

Analysis through Action for Actors and Directors

From Stanislavsky to Contemporary Performance



David Chambers

ROUTLEDGE

Analysis through Action for Actors and Directors

Analysis through Action for Actors and Directors is a comprehensive view of an innovative and exciting process for making new theatre.

As well as an understanding of how Analysis through Action has developed over time, this book also demonstrates how it can be put into practice in today's theatre. The first part of this book traces the exciting genealogy from Stanislavsky's unfinished experiments, through the insights of geniuses Maria Knebel and Georgii Tovstonogov, down to today's avant-garde auteurs. The second part is a practical manual based on extensive field testing by the author and colleagues. Here, two key components of the process are elucidated: Text Actions – ten interwoven text analysis steps – to be twinned with the thrilling rehearsal process using focused and joyful improvisations called Études.

Written for new or experienced theatre students and practitioners, this book will enrich the technique of any theatre artist and anyone else interested in the theatre and its future.

David Chambers is a director, writer, and producer of theatre and opera. His work has been seen in New York from basements to Broadway, in theatres throughout the US, as well as Europe, Russia, and Asia. He taught acting and directing at the Yale School of Drama for three decades. Since then he has been on the faculties of The New School for Drama, The Stella Adler Studio, and Harvard University. He currently teaches in the department of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at Yale University, USA.



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From Stanislavsky to Contemporary
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David Chambers

Designed cover image: © Cover photograph courtesy of photographer Ken Reynolds

First published 2024

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-78212-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-78213-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-47557-6 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003475576

Typeset in Times New Roman

by SPi Technologies India Pvt Ltd (Straive)

**To my Russian friends and colleagues, whether still there or
recently departed**

and

**To my family, especially Christine, Jessica, and Dmitri
who will be delighted by the completion of TFB**



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To The Reader

Welcome! Here are a few words to assist you in reading *Analysis through Action*.

This book is intended for all actors, directors, related teachers, and theatre aficionados. It is in two parts. Part I, 'A Genealogy of Analysis through Action,' traces the evolving lineage of Analysis through Action from the originators, starting with Stanislavsky's last experiments, through selected historical and current-day practitioners. Part II, 'The Practice of Analysis through Action,' covers the intertwined aspects of (1) a close reading text analysis process – here called "Text Actions" – and (2) 'The practice of Études,' meaning focused improvisations pointed toward the exploration and theatrical realization of a text.

Part I covers some basic Russian theatre history and theory and is aimed toward a new reader in this field, someone seeking practical knowledge readily applicable in today's Western theatre. Part II is a kind of manual, with a progression of text analysis steps – ten Text Actions - followed by strategies for implementing Études. While an impatient reader could leap immediately into Part II, there are critical underlying ideas and important references to be found in Part I. So, think of the entire volume as an introductory handbook to this creatively exciting and highly productive rehearsal and training process.

Some tips: The book cites examples from well-known plays, most often from Chekhov and regularly from *The Cherry Orchard*. I strongly advise reading or re-reading that play. I recommend the Paul Schmidt translation used in this volume or the Laurence Senelick edition, generally considered to be closer to the Russian original with an extensive introduction and valuable notes. Other Chekhov dramas will come into play now and again; while they do not play a critical role, they are always worth a read. Also cited periodically are *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, where basic knowledge is assumed.

A reader unfamiliar with Russian nomenclature will run into a common problem: pronunciation of names, places, and terms. The general rule of thumb for non-Russian readers is to first sound out the name or word phonetically so that you don't completely stumble when it comes up again. The Senelick single-play Chekhov editions offer a pronunciation guide for characters and locations. For further help, enter the word into Google Translate for a recording. Best yet, a two-minute audio of *Cherry Orchard* (and other Chekhov plays)

names and places can be found at <https://www.dialectsarchive.com/the-cherry-orchard>.

A simple guide to how Russian names work – 1. given name, 2. patronymic (a middle name derived from the father’s given name), 3. surname, and 4. affectionate names (nicknames), as well as masculine and feminine endings - can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Slavic_naming_customs

On translation: The translations are mine unless otherwise noted. I also relied heavily on Yulia Kleiman in Russia and Ilya Khodosh in the US, for translation and consultation.

On spelling: I have used the most common transliterations, except inside quotations where different spellings may appear. I use the ‘y’ ending on Russian names – Stanislavsky, not Stanislavski - except where the subject uses a different ending when they write in English.

On capitalization: As one can already see on these prefatory pages, throughout the book I capitalize words that are important to Analysis through Action: for instance, here you have seen ‘Text Actions’ and ‘Études.’ Many more uppercase examples will follow, including (following Maria Shevtsova and others) “System” for Stanislavsky’s decades-long attempt to codify the components of stage acting. Non-Stanislavsky uses of the word ‘system’ will remain in lower case.

On acronyms and place names: Russians are as devoted as any culture to acronyms for official organizations. But Russian acronyms and place names can be thorny because of numerous government reformations. As an example, the city Saint Petersburg became Petrograd in 1914 (Petersburg was considered too German), then Leningrad in 1924, and then back to Saint Petersburg in 1991. Such changes were similarly reflected in the names of governmental and artistic institutions and their acronyms.

The Moscow Art Theatre opened in 1898 as The Moscow Public-Art Theatre, then became The Moscow Art Academic Theatre then simply The Moscow Art Theatre. For political reasons in 1987, it split into The Gorky Moscow Art Theatre, with a separate home and resident company, and The Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre, the traditional one we shall follow. To avoid confusion, in this book we shall simply refer to this institution as the Art Theatre or sometimes use the general acronym MAT, regardless of era.

The two major drama schools that trained almost all the Russian theatre artists we shall meet in this book went through similar changes. We shall refer to the Moscow school as GITIS (The State Institute for Theatre Arts), the name it has held since 1923. Since 2015, the main Petersburg theatre school has been called RGISI (The Russian State Institute of Performing Arts). Prior incarnations were colloquially known as the Institute (The Leningrad State Institute of Theatre, Music, and Cinema, LGITMiK) from 1962 to 1992, and The Saint Petersburg State Theatre Arts Academy (SPbGATI), or simply the Academy from 1993 to 2014.

