



AN ACTOR PREPARES

CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI



## THE ACTING TRILOGY

*An Actor Prepares* explores the inner preparation an actor must undergo in order to explore a role to the full. In this volume, Sir John Gielgud said, this great director “found time to explain a thousand things that have always troubled actors and fascinated students.”

*Building a Character* discusses the external techniques of acting: the use of the body, movement, diction, singing, expression, and control.

*Creating a Role* describes the preparation that precedes actual performance, with extensive discussions of Gogol’s *The Inspector General* and Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Sir Paul Scofield called *Creating a Role* “immeasurably important” for the actor.

These three volumes belong on any actor’s short shelf of essential books.



CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI

AN ACTOR PREPARES



Translated by  
Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood

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## Note by the Translator

FRIENDS OF STANISLAVSKI have long known that he wished to leave a record of the methods by which the Moscow Art Company was built up, in such a form that it could be of use to actors and producers after his death. The first time he mentioned this wish to me he spoke of the projected work as a grammar of acting. In his own *My Life in Art*, and in similar expressions by persons who studied under him, a wholly different contribution has been made, one much easier, and in his opinion of lesser importance. A manual, a handbook, a working textbook has been his dream, and a most difficult one to realize.

Since the modern theatre came into existence, something like three centuries ago, conventions have accumulated, outlived their usefulness, and become hardened, so that they stand in the way of fresh art and sincere emotion on the stage. For forty years the effort of the Moscow Art Company has been to get rid of what has become artificial, and therefore an impediment, and to prepare the actor to present the externals of life and their inner repercussions with convincing psychological truthfulness.

How was this long and difficult process to be put into a book? Stanislavski felt the need of a freedom of speech, especially about the faults that harass actors, that he would not have if he used the names of his actual players, from Moskvin and Kachalov down to the very beginners, and therefore he decided on a semi-fiction form. That he himself appears under the name of Tortsov can scarcely

*Note by the Translator*

escape the astute reader, nor is it difficult to see that the enthusiastic student who keeps the record of the lessons is the Stanislavski of half a century ago who was feeling his way toward the methods best suited to mirror the modern world.

There is no claim made here to actual invention. The author is most ready to point out that a genius like Salvini or Duse may use without theory the right emotions and expressions that to the less inspired but intelligent student need to be taught. What Stanislavski has undertaken is not to discover a truth but to bring the truth in usable form within the reach of those actors and producers who are fairly well equipped by nature and who are willing to undergo the necessary discipline. The book does include, again and again, statements of general principles of art, but the great task set for himself by the author has been the embodiment of those principles in the simplest working examples, to be laboured over day after day and month after month. He has endeavoured to make the examples so simple, so near to the emotions that can be found as well in one country as in another, that they can be adapted to the needs of actors whether they happen to be born in Russia or Germany, in Italy, France, Poland, or America.

Of the importance of such a working record, in order that the greatest of modern acting companies shall shed its beams as far and as wide as may be, little need be said. What would we not give for detailed notes of how Molière rehearsed his own plays,—rehearsals of which echoes, true or outworn, remain in the Comédie Française? Or could the value be estimated a full picture of Shakespeare in the theatre, drilling his actors in *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet*, or *King Lear*?

E.R.H.



# The First Test



## 1

WE WERE EXCITED as we waited for our first lesson with the Director, Tortsov, today. But he came into our class only to make the unexpected announcement that in order to become better acquainted with us, he wished us to give a performance in which we should act bits from plays chosen by us. His purpose is to see us on the stage against the background of scenery, in make-up, in costume, behind footlights, with all the accessories. Only then, said he, will it be possible to judge our dramatic quality.

At first only a few favoured the proposed test. Among these were a stocky young fellow, Grisha Govorkov, who had already played in some small theatre; a tall, beautiful blonde, called Sonya Veliaminova; and a lively, noisy chap named Vanya Vyuntsov.

Gradually we all became accustomed to the idea of the coming try-out. The shining footlights grew more tempting and the performance soon seemed interesting, useful, even necessary.

In making our choices I, and two friends, Paul Shustov and Leo Pushchin, were at first modest. We thought of vaudeville or light comedy. But all around us we heard great names pronounced—Gogol, Ostrovski, Chekhov, and others. Imperceptibly we found that we had stepped ahead in our ambitions and would play something romantic, in costume, in verse.

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I was tempted by the figure of Mozart; Leo by that of Salieri; Paul thought of Don Carlos. Then we began to discuss Shakespeare, and my own choice fell on Othello. When Paul agreed to play Iago, everything was decided. As we were leaving the theatre we were told that the first rehearsal was fixed for the next day.

