a sense of play, and saying to yourself – just like a child would – '*what would I do if... there's a madman behind the door? What would I do if... my brother just threw all my money on the fire? What would I do if... I turned my back on my baby and it drowned in the bath?*' (All these questions are provoked by the 'Magic "If"'.) Anatoly Smeliansky points out in his terrific Afterword to the book that some of the references to jewels and estates in the acting exercises proposed by Stanislavski were problematic for the Soviet actors, and sure enough, they can make the book feel rather outdated. But I

would argue that, for the actor's inner child to start playing, the higher the stakes, then the more fun there is to be had. And for an English-speaking, twenty-first-century acting practitioner, whose reference points are just as likely to be *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *The Golden Compass*, I think the examples provided by the early twentieth-century Russian can still be imaginatively lucrative.

Having dealt with 'Action' and 'the Magic "If"', the first year of training is then about feeding your sense of play with the 'Given Circumstances' of the situation, both those provided by the writer and those supplied by your own 'Imagination'.

Then your first year of training is about negotiating your own inner blocks, understanding whatever it is that prevents you from being creative successfully. These blocks might arise out of fear of being watched and, therefore, you need to 'Concentrate your Attention' on the appropriate onstage task to avoid being put off by your audience. Or those blocks might come from certain physical tensions and, therefore, you need to find a way to 'Release your Muscles' and relax.

Then it's about understanding the structure of a dramatic scene – its 'Bits' – in order that you can fathom the play's architecture and rhythm. Then it's about identifying your 'Task' in each 'Bit', so that you have a very clear and achievable goal every moment that you're on stage.

All these components – which are ultimately about kneading your creative clay, i.e. your imagination and your body – form the core of Year 1's training in a logical and accessible way. Combined together, they can endow you with an utter sense of 'Truth' about what you're doing, which in its own right will fill you with a sense of 'Belief'.

The logic and the comprehensiveness of these basic fundamentals somehow comes through so much more clearly in *An Actor's Work* than was ever really tangible in *An Actor Prepares*. And the whole of this first year is entitled 'Experiencing' – which Benedetti's Foreword describes as 'the process by which an actor engages actively with the situation in each performance'. I would take that interpretation further, suggesting it's also about 'making yourself available to yourself', getting to know your imagination, your anatomical body, and your sense of genuine action and drive onstage, so that you need never fall back on clichés and (what Stanislavski calls) 'stock-in-trade'.

Year 2 of Stanislavski's actor-training

As I've suggested, Stanislavski is not always entirely consistent about when Year 1 finishes and Year 2 begins. Benedetti provides us with 'Year 2: Drafts and Fragments: A Reconstruction', yet from time to time, there are references which don't quite stack up. In the middle of Chapter 16 entitled 'The subconscious and the actor's creative state', Tortsov suddenly says:

Now, after almost a year's work, each of you has formed some idea of what the creative process is. (Stanislavski, 2008: 343)

For a moment as a reader, I found myself hurled out of the narrative, asking, 'Do you mean calendar year or academic year? Is this the *first* year of training or the *second*?' However, it's these inconsistencies which give a greater feeling of authentication to the new translations. Benedetti hasn't ironed out all the flaws or overwhelmingly edited in the way that both Elizabeth Hapgood, and the original Editor-in-Chief, Edith Isaacs, did. Therefore, Benedetti is not only giving us an invaluable practical translation, but also an historical document, so that we the reader can piece together or make sense of the inconsistencies in our own way.

Emotion memory

Despite these occasional inconsistencies, the thrust of Year 2 is extremely useful. Beginning with 'Emotion Memory', the semi-fictional director, Tortsov, suggests that an actor must fill a characterisation with genuine feelings, at the same time as stressing that you can't just conjure up emotions at the click of your fingers. Instead, there are decoys which stimulate Emotion Memories and lure them out from within us. And at this point, he links very succinctly Years 1 and 2:

Each successive stage in our studies has brought out a new decoy (or stimulus) for our Emotion Memory and recurrent feelings. In fact, the magic "if", the Given Circumstances, our imagination, the Bits and Tasks, the objects of attention, the truth and belief in inner and outer actions, provided us with the appropriate decoys (stimuli).

So all the work we have done so far in school has led us to these decoys which we need to stimulate our Emotion Memory and stored-up feelings. (Stanislavski, 2008: 225)

And suddenly everything is made abundantly clear. Of course, real human feelings are at the heart of dynamic onstage interaction, but you have to spend a long, solid period of time building up the techniques which serve as decoys, before you can really be assured of understanding how to provoke those genuine feelings. This is why it makes sense for ‘Emotion Memory’ to come at the beginning of Year 2, rather being included in Year 1 (which is the sense we get from reading *An Actor Prepares*). In this way, the student actor is totally forewarned of the amount of preparatory work needed, before the sexy stuff – the emotions – can be sensibly and healthily dealt with.

All the technical aspects...