Acronyms found in this book are:

BDT: the Large (Bolshoi) Dramatic Theatre, Leningrad/Saint Petersburg

CCT: Central Children's Theatre (Moscow home of Knebel and Efros)

KGB: the State Security Committee (secret police)

MDT: Maly (Small) Drama Theatre, Saint Petersburg (home of Lev Dodin's company)

Narkompros: People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (the cultural ministry of the USSR)

NEP: New Economic Policy (a 1920s attempt to jump-start Russian post-Civil War economy)

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (aka the Soviet Union)

Finally but importantly, Analysis through Action is the term I use here and elsewhere. I believe this translation to be more accurate to the Russian (Действенным Анализе per Maria Knebel) and more descriptive: a process that activates Analysis – meaning embodied knowledge – through or by means of psychophysical Action: hence Analysis through Action. More common usages elsewhere include Active Analysis, Action Analysis, or the Method of Active Analysis.

By whatever name, Analysis through Action is a recent arrival in the anglophone world. Articles and chapters have begun to appear regularly, often in the online journal *Stanislavsky Studies*. Moreover, two recent books, James Thomas' *A Director's Guide to Stanislavsky's Active Analysis: Including the Formative Essay on Active Analysis by Maria Knebel* (2016) and Sharon Carnicke's *Dynamic Acting through Active Analysis: Konstantin Stanislavsky, Maria Knebel, and Their Legacy* (2023) have recently entered the conversation, a dialogue long needed in the American theatre. Readers familiar with Katie Mitchell's *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theater* (2009) will notice some similarities between this book and hers (Mitchell studied with a Lev Dodin-trained actor). Each of these authors have their own style, emphases, and foci; each broaches the topic in a distinct manner leading to a diversity of options and opinions in this new field of study and practice.

And there will be more books and articles. As James Thomas said to me: "It's becoming a cottage industry."

As we enter a challenging new era in our art – the *Washington Post* describes the American theatre as being in "freefall" – innovations are an urgent necessity. Certainly the institutional leaders have a lot of soul-searching to do to remain relevant – or just to keep their doors open. But the artists who make theatre can also look at what they are making, whom they are making it for, and *how* they are making it.

May this book, and the articles and volumes cited above, be instrumental in creating a lively, unexpected, and vividly exciting theatre that will draw audiences young and old, new or experienced, back into the increasingly empty spaces – there to find a theatre created by passionate actors and directors trained in an innovative, vigorous, and surprising approach to making inspiring and significant theatre.

Part I

**A Genealogy of Analysis
through Action**



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Introduction

A Journey Begins

I stumbled onto Analysis through Action¹ and Études through a back door. As co-director of The Meyerhold Project, a mid-1990s collaboration between the Yale School of Drama and The Saint Petersburg State Academy of Theatre Arts that was dedicated to reconstructing Vsevolod Meyerhold's landmark 1926 production of *Revizor* (Gogol's *The Inspector General*), I made several trips to "Piter." It was immediately apparent that something very different was going on in actor and director training there. Much of the rigor, ferocity, and intensity of the instruction I observed in their classrooms would likely be branded as 'unsafe' or 'inappropriate' at an American institution.

But in contrast to the arduous intensity of the classrooms, the Russian student performances were alive with an imaginative, buoyant, and emotional *joie de jouant* I had not seen at home. This was something different; an unpredictable cascade of spontaneity, whimsy, playfulness, and psychophysical danger was released through astonishingly flexible bodies and voices, all coached to the hilt. Yes, Vsevolod Meyerhold's *commedia* and biomechanical researches were somehow encoded inside the cultural DNA of these actors and directors...but I sensed that something else was up, some process that allowed for this theatrical freedom in rehearsal and performance, that encouraged this deeply soulful, highly physical action-based theatre.

However, I was there on a mission that required a singular focus: tending to our bi-national "production about Meyerhold's production" which would ultimately play in Saint Petersburg, Amsterdam, and New Haven. I had neither physical energy nor psychic capacity to pursue anything else.

Nonetheless, it did not escape my notice that in the hallways of the Academy there were austere Soviet-era photographs of departed master teachers. The sepia ghosts of an extraordinary team of 1950s to late 1980s acting and directing teachers – Georgii Tovstonogov, Arkady Katsman, Mar Sulimov, Boris Zon, Zinovy Korogodsky, and others we shall meet later – were still smoking their long cigarettes and monitoring their students from the vapors. My docent in this gallery, Academy graduate and now Professor Sergei Tcherkasski, taught me

4 *A Genealogy of Analysis through Action*

the recurring student question: “Who was your teacher’s teacher?” I soon learned that one or another of this Tovstonogov-era cohort had taught all my current colleagues on the Academy directing faculty.

Unlike the other names, Tovstonogov’s was distantly familiar to me: a translated book of his, *The Profession of the Director*, lay unread on some shelf back home. I vaguely recalled that he had directed a unique *Uncle Vanya* at Princeton’s McCarter Theater in the 1980s. My own mentor, Russophile Zelda Fichandler, famed founder of Washington’s Arena Stage, had spoken of him with great respect – and had given me that unread book long ago. I learned from Tcherkasski that Tovstonogov taught something called Analysis through Action. I knew that to some people this towering figure was a god – but probably not my god: Stanislavsky’s pedagogical descendants were not my interest. Stanislavsky was Satan, as far as I was concerned.

Instead, my god Meyerhold called me back to work, and in I went.

A decade later, I taught a mask workshop at a university in Romania. The head acting and directing teacher there was a lively Bulgarian named Maria Ganeva, who had studied with Tovstonogov at the Petersburg Academy for eight years in the 1980s. It was she who first outlined to me Tovstonogov’s core ideas on Analysis through Action and then spoke of her own interest in Maria Knebel, who had independently developed her own related but distinct methodology in Moscow.

Now having time to listen, I sensed that somewhere in what Professor Ganeva was telling me there might be some common ground between Russian and American actor director training. Despite my ongoing enthusiasm for Meyerhold, I had sadly concluded that his work was too aesthetically distant, too extreme, and too specialized for most American actors’ careerist interests (though directors loved it).

I needed to know more about this Analysis through Action, the roots of which could be traced directly to Stanislavsky, certainly a familiar if misunderstood icon in American theatre whom I had perennially discarded as obsolete and counter-theatricalist, despite American actor training’s continual embracement. Perhaps there was some key in Analysis through Action, an outgrowth of Stanislavsky’s little known (in the West) final experiments that could unlock the high-spirited Russian freedom-within-form that I so rarely saw back home.

Supported by a Likhachev Foundation Fellowship in 2012, I returned to a greatly changed Petersburg. With my close colleague and co-producer of the Meyerhold Project Nikolai Pesochinsky translating, I first interviewed Irina Malochevskaya, who had been Tovstonogov’s principal associate for many years, joined by her PhD student Andrei Smolko with whom I had already corresponded; (ergo Andrei’s teacher’s teacher was Tovstonogov himself). After her mentor’s death in 1989, Malochevskaya had authored *The Directing School of Georgii Tovstonogov*, a detailed appraisal of his four-year directing course including an in-depth chapter on Analysis through Action. We shall be citing passages of this invaluable book ahead.

