

Introduction

Konstantin Stanislavsky was without question the father of contemporary acting practice, particularly when it comes to the kind of realism which dominates Western theatre and screen today. He was the inspiration behind what became known as the American ‘Method’, and he was arguably the first acting practitioner to look at what human beings do naturally in their everyday lives and turn it into something systematic for the stage.

The study of his ideas is on almost every acting academy timetable, every drama degree syllabus, every theatre studies exam, and – be it implicitly or explicitly – his terms and theories are on the lips of most Western acting practitioners.

And yet, bizarrely, he’s often dismissed. Why so?

Is it due to poor translations? Misdirected editors? Vainglorious gurus who clamour to ‘claim’ him? Post-modern performers who consider psychology obsolete? Could it even be due to his own inability from time to time to express his emerging ideas succinctly, with the result that his writings sometimes seem to go round in circles and muddy his practical propositions?

Whatever the reason, his highly hands-on notions have frequently become distorted into something academic and atrophied. And let’s face it, the alternatives are very attractive: David Mamet is muscular; Ivana Chubbuck is chic; Suzuki is sexy. Yet all of them use Stanislavsky, whether they know it or not. So it’s time to look beneath the bad translations and the cranky turns of phrase, and reappraise what Stanislavsky really had to offer.

As a key for opening *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit*, I’m going to use one of the tools described in *An Actor Prepares* as

the Six Fundamental Questions. Those six questions are: ‘Who?’, ‘When?’, ‘Where?’, ‘Why?’, ‘For what reason?’, and ‘How?’¹ (all of which are examined in detail in Chapter 2 below). Stanislavsky believed that the information contained in your answers to these questions could save you as an actor from floundering in a quagmire of generalisation once you greeted the audience or stood in front of the camera.

Putting the questions simply in the context of this book:

- Who was Stanislavsky?
- When was he working?
- Where was he working?
- Why might we as twenty-first-century actors need this book?
- For what reason has it been written?
- How does it go about setting out the tools for the actor?

Here are some possible answers to these questions:

Who was Stanislavsky?

He was a Russian. Born in 1863. And he was arguably the first person to systematise natural (and often *unconscious*) human responses and organise them into something which could be *consciously* applied to the artifice of acting.

Whether we call it a ‘system’ or a ‘method’ – two terms which Stanislavsky used, yet simultaneously resisted – his acting principles emerged from a whole lifetime of practical exploration. As an ardent adolescent, he devised plays with his siblings for their family’s entertainment. By the age of twenty-two, he was probing his own acting experience, asking himself questions not just about the broad brushstrokes of a character but about its *physiological* qualities and its *psychic* aspect:² thus, even at this early stage as a young amateur actor, he was eager

to negotiate the profound and nuanced dialogue between our *bodies* and our *psychologies*. In fact, the relationship between our physical lives and our psychological experiences underpinned Stanislavsky’s investigations throughout the whole of his life: little by little, he developed his understanding of the human being (and, therefore, the actor) as what he called a ‘psycho-physical’ instrument. (This phrase forms the bedrock of much of this book’s terrain.)

After setting up the Moscow Art Theatre in 1897 with the professional writer-producer, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Stanislavsky pursued his investigations into acting processes till the day he died in 1938.

When was he working?

Stanislavsky’s investigations into performance exploded into the international arena at a very timely point. It coincided with the climax to a debate which had been bubbling for centuries. The debate concerned the idea of what at various stages had been termed ‘truthful’ acting, ‘authentic emotion’ and ‘natural behaviour’ on the stage. Hamlet’s ‘Speak the speech’ words to the players reveal it was a sixteenth-century preoccupation. Then in the eighteenth century, the British actor David Garrick shocked his public with realistic portrayals of swooning and sweating, before passing the dramatic baton to Edmund Kean as the eighteenth century drew to a close; while across the sea in France, Constant Coquelin declared that ‘Everything must spring from truth’,³ so that by the end of the nineteenth century when Stanislavsky appeared on the stage, the whole of Europe could be seen to be at it. The arts were truly evolving.