The content of Year 2 makes up the bulk of *An Actor’s Work*. And the joy of having the substance of *Building a Character* in the volume is that you’re reminded of all Stanislavski’s wonderful and invaluable ideas about speech, diction and punctuation, as well as tempo-rhythm in movement and text, not to mention physical transformation through costume, and the value of props for a character. Let alone the all-important connection between two or more living actors (called ‘Communion’ in *An Actor Prepares*, here called – quite simply – ‘Communication’). As well as the vital triumvirate of ‘Thought’ and ‘Feeling’ and ‘Will’ (called the ‘Inner Motive Forces’ in *An Actor Prepares*, and here called the ‘psychological inner drives’). In other words, very technical elements of diction and costume are directly connected to the more esoteric aspects of energy exchange or psychological motivations – a connection which it’s hard to hang on to if you’re reading either *An Actor Prepares* or *Building a Character* on its own. Indeed, only last week (the first week of the spring term at Exeter University, 2008), I found myself referring my students on a ‘Spoken Text in Performance’ practical module straight back to Stanislavski and *An Actor’s Work*. Much of our module to date had taken Cecily Berry, Patsy Rodenburg, Kristen Linklater as our reference points. To my shame (being a Stanislavski scholar), I’d completely forgotten the depth into which Stanislavski goes in his analysis of Voice and Speech, because – I confess – I was more prone to using *An Actor Prepares* as a ‘textbook’ than I was *Building a Character*. Whereas there’s very little in *An Actor Prepares* on Voice and Speech, *An Actor’s Work* combines the three chapters found in *Building a Character* on ‘Diction and Singing’, ‘Intonations and

Pauses' and 'Accentuation: the Expressive Word' into one extremely useful 80-page chapter.

All the physical disciplines...

On reading *An Actor's Work*, I was also reminded – again, having forgotten this from *Building a Character* – of the range of different *physical* disciplines involved in Stanislavski's actor-training programme. In Chapter 18, 'Physical education', Kostya refers to Swedish gymnastics, acrobatics, dance, and 'rhythmics' (as in Emile Dalcroze's eurhythmics). He also refers to classes on 'the flexibility of movement' (which could well include the lessons in yoga which Leopold Sulerzhitski – the role model for the assistant director Rakhmanov – certainly taught at Stanislavski's behest in the studios attached to the Moscow Art Theatre). We also know from references throughout *An Actor's Work* that the students were learning both fencing and ballet. While similar references are scattered throughout *An Actor Prepares*, the accumulation of them through this extended book is a welcome reminder of the interdependence of the physical, technical classes and the more psychologically-orientated acting exercises.

Having looked at the overall structure of the book, let's now turn our attention to a handful of the specific tools. This new translation accesses some new ideas, as well as offering some interesting provocations in terms of the old terminology. I've picked four chapters from Year 1: 'Concentration and attention', 'Bits and Tasks', 'Inner psychological drives', and 'Communication'. These are all terms and tools I use frequently both as an actor and as a teacher, and all of which I find stimulating in their change of vocabulary in the new translation as well as problematic in their implementation. There's no question that *An Actor's Work* is going to stir debate and discussion, and I'd like to suggest that not only is that debate healthy, but it also enables us simultaneously to *embrace* the new aspects while *defending* our own toolkits. After all, Stanislavski never intended his 'system' to be gospel, and I have no doubt that Benedetti doesn't intend this new translation to be a bible. With something as practical as an acting technique, there'll be as many different ways of building a character as there are actors in the business. We have to be sure that our attitude is just as open and creative

towards systems and terminology as Stanislavski challenged us to be in terms of playfully creating a role.

Chapter 5: Concentration and attention

The difficulties of ‘concentration’

In the very useful (though arguably rather short) ‘Glossary of Key Terms: A Comparison of Translations’ at the back of the book, the Russian word for ‘attention’ is listed as ‘vnimanie’. ‘Vnimanie’ is the word you might shout at someone about to cross the road without looking properly, or you might hear it on the announcement system of the underground in a ‘Mind the gap’ situation. I know from early conversations with Katya Kamotskaia that finding the absolute translation for this word is tricky. ‘Concentration’ is too schoolish, and is certainly a word which set David Mamet on a personal hobby-horse of attacks against Stanislavski in *True or False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*. He writes:

Acting has nothing to do with the ability to concentrate. It has to do with the ability to *imagine*. For concentration, like emotion, like belief, cannot be forced. It cannot be controlled. [...] The ability to concentrate flows naturally from the ability to choose something interesting. Choose something legitimately interesting to do and concentration is not a problem. Choose something less than interesting and concentration is impossible. (Mamet, 1999: 94–5)

You can see the problems involved: ‘Attention’ implies the shouting of a soldier on a parade ground. ‘Concentration’ suggests a heavy-duty, school exams mentality. Hapgood chose to mix the terms into one phrase in Chapter 5 of *An Actor Prepares*:

‘Concentration of attention’, whereas – in *An Actor’s Work* – we read how Kostya comes into the class one day to see a large notice hanging in the auditorium:

CREATIVE CONCENTRATION AND ATTENTION (Stanislavski, 2008: 90)

The inclusion of the word ‘creative’ is very significant, as indeed is the equal weighting of the two nouns, ‘concentration’ and ‘attention’.

