



AN ACTOR'S HANDBOOK

AN ALPHABETICAL ARRANGEMENT OF
CONCISE STATEMENTS ON ASPECTS OF ACTING

CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI



AN ACTOR'S HANDBOOK

“I have felt there was nothing for me to do except to devote my labour and energy almost exclusively to the study of Creative Nature....I have acquired a sum of experience in the course of long years of work and this is what I have sought to share with you.”

— Stanislavski

Also by Constantin Stanislavski

AN ACTOR PREPARES

BUILDING A CHARACTER

CREATING A ROLE

MY LIFE IN ART

STANISLAVSKI IN REHEARSAL

STANISLAVSKI ON OPERA

STANISLAVSKI'S LEGACY

AN ACTOR'S HANDBOOK

AN ALPHABETICAL ARRANGEMENT OF
CONCISE STATEMENTS ON ASPECTS OF ACTING

CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
ELIZABETH REYNOLDS HAPGOOD

A Theatre Arts Book

ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK

A Theatre Arts Book

Routledge
Taylor & Francis
711 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.

© 1963 by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood
© 1924, 1936, 1948, 1949, 1958, 1961 by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood
© 1924 by Little, Brown & Co.
© 1936 by Theatre Arts, Inc.

First published on the 100th Anniversary of the birth of Constantin Stanislavski, January 17th, 1963, by Theatre Arts Books.

Text entirely reset in 2004

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stanislavsky, Konstantin, 1863-1938.

An actor's handbook : an alphabetical arrangement of concise statements on aspects of acting / Constantin Stanislavski ; edited and translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood.

p. cm.

Translated from Russian.

Originally published: New York : Theatre Arts Books, 1963.

ISBN 0-87830-181-X (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Acting. I. Hapgood, Elizabeth Reynolds. II. Title.

PN2061.S7 2004
792.02'8--dc22

2004002063

FOREWORD BY THE EDITOR, 1963

In the course of the last few years a number of books, purporting to explain, interpret, or restate in simplified form what Stanislavski really thought and taught, have appeared in America and England. To commemorate the centennial of his birth on January 17th, 1963, it occurred to his principal publisher that a tribute and service to him would be to make available in Stanislavski's *own words* what he himself said about the various facets of the art to which he devoted his whole life, body and soul.

Here, then, is the alphabet of his teaching in concise form. It is based to some extent on a similar "lexicon" published in Moscow and sent to me by his son, but the choice of quotations here is predicated more on their usefulness to theatre people in the West. Much of the material is taken from books previously published in English, but, thanks to the efforts of the archivists in Moscow who have collated all of Stanislavski's papers, including fragments and variations, exceptionally pithy statements for many topics were found and are here translated for the first time.

This volume in no way replaces the full expression of his ideas in his books, which have spread all over the world, to the West and to the East, to India, South America and Japan. It can serve, in this present form, as a handy reference book for the person who is already familiar with the important tenets of his teaching; and, it is to be hoped, it will whet the desire of others to find out through reading the full texts why Stanislavski was such a towering theatre figure and how they themselves can apply his writings.

Since these quotations are drawn from statements made over a long period of years—he lived to be 75—the reader will be aware of certain minor shifts of viewpoint. Because Stanislavski never stood still (“Art and artists must move forward or they will move backward”), he was revising his ideas to his last breath. But the fundamental aim never varied: “to create the life of a human spirit, but also to express it in a beautiful, artistic form.” No matter what the angle of approach, his efforts remained constant to achieve “a truth transformed into a poetical equivalent by means of creative imagination.”

Stanislavski was fortunate in many ways. He was the son of a wealthy man who could give him the advantages of a broad education, the opportunity to see the greatest exponents of theatre art at home and abroad, the possibility of making his own early experiments in the theatre. He might have remained a brilliant dilettante had he not set his sights on a high goal and never faltered along the hard road leading to it. His personal integrity and inexhaustible capacity for work contributed to make him a professional artist of the first rank. For Stanislavski was also richly endowed by nature with a handsome exterior, fine voice, genuine talent, so that as an actor, director and teacher he was destined to influence and inspire by his own example the many who worked with him and under him, or who had the privilege of seeing him on the stage with the incomparable company of the Moscow Art Theatre of his time.