When I reached home, late, I took down my copy of *Othello*, settled myself comfortably on the sofa, opened my book and began to read. Hardly had I read two pages when I was seized with a desire to act. In spite of myself, my hands, arms, legs, face, facial muscles and something inside me all began to move. I declaimed the text. Suddenly I discovered a large ivory paper-cutter. I stuck it into my belt like a dagger. My fuzzy bath towel served as a white headcloth. Out of my sheets and blankets I made a kind of shirt and gown. My umbrella was pressed into service as a scimitar, but I had no shield. Here it occurred to me that in the dining-room which adjoined my room there was a big tray. With the shield in my hand I felt myself to be a genuine warrior. Yet my general aspect was modern and civilized, whereas Othello was African in origin and must have something suggestive of primitive life, perhaps a tiger, in him. In order to recall, suggest, and fix the walk of an animal, I began a whole new set of exercises.

Many of these movements I felt to be in a high degree successful. I had worked almost five hours without noticing the passage of time. To me this seemed to show that my inspiration was real.

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I awoke much later than usual, rushed into my clothes and dashed to the theatre. As I went into the rehearsal room, where they were

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waiting for me, I was so embarrassed that instead of apology I made the careless remark, "I seem to be a little late." Rakhmanov, the Assistant Director, looked at me a long time reproachfully, and finally said:

"We have been sitting here waiting, our nerves on edge, angry, and 'it seems I am *a little* late'. We all came here full of enthusiasm for the work waiting to be done, and now, thanks to you, that mood has been destroyed. To arouse a desire to create is difficult; to kill that desire is extremely easy. If I interfere with my own work, it is my own affair, but what right have I to hold up the work of a whole group? The actor, no less than the soldier, must be subject to iron discipline."

For this first offence Rakhmanov said he would limit himself to a reprimand, and not enter it on the written record kept of students, but that I must apologize immediately to all, and make it a rule in the future to appear at rehearsals a quarter of an hour before they begin. Even after my apology Rakhmanov was unwilling to go on, because he said the first rehearsal is an event in an artist's life, and he should retain the best possible impression of it. Today's rehearsal was spoiled by my carelessness; let us hope that tomorrow's will be memorable.

\* \* \*

This evening I intended to go to bed early because I was afraid to work on my role. But my eye fell on a cake of chocolate. I melted it with some butter and obtained a brown mess. It was easy to smear it on to my face, and make myself into a Moor. As I sat in front of my mirror I admired at length the flash of my teeth. I learned how to show them off and how to turn my eyes until the white

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showed. In order to make the most of my make-up I had to put on my costume, and once I was dressed I wanted to act; but I didn't invent anything new; I merely repeated what I had done yesterday, and now it seemed to have lost its point. However, I did think I had gained something in my idea of how Othello ought to look.

### 3

Today was our first rehearsal. I arrived long ahead of time. The Assistant Director suggested that we plan our own scenes and arrange the properties. Fortunately, Paul agreed to everything I proposed, as only the inner aspects of Iago interest him. For me the externals were of greatest importance. They must remind me of my own room. Without this setting I could not get back my inspiration. Yet no matter how I struggled to make myself believe I was in my own room all my efforts did not convince me. They merely interfered with my acting.

Paul already knew the whole of his role by heart, but I had to read my lines out of the book, or else to get by with approximations. To my astonishment the words did not help me. In fact they bothered me, so that I should have preferred to do without them entirely, or to cut the number in half. Not only the words, but also the thoughts, of the poet were foreign to me. Even the action as outlined tended to take away from me that freedom which I had felt in my own room.

Worse than that, I didn't recognize my own voice. Besides, neither the setting nor the plan which I had fixed during my work at home would harmonize with the playing of Paul. For example, how could I introduce, into a comparatively quiet scene, between Othello and

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Iago, those flashes with my teeth, rollings of my eyes, which were to get me into my part? Yet I could not break away from my fixed ideas of how to act the nature I conceived of as savage, nor even from the setting I had prepared. Perhaps the reason was that I had nothing to put in its place. I had read the text of the role by itself, I had played the character by itself, without relating the one to the other. The words interfered with the acting, and the acting with the words.

\* \* \*

When I worked at home today I still went over the old ground without finding anything new. Why do I keep on repeating the same scenes and methods? Why is my acting of yesterday so exactly like today's and tomorrow's? Has my imagination dried up, or have I no reserves of material? Why did my work in the beginning move along so swiftly, and then stop at one spot? As I was thinking things over, some people in the next room gathered for tea. In order not to attract attention to myself, I had to move my activities to a different part of my room, and to speak my lines as softly as possible, so as not to be overheard.

To my surprise, by these little changes, my mood was transformed. I had discovered a secret—not to remain too long at one point, for ever repeating the too familiar.