From observation to action

Like most of the chapters in *An Actor's Work*, Chapter 5: Concentration and Attention is significantly longer than its counterpart in *An Actor Prepares*, with the result that the journey through the chapter is much more coherent, taking us through five easy steps. In many ways, Mamet hits the nail on the head when he says that if you choose something legitimately interesting for you, concentration isn't an issue. Indeed, Tortsov begins with exercises in which (Step 1) the students *observe* objects which interest them, saying:

[T]he actor needs an object on which to focus his attention, only not in the auditorium, but on the stage, and the more compelling that object is, the more it can command attention. (Stanislavski, 2008: 91)

Just by concentrating attention on an object, some kind of vibrant interaction can begin, and this kind of observation will in fact (Step 2) inspire your *imagination* because it will (Step 3) appeal to your *senses*. As Tortsov says:

[I]n our imagination, our concentration does not approach the object directly, but indirectly, via another, so to speak secondary object. That is what happens with our five senses. [...] You must be able to revitalize the object and beyond that the power of concentration itself, turning it from something cold, intellectual, rational, into something warm, *sensory*. (Stanislavsky, 2008: 107, 111) (Original emphasis)

Once your senses are involved, it doesn't take long (Step 4) for your *emotions* to be lured into the process. As Tortsov says:

First you must explain to [people] how to look and see, listen and hear not only what is bad but above all what is beautiful. The beautiful elevates the soul and stirs its finest feelings, leaving indelible, deep tracks in emotion and other kinds of memory. (Stanislavski, 2008: 114)

But the attention on the object doesn't stop there. If your concentration and attention are of the right creative substance, then pretty quickly (Step 5) your desire for *action* is drawn into the picture. As Tortsov says:

[I]t's not the object itself [...] that causes us to concentrate, but an idea your imagination suggests. This idea gives it new life and, aided by the given circumstances, makes the object interesting. Create a wonderful and exciting

story round it. [...] As a result your imagination is aroused. It takes hold of you and an impulse to action results. And if you take action that means you have accepted the object, you believe in it, you have formed a link with it. That is, your goal has become clear, and your attention has been distracted from anything which is not onstage. (Stanislavski, 2008: 110)

Thus, the expanded version of this chapter in *An Actor's Work* takes us effortlessly from (1) object to (2) imagination to (3) sensory stimulation to (4) emotion memory to (5) action, rendering both concepts of 'concentration' and 'attention' very practical and totally physical, rather than dry and intellectual. It also keeps the actor's focus on the stage, and not in the auditorium.

The introduction of Rakhmanov

The expanded version of Chapter 5 also highlights some other factors about this new translation, not least of which is the storytelling device. For the first time in the book, the assistant director, Rakhmanov (based on Sulerzhitski) takes a class. No particular comment is made on this in *An Actor Prepares*, but in *An Actor's Work* we're taken more deeply into the fictional realm of the students:

To our general disappointment, instead of Tortsov, Rakhmanov turned up at the class alone and explained that, on Tortsov's orders, he was going to work with us.

So, today was Rakhmanov's first class.

What's he like as a teacher?

Of course he is quite different from Tortsov. But none of us could have anticipated he would turn out to be the man we got to know today.

In life, because of his admiration for Tortsov, he is quiet, reserved and taciturn but when Tortsov's not there he is energetic, decisive and rigorous.

(Stanislavski, 2008: 96)

These details tell us three things: (1) they show how imaginative Stanislavski strove to be with this account of actor-training, in that he wanted to create a novelistic world into which we could enter with all its various characters and personalities, rather than simply soaking up acting tips; (2) the character of Rakhmanov appears throughout the book, and by introducing him like this, we're instantly invited to consider him a full-bodied

individual and a significant influence on the actor-training; (3) it's Stanislavski's little acknowledgement of Sulerzhitski's importance in his own life and in that of the Moscow Art Theatre. He was immensely fond of him and indeed Sulerzhitski contributed a huge amount to the development of the more esoteric, 'spiritual' aspects of the 'system', not least the notion of 'radiating' energy, as we'll touch upon in 'Communication' (see below).

Stories from Kostya

The extended version of Chapter 5 also includes a couple of anecdotes in which Kostya tries out some of the exercises away from the rehearsal room. For example, he walks down Moscow's crowded Arbat experimenting with different sized 'circles of attention'. These cross-references between the rehearsal room and 'real life' humanise the exercises and reflect what actors often do: we test out rehearsal-room discoveries in everyday situations. It's fun, and the inclusion of these little stories makes the book more fun. There's no question that *An Actor's Work* has a lightness of touch which renders the contents sympathetic, approachable, and understandable. We're drawn into the lives of the characters in a lively and empathic way, not least by referring to the key player as 'Tortsov', (meaning 'Creator') as opposed to 'the Director', which is his usual nomenclature in *An Actor Prepares*. In his Foreword, Benedetti also alerts us to the meanings of the various students' names: Brainy, Fatty, Prettyface, Big Mouth, Youngster, Happy, Showy – the nuances of which are lost to the non-Russian speaker, but which raise a wry smile as we now really understand the gist of the students' stories throughout the book.