And not just the arts: in the sciences too evolution was reaching a new peak with the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1873). Not to mention Pavlov and his incredible drooling dogs. Stanislavsky’s emergence as a theatre

pioneer was a timely marriage of science and arts and it's highly likely that if *he* hadn't created a 'system', it wouldn't have been long before somebody else did. Would it have been a Briton or a German? A Gaul or a Swede? Who knows? But there's something to be said for the significance of Stanislavsky's geographical placement in the development of his ideas.

Where was he working?

There are two reasons why it's relevant that Stanislavsky was working in Russia. First of all, the *state of the art* as he began life as an actor and director. And secondly, the *state of the state* as he developed his acting theories.

As far as *the state of the art* was concerned, Russian theatre at the end of the nineteenth century was in a tawdry condition. Morals were low, ethics were shabby, and acting was little more than a poorly paid means to a poorly valued end. The repertoire was uninspiring. The performances were dissolute. And actors staggered drunkenly through performances, relying on the prompter to haul them through to the curtain call.

Out of the midst of this mediocrity rose Stanislavsky, a lover of acting and, in all senses of the word, a true *amateur*. For him:

The theatre is one large family where you live together in closest harmony or where you engage in mortal quarrels.

The theatre is a beloved woman, sometimes capricious, ill-tempered, ugly and selfish; sometimes fascinating, tender, generous and beautiful.

The theatre is an adored child, unconsciously cruel and artlessly charming. His whims demand everything and you cannot refuse him anything.

The theatre is your second home, it nourishes you and drains all your forces.

The theatre is a source of heartaches and immeasurable joys.

The theatre is air and wine, which we must breathe in frequently and be intoxicated by.⁴

And for a lifetime, he was intoxicated by it.

As for *the state of the state*, the Soviet regime of the early twentieth century rejected personal emotion and championed rock-solid action. In this political climate, Stanislavsky had no choice but to veer away from his own early fascination with emotion and turn his attention towards that all-important action. And thus he created the 'Method of Physical Action' and 'Active Analysis' – his two powerful legacies (described in detail in Chapter 2).

Why do we need this book?

Because his ideas became fractured.

Stanislavsky never wanted his 'system' to be considered gospel. That's why he resisted committing it to print. But after a tour to the States in the early 1920s raised his international profile, the American public grew hungry. The pressure was on, and he finally began work on a written version in 1925. His intention was to publish all the psychological and the physical aspects of actor-training together in one volume. Yet what began to emerge was a tome of such gargantuan proportions that no serious publisher could accept it. Against his better judgement, he was persuaded to produce two books: the first was to be called *An Actor's Work on Himself in the Creative Process of Experience* and the second was to be called *An Actor's Work on Himself in the Creative Process of Physical Characterisation*. He agreed to this – on the condition that he also wrote an overview, alerting his readers to the fact that the two strands of acting (as presented in the two books) were two halves of the same whole.

Sadly, the overview never appeared. Even today most readers consider *An Actor Prepares* (the published English-language name of the first volume) to be the main stay of the 'system' with its emphasis on the *psychological* perspectives.

And many never even go near *Building a Character* (the published English-language name of the second volume), which includes many of the *physical* perspectives.

Curiously, the third book in what might be called Stanislavsky's English-language 'trilogy' – *Creating a Role* – contains some of his most revealing ideas, and yet it remains elusive. Maybe because it's an amalgam of various writings, rather than a complete book in its own right. As a result, few readers fully fathom its practicability – which is a shame, because it's gold-dust.

The aim of *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit* is to take the basic elements of each of the three books and re-integrate them into one user-friendly volume. Beyond the 'trilogy', *The Toolkit* draws together many of his other writings, so that we have the *psychological* elements together with the *physical* aspects, as well as the rehearsal practices from *Creating a Role*, all meshed into one unified whole.

For what reason?