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At today's rehearsal, from the very start, I began to improvise. Instead of walking about, I sat on a chair, and played without gestures or movement, grimaces, or rolling eyes. What happened? Immediately

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I became confused, I forgot the text and my usual intonations. I stopped. There was nothing for it but to go back to my old method of acting, and even to the old business. I did not control my methods; rather they controlled me.

5

Today's rehearsal brought nothing new. However, I am becoming more accustomed to the place where we work, and to the play. At first my method of portraying the Moor could not be harmonized with the Iago of Paul at all. Today it seemed as though I actually succeeded in fitting our scenes together. At any rate, I felt the discrepancies less sharply.

6

Today our rehearsal was on the big stage. I counted on the effect of its atmosphere, and what happened? Instead of the brilliancy of the footlights, and the bustle of the wings filled with all sorts of scenery, I found myself in a place dimly lighted and deserted. The whole of the great stage lay open and bare. Only near the footlights there were a number of plain cane chairs, which were to outline our set. To the right there was a rack of lights. I had hardly stepped on to the stage when there loomed up in front of me the immense hole of the proscenium arch, and beyond it an endless expanse of dark mist. This was my first impression of the stage from behind.

“Begin!” someone called.

I was supposed to go into Othello's room, outlined by the cane chairs, and to take my place. I sat down in one of them, but it

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turned out to be the wrong chair. I could not even recognize the plan of our set. For a long time I could not fit myself into my surroundings, nor could I concentrate my attention on what was going on around me. I found it difficult even to look at Paul, who was standing right beside me. My glance passed by him and travelled out into the auditorium, or else backstage to the workrooms where people were walking around carrying things, hammering, arguing.

The astonishing thing was that I continued mechanically to speak and act. If it had not been for my long exercises at home, that had beaten into me certain methods, I must have stopped at the very first lines.

### 7

Today we had a second rehearsal on the stage. I arrived early, and decided to prepare myself right on the stage, which today was quite different from yesterday. Work was humming, as properties and scenery were being placed. It would have been useless, amid all this chaos, to try to find the quiet in which I was accustomed to get into my role at home. First of all it was necessary to adjust myself to my new surroundings. I went out to the front of the stage and stared into the awful hole beyond the footlights, trying to become accustomed to it, and to free myself from its pull; but the more I tried not to notice the place the more I thought about it. Just then a workman who was going by me dropped a package of nails. I started to help pick them up. As I did this I had the very pleasant sensation of feeling quite at home on the big stage. But the nails were soon picked up, and again I became oppressed by the size of the place.

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I hurried down into the orchestra. Rehearsals of other scenes began. But I saw nothing. I was too full of excitement, waiting for my turn. There is a good side to this period of waiting. It drives you into such a state that all you can do is to long for your turn to get through with the thing that you are afraid of.

When our turn did come I went up on to the stage, where a sketchy set had been arranged out of bits taken from various productions. Some parts were wrong side up, and all the furniture was ill assorted. Nevertheless, the general appearance of the stage, now that it was lighted, was pleasant, and I felt at home in this room that had been prepared for Othello. By a great stretch of the imagination I could recognize a certain similarity to my own room. But the minute the curtain rose, and the auditorium appeared before me, I again felt myself possessed by its power. At the same time some new unexpected sensations surged inside of me. The set hems in the actor. It shuts off the backstage area. Above him are large dark spaces. At the sides are the wings that outline the room. This semi-isolation is pleasant, but a bad aspect is, that it projects the attention out into the public. Another new point was that my fears led me to feel an obligation to interest the audience. This feeling of obligation interfered with my throwing myself into what I was doing. I began to feel hurried, both in speech and in action. My favourite places flashed by like telegraph poles seen from a train. The slightest hesitation and a catastrophe would have been inevitable.

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As I had to arrange for my make-up and costume for the dress rehearsal, I reached the theatre today even earlier than usual. A good

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dressing-room was given to me, as well as a gorgeous gown, which is really a museum piece, and is used by the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*. I sat down at the dressing table, on which were laid out various wigs, bits of hair, lacquer pots, grease paints, powder, brushes. I started to put on some dark brown colour with a brush, but it hardened so quickly that it left almost no trace. Then I tried a wash with the same result. I put the colour on my finger, and thence on to my face, but had no luck, except with the light blue, the very colour, it seemed to me, that was of no possible use in the makeup of Othello. I put some lacquer on my face, and tried to attach some hair. The lacquer pricked my skin and the hair stuck straight up from my face. I tried one wig after another. All, put on a face without make-up, were too obvious. Next I tried to wash off what little make-up I had on my face, but I had no idea how to do it.