One conversation in Petersburg always led to another; soon I was talking to world-renowned director Lev Dodin, scholar-director Veniamin Filshinsky, master of vocal expression Valery Galandeev and Dodin's associate director, and other experts of Tovstonogov's mode of Analysis through Action and Maria Osipovna Knebel's 'Étude Method' of Rehearsal.

Numerous Petersburg artists, all rightfully proud of their theatrical legacy, at that time was generally unknown in the West, generously came forward to help: Tcherkasski led me through a chronological introduction to the genealogy of Analysis through Action, from Stanislavsky to today. Fluently bilingual (and very funny) Dina Dodina, Lev Dodin's niece and gatekeeper, set up crucial interviews, and translated them live. Academy faculty member Yulia Kleiman photocopied numerous early articles and chapters and translated some of them as later did the remarkable Yale dramaturgy student, Russian/American Ilya Khodosh. Over time, I became familiar with the people in the fading sepia Academy portraits – Georgii Tovstonogov, Arkady Katsman, Mar Sulimov, Boris Zon, Zinovy Korogodsky – as well as Maria Knebel, who, as she hailed from a competing institute in Moscow called GITIS, did not have a picture on the wall, but nonetheless was justifiably highly regarded by her Petersburg legatees.

I now had a new list of teachers about whom I could say to my directing and acting students: "These artists have become your teacher's teachers."

Maria Knebel

Early in the journey I was shown a few words by Maria Knebel that encapsulated what I had started looking for – a succinct definition of Analysis through Action and the central role of Études:

The idea of this technique...is that at an early stage of work, the play chosen for staging is not rehearsed as usual at the table, but subsequent to a certain preliminary analysis it is analyzed in action through études with improvised text. These études serve as steps leading the actor to the creative assimilation of the text of the play.²

I am now embarrassed to admit this, but at that time the name Maria Knebel was barely known to me. In my student study of the canon formation of directing, she had never come up. Allusions to her had drifted by me later in life but only faintly.

Maria Osipovna Knebel: I remembered there was a link to Stanislavsky's last years, about which I then knew nothing other than Toporkov's *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, in which she is not mentioned. I also knew that an American scholar I greatly respected, Sharon Carnicke, had started to write about Knebel. That was about it. (Even today, despite the untiring work of Carnicke, Bella Merlin, James Thomas and a few others, it is the rare North American professional theatre practitioner who could identify this remarkable director,

artistic director, and deeply influential teacher at GITIS. Bob Falls, the long-time artistic director of Chicago's Goodman Theatre is a notable exception.)

But in Russia I soon found that if Tovstonogov was a god to some, Knebel was a god to all. In a conversation with Valery Galandeev, Lev Dodin's key associate at the Maly Drama Theatre and renowned teacher at the Academy, he started with: "I think that in the Russian theatre of the Soviet period no one has ever had such a life story to tell as M.O. Knebel did." Galandeev finished two hours later with: "I was once shown a note written in Knebel's hand. It was obviously from some sort of public discussion where somebody wrote her a note from the auditorium, asking 'What is the essence of the Analysis through Action Method?' She wrote back "I don't know. Nor does anyone."³

I have since grasped that Knebel's perplexing reply *is* the essence of Analysis through Action, that is: no one can *definitively* say what its essence is or catalogue its practical design; there are many variants. But every young Russian director knows what their teacher's teacher taught their teacher and how their teacher teaches their lessons today, always urging their students to consider what they will do with it tomorrow. Hence there is a generational and individualistic evolution.

In very simplistic form: Stanislavsky taught Knebel, who adapted his last experiments into Analysis through Action (her term), with an emphasis on Études; Knebel then taught Anatoly Efros, Lev Dodin, Anatoly Vasiliev, and others; they in turn taught the next generation of students, and so forth. More or less concurrently, in Leningrad Tovstonogov created his rigorous text analysis process drawn from Stanislavsky; he taught Kama Ginkas and Genrietta Yanovskaya; today Ginkas teaches his students his own variant, his wife, Yanovskaya, teaches her variant, and Maria Ganeva, who sat in the same classes with them, teaches her own variant. Their students will in turn make their own adaptation.

Once the student becomes a professional, their task is not to reiterate what their teacher did but to transform it for their own generation through their distinctive cultural personality and life experience. Consequently there are many branches in the family tree emanating from the rootstock of Stanislavsky up to today's avant-garde such as Yuri Butusov and Dmitry Krymov – neither of whose works look at all Stanislavskian. I soon recognized that Analysis through Action is not a doctrine, not a tick-list of mandatory obligations. It is an individually deployed interactive process of text analysis (called 'Reconnaissance of the Mind') and Étude rehearsal technique ('Reconnaissance of the Body').

It also became clear to me that just as "the étude form reveals the actor's individuality especially vividly"⁴ so too will Analysis through Action 'especially vividly' reveal the director or teacher's individuality. Analysis through Action is not a dogma; it is an open-ended suite of practices with some basic underlying principles that re-invents itself generation-to-generation, director-to-director, rehearsal-to-rehearsal.

Back Home

My first-year graduate directing students at Yale – Cole Lewis, Katie McGerr, and Dustin Wills – and I now had translations of Knebel’s *Analysis through Action of the Play and the Role*; Malochevskaya’s manual on Tovstonogov’s course and my notes from a lengthy interview with her; an essay by her PhD student Andrei Smolko; Maria Ganeva’s detailed class notes; two essays on Analysis through Action in practice by Tovstonogov; two lengthy interviews with Lev Dodin; two equally long interviews with Dodin’s colleague Valery Galandeev; two with scholar of Études, insert comma Academy Professor Veniamin Filshtinsky; and several transcribed conversations with my friends Sergei Tcherkasski and Nikolai Pesochinsky. In English, along with Carnicke and Merlin essays, we had the following pertinent books: Tovstonogov’s *The Profession of the Stage Director*, now dusted off from my shelves of unread books; Irina and Igor Levin’s instructive *Working on the Play and the Role*; Kama Ginkas’ provocative *Provoking Theater* (as interviewed by John Freedman); and Katie Mitchell’s *The Director’s Craft*.⁵ Later many more interviews would come, most notably with directors Yuri Butusov and Dmitry Krymov and several more with the prodigious scholar Anatoly Smeliansky.