It's curious that although Stanislavsky's legacies have been impacting on global acting practice for well over a century, they still remain shrouded in mystery. I regularly encounter actors who have rejected his ideas, because at some point they've been at the mercy of a teacher or a director who has mystified everything for them.

But why anyone would want to mystify the practical? In Peter Brook's words, 'There are no secrets'. By referring here to a 'toolkit', rather than a 'system' or a 'method', anyone can pick it up and use it. It doesn't take a specialist to ask: 'Do I need a hammer for this job? A saw? Or a plane? Can I unlock this particular role with the "inner motive forces"? Or "emotion memory"? Or "grasp"?' A toolkit can be accessed by both the apprentice and the master craftsman. Each role will require different tools and a different application. And we can begin to understand which options are available to us without any mystification.

How are the tools made accessible?

The *Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit* has two strands:

First of all, each tool is defined. Those definitions come from Stanislavsky's own writings, as well as those of his pupils and protégés. One of these protégés is a practitioner less well-known in the West, Maria Knebel, who was one of Stanislavsky's assistant directors at the time of his death in 1938. Her book *On the Active Analysis of Plays and Roles* (*O deistvennom analize p'esy i roli*) is a seminal text in Russia though it has yet to appear in English translation. Until now. *The Toolkit* contains several examples from her book to access deeper aspects of some familiar tools, as well as to introduce some new ones.

Within the definitions of each tool are illustrations. They come from Stanislavsky, from his acolytes including Knebel, and from my own working practice as an Anglo-Russian-trained performance practitioner. The illustrations place the definitions in concrete, practical examples, so you can understand how the tools impact on an actor, a director and a writer.

The second strand of *The Toolkit* consists of exercises, contained in Chapter 4: these give you direct means to use the particular tool-in-hand. Sometimes various tools are clustered together, when it would be unhelpful to separate the different components or it would fracture too significantly the holistic kit. And not every tool has an exercise, as sometimes they're most effectively used as part of a cumulative process. Basically, the exercises in Chapter 4 are just starting points for you to develop your own working strategies.

The book as a whole falls into four main chapters. The division of the first three chapters is something of a construct, given the integrated nature of Stanislavsky's work. But the idea is to tease out the various aspects of acting – just as an artist might set out the primary colours in order to mix them into a whole palette of possible shades.

CHAPTER 1, ‘Actor-Training’, looks at a number of the basic ideas and philosophies included in Stanislavsky’s ‘trilogy’, as well as his other writings: it serves as a foundation for the rest of the book. ‘Actor-Training’ needn’t be confined to the eighteen-year-old student. Since our raw materials as actors – i.e. our bodies, imaginations, voices and emotions – change every day according to our life experiences, we can never really afford to stop training. We need to return constantly to the toolkit just to keep up with our own ever-changing instrument. So don’t be fooled by the term ‘Actor-Training’: there should be elements of Chapter 1 which appeal to the seasoned Shakespearean or the celebrated soap star, as much as to the beginner at drama school.

CHAPTER 2, ‘Rehearsal Processes’, forms the kernel of the book, and it focuses on three main areas of Stanislavsky’s work on a role. The first section, ‘Mining the Text’, covers the kind of detective analysis you might embark upon (either on your own or with the whole company) before putting a play on its feet. The second section, ‘Embodying the Role’, considers issues of building a character in rehearsal. The final section of Chapter 2, ‘Approaches to Rehearsal’, looks at Stanislavsky’s legacies of the Method of Physical Actions and Active Analysis. To some extent, Chapter 2 moves from *cerebral* work on a text, through *physical* work on a character, to *ensemble interaction* on a scene.

CHAPTER 3, ‘Performance Practices’, addresses some of the issues which arise when you step out in front of an audience or camera. What happens to your creative processes when your work goes public? And which tools are available to you to keep your performance on course?