Chapter 7: 'Bits and Tasks'

The challenge of changing your terminology

The personalised tone of *An Actor's Work* is reflected in the choice of the terminology in general. Stanislavski never intended his 'system' to be alienating or elitist. Of course he was influenced by the scientific discoveries being made internationally at the time – not least in the areas of evolution and psychology (as we'll see below in 'Communication'). However, his discussion of acting tactics was far from scientific: he preferred what Benedetti translates as 'home grown' vocabulary. Many actors today use the terms 'units'

(to describe a piece of text) and ‘objectives’ (to describe what each character wants in a particular scene), and both these terms come from *An Actor Prepares*. I suspect these two will be the trickiest terms to adjust, given the wide use of ‘units’ and ‘objectives’ across the globe already. Indeed, I myself have mixed feelings: although I’ve been using ‘Bits’ for about fifteen years, since my own training in Moscow, I’m rather attached to ‘objectives’ as a tool. Though, I’ll admit there are various insights in Chapter 7 which could persuade me to overthrow the old and embrace the new...

‘Bits’

‘Bit’ – *kusok* – is a great word: it can also mean ‘piece’ or ‘chunk’, in that you could have a *kusok* of cheese or a *kusok* of cake. It’s an everyday, practical word, and as such has huge advantages over the far more scientific and particularly alienating ‘unit’. There’s something about ‘unit’ which implies measured regularity, like a unit of alcohol. ‘Bit’, on the other hand, allows for different sizes; it allows for rough edges and irregularities – all of which I think are immensely useful. Those of you who have ever tried collectively to break down a text into its ‘Bits’ of action will know that it always arouses great discussion, often depending on from which character’s perspective you’re viewing the scene. One person will want to make a division *before* a particular line, another will want to make it *after* the line, subject to which character seems to be in the driving seat – or even, which actor in the room is the most opinionated.

Chapter 7 states quite simply how you go about the dissection process:

The technique of dividing into Bits is quite simple. Just ask yourself, ‘What is the one essential thing in the play?’ and then start to recall the main stages, without going into detail. [...]

[L]arge Bits, which have been well thought out, are easy for actors to master. Bits like that, that are laid out during the length of the play, serve us as a fairway which shows us the right course to follow, and leads us through the dangerous shoals, reefs and the complex threads of the play, where we can easily get lost. (Stanislavski, 2008: 141)

Putting it in a nutshell...

Lesson 1: Look for the large Bits

However... what emerges quite reassuringly in this chapter is that there seems to be no hard or fast rule for dividing a scene into its Bits of action: Stanislavski (under the guise of Tortsov) suggests that you might *start* by breaking it down into big Bits, but then develop each Bit in detail. That obliges you to divide all the individual Bits into their smaller, constituent parts, to develop them and convey each of them clearly, in every detail. (Stanislavski, 2008: 140)

Lesson 2: Break the big Bits down into smaller Bits

However... he also suggests the opposite strategy:

Dividing a play and a role into small Bits is only permissible as an interim measure. [...] The play and the role cannot be left in such a fragmentary form for very long. [...] With small Bits we are dealing with preparatory work but, when acting, they are combined into large Bits, and we ensure they are maximal in size and minimal in number. The larger the Bits, the fewer the number and the more they help us grasp the play and the role as a whole. (Stanislavski, 2008: 140)

Lesson 3: there is no definitive strategy!

In other words, it may depend on the play, the director, and the group of actors as to whether you start with lots of small Bits and then snowball them into larger chunks, or whether you start with the big Bits and break them down as you need more detailed analysis.

Personally, when I'm *directing*, I tend to go for the bigger chunks. Although I might note the kinks in the banks of the river, I'm really looking for the places where the river completely changes its course. That's because I generally use Stanislavski's Active Analysis in rehearsals, whereby you never take the script onto the rehearsal room floor; instead, you uncover the text through a series of improvisations. Improvising the scene can be extremely tricky if you've broken it down into too many Bits. So, beginning with the broad brushstrokes is the most accessible way of working, and the details can be painted in as the actors become more and more familiar with the scene's architecture. However, if I'm working on a script from an *acting* perspective, I break it down into as many Bits as I need in order to get right inside the character's thought processes. So I

carefully note each and every kink in the banks, because each kink will be a new tactic, and each change in tactic will give me a clear insight into the character's way of thinking and responding.