In class, we began to forge our own step-by-step version of Reconnaissance of the Mind, the text analysis side of Analysis through Action, also known as ‘the Director *Tête-à-Tête* with the Play.’⁶ With crucial contributions from then-student Katie McGerr, we created a preliminary workflow of analytical ‘Text Actions.’ Over time these became a staple of the Yale School of Drama’s introductory directing seminar, encompassing the entire semester of the first year. Each of my trio of directing students had their own Chekhov play to break down sequentially: *The Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Seagull*. *The Cherry Orchard* served as the master text from which examples were created. By the end of the semester, they had scrupulously interrogated their text à la Tovstonogov, gone into the ‘poetic heart’ of their play, and formulated distinctive initial ideas of how to generate their own production, presumably to be explored with actors serving as “co-authors.”

It was time for Études.

Into the Lab

Words from celebrated Academy master teacher and expert on Études Veniamin Filshtinsky became our principle guideline as the trio of directors prepared to work with their peer actors: “The theater of co-authorship is our postulate... The director is not a boss nor a judge, but the primary ‘ringleader.’ This person is only a powerful spur, they choose the text and help the actors fall in love with it.”⁷

Co-authorship. Could young directors forgo their dreams of being a brilliant *auteur* to being a generous and inspiring co-author of a production?

Could the actors, often a self-protective lot through negative past experiences, trust this unstated directorial offering: ‘come co-author with me?’ Or conversely, did some directors and some actors not want the responsibilities of co-authorship? Given the debilitating brief amount of rehearsal time in the US was co-authorship a romantic fantasy? And as professional drama schools and conservatories are vocational training centers, not research institutions, of what use would all this Analysis through Action be once the student has graduated into ‘the industry?’

Fortunately, we had a laboratory in which we could attempt to bring flesh to these inconvenient ideas. An actor-director practicum class using Chekhov plays as source material which I co-taught with renowned acting teacher Ron Van Lieu had been born a few years earlier out of a desire to find a common ground for our respective first-year participants. In student rehearsals on new and classic plays I had observed vague terminology that was frequently obstructive: many terms common to the rehearsal hall – objectives, action, beats, rhythm, and the like – meant different things to different people. An over-reliance on *naming* things in lengthy table sessions, particularly pre-identifying so-called objectives, seemed to lead most students to a schematic approach to acting, with concomitant results. These rambling tablework negotiations, at best expedient for general collective knowledge, rarely seemed to generate dynamic stage life, idiosyncratic characters, or stimulating theatrical possibilities.

On a deeper level, the actor-director, labor-management struggle so common in the American theater – who ‘owns’ what share of the creative enterprise? – often created actor resistance and/or an overly aggressive directorial manner – or, worse yet, director confusion or passivity when trying to appease an assertive actor. At the table and then later on the floor tension between these two camps was routinely present, if sometimes subliminal; at worst it was paralytic and soul-crushing.

These were the concerns our “Chekhov Lab” was born to address. Perhaps the Étude method could be the mainspring that could release these tensions. Forging ahead with no experiential precedent to rely on, the directors and I drew up an Étude protocol for our laboratory experiment in co-authorship (a revised version can be found in Part II of this book). Our Étude guidelines were aggregated from ideas and insights drawn from numerous sources referenced above, particularly Boris Zon, Maria Knebel, Zinovy Korogodsky, Sharon Carnicke, and Bella Merlin. Always recalling wise words I had heard from Professor Tcherkasski – “Whatever you would talk about at the table, we do on the floor”⁸ – we ambitiously if innocently began our embodied research into Analysis through Action. That first year the Études ranged from tiresome to exhilarating but those of the latter kind were truly revelatory, showing us that we were on the right track. Over the years, the students consistently improved as did we faculty, and a similar course exists to this day at that school.

The Research Continues

Much has happened since those first years of synthesizing Analysis through Action at the Yale School of Drama. We have subsequently developed our version of this process in classes and rehearsals at Yale College's Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies Department; Harvard College's Theatre, Dance, and Media concentration; The New School of Drama's MFA Acting and Directing Programs; and The Stella Adler Studio. I say 'our version' because I was blessed over the years with fantastic teaching associates. In chronological order they are: Angie Tennant (The New School); Aida Rocci (Harvard); Annelise Lawson (New School and Adler); Sara Holdren (New School); Mikaela Boone (Yale); and Evelyn Giovine (Adler). All of them were keen lab co-teachers and idea generators. Additionally, the numerous bold and talented acting students who joined our ongoing experiments at these institutions are emblazoned on my memory – they are the unsung heroes of this book. My former student directors, now working professionally in US and Canadian theatres and universities, are implementing their own variants of this exciting process. Thanks to those associates and the scores of students who have participated over time, what I can guarantee you is: Analysis through Action *works*, the onstage results can be unexpectedly breath-taking, and it's a fabulously exciting thing to do for all. It makes for a complete "joy of rehearsal" to quote a brilliant student of Knebel's, director Anatoly Efros.⁹

To encourage you to partake in this joy, the Text Action process – Reconnaissance of the Mind, and the Étude process – Reconnaissance of the Body – are the subjects of Part II of this book. In Part I, I shall trace (necessarily all too briefly) the Russian genealogy of Analysis through Action from Stanislavsky to today. I recommend reading the book in its order. Part I serves as a crucial artistic chronology preceding the practical how-to "manual" of Part II. Many ideas and references in the second part will be established in the first.

Why do this? I won't hide it: my project is to break the chokehold of imagination with which American directors and actors have too often suffocated Chekhov, Shakespeare, and so many other authors, classical and contemporary, domestic and foreign, whom they dutifully say they want to 'serve.' The pages that follow have a passionate personal motivation. As Yuri Butusov says, "I want to "knock the spectators out of their chairs"¹⁰ to "shake the conscience of the audience"¹¹ and jump-start the artistic lassitude of American theatre-makers and their shrinking audiences. The need to jolt the American theatre forward has never been more compulsory than now.