“Do you realize ... what is required of an actor, why a real artist must lead a full, interesting, beautiful, varied, exciting and inspiring life?” Those were his words. That was his life.

—E. R. H.

A

ACCENTUATION

Accent is a pointing finger. ... [It] singles out the key word ... the high point of the subtext. You know how the third dimension is used to produce depth in a picture. ... We have as many planes of speech which create perspective in a phrase. The most important word stands out most vividly defined in the very foreground of the sound plane. Less important words create a series of deeper planes. ... The essential point is not so much the volume as the quality of the accent. Accent can be combined with intonation ... the latter will colour a word with varied shades of feeling: caressing, malicious, ironical, a touch of scorn, respect and so on. Coordination is [to establish an] harmonious integration ... of degrees of accentuation volume, for the purpose of setting forth certain words. ... Another method of emphasis for a key phrase is to change the tempo and rhythm.

—*Building a Character*

See INTONATIONS AND PUNCTUATION, PAUSES IN SPEECH, SPEECH, SUBTEXT, VOICE VOLUME.

ACTION

On the stage you must always be enacting something; action, motion is the basis of the art ... of the actor; ... even external immobility ... does not imply passiveness.

You may sit without motion and at the same time be in full action. ... Frequently physical immobility is the direct result of inner intensity. So I will ... put it like this: on the stage it is necessary to act, either outwardly or inwardly. Everything that happens on the stage has a definite purpose. ... All action in the theatre must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent and real ... and as a final result we have a truly productive activity. ...

1. *PHYSICAL ACTIONS*

An example: With what is Lady Macbeth occupied at the culminating point of her tragedy? The simple physical act of washing a spot of blood off her hand. ... In real life also many of the great moments of emotion are signaled by some ordinary, small, natural movement. ... A small physical act acquires an enormous inner meaning: the great inner struggle seeks an outlet in such an external act. The significance of physical acts in highly tragic or dramatic moments is ... that the simpler they are, the easier it is to grasp them, the easier to allow them to lead you to your true objective. ... By approaching emotion in this way, you avoid all forcing and your result is natural, intuitive, and complete.

There are no physical actions divorced from some desire, some effort in some direction, some objective, without one's feeling inwardly a justification for them; there is no imagined situation which does not contain some degree of action of thought; there should be no physical actions created without faith in their reality, consequently a sense of truthfulness. All this bears witness to the close bond between physical action and all so-called "elements" of the inner creative state.

2. *ACTIONS CREATE THE PHYSICAL LIFE OF A ROLE*

The creation of the physical life is half the work on a role because, like us, a role has two natures, physical and spiritual. To permeate external physical actions with inner essentials, the spiritual life of a part, you must have appropriate material. This you find in the play and in your role ... because a role, more than action in real life, must bring together the two lives—of external and internal action—in mutual effort to achieve a given purpose.

The spirit cannot but respond to the actions of the body, provided of course that these are genuine, have a purpose, and are productive. ... Thanks to this approach ... a part acquires inner content. ... External action acquires inner meaning and warmth from inner feeling, and the latter finds its expression in physical terms.

To sum up: the point of physical actions lies not in themselves as such but in what they evoke: conditions, proposed circumstances, feelings. The fact that the hero of a play kills himself is not so important as the inner reason for his suicide. If that does not appear or is lacking in interest, his death as such will pass without leaving any impression. There is an unbreakable bond between the action on the stage and the thing which precipitated it. In other words there is a complete union between the physical and the spiritual being of a role. That is what we make use of in our psycho-technique.

3. *PATTERN OF PHYSICAL ACTIONS*

Write down the list of the physical actions you would undertake if you found yourself in the situation of your imaginary character. Do this same work with the textual role. ... Write down the list of actions which your character

undertakes in accordance with the plot of the play. ... If the work of the playwright is ... drawn ... from the living sources of human nature and human experience and feelings, ... there will be coincidence at many points between the two lists, especially in all the basic ... places. ... To feel yourself even partly in your role and your role even partly in you ... is the initial step of merging with and living your part.