Drawing out the three prongs of ‘Actor-Training’, ‘Rehearsal Processes’, and ‘Performances Practices’ highlights the different strategies that we adopt as actors at various stages in our creative process. Of course, the cross-over points between all three

prongs are numerous, since so many of the tools in the kit combine our logic with our imagination, our bodies with our psychologies, and our conscious technique with our subconscious inspiration. Nonetheless, we can begin to see how our processes develop as we move from the intimacy of our own training, into the working environment of a rehearsal room, and from there into the public arena of live or recorded performance. And time and again we’ll see that at the heart of it all lies action.

CHAPTER 4 provides ‘An Overview of the Toolkit’, along with the various exercises proposed.

The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit adopts the metaphor of a real-life toolkit with its various metal trays and compartments. Particular tools are collected together in specific ‘trays’ when their application can be seen to share similar ends. Whenever a tool is mentioned, it appears in small capitals but if, however, it’s not the tool being described in that particular section, it will be detailed elsewhere in the book and the index at the back will guide you to the appropriate ‘tray’. On occasion, a tool such as ‘imagination’ or ‘emotion’ does *not* appear in capitals, because there’s no need at that moment to draw specific attention to it; for example, where it forms part of a list of the actor’s raw materials including, say, body, imagination, emotions and psyche.

One of the tricky things about Stanislavsky’s writings is that he only discusses theatre. At the time when he was working, film was still in its infancy and the very first television experiments didn’t happen until 1924 when Logie Baird ‘hit the screen’. So Stanislavsky simply didn’t have the reference points. That doesn’t mean that the basic tools aren’t transferable from one medium to another. Usually when he refers to ‘on stage’, he could just as easily have written ‘in front of the camera’. Wherever possible, I’ve drawn parallels. Even in radio where you seemingly don’t ‘have a body’, you can use many of

these psycho-physical tools as you approach a character. Admittedly, it's hard to transfer the extended work on rehearsals featured in Chapter 2 completely to television, film or radio, where rehearsal is a financial luxury and not an accepted norm. And obviously, any illustrations which rely on the nightly responses of an audience can only be applied to theatre or live broadcasts. However, when it comes to building a character and turning the black-and-white pages of a script into a flesh-and-blood living creation, medium is irrelevant. You'll take whatever you need from *The Toolkit*, depending on the character you're playing, the director, the medium and a whole range of other production challenges.

My own illustrations throughout the book come from my eclectic experiences of acting, directing and teaching. In terms of performance, I draw heavily on the original production of David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003) directed by Max Stafford-Clark as a co-production between his own company Out of Joint, the National Theatre, London, and ultimately the Sydney Theatre, Australia. Because the production run was long and the material was emotionally charged, the experience of performing *The Permanent Way* threw up all sorts of challenges that have impacted hugely on my understanding of acting. Elsewhere in the book I've been a complete magpie and collected anecdotes and examples from the actors, directors, writers and students, whom I've had the fortune to encounter in the course of compiling *The Toolkit*. Their hands-on experiences are invaluable and I'm immensely grateful to them for their honesty, insights, talent and wit.

Throughout *The Toolkit*, we must remain absolutely clear about something: Stanislavsky never intended his 'system' to be gospel. If your process ain't broken, there's no need to fix it. If the Muse descends upon you, celebrate that visitation, and don't overlay it with conscious intervention. But if you do need a mole-grip or a monkey-wrench, then use them – from any source: it doesn't have to be from Stanislavsky. It's vital that each actor's unique and idiosyncratic toolkit should include

fretsaws, hacksaws, chisels and hammers from Meisner, Brecht, Lecoq, Hagen, Chubbuck, or any number of other practitioners. It all depends on your own personality and training, as well as the task-in-hand and the character and the director. My personal favourites include David Mamet's 'terrifying unforeseen'⁵ (where you just get out there and see what happens), Michael Chekhov's 'quality of ease'⁶ (where you perform even the darkest tragedy with a lightness of touch), and Jerzy Grotowski's '*via negativa*'⁷ (where you eliminate the blocks between your inner impulse and your outer expression). All of these (in their own ways) are permutations of tools from Stanislavsky's original 'system'. At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter whether you use a Swiss Army knife or a Leatherman, as long as you get the job done effectively, creatively and, above all, inspirationally.