Accordingly I close this introduction with a poetic vision I treasure from William Butler Yeats: "What is there left for us...but to rediscover an art of the theatre, which shall be joyful, fantastic, extravagant, whimsical, beautiful, resonant, and altogether reckless."¹²

Notes

- 1 The technically correct and to me more helpful English translation of *МЕТОДЕ ДЕЙСТВЕННОГО АНАЛИЗА* is “The Method of Analysis Through Action,” a.k.a. Analysis through Action. In English this approach has also been called Action Analysis or Active Analysis. This book will use Analysis through Action throughout except where quoted otherwise.
- 2 Knebel, Maria, *О том, что мне кажется особенно важным статьи, очерки, портреты [About What Seems Especially Important to Me]*, trans. Ilya Khodosh (Москва: Искусство, 1971), p. 44.
- 3 Valery Galandeev, author interview, Maly Drama Theatre, Saint Petersburg May 23, 2011.
- 4 Maria Кnebel, *Poeziia Pedagogiki [The Poetry of Pedagogy]*, trans. Khodosh (Москва: Vserossiiskoe teatral noe obshchestvo, 1976), 358.
- 5 As a young London director, Katie Mitchell had observed Dodin’s teaching in Russia and later studied with an actor from his company. Readers of directing books will notice some parallels between her book *The Directors Craft* (Routledge, New York, 2009) and this one.
- 6 Malochevskaya, I.V. *Режиссерская Школа Товстоногова [The Directing School of Tovstonogov]*, Trans. Khodosh (Акад. Театрального Искусства, Sankt-Peterburg, 2003), p. 32.
- 7 Filshinsky, Venjamin, Interview with author, Saint Petersburg, May 26, 2012. stanislavskistudies.org Issue #4, May 2014 p. 115.
- 8 Tcherkasski, author interview, Saint Petersburg, March 9, 2011.
- 9 Director Anatoly Efros’ book *Репетиция - любовь моя [Rehearsal – My Love]* is translated by James Thomas as *The Joy of Rehearsal* (Peter Lang, New York, 2006).
- 10 Butusov Interview with Ludmila Gromyko, November 10, 2016, <https://gromykotheatre.org/author/gromykotheatre/> as of June 2023.
- 11 Butusov Interview with author, June 6, 2014, Saint Petersburg.
- 12 W.B. Yeats *The Collected Works in Verse and Prose of William Butler Yeats, Vol. 4*, (Shakespeare Head Press, Stratford-on-Avon, 1908), 174.

1 An Anatomy of Stanislavsky's System

Introduction

I once asked a Jesuit priest, what does a Jesuit do? “We wrestle with the God problem” he replied. After many years of evasion I realized that to move forward with Analysis through Action I finally had to wrestle with the Stanislavsky problem. While the match may have been a near draw: he won, but (like a good Jesuit) I still have real doubts and questions. But in the end I developed an appreciation for this god of modern acting's dogged efforts to articulate the elements of good acting as he saw it, if often ineptly expressed. I now think the problem is not only Stanislavsky's tangled writing, it's also what we Americans did to him.

Partway through my own encounter, another longtime System denier, the brilliant Russian director and my teaching colleague Dmitry Krymov, was concurrently having his first bout with KS.¹ Comparing notes, Krymov said: “If you read Stanislavsky like Newton, he will disappoint you. But if you read him like Einstein, he is brilliant.”² Meaning if you are looking for the “laws” of acting in the manner of Newton's laws of motion, you will come away discouraged. But if one reads Stanislavsky's System³ as an attempt at a unified field theory – an open line of research with many valuable propositions but destined to be incomplete as was Einstein's search – there are some surprising spiritual rewards, creative possibilities, and practical offerings amid the oft-jumbled verbiage.

What This Chapter Is and Is Not

Caveat emptor: the following pages are not an exhaustive survey or critique of Stanislavsky's System. Numerous more worthy anglophone scholars than I have taken on those daunting tasks: England's polymathic Maria Shevtsova and erudite Rose Whyman, Jonathan Pitches, and, of course, the prolific translator/author, albeit prone to mistranslation, Jean Benedetti. Americans include Sharon Carnicke, Bella Merlin (UK born), and the doyen of American Russian theatre scholarship, Laurence Senelick (his *Stanislavsky: A Life in Letters*⁴ is the best biography there is, alongside his numerous other books and essays).

Possibly the clearest of them all for System newcomers is the late Professor Burnet Hobgood's excellent though unpublished PhD thesis, which can be found online.⁵

But even in Russia, much less the anglophone world, grasping what the System actually *is* proves difficult. About KS's works the Russian Stanislavsky sage Anatoly Smeliansky quips: "the problem [with reading Stanislavsky] is not to translate from Russian into English but the equally complex problem of translating Russian into Russian."⁶ The brilliant director Kirill Serebrennikov said on the 150th anniversary of Stanislavsky's birth: "Not even professionals can explain what the 'Stanislavsky system' is."⁷

That said, this book, intended for theatre students, teachers, and professional practitioners, is about Analysis through Action, and not about deciphering the myriad complexities and cultural contexts of the System by diligent and laudable authors such as those listed above. However, Analysis through Action is a rehearsal methodology and a teaching program that is inextricably rooted in the System. Maria Knebel herself wrote about Analysis through Action: "One cannot view this part of his work [Analysis through Action] separately from the entire Stanislavsky system. That is precisely why I believe it is essential to touch upon especially important elements of the Stanislavsky system."⁸ Following Knebel's lead, in this chapter I put forth a modest and selective overview of the System, concentrating on some key ideas and propositions that will materialize through the practice of Analysis through Action.

While both Stanislavsky and Knebel attempted to record their ideas in numerous published volumes and private notebooks, the poetic heart, the ethereal spirit of what they laboriously delineated on paper, can only be truly known, truly *felt*, through extensive psychophysical Experience. And, as we shall see, Experience (*переживание*, pronounced *perezhivanie*) is one of the cardinal words of Stanislavsky's System and therefore of Knebel's Analysis through Action. How to best achieve deep psychophysical Experiencing through the practice of Analysis through Action is the subject of Part II of this book.

Helpful Hint: The System Is Not a System

Although it was he who first coined the term "System" in 1909 to describe his then-nascent acting methodology, Stanislavsky was perennially ambivalent about the word. Throughout his life he regularly shrouded the word System in quotation marks, sometimes further diminishing it further as "my so-called System." His hesitancy suggests that he was never fully satisfied with his tireless rehearsal research, studio classes, and consequent writing – writing he found agonizing (unlike his letters and speeches, which are more fluid). He must have felt that his thirty-two years, 1906 to 1938, of manuscript to nail the System were never comprehensive or precise enough to merit the status of a concrete system.

Or he simply felt that the word itself was misleading. System implies something, well, systematic: a weather system, a school system, the solar system.

A car is a system composed of many systems: fuel system, electrical, mechanical, and so forth.