About this time there came into my room a tall, very thin man with glasses, dressed in a long white smock. He leaned over and began to work on my face. First he cleaned off with vaseline all that I had put on, and then began again with fresh colours. When he saw that the colours were hard he dipped a brush into some oil. He also put oil on to my face. On that surface the brush could lay the colours smoothly. Then he covered my whole face with a sooty shade, proper to the complexion of a Moor. I rather missed the darker shade which the chocolate had contributed, because that had caused my eyes and teeth to shine.

When my make-up was finished and my costume put on I looked into the mirror and was delighted with the art of my make-up man, as well as with the whole impression. The angles of my arms and body disappeared in the flowing robes, and the gestures I had worked up went well with the costume. Paul and some others came into

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my dressing-room, and they congratulated me on my appearance. Their generous praise brought back my old confidence. But when I went out on the stage I was disturbed by the changes in the position of the furniture. In one place an armchair was unnaturally moved forward from the wall almost into the middle of the scene, and the table was too near the front. I seemed to be put on exhibition right in the most conspicuous place. Out of excitement I walked up and down and kept catching my dagger in the folds of my costume, and my knives on the corners of the furniture or scenery. But this did not keep me from an automatic delivery of my lines and an incessant activity on the stage. In spite of everything it seemed as though I should get through to the end of the scene, yet when I came to the culminating moment in my role the thought flashed into my mind: "Now I'll be stuck!" Whereupon I was seized with a panic, and stopped speaking. I do not know what guided me back to an automatic rendering of my part; but once more it saved me. I had only one thought in my mind, to finish as quickly as possible, to take off my make-up, and to get out of the theatre.

And here I am at home alone, where I am most unhappy. Fortunately Leo came around to see me. He had seen me out in the audience, and wanted to know what I thought of his performance, but I could not tell him because although I had watched his bit I did not notice anything, because of my own excitement in waiting for my turn.

He spoke familiarly about the play and the role of Othello. He was especially interesting in his explanation of the sorrow, the shock, the amazement of the Moor, that such vice could exist in the lovely form of Desdemona.

After he left, I tried to go over some parts of the role, with his interpretation, and I almost wept, I was so sorry for the Moor.

This is the day of the exhibition performance. I thought I could see ahead exactly what was going to happen. I was filled with a complete indifference until I reached my dressing-room. But once inside, my heart began to pound and I felt almost nauseated.

On the stage what first disturbed me was the extraordinary solemnity, the quiet and order that reigned there. When I stepped away from the darkness of the wings to the full illumination of the footlights, headlights and spotlights, I felt blinded. The brightness was so intense that it seemed to form a curtain of light between me and the auditorium. I felt protected from the public, and for a moment I breathed freely, but soon my eyes became accustomed to the light, I could see into the darkness, and the fear and attraction of the public seemed stronger than ever. I was ready to turn myself inside out, to give them everything I had; yet inside of me I had never felt so empty. The effort to squeeze out more emotion than I had, the powerlessness to do the impossible, filled me with a fear that turned my face and my hands to stone. All my forces were spent on unnatural and fruitless efforts. My throat became constricted, my sounds all seemed to go to a high note. My hands, feet, gestures and speech all became violent, I was ashamed of every word, of every gesture. I blushed, clenched my hands, and pressed myself against the back of the armchair. I was making a failure, and in my helplessness I was suddenly seized with rage. For several minutes I cut loose from everything about me. I flung out the famous line, "Blood, Iago, blood!" I felt in these words all the injury to the soul of a trusting man. Leo's interpretation of Othello suddenly rose in my memory and aroused my emotion. Besides, it almost seemed as though for

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a moment the listeners strained forward, and that through the audience there ran a murmur.

The moment I felt this approval a sort of energy boiled up in me. I cannot remember how I finished the scene, because the footlights and the black hole disappeared from my consciousness, and I was free of all fear. I remember that Paul was at first astonished by the change in me; then he became infected by it, and acted with abandon. The curtain was rung down, out in the hall there was applause, and I was full of faith in myself.

With the airs of a visiting star, with assumed indifference, I went out into the audience during the intermission. I chose a place in the orchestra from which I could easily be seen by the Director and his Assistant and sat down, in the hope that they would call me over and make some pleasant comment. The footlights went up. The curtain was drawn, and instantly one of the students, Maria Maloletkova, flew down a flight of stairs. She fell to the floor, writhing, and cried: "Oh, help me!" in a way that chilled me to the heart. After that, she rose and spoke some lines, but so rapidly that it was impossible to understand them. Then in the middle of a word, as though she had forgotten her part, she stopped, covered her face with her hands, and dashed off into the wings. After a little the curtain came down, but in my ears I still heard that cry. An entrance, one word, and the feeling goes across. The Director, it seemed to me, was electrified; but had I not done the same thing with that one phrase, "Blood, Iago, blood!" when the whole audience was in my power?