'Tasks'

As for 'Task' – *zadacha* (also translatable as 'goal') – I struggle a little with this term as it sounds rather labour-intensive, as in 'task-master'. The word 'objective' seems to have a psychological component which isn't necessarily as present for me in the term 'Task'. That said, I'm also aware that the main question used to define an objective for a scene is usually, 'What do I want to *do*... in this scene? What do I want to *achieve*...?' Therefore, being actively engaged in a 'Task' could be a useful way of tackling a scene's substance. The truth of the matter is that, in life, we often don't really know what we want until we're in the middle of a situation. We may think we have one intention, but the minute we actually find ourselves in dialogue – be that a conflict-ridden dialogue or a harmonious one – our intention can subtly shift *in response* to our partner. And this is where the new translation is very useful. Defining your 'Task' – as described in *An Actor's Work* – arises out of direct interaction with another person. If the term 'objective' has a sense of predetermining what you might be striving for *before* you actually go out on stage, 'Task' seems to arise out of the physical actions in which you engage *once you're out there*. Stanislavski's definition makes that clear:

Life, people, circumstance and we ourselves endlessly set up a whole series of obstacles one after the other and we fight our way through them, as though through bushes. Each of these obstacles creates a Task and the action to overcome it.

A human being wants something, fights for something, wins something every moment of his life. [...]

Theatre consists in staging major human Tasks and the genuine, productive and purposeful actions necessary to fulfil them. As to the results, they take care of themselves if everything that has been done beforehand is right.

The mistake most actors make is that they think not about the action but the result. They bypass the action and go straight for the result. What you get then is ham, playing the result, forcing, stock-in-trade.

Learn not to play the result onstage but to fulfil the Task genuinely, productively, and aptly through action all the time you are performing. You must love the Tasks you have, find dynamic actions for them. (Stanislavski, 2008: 143–4)

This definition makes it absolutely clear that the actor's 'Task' on stage is to engage in real, dynamic, vital action, in the pursuit of aims and desires which are significant and engaging.

'Objectives' and 'Tasks': couldn't we have both?

There's a part of me which wants to argue that 'objectives' and 'Tasks' might be slightly different from each other and could actually co-exist. My 'objective' at the moment might be: 'to inspire you, the reader, to love Stanislavski'. So my 'Task' is: 'to set out my argument as clearly as possible', and I go about this 'Task' through a series of 'actions'. Those actions might be: 'I read the new translation, I compare it with the original translation, I plan my argument, I make my notes, I switch on my computer, I get a new ink cartridge for my printer', etc. Who knows? What's so exciting about the new translation of *An Actor's Work* – as I keep insisting – is that it's inevitably going to arouse debate. If the ensuing discussions ensure that our acting processes become increasingly precise and fine-tuned, that's certainly no bad thing.

There can, however, be a case of wanting to have one's cake and eat it, and even Stanislavski falls into just such a trap from time to time, as revealed in Chapter 12: 'Inner psychological drives'.

Chapter 12: Psychological inner drives

The joys of changing your terminology

For some years now, this has been one of my favourite tools in Stanislavski's toolkit. I use it endlessly in my own acting practice, as well as when I'm introducing students to the psycho-physicality of Stanislavski's 'system' or leading 'M.O.T.' style workshops with professional actors and directors. In *An Actor Prepares*, it's referred to as the 'inner motive forces' and this is the name that instinctively comes to my lips. However, it's one tool in particular for which I'll endeavour to change my terminology.

The phrase ‘psychological inner drives’ instantly gives us a much clearer sense of what we’re talking about. ‘Psychological’ (as opposed to ‘inner’) lets us know we’re dealing with something that reflects our personality. ‘Inner drives’ (as opposed to ‘motive forces’) gives us a definite sense that there’s action involved, a kind of inner-outer action that motors us towards particular choices and decisions. There’s still a lot to be said for the phrase ‘motive forces’, as the ‘motive’ part certainly echoes the notion of ‘motivation’, which is a plus; on the other hand, the word ‘forces’ could suggest tension or strain, which is a minus. So I’m all for switching to ‘psychological inner drives’.

‘Mind’, ‘Feeling’ and ‘Will’

But what exactly are they, these ‘psychological inner drives’? In Chapter 12 of *An Actor Prepares*, the very short (eight page) account of ‘Inner Motive Forces’ describes them as ‘mind’, ‘feelings’ and ‘will’, and these are:

three impelling movers in our psychic life, three masters who play on the instrument of our souls. (Stanislavski, 1937: 247)

‘Will’ is a curious word, also translated as ‘desires’ and (as I discovered during my own actor-training in Russia) ‘deeds’ or ‘actions’. In life, we’re either *thinking* something, *feeling* something or *doing* something: I would argue there are no other fundamental human activities. With this in mind, a person or character may be fundamentally *thought-*led (either very imaginative or very rational, either Walter Mitty or Einstein), or fundamentally *emotion-*led (ranging across the whole palette from very fiery to very compassionate), or fundamentally *will-*led (either very impulsive or very active, either a sexually-charged Casanova or a very practical Bob the Builder). Of course, we can all be all of these things, depending on circumstance, and as Stanislavski goes on to say in *An Actor Prepares*:

The power of these motive forces is enhanced by their interaction. They support and incite one another with the result that they always act at the same time and in close relationship. When we call our mind into action by the same token we stir our will and feelings. It is only when these forces are co-operating harmoniously that we can create freely. (Stanislavski, 1937: 248)

The new chapter in *An Actor’s Work* embellishes some of these very useful ideas. In one instance, Stanislavski uses the device of a conversation between the director, Tortsov,

and the argumentative student, Grisha, to field an accusation which – even then – he knew might be a significant one (as indeed it’s proved ever since). Here he defends his emphasis on *feeling* over thought and will, arguing:

Yes, I do lay too much stress on the emotional side of creative work, but I do so intentionally, as other schools of acting all too often forget about feeling. We have too many intellectual actors, and productions that are all in the mind, while genuine, living, emotional theatre is rarely encountered. And so I feel I have to pay double attention to feeling, somewhat to the detriment of thought. (Stanislavski, 2008: 276–7)

Curiously, many of those ‘intellectual productions’ still haunt the boards today...