Stanislavsky's "System" is not an all-inclusive 'thing,' materially, mathematically, or philosophically. Instead, it is a set of often clumsily written chapters – Maria Shevtsova calls them "baggy"⁹ – based on his observations of the underlying components of acting, good acting and bad acting. Given his changeable mind and importunate experiments, Stanislavsky's System was perpetually evolving; it was still being formulated, not tweaked but formulated, up to a few days before his death. For the coup de grâce, on the final page of Stanislavsky's epic opus *An Actor's Work: Years One and Two* (a more recent and revised translation of the topics covered in *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*) the master teacher tells us: "There is no 'system.' There is nature."¹⁰

Herein lies the reason behind Stanislavsky's ambivalence about his own term: he must have recognized that his System is not actually a system; it is a set of hypotheses about human nature in search of a unified field theory. As Laurence Senelick has written:

It would be a mistake to take Stanislavsky as a systematic thinker, and there is something ironic that his articulated thoughts on acting have been labelled variously the System and the Method. System suggests a coherent and organized body of material or principles; method an orderly arrangement of ideas based on Cartesian logic. On the other hand, *The Actor Works on Himself* is configured as the narrative of classroom études, goal-oriented but open-ended, closer to Platonic dialogues than metaphysical treatises.¹¹

So, does this mean we should then ignore the System, write it off as a suite of lofty but incomplete drafts? Or perhaps consult it for periodic divine guidance through chance readings, like, say, the *I Ching*? Of course not. For any serious theatre-maker of any artistic inclination, KS's attempts to create a System provides a humanist, quasi-scientific if incomplete approach to theatre, to acting, to directing – and to creative life. If Stanislavsky did not write a "manual" or a "grammar" of acting as he hoped to, it's because he couldn't verbalize what he intuitively felt. Senelick has said: "Much of what seems contradictory in KS comes from his trying to reconcile an essentially supernal concept with a scientific or positivist one."¹²

Nonetheless, he did write, or overwrite, substantial books about theatre with human insight and some valuable practical theatre advice. No one has left us so much on the topic of achieving artistic freedom and discipline onstage. No one has tried so thoroughly to grapple with life in rehearsal and performance. No one has championed collective artistry and deep training so ardently. Will reading the major works of Stanislavsky make you a better actor or director? Probably not; at best maybe a little. But you will gain some insight to what you are doing on stage or in rehearsal. Reading his works, you will inevitably experience moments when something meaningful will leap out at you, a sentence or

a paragraph, or possibly a chapter that explains or even inspires you (and might leave someone else cold). There will be pages you will skim or just give up on. Then some passage will unexpectedly snag you, make you stop and think. Yes, Stanislavsky still asks to be wrestled with, especially today when many students and more than a few teachers consider his ideas old and in the way.

From Newton to Einstein

To revivify the System, we need to experience it holistically. This is where the above quotation from the director Dmitry Krymov echoes: If you are looking for a taxonomic concordance of systematic laws about how to act, direct, or teach, Stanislavsky will disappoint you. But if you are eager to explore a unified field theory of creativity, art, and human nature – the very things theatre exists for – Stanislavsky at his best can inspire, provoke, and challenge you.

Isaac Newton, the principal progenitor of modern systems theory, became known for his “laws,” for example, the Third Law of Motion: “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.”¹³ Such scientific laws of the physical world are observable, measurable, reliable, and often mathematically captured in formulae, as Newton did. But Stanislavsky’s restless soul insistently strove for something beyond the cold scientific rationality of Newtonian maxims. Rose Whyman states:

Although Stanislavsky may have subscribed to the view that science would eventually define the laws of nature, at the same time he viewed human nature as having *mysterious hidden depths* (emphasis added) (*AWHE*, p. 61). As these are not accessible directly, he states on many occasions that the conscious psychotechnique of the artist...is the ground for the growth of the subconscious creative processes of our organic nature.¹⁴

‘Mysterious human depths.’ Therein lies Stanislavsky main fixation. Depths that yield sudden intuitions, impulses, affective memories, and communal spirit.

For thirty years Stanislavsky worried his problem daily: how can we access what he called the subconscious by conscious means? Unfortunately, the word he chose to organize his conclusions under – “System” – has led many to believe that there is an efficient system for acting that one can master as an electronics engineer would master computer systems or a plumber HVAC systems. Not the case. Stanislavsky “so-called System” is best seen as a *theory* dedicated to exploring the mysteries of acting. This theory is akin to Einstein’s vain struggle with his unified field theory of the universe, which yielded many valuable ideas but was never consummated.

So, theory, yes; “System,” not so much. While in this book we will continue to use Stanislavsky’s term “System,” it will be helpful for the reader to mind-whisper “Theory” every time you see it.

The Books and the Spirit

As should be clear by now, attempting to decode Stanislavsky's writings requires accepting a certain amount of perplexity. Joseph Roach writes: "Stanislavsky's theories defy tidy summation."¹⁵ And Jean Benedetti, the most recent translator of Stanislavsky's main works says: "You can see what he means but the words get in the way."¹⁶

In the anglophone world we are further bedeviled by two translators writing in two different time periods from two different countries, the US and the UK, therefore employing slightly differing languages. These two, American Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood and British Jean Benedetti, spent much of their lives converting Stanislavsky's elusive Russian words into hopefully intelligible English. Their two translation sets, while more or less sharing the basic structure of Stanislavsky's writings, exhibit some key differences.

Hapgood's volumes, which became the American gold standards for decades, are based on pages that Stanislavsky or others passed on to her. They appeared with wide chronological gaps in publication as *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Building a Character* (1949), and *Creating a Role* (1963). The first two were highly redacted by the American publishing house which deleted a third to half of both books. The second volume, which Stanislavsky had not completed before his death, was based on disordered fragments sent by Stanislavsky's son. The third volume, *Creating a Role*, is a dog's breakfast of essays and incomplete notebook entries that Stanislavsky wrote between 1916 and 1937, these selected and edited by biased Soviet editors. The long hiatuses in publication left much of the US actor market thinking that *An Actor Prepares* was the complete Stanislavsky bible, not knowing that it was (a) highly redacted and (b) lacking its crucial companion volume on the necessity of physical and vocal expressive technique.

Jean Benedetti's unredacted versions were published almost simultaneously by Routledge Press as a package: Stanislavsky's first book, *My Life in Art* (2008), which Hapgood did not translate; then came *An Actor's Work on Himself: A Student's Diary* (2008); followed by *An Actor's Work on a Role* (2009). As Stanislavsky originally intended, Benedetti's doorstep volume *An Actor's Work on Himself* (henceforth *AWH*) contains two parts, "Year One" (*AWH1*) and "Year Two" (*AWH2*). This 600+ page volume generally follows the path of Hapgood's highly condensed pair: *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character* but is much longer. Benedetti's *AWH* tome includes revisions that Stanislavsky made after Hapgood's *An Actor Prepares* appeared; it is as close to a "final" volume as there is – close, but not conclusive, given the absence of a crucial pedagogical event found in the Hapgood edition, to be discussed later.