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# When Acting Is an Art



TODAY WE WERE called together to hear the Director's criticism of our performance. He said:

"Above all look for what is fine in art and try to understand it. Therefore, we shall begin by discussing the constructive elements of the test. There are only two moments worth noting; the first, when Maria threw herself down the staircase with the despairing cry of 'Oh, help me!' and the second, more extended in time, when Kostya Nazvanov said 'Blood, Iago, blood!' In both instances, you who were playing, and we who were watching, gave ourselves up completely to what was happening on the stage. Such successful moments, by themselves, we can recognize as belonging to the art of living a part."

"And what is this art?" I asked.

"You experienced it yourself. Suppose you state what you felt."

"I neither know nor remember," said I, embarrassed by Tortsov's praise.

"What! You do not remember your own inner excitement? You do not remember that your hands, your eyes and your whole body tried to throw themselves forward to grasp something; you do not remember how you bit your lips and barely restrained your tears?"

"Now that you tell me about what happened, I seem to remember my actions," I confessed.

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“But without me you could not have understood the ways in which your feelings found expression?”

“No, I admit I couldn’t.”

“You were acting with your subconscious, intuitively?” he concluded.

“Perhaps. I do not know. But is that good or bad?”

“Very good, if your intuition carries you along the right path, and very bad if it makes a mistake,” explained Tortsov. “During the exhibition performance it did not mislead you, and what you gave us in those few successful moments was excellent.”

“Is that really true?” I asked.

“Yes, because the very best that can happen is to have the actor completely carried away by the play. Then regardless of his own will he lives the part, not noticing *how* he feels, not thinking about *what* he does, and it all moves of its own accord, subconsciously and intuitively. Salvini said: ‘The great actor should be full of feeling, and especially he should feel the thing he is portraying. He must feel an emotion not only once or twice while he is studying his part, but to a greater or lesser degree every time he plays it, no matter whether it is the first or the thousandth time.’ Unfortunately this is not within our control. Our subconscious is inaccessible to our consciousness. We cannot enter into that realm. If for any reason we do penetrate into it, then the subconscious becomes conscious and dies.

“The result is a predicament; we are supposed to create under inspiration; only our subconscious gives us inspiration; yet we apparently can use this subconscious only through our consciousness, which kills it.

“Fortunately there is a way out. We find the solution in an oblique instead of a direct approach. In the soul of a human being there are

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certain elements which are subject to consciousness and will. These accessible parts are capable in turn of acting on psychic processes that are involuntary.

“To be sure, this calls for extremely complicated creative work. It is carried on in part under the control of our consciousness, but a much more significant proportion is subconscious and involuntary.

“To rouse your subconscious to creative work there is a special technique. We must leave all that is in the fullest sense subconscious to nature, and address ourselves to what is within our reach. When the subconscious, when intuition, enters into our work we must know how not to interfere.

“One cannot always create subconsciously and with inspiration. No such genius exists in the world. Therefore our art teaches us first of all to create consciously and rightly, because that will best prepare the way for the blossoming of the subconscious, which is inspiration. The more you have of conscious creative moments in your role the more chance you will have of a flow of inspiration.

“‘You may play well or you may play badly; the important thing is that you should play truly,’ wrote Shchepkin to his pupil Shumski.

“To play truly means to be right, logical, coherent, to think, strive, feel and act in unison with your role.

“If you take all these internal processes, and adapt them to the spiritual and physical life of the person you are representing, we call that living the part. This is of supreme significance in creative work. Aside from the fact that it opens up avenues for inspiration, living the part helps the artist to carry out one of his main objectives. His job is not to present merely the external life of his character. He must fit his own human qualities to the life of this other person, and pour into it all of his own soul. The fundamental aim of our art is the creation of this inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in an artistic form.

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“That is why we begin by thinking about the inner side of a role, and how to create its spiritual life through the help of the internal process of living the part. You must live it by actually experiencing feelings that are analogous to it, each and every time you repeat the process of creating it.”

“Why is the subconscious so dependent on the conscious?” said I.

“It seems entirely normal to me,” was the reply. “The use of steam, electricity, wind, water and other involuntary forces in nature is dependent on the intelligence of an engineer. Our subconscious power cannot function without its own engineer—our conscious technique. It is only when an actor feels that his inner and outer life on the stage is flowing naturally and normally, in the circumstances that surround him, that the deeper sources of his subconscious gently open, and from them come feelings we cannot always analyse. For a shorter or longer space of time they take possession of us whenever some inner instinct bids them. Since we do not understand this governing power, and cannot study it, we actors call it simply nature.