People who do not understand the line of the physical being in a role laugh when you explain to them that a series of simple, physical, realistic actions has the capacity to engender ... the life of a human spirit in a role. ... The point does not lie in these small, realistic actions but in the whole creative sequence which is put into effect, thanks to the impulse given by these physical actions.

—*An Actor Prepares*

—*Creating a Role*

—*Stanislavski's Legacy*

See ELEMENTS OF THE INNER CREATIVE STATE, IMMOBILITY, JUSTIFICATION, PSYCHO-TECHNIQUE, TEMPO-RHYTHM IN MOVEMENT.

ACTOR AS MASTER OF HIS ART

It takes a great artist to convey great feelings and passions—an actor of great power and technique. ... Without [this last] an actor is incapable of transmitting the universal hopes and tribulations of man.

Lack of understanding and education stamps our art as amateur.

Without a complete and profound mastery of his art an actor cannot carry over to the spectator either the idea, theme or living content of any play.

An actor grows as long as he works. ... Over a period of years of study [an actor] learns to follow a right course on his own ... and having learned to do his work properly he becomes a master of his art.

—*Creating a Role*

—*Collected Articles, Speeches, Talks and Letters*

—*Collected Works, Vols. I and VI*

See PSYCHO-TECHNIQUE.

ACTOR AS TRUE ARTIST

A real artist must lead a full, interesting, varied and exciting life. He should know not only what is going on in the big cities, but in the provincial towns, faraway villages, factories and the big cultural centres of the world as well. He should study the life and psychology of the people who surround him, of various other parts of the population, both at home and abroad.

We need a broad point of view to act the plays of our times and of many peoples. ... To reach the pinnacle of fame an actor has to have more than his artistic talents, he must be an ideal human being ... capable of reaching the high points of his epoch, of grasping the value of culture in the life of his people, ... of reflecting the spiritual craving of his contemporaries.

—*An Actor Prepares*

—*Collected Works, Vol. II*

See IDEAL ARTIST.

ACTOR IN HIS ROLE

Closeness to your part we call perception of yourself in the part and of the part in you. ... Suppose you go through the whole play ... find the right actions and accustom yourself to executing them from start to finish. You will then have established ... the physical life of a part. ... You must remember ... that the actions ... are based on inner feelings. ... Inside of you, parallel to the line of physical actions, you have an unbroken line of emotions verging on the subconscious. ... Moreover you can speak for your character in your own person. ... Bring yourself to the point of taking hold of a new role concretely, as if it were your own life. When you sense that real kinship to your part, ... your newly created being will become soul of your soul, flesh of your flesh.

—*An Actor Prepares*

—*Collected Works, Vol. VI*

See ROLE INSIDE THE ACTOR, ACTION, UNBROKEN LINE.

ACTOR IN OPERA

The objective of the director of an opera is to sift out the *action inherent in the musical picture* and restate this composition of sounds in terms of the dramatic, that is to say the *visual*.

In other words: the action should be determined to a far greater degree by the musical score than merely by the text. The objective of the director is to explain exactly what it is that the composer wished to say when he wrote each phrase of his score, and what dramatic

action he had in mind, even though this last may have been only subconsciously in his mind.

I believe there is no basis for dividing operas into operas for singing and musical dramas, for *every* opera is a musical drama. ... The chief exponent of the action in an opera is the *singer-actor*, not the conductor who often misses the point of dramatic action. ... The most necessary item of equipment for an operatic artist is, beyond all doubt, a well-placed voice which enables him to sing both *vowels* and *consonants*. The consonants are the more important because they are what carry through the volume of the orchestral accompaniment. The famous singer Battistini owed the volume of his voice to his ability to reinforce his tone through consonants. ... Tamagno was a dramatic and magnificent Othello in opera because he studied his role with the great tragic actor Salvini, and his musical mentor was Verdi himself. Another master of diction was Chaliapin ... because he had an intuitive genius he was able to find the right expression and achieved by this means an unparalleled effect.

The production notes of Richard Wagner contain, among other things, the secret of producing an opera. You can bring Wagnerian heroes to life, and make human beings out of them if you can wean them from everything "operatic," and plan their actions in consonance with the *inner meaning* of the music and not the *external* effects.