One can fall deep down a rabbit hole comparing any two translations of anything (try Chekhov plays, for instance); limited space prohibits comprehensive comparison here. But for those who do wish to take a peek down the rabbit hole, and thereby enhance their understanding of the System, I heartily recommend two articles: Bella Merlin's "Where's the spirit gone: The complexities of

translation and the nuances of terminology in *An Actor's Work*¹⁷ and Maria Shevtsova's "*My Life in Art and An Actor's Work* (review)."¹⁸ Both focus on Benedetti's failed translation choices about spirituality and the actor, a conception that is central to Experiencing the System and therefore to Analysis through Action. About Benedetti's translation of *AWH* Shevtsova writes that "it does not quite fully convey the emotional principle embedded in Stanislavski's research."

Thus, too frequently, he uses "mind" for Stanislavski's *dusha* (meaning both "heart" and "soul") as well as for *dukh* ("spirit"). "Mental," then, covers the adjectives *dushevnoe* and *dukhovnoe* from the corresponding two nouns. Benedetti's choices might be tidy, but they suggest that Stanislavski envisaged the actor as more rationally driven and in-the-head in his/her practice than is implied by his continual emphasis on the actor as a constantly developing emotional and spiritual being.¹⁹

Merlin quotes actor/teacher Benjamin Lloyd:

Why has spirituality been excised from the transmission of Stanislavski's work, when so much else which came from him has shaped Western actor training?... There is a tremendous urge in our modern era to remove the mysterious, the spiritual, the inexplicable from the study of acting.²⁰

As Shevtsova reinforces with clarity and wisdom in her illuminating 2020 book *Rediscovering Stanislavsky*, one cannot truly experience the man and therefore his System without incorporating Stanislavsky's profound spirituality, both as a devotee of the Russian Orthodox religion and as a practicing artist. In the Preface she cuts right to her argument:

Much has been written in English about Stanislavsky's System and here is to be found another perspective – that of the worldview which underpins the System's practical purpose and is rooted in Russian Orthodoxy. Stanislavsky's religious outlook shapes the worldview that envelops his search for the organic actor-creator for whose benefit he elaborated the System until his dying day.²¹

Citing Russian scholar Tatiana Bachelis, Senelick states matters succinctly: KS was "a mystic rather than a scientist."²²

Recognizing Stanislavsky's deep spiritual 'worldview,' and his lifelong devotion to a theatre as a spiritual space, a "cathedral" as he often called it, turns us away from Newtonian formulae, dollar-book Freudian psychology, and toward the inner spiritual world of the actor and the audience. When in Hapgood's words Stanislavsky writes "soul," he means *soul*. When he writes "spirit" he means *spirit*. Hapgood got that part right.

The Plan of 1935: Overview

As we have said, Stanislavsky never was able to write a definitive summary of his System. The diagram Figure 1.1²³ is probably the most concise and useful synopsis he left behind, but it did not make it into any of the English-language translations. This detailed specimen, which both Sharon Carnicke and Rose Whyman have previously exhibited, was drawn under Stanislavsky's supervision

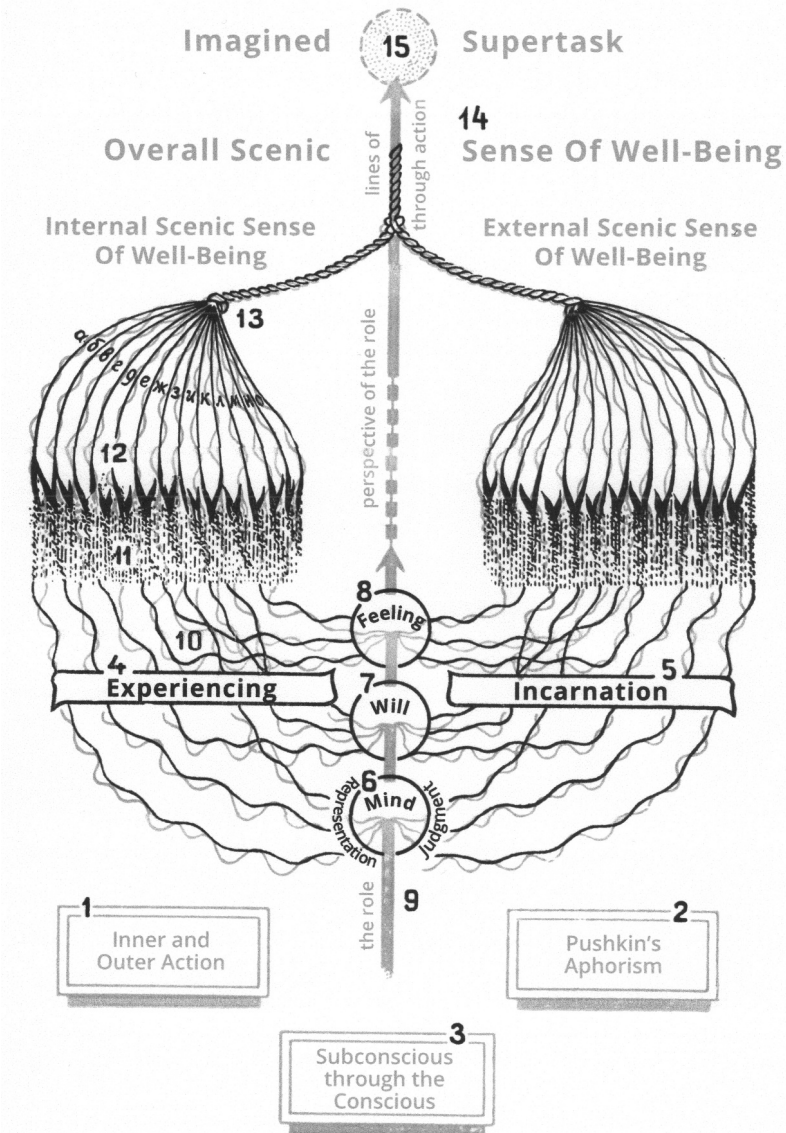


Figure 1.1 The Plan of the System 1935.

during the mid-1930s. Designed to be an all-inclusive visual summary of the first-year actor lessons in *Experiencing*, it was originally intended to be placed at the end of *AWHI*, then at the end of *AWH2* – which Stanislavsky never finished. Consequently, it was not published until 1955 in the first set of Stanislavsky’s collected works.²⁴ Stanislavsky wrote: “The drawing illustrates and summarizes the course of our first-year program...Now you know what the so-called ‘system’ is.”²⁵ (N.B.: As we will cite Figure 1.1 throughout the remainder of this chapter, I strongly advise bookmarking or photocopying the image for easy reference.)