“But if you break the laws of normal organic life, and cease to function rightly, then this highly sensitive subconscious becomes alarmed, and withdraws. To avoid this, plan your role consciously at first, then play it truthfully. At this point realism and even naturalism in the inner preparation of a part is essential, because it causes your subconscious to work and induces outbursts of inspiration.”

“From what you have said I gather that to study our art we must assimilate a psychological technique of living a part, and that this will help us to accomplish our main object, which is to create the life of a human spirit,” Paul Shustov said.

“That is correct but not complete,” said Tortsov. “Our aim is not only to create the life of a human spirit, but also to ‘express it in a

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beautiful, artistic form.’ An actor is under the obligation to live his part inwardly, and then to give to his experience an external embodiment. I ask you to note especially that the dependence of the body on the soul is particularly important in our school of art. *In order to express a most delicate and largely subconscious life it is necessary to have control of an unusually responsive, excellently prepared vocal and physical apparatus.* This apparatus must be ready instantly and exactly to reproduce most delicate and all but intangible feelings with great sensitiveness and directness. *That is why an actor of our type is obliged to work so much more than others,* both on his inner equipment, which creates the life of the part, and also on his outer physical apparatus, which should reproduce the results of the creative work of his emotions with precision.

“Even the externalizing of a role is greatly influenced by the subconscious. In fact no artificial, theatrical technique can even compare with the marvels that nature brings forth.

“I have pointed out to you today, in general outlines, what we consider essential. Our experience has led to a firm belief that only our kind of art, soaked as it is in the living experiences of human beings, can artistically reproduce the impalpable shadings and depths of life. Only such art can completely absorb the spectator and make both understand and also inwardly experience the happenings on the stage, enriching his inner life, and leaving impressions which will not fade with time.

“Moreover, and this is of primary importance, *the organic bases of the laws of nature on which our art is founded will protect you in the future from going down the wrong path.* Who knows under what directors, or in what theatres, you will work? Not everywhere, not with everyone, will you find creative work based on nature. In the vast majority of theatres the actors and producers are constantly

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violating nature in the most shameless manner. But if you are sure of the limits of true art, and of the organic laws of nature, you will not go astray, you will be able to understand your mistakes and correct them. That is why a study of the foundations of our art is the beginning of the work of every student actor.”

“Yes, yes,” I exclaimed, “I am so happy that I was able to take a step, if only a small one, in that direction.”

“Not so fast,” said Tortsov, “otherwise you will suffer the bitterest disillusion. Do not mix up living your part with what you showed us on the stage.”

“Why, what did I show?”

“I have told you that in all that big scene from *Othello* there were only a few minutes in which you succeeded in living the part. I used them to illustrate to you, and to the other students, the foundations of our type of art. However, if we speak of the whole scene between Othello and Iago, we certainly cannot call it our type of art.”

“What is it, then?”

“That is what we call forced acting,” defined the Director.

“And what, really, is that?” said I, puzzled.

“When one acts as you did,” he explained, “there are individual moments when you suddenly and unexpectedly rise to great artistic heights and thrill your audience. In such moments you are creating according to your inspiration, improvising, as it were; but would you feel yourself capable enough, or strong enough spiritually or physically, to play the five great acts of *Othello* with the same lift with which you accidentally played part of that one short scene?”

“I do not know,” I said, conscientiously.

“I know, unquestionably, that such an undertaking would be far beyond the strength not only of a genius with an extraordinary temperament, but even of a very Hercules,” answered Tortsov. “For

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our purposes you must have, in addition to the help of nature, a well worked-out psychological technique, an enormous talent, and great physical and nervous reserves. You have not all these things, any more than do the personality actors who do not admit technique. They, as you did, rely entirely on inspiration. If this inspiration does not turn up then neither you nor they have anything with which to fill in the blank spaces. You have long stretches of nervous let-down in playing your part, complete artistic impotence, and a naïve amateurish sort of acting. At such times your playing is lifeless, stilted. Consequently high moments alternate with overacting.”

## 2

Today we heard some more from Tortsov about our acting. When he came to the classroom he turned to Paul and said to him:

“You too gave us some interesting moments, but they were rather typical of the ‘art of representation’.

“Now since you successfully demonstrated this other way of acting, Paul, why not recall for us how you created the role of Iago?” suggested the Director.

“I went right at the role for its inner content, and studied that for a long time,” said Paul. “At home it seemed to me that I really did live the part, and at some of the rehearsals there were certain places in the role that I seemed to feel. Therefore I do not know what the art of ‘representation’ has to do with it.”

“In it the actor also lives his part,” said Tortsov. “This partial identity with our method is what makes it possible to consider this other type also true art.

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“Yet his objective is different. He lives his part as a preparation for perfecting an external form. Once that is determined to his satisfaction he reproduces that form through the aid of mechanically trained muscles. Therefore, in this other school, living your role is not the chief moment of creation as it is with us, but one of the preparatory stages for further artistic work.”