In opera I take my point of departure from the music, I try to discover what it was that prompted the composer to write his work. Then I try to reproduce this in the action of the singers. If the orchestra plays a prelude, introducing a scene before the action begins we are not content to have the orchestra simply play this, we put it into scenic terms, in the sense of actions, words, phrases.

Thus we often use action to illustrate the other instruments which lend colour to the orchestra. If an instrument gives the theme of death, the singer will feel the corresponding emotions. He must not disregard these preludes and use the time to clear his throat or prepare his entrance, he must already be part of the unbroken pattern, of the unfolding life of a human spirit in his part in the play.

The bond with the music must be so close that the action is played in the same rhythm as the music, But this should not be rhythm for the sake of rhythm. ... I would like this union of rhythm [of action] and music to be imperceptible to the public. We try to have the words merge with the music and be pronounced musically. ... Since I look upon opera as the collective creation of several arts, the words, the text, diction must be as well worked out as possible on the part of the singer; the public must understand everything that is transpiring on the stage. I even wish to have every word of the ensemble and chorus singing made intelligible.

Chaliapin ... is the great criterion in opera. Chaliapin cannot be made ... but the method of Chaliapin should be taught because artists of his calibre come once in a century.

The age of the actor has arrived. He is the top person in the theatre. ... In opera the need is not only for a good singer, but also a good actor. There must be a matching of the dramatic art with the vocal-musical art.

—*Collected Works, Vol. VI*

—*Stanislavski's Legacy*

See SPEECH, SPEECH TEMPO-RHYTHM, TEMPO-RHYTHM.

ACTOR IN THE FILMS

An actor in the talking films is obliged to be incomparably more skilful and technically expert than an actor on the stage, if the requirements of true art rather than routine accomplishment are to be applied to him. ... Film actors need real theatre training. They should be bred on a repertory of the world geniuses like Shakespeare, Griboyedov, Gogol, Chekhov and not on ordinary movie scripts.

Film actors are often called upon to play the last sequences in a picture and then the first; they have to die and be born later on. And all this is usually improvised, they rehearse death and then birth.

—*Collected Works, Vol. VI*

ACTOR IN THE THEATRE

In our theatre, which had its genesis in the Shchepkin traditions, the first place has always been assigned to the actor. For him we did everything that lay in our power.

The theatre exists above all, for the actor, and without him it cannot exist at all.

The only king and ruler of the stage is the talented actor. ... The main difference between the art of the actor and all other arts is that every other [non-performing] artist may create whenever he is in the mood of inspiration. But the artist of the stage must be the master of his own inspiration and must know how to call it forth at the hour announced on the posters of the theatre. This is the chief secret of our art.

—*My Life in Art*

See ART OF THE ACTOR AND THE ART OF THE DIRECTOR, INSPIRATION, PSYCHO-TECHNIQUE.

ACTORS USE THEIR OWN FEELINGS

Must we use our own, same, old feelings ... in every kind of role from Hamlet to Sugar in *The Blue Bird*? What else can you do? ... Do you expect an actor to invent all sorts of new sensations, or even a new soul, for every part he plays? How many souls would he be obliged to house? ... Can he tear out his own soul and replace it by one he has rented as being more suitable to a certain part? Where can he get one? You can borrow *things* of all sorts, but you cannot take feelings away from another person. My feelings are inalienably mine, and yours belong to you in the same way. You can understand a part, sympathize with the person portrayed, and put yourself in his place, so that you will act as he would. That will arouse feelings in the actor that are analogous to those required for the part. Those feelings will belong, not to the person created by the author of the play, but to the actor himself. When a real artist is speaking the *Hamlet* soliloquy "To be or not to be" he puts into the lines much of his own conception of life. ... For him it is necessary that the spectators feel his inner relationship to what he is saying.

The musical scale has only seven notes, the sun's spectrum only seven primary colours, yet the combinations of those notes in music and those colours in painting are not to be numbered. The same must be said of our fundamental emotions.

—*An Actor Prepares*

—*Stanislavski's Legacy*

See JUSTIFICATION, LIVING A PART, TRUE ACTING.