Responding to scientific developments

There is also a whole section in this chapter, not found in *An Actor Prepares*, which is worth noting because of its curious rationale as much as its actual content. Stanislavski offers another set of terms for the ‘psychological inner drives’, terms described as ‘new scientific terms’ and they are:

REPRESENTATION, APPRAISAL AND WILL-FEELING (Stanislavski, 2008: 277)

As Benedetti points out in his endnotes, this was Stanislavski’s attempt to bring his ideas into line with Soviet psychology. Tortsov says:

These terms are, in essence, the same as the older ones. They merely refine them. When you compare them, the main thing you will note is that representation and appraisal, when combined, fulfil the same inner function as the mind (intellect) in the old definition.

If you examine the new terms further you will see that the words ‘will’ and ‘feeling’ have been merged into one – ‘will-feeling’. (Stanislavski, 2008: 277)

He then goes on to explain why he has made these adjustments to his own terminology. Basically, when we contemplate something – an event, a person, a place, a possibility – it appears in our imagination: that image is a ‘representation’ of whatever it is we’re thinking of, dreaming about, predicting for the future, or remembering from the past. Our thoughts work in images, in ‘representations’.

The next stage of our intellectual, mind-led, thought process is that we assess and make judgements about whatever it is we're imagining. We make an 'appraisal'. Stanislavski suggests that it's only after we've conjured up the 'representation' and made an 'appraisal' of it that our feelings and desires propel us into action. He argues that feelings and will (desires/action) are so closely interconnected that it would be tricky to differentiate between them. These two 'psychological inner drives' come together in a common effort:

Try to divide them. Try, in your spare time, to think of cases when will and feeling are separate, draw the line between them, show me where one ends and the other begins. I don't think you'll be able to [...] That's why the most recent scientific terms have united them in one word – will-feeling.'

(Stanislavski, 2008: 278–9)

Personally, I find this section very interesting for two reasons. First of all, I've often found – in practice and in workshops – that when I've set up exercises to draw out the various impulses behind each of the three 'psychological inner drives', I'm aware that the separation is artificial, because the 'drives' interact so quickly. It has, indeed, been especially true when trying to separate out emotions and actions. If something really touches your inner emotional landscape, it doesn't take long for you to want to *do* something about it: it's the whole point of psycho-physical acting, in that the body and the inner realm work incredibly intimately and sensitively with each other.

Secondly, it's fascinating to see the hoops through which Stanislavski had to leap. He tried to deal with all things artistic, personal and esoteric, at a time when the Soviet political regime was Marxist, pragmatic, resistant to whims of personality. (This crops up again later in the chapter on 'Communication': see below.) His own uncertainty in this area is revealed when he goes on to say, with reference to the notion of 'will-feeling':

Those of us who work in the theatre recognize the truth of this new term, and foresee practical applications in the future, but we aren't able to use it fully at the moment. That needs time. Let us use it only partially, in so far as we have seen it in practice, and for the rest, for the moment, [we'll] be content with the old, well-tried terms.

I can see no other way out of our situation for the present. So, I am obliged to use both sets of terms for the psychological inner drives, the old and the new, depending on which one seems easier to master in each individual case. If I find it more convenient at any given moment to make use of the old term, i.e. not dividing off the functions of the mind, not merging will and feeling, I will do so.’ (Stanislavski, 2008: 279)

And so will I! This little section reminds us of the value of these new translations: not only are they giving us new terms and expanding passages previously obscured in the earlier translation, but they also serve as useful historical tomes, giving us insights into Stanislavski’s situation and his fathoming out of acting processes during particular socio-political times.

Chapter 10: Communication

‘Communication’ vs. ‘communion’

The final chapter I’d like to submit to some scrutiny – though there are many more tools I could have chosen from this new translation – is Chapter 10 on ‘Communication’. Again, this is a tool put into Year 2, when in Chapter 10 of *An Actor Prepares* it would seem to appear as part of one year’s training, and is called ‘Communion’.