“But Paul did use his own feelings at the exhibition performance!” I maintained.

Someone else agreed with me, and insisted that in Paul’s acting, just as in mine, there had been a few scattered moments of truly living the part, mixed with a lot of incorrect acting.

“No,” insisted Tortsov, “*in our art you must live the part every moment that you are playing it, and every time*. Each time it is recreated it must be lived afresh and incarnated afresh. This describes the few successful moments in Kostya’s acting. But I did not notice freshness in improvisation, or in feeling his part, in Paul’s playing. On the contrary, I was astonished in a number of places by the accuracy and artistic finish of a form and method of acting which is permanently fixed, and which is produced with a certain inner coldness. However, I did feel in those moments that the original, of which this was only the artificial copy, *had been* good and true. This echo of a former process of living the part made his acting, in certain moments, a true example of the art of representation.”

“How could I have got hold of the art of mere reproduction?” Paul could not understand.

“Let us find out by your telling us more about how you prepared your Iago,” suggested the Director.

“To be sure that my feelings were externally reflected I used a mirror.”

“That is dangerous,” remarked Tortsov. “*You must be very careful*

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*in the use of a mirror. It teaches an actor to watch the outside rather than the inside of his soul, both in himself and in his part."*

"Nevertheless, it did help me to see how my exterior reflected my sensations," Paul insisted.

"Your own sensations, or the sensations prepared for your part?"

"My own, but applicable to Iago," explained Paul.

"Consequently, while you were working with the mirror, what interested you was not so much your exterior, your general appearance, your gestures, but principally the way in which you externalized your inner sensations," probed Tortsov.

"Exactly!" exclaimed Paul.

"That is also typical," remarked the Director.

"I remember how pleased I was when I saw the correct reflection of what I felt," Paul continued to reminisce.

"You mean that you fixed these methods of expressing your feelings in a permanent form?" Tortsov asked.

"They became fixed by themselves through frequent repetition."

"Then in the end you worked out a definite external form for the interpretation of certain successful parts in your role, and you were able to achieve their external expression through technique?" asked Tortsov with interest.

"Evidently yes," admitted Paul.

"And you made use of this form each time that you repeated the role?" examined the Director.

"Evidently I did."

"Now tell me this: did this established form come to you each time through an inner process, or after it was once born did you repeat it mechanically, without the participation of any emotions?"

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“It seemed to me that I lived it each time,” declared Paul.

“No, that was not the impression that came to the spectators,” said Tortsov. “Actors of the school we are discussing do what you did. At first they feel the part, but when once they have done so they do not go on feeling it anew, they merely remember and repeat the external movements, intonations, and expressions they worked on at first, making this repetition without emotion. Often they are extremely skilful in technique, and are able to get through a part with technique only, and no expenditure of nervous force. In fact, they often think it unwise to feel, after they have once decided on the pattern to follow. They think they are surer to give the right performance if they merely recall how they did it when they first got it right. This is applicable in some degree to the places we picked out in your playing of Iago. Try to remember what happened as you went on with your work.”

Paul said that he was not satisfied with his work in other parts of the role, or with the appearance of Iago in his mirror, and he finally tried to copy an acquaintance whose appearance seemed to suggest a good example of wickedness and cunning.

“So you thought you could adapt him to your own uses?” Tortsov queried.

“Yes,” Paul confessed.

“Well, then, what were you going to do with your own qualities?”

“To tell the truth, I was simply going to take on the external mannerisms of my acquaintance,” admitted Paul frankly.

“That was a great mistake,” Tortsov replied. “At that point you went over to sheer imitation, which has nothing to do with creativeness.”

“What should I do?” asked Paul.

“You should first of all assimilate the model. This is complicated.

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You study it from the point of view of the epoch, the time, the country, condition of life, background, literature, psychology, the soul, way of living, social position, and external appearance; moreover, you study character, such as custom, manner, movements, voice, speech, intonations. All this work on your material will help you to permeate it with your own feelings. Without all this you will have no art.

“When, from this material, a living image of the role emerges, the artist of the school of representation transfers it to himself. This work is concretely described by one of the best representatives of this school, the famous French actor, Coquelin the elder. . . . “The actor creates his model in his imagination, and then, just as does the painter, he takes every feature of it and transfers it, not on to canvas, but on to himself.” . . . He sees Tartuffe’s costume and puts it on himself; he notices his gait and imitates it; he sees his physiognomy and adapts it to himself; he adapts his own face to it. He speaks with the same voice that he has heard Tartuffe use; he must make this person he has put together move, walk, gesticulate, listen and think like Tartuffe, in other words, hand over his soul to him. The portrait ready, it needs only to be framed; that is, put on the stage, and then the public will say either, ‘That is Tartuffe,’ or, ‘The actor has not done a good job.’ . . .”