While regularly declaring that he was no scientist, Stanislavsky opportunistically appropriated whatever scientific sources might inspire or support his theories, what Senelick describes as “a lazy Susan of concepts: Ribot, Freud, Dalcroze, Duncan, yoga, *I tutti quanti*.”²⁶ Accordingly his Plan of 1935 was presumably influenced by the exquisitely detailed drawings in Henry Gray’s *Anatomy: Descriptive and Surgical* (1858). This landmark medical text with over 1,200 detailed anatomical illustrations is still in print today as *Gray’s Anatomy* – yes, it’s the punning source for the TV show’s title – and remains a staple of global medical training.

One can readily infer some specific anatomical imagery in the Plan of 1935: the two lobes – labeled *Experiencing* and *Incarnation* – suggest lungs; these are infiltrated by wavy lines emanating from the sacral plexus region, which also suggests the radiating pathways of the central and peripheral nervous systems. The lungs are bifurcated by a “spine” that charts the actor’s ascending journey of creating a role. The spine carries inside it the spinal cord, which transmits nerve signals throughout the body. Simultaneously we can also associate this diagram with a chart of the yogic chakras. (Another System chart, drawn by Robert Lewis, following notes from Stella Adler’s 1934 Paris meetings with Stanislavsky, suggests organ pipes perhaps unconsciously signifying the System’s spirituality better than the scientism of the 1935 rendering.²⁷)

From an initial observation of the Plan of 1935, we can identify two fundamental principles crucial to contemplating the System, which as Knebel says above is inseparable from *Analysis through Action*.

First off, Stanislavsky conceived his System as an organically unified entity, pulsing with energy passing through two primary pathways: psychic (**4. *Experiencing***) and physical (**5. *Incarnation***); these two are regularly compounded as “psychophysical.” Joseph Roach asserts that “at every stage of the development of his system [Stanislavsky] accepted the premise of dual-aspect monism.”²⁸ Roach then quotes from *An Actor Prepares*: “The bond between body and soul is indivisible...In every physical act there is a psychological element and a physical one in every psychological act.”²⁹ This indivisible correspondence between body and soul, soma and psyche, is *the* central premise of the System, and crucial for us to understand during the physicality of *Analysis through Action*.

Second, the Plan of 1935 addresses two interrelated programs: (1) the process of training an actor and (2) the actor's work in creating a role. The Plan illustrates both agendas dynamically: an actor's journey of role creation necessitates activating the System, and vice-versa. The actor's journey to creation of the role is founded from a base of three maxims – particularly maxim 3, the “Subconscious through the Conscious” – and passes through “Experiencing” and “Incarnation” to finally reach (15)...the “Imagined Supertask?” All that psychophysical energy to come up with a proposed Supertask?

A Contradictory Plan

To understand the Plan more fully, we must make an essential digression. German scholar Karin Jansen informs us that the Plan of 1935 is noticeably different from a 1930 System plan sketched by Stanislavsky which she displays in her book.³⁰ Crucially, at the pinnacle of the 1930 plan lies *not* “Imagined Supertask” as in 1935: the apex in 1930 is labeled “The Unconscious.” Jansen denotes “The Unconscious” in the 1930 plan as the “summation of the system, therefore at the top.”³¹

Why would Stanislavsky change something so critical as the very peak, the ultimate goal of the System? Most likely Stanislavsky's replacement of ‘The Unconscious’ at the pinnacle of the Plan of 1935 was bowing to advisers, particularly his Russian colleague, first reader, and editor Liubov Gurevich, who repeatedly urged him to avoid any suspect European psychological terms in the 1930s Soviet era of reflexology per native Russians Sechenov and Pavlov. (Stanislavsky inexplicably retained the word ‘Subconscious’ at the base of The Plan of 1935 [3] but nonetheless stopped short of applying it at the pinnacle.)

As always, Stanislavsky's experience of an actor's creative process had more to do with his own *intuitive* reflexes, not Pavlovian reflexology; his lifelong religious faith necessarily clandestine by this time (he kept a shrine secreted in a cupboard);³² and his own experiences as an actor, than it did with the finer points of Pavlovian psychology or Marxist ideology – he was uneducated and uninterested in both. Going forward with the Plan of 1935, we shall recognize that “The Imagined Supertask” should read “The Subconscious.”

An Actor's Journey: Ascending the Plan of 1935

We begin this section with another fair warning: what follows is an attempt to comprehend the System and how it functions in the process of creating a role, using this visual guide. In real life, role creation by an actor is far more instinctual, haphazard, and disordered, whatever the rehearsal process. While the

Plan of 1935 attempts to track an ideal progression numerically ascending from the base to the Subconscious, it is improbable, nor recommended in this book, that an actor should (or even could) follow this order, albeit the way stations it illustrates will likely be familiar to the working actor and director. That said, let us follow the sequential Plan as KS charted it.

So far we have identified the starting point and the pinnacle: maxim **3**, at the root of the spine – the “Subconscious through the Conscious” – to **15**, the pinnacle which should read “The Subconscious.” Elsewhere, Stanislavsky calls “the subconscious through the conscious” the “basic principle of our school of acting,”³³ and indeed entering into the subconscious by conscious means is the very *raison d’être* and purpose of the System.

To make this latter point, let us for now circumvent the numbered stations ascending along and beside the “spine” and jump to the region above the lobes, the upper target zone of the whole process. Here we find two Scenic Senses of Well-Being, Internal and External. These two states or conditions then merge into the Overall Sense of Well-Being (**14**).

A definition of a state of “well-being” – sometimes translated as “health” – is crucial to our actor’s journey upward. Today, we might think of this as a “flow state,” a state of heightened awareness of self and environment, opening to a virtually supernatural ease at achieving the task at hand. This is a term created by Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who writes that the flow state is:

the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement...In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future.³⁴

The author then quotes a dancer describing this state:

Your mind isn’t wandering, you are not thinking of something else; you are totally involved in what you are doing. Your body feels good. You are not aware of any stiffness. Your body is awake all over. No area where you feel blocked or stiff. Your energy is flowing very smoothly. You feel relaxed, comfortable, and energetic.³⁵

This dancer’s recollection of being in a fully alive and self-confident state echoes Stanislavsky’s Overall Scenic Sense of Well-Being: all the psychophysical elements of the System, psychic (Experiencing) and physical (Incarnation), are in full flow with total harmony as they pursue an Action, in the dancer’s case dancing. But the dancer, like the actor in a flow state, is aware of their sensory self being ‘relaxed, comfortable, and energetic.’