‘Communion’ has always been a tricky term, not least because of its various religious connotations: taking communion is part of Christian rituals, and other faiths speak easily of ‘communing’ with spirits, etc. Therefore, it’s understandable why Benedetti opted for ‘Communication’. Yet there are still problems with this word. Given our twenty-first-century world of high-speed, high-tech global systems, the word ‘communication’ could all too easily sound scientific and almost glib. However, it’s worth remembering the outline of ‘Communication’ provided in the Glossary of Terms, where ‘obschchenie’ is described as: ‘The act of being in contact with an object or in communication with another person, verbally or non-verbally.’ (Stanislavski, 2008: 683) The ‘object’ reference and the ‘non-verbal’ reference are particularly important to hold on to: we’re not talking mobile phones and Skype and satellites, we’re talking about an exchange of energies which can evolve just as powerfully between an actor and an inanimate object, as between two living human beings. Or as Stanislavski puts it:

Brief moments of being in communication are created by things to which you give something of yourself, or from which you take something. (Stanislavski, 2008: 231)

How many of us coax our cars into starting on a cold January morning? How many of us shout at our computers when they crash mid-assignment? How many of us treasure a favourite novel or drink from a certain coffee mug? Times like these are as much ‘moments of being in communication’ as any dialogue with another person – often more so...

Adaptations to the ‘spiritual’ references in *An Actor Prepares*

There are two very specific reasons I find this chapter provocative. First of all, throughout the new translation, there seems to be a reduction in the ‘spiritual’ references which have always struck me as so extraordinary in *An Actor Prepares*. In this particular chapter, there’s a curious omission with regard to energy centres. Hapgood’s 1937 translation states:

I have read what the Hindus say on this subject. They believe in the existence of a kind of vital energy called Prana, which gives life to our body. According to their calculation the radiating centre of this Prana is the solar plexus. Consequently, in addition to our brain which is generally accepted as the nerve and psychic centre of our being, we have a similar source near the heart, in the solar plexus.

I tried to establish communication between these two centres, with the result that I really felt not only that they existed, but that they actually did come into contact with one another. The cerebral centre appeared to be the seat of consciousness and the nerve centre of the solar plexus – the seat of emotion. The sensation was that my brain held intercourse with my feelings. I was delighted because I had found the subject and the object for which I was searching. From the moment I made the discovery I was able to commune with myself onstage, either audibly or in silence, and with perfect self-possession.

I have no desire to prove whether Prana really exists or not. My sensations may be purely individual to me, the whole thing may be the fruit of my

imagination. That is all of no consequence provided I can make use of it for my purposes and it helps me. If my practical and unscientific method can be of use to you, so much the better. If not, I shall not insist on it.' (Stanislavski, 1937: 198–9)

What we get in *An Actor's Work* is:

I learned there was another centre, apart from the centre of the nervous system in the brain, one located near the heart – the solar plexus.

I tried to get these two centres talking to each other.

I marvelled in the fact that not only did I feel they actually existed, but they had started talking to each other.

I took the centre in my head to represent consciousness and the solar plexus to represent emotion.

So, my impression was that my head was in communication with my heart.

'Well then,' I said to myself, 'let them talk.' My subject and my object have been found.

From that moment on my mood when relating to myself onstage felt secure, not only in silent pauses, but also when speaking out loud.

I have no wish to go into whether what I felt is acceptable to science or not.

My criterion is the way I felt. It may indeed be purely personal, it may indeed prove to be the product of my own imagination but it helps me, so I make all possible use of it.

If my practical and unscientific technique is also useful to you, then so much the better. I make no assertions. (Stanislavski, 2008: 233–4)

I've quoted this at length because the omission of the references to Prana is very interesting. I went back to my Russian copy of *An Actor's Work on Himself*, published in Moscow in 1985, and I found that there is no reference to Prana there. So when was it deleted? Is it there in the first Russian version, published in the Soviet Union in 1938, just a few weeks after Stanislavski's death? Or were there certain ideas that he could only expound for his American readers, and not for his own native audience?

Benedetti's Foreword explains it clearly: what we're dealing with here is the Soviet edition, not the American Hapgood version. As Benedetti writes:

[Stanislavski] was locked in a bitter battle with pseudo-Marxist Soviet psychology, which was Behaviourist and did not recognize the existence either of the subconscious or of the Mind. Consequently, he substantially rewrote whole passages in an attempt to appease the authorities. (Stanislavski, 2008: xvii)

The reasons behind this are expanded by Anatoly Smeliansky in his Afterword, in which he cites from various communiqués between Stanislavski and his Russian editor, Lyubov Gurievich. Gurievich stresses that the tastes and moods of the Russians at the time couldn't be further away from those of foreign society. Indeed, Stanislavski himself acknowledged that:

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.' (Stanislavski, 2008: 698) (Original emphasis)

This makes for another exciting discovery: in no way does *An Actor's Work* render *An Actor Prepares* obsolete, as the latter gives us certain insights into what Stanislavski wanted to explore in terms of the soul and the 'spiritual' in a way in which his Russian version was far less able. Actors and directors needn't cast away their Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood translations and replace them for all time with Jean Benedetti's: they simply need to add *An Actor's Work* to their library and allow the American-orientated Stanislavski to dialogue with the Russian-orientated Stanislavski in a truly enlightening way.

'Grip' or 'grasp'?