“But all that is frightfully difficult and complicated,” said I with feeling.

“Yes, Coquelin himself admits it. He says: ‘The actor does not live, he plays. He remains cold toward the object of his acting but his art must be perfection.’ . . . And to be sure,” added Tortsov, “the art of representation demands perfection if it is to remain an art.

“The confident answer by the school of representation is that ‘art is not real life, not is it even its reflection. Art is in itself a creator, it creates

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its own life, beautiful in its abstraction, beyond the limits of time, and space.’ Of course we cannot agree to such a presumptuous defiance of that unique, perfect and unattainable artist, our creative nature.

“Artists of the Coquelin school reason this way: The theatre is a convention, and the stage is too poor in resources to create the illusion of real life; therefore the theatre should not avoid conventions. . . . This type of art is less profound than beautiful, it is more immediately effective than truly powerful, in it the form is more interesting than its content. It acts more on your sense of sound and sight than on your soul. Consequently it is more likely to delight than to move you.

“You can receive great impressions through this art. But they will neither warm your soul nor penetrate deeply into it. Their effect is sharp but not lasting. Your astonishment rather than your faith is aroused. Only what can be accomplished through surprising theatrical beauty, or picturesque pathos, lies within the bounds of this art. But delicate and deep human feelings are not subject to such technique. They call for natural emotions *at the very moment* in which they appear before you in the flesh. *They call for the direct co-operation of nature itself.* Nevertheless, ‘representing’ the part, since it follows our process in part, must be acknowledged to be creative art.”

### 3

At our lesson today, Grisha Govorkov said that he always feels very deeply what he does on the stage.

To this Tortsov replied:

“Everyone at every minute of his life must feel something. Only the dead have no sensations. It is important to know *what* you are feeling

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on the stage, because it often happens that even the most experienced actors work out at home and carry on to the stage something which is neither important nor essential for their parts. This happened to all of you. Some of the students showed off their voices, effective intonations, techniques of acting; others made the spectators laugh by their lively activity, ballet jumps, desperate over-acting; and preened themselves with beautiful gestures and poses; in short, what they brought to the stage was not what was needed for the roles they were portraying.

“As for you, Govorkov, you did not approach your role from its inner content, you neither lived it nor represented it, but did something entirely different.”

“What was it?” Grisha hastened to ask.

“Mechanical acting. To be sure, not bad of its kind, having rather elaborately worked out methods of presenting the role with conventional illustrations.”

I shall omit the long discussion raised by Grisha, and jump directly to the explanation by Tortsov of the boundaries which divide true art from mechanical acting.

“There can be no true art without living. It begins where feeling comes into its own.”

“And mechanical acting?” asked Grisha.

“That begins where creative art ends. In mechanical acting there is no call for a living process, and it appears only accidentally.

“You will understand this better when you come to recognize the origins and methods of mechanical acting, which we characterize as ‘rubber stamps.’ To reproduce feelings you must be able to identify them out of your own experience. But as mechanical actors do not experience feelings they cannot reproduce their external results.

“With the aid of his face, mimicry, voice and gestures, the mechanical actor offers the public nothing but the dead mask of non-

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existent feeling. For this there has been worked out a large assortment of picturesque effects which pretend to portray all sorts of feelings through external means.

“Some of these established clichés have become traditional, and are passed down from generation to generation; as for instance spreading your hand over your heart to express love, or opening your mouth wide to give the idea of death. Others are taken ready-made, from talented contemporaries (such as rubbing the brow with the back of the hand, as Vera Komissarzhevskaya used to do in moments of tragedy). Still others are invented by actors for themselves.

“There are special ways of reciting a role, methods of diction and speech. (For instance, exaggeratedly high or low tones at critical moments in the role, done with specifically theatrical ‘tremolo,’ or with special declamatory vocal embellishments.) There are also methods of physical movement (mechanical actors do not walk, they ‘progress’ on the stage), for gestures and action, for plastic motion. There are methods for expressing all human feelings and passions (showing your teeth and rolling the whites of your eyes when you are jealous, or covering up the eyes and face with the hands instead of weeping; tearing your hair when in despair). There are ways of imitating all kinds of types of people, various classes in society (peasants spit on the floor, wipe their noses with the skirts of their coats, military men click their spurs, aristocrats play with their lorgnettes). Certain others characterize epochs (operatic gestures for the Middle Ages, mincing steps for the eighteenth century). These ready-made mechanical methods are easily acquired through constant exercise, so that they become second nature.

“Time and constant habit make even deformed and senseless