If I have any 'gripe' with the new translations, it's with regards to the term 'grip'. 'Grip' is a tool tucked into Chapter 10 on 'Communication', described by Stanislavski thus:

[I]f you use a long line of experiences and feelings which are in logical sequence and are interconnected, then that bonding will be strengthened, will grow and finally develop the degree of strength which we call the *iron grip* and which makes the process of emitting and receiving rays stronger, sharper and more concrete.

'What kind of iron grip is that?' the students asked with interest.

‘The kind a bulldog has in its teeth,’ Tortsov explained. ‘And we must have an iron grip onstage, in the eyes, the ears, in all five senses. (Stanislavski, 2008: 251) (My emphasis)

This is actually one of my favourite tools. In *An Actor Prepares* it’s called ‘grasp’, and I have to say it’s one of the old terms with which I’ll probably be sticking. As I wrote in my own book, *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit*:

GRASP is a term embedded in Chapter 10 of *An Actor Prepares* entitled ‘Communion’, and I’d read the book nine times before I really noticed the term, let alone fully understood its impact and usability as a tool. I was already familiar with COMMUNION and ‘radiation’, which cover similar territory, but both words were rather alienating and inaccessible. GRASP, on the other hand, seemed far more immediate and understandable.’ (Merlin, 2007: 208) (Original caps.)

Getting someone ‘in your grasp’ is a tangible, practicable image, the idea being that if you and your fellow actor can really get each other ‘in each other’s grasp’ – if you can really listen and respond to each other dynamically and attentively – the audience will be drawn into your communication and magnetised towards the onstage action.

‘Iron grip’ feels a bit tense to me: ‘gripping something’ has the suggestion of lack of flexibility, and ‘iron’ feels rather cold and machine-like. According to the dictionary, the Russian word *khvatka* could be translated as ‘grip’ or ‘grasp’: I just prefer ‘grasp’. All this goes to show yet again that the two translations will provoke discussion, and discussion is good, as it stimulates precision.

Appendices

Finally, it’s worth turning attention to the end pages of *An Actor’s Work*. Not only are the translations in themselves invaluable, but the Appendices are extremely useful.

Training and Drill

Throughout both *An Actor Prepares* and *An Actor’s Work* there are numerous references to ‘Training and Drill’, usually led by the assistant director, Rakhmanov. I’ve always wondered what on earth ‘Training and Drill’ were. Now we know, as one of the appendices in the new translation is devoted to this very subject. What is revealed in this

appendix is that many of the exercises set up by Tortsov in the main classes are then repeated many times with Rakhmanov in his follow-up workshops. These exercises are often very simple, but during ‘Training and Drill’ they are usually executed without a ‘fourth wall’, i.e. without the comfort of a studio or rehearsal space, but on the stage. The combination of the repetitions and the use of the stage space means that the students are able to grow more and more familiar with everyday exercises, while at the same time becoming less and less likely to allow the pressures of being ‘public’ to disturb their inner process.

This is such an important section. It really gives us the feeling that the classes undertaken with Tortsov are just the tip of the iceberg, the submerged part being the repetitions with Rakhmanov, in which the students can work towards changing bad habits and honing their general sense of aesthetics and artistry. It also reminds us that all the tools offered by Tortsov – ‘communication’, ‘Bits and Tasks’, ‘emotion memory’, ‘imagination’, etc. – aren’t just learnt overnight. Continual ‘Training and Drill’ and general hard work lie at the heart of the ‘system’. They are the only way for an actor to truly eliminate ‘lies’ and create ‘a sense of truth and belief’.

The cherry on the cake in this appendix is the relevance of miming props: once the real props have been used a few times, the students are encouraged to mime those props in infinite detail, not so much to sharpen their mime skills as to strengthen their sense of truth and belief. The ‘Training and Drill’ appendix is a very playful and fun section, almost warranting inclusion in the main body of the text.

Exercises and Classwork

‘Exercises and Classwork’ is another invaluable appendix, with a range of ‘off-the-shelf’ exercises, which are not only helpful and accessible in their own right, but also give us another insight into how Stanislavski’s brain worked as a teacher and a workshop leader. There are acting exercises on ‘Physical Actions’, ‘The five senses’, ‘Imagination’, ‘Public solitude’, ‘Natural silence for two people’, ‘Natural silence for several people’, ‘Actions’, and more. For those teachers and workshop leaders always on the hunt for stimuli and exercises, look no further. Stanislavski’s own ideas give you almost everything you need.

And finally...

There's a certain sentimental value attached to my battered, old, Sellotaped copy of *An Actor Prepares*, which has scribbles in the margin from nine different readings, ranging from my first encounter with the book as a young student in 1984, to 2007 when I was writing *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit*. So I shan't be burning my Hapgood translation in a hurry. Besides, I do believe there are some useful things in there. At the same time, it was with great excitement that my first margin notations were scribbled into my spanking new copy of *An Actor's Work*. This is an invaluable contribution to Stanislavski studies, not to mention acting processes and directing practices. Hearty congratulations must go to Jean Benedetti and Katya Kamotskaia, and certainly to Talia Rodgers at Routledge, whose relentless and heartfelt dedication over the last few years has finally brought this volume into the public domain. Yes, *An Actor's Work* is finally done!

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