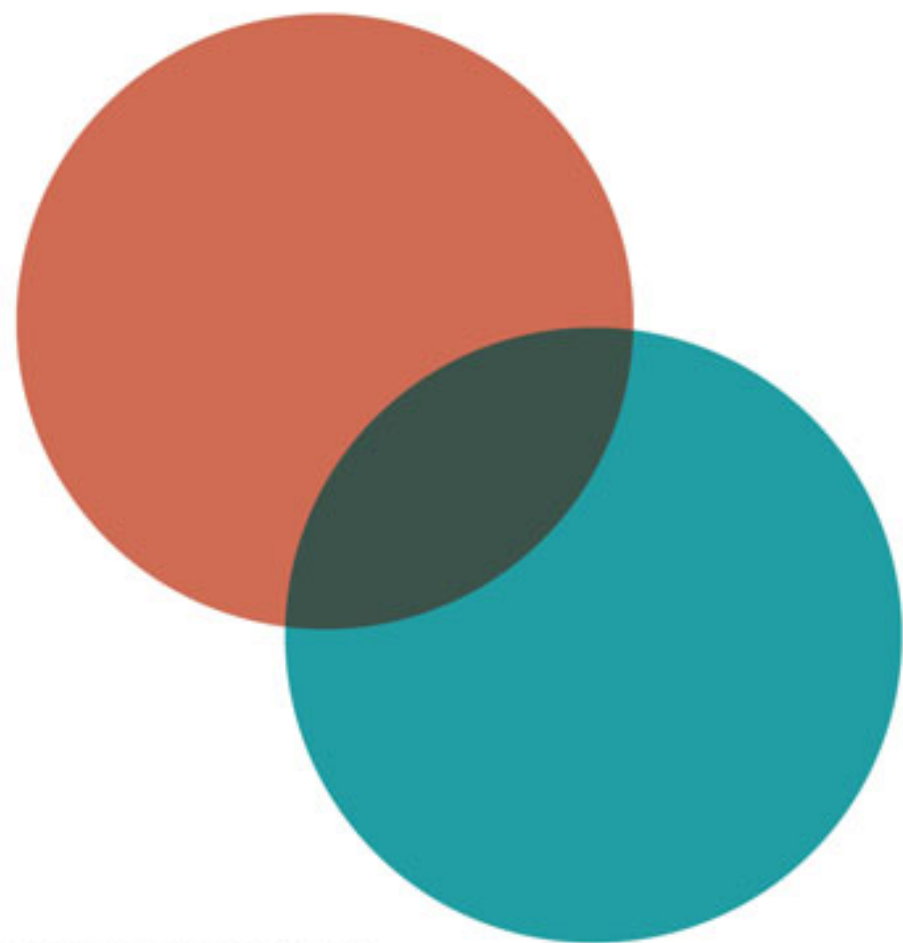


A Director's Guide to
**Stanislavsky's
Active Analysis**

Including the Formative Essay
on **Active Analysis** by Maria Knebel



James Thomas

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The Method of Active Analysis is in my opinion the most perfect method of work with the actor, the crowning achievement of Stanislavsky's lifelong search in the sphere of methodology.

– GEORGII TOVSTONOGOV, *THE PROFESSION OF STAGE DIRECTOR*

Contents

Acknowledgements xi

Preface xii

Introduction 1

PART ONE A Director's Work with Active Analysis 7

1 Choosing the Play 9

Plot summary of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 11

2 Director's Plan: General Challenges 15

Director's impression 15

Further thoughts 17

Internal plausibility 18

Further thoughts 21

Clichés 22

Further thoughts 23

Genre 23

Further thoughts 27

3 Director's Plan: Action Analysis 29

Exercise: Reading Stanislavsky unabridged 30

Thinking eventfully 30

Exercise 31

Chain of external events 32

Exercise 34

Seed 34

- Exercise* 35
- Chain of internal events 36
- Exercise* 37
- Theme 37
- Exercise* 38
- Beginning, middle, end 38
- Exercise* 39
- Through-action and counter through-action 40
- Exercise* 41
- 4** An Introductory Conversation with Stanislavsky about Active Analysis 43
- 5** Active Analysis in Rehearsal 49
- First reading of the play with the actors 49
- First episode (1.1.1–20): Introduction to the etude process 50
- Exercise* 55
- Etude possibilities for scenes not in the play* 56
- Second episode (1.1.21–129): The subtext and the feeling of empowerment 57
- Exercise* 59
- Etude possibilities for scenes not in the play* 60
- Third episode (1.1.130–182) : The theme and the director's 'secret plan' 60
- Exercise* 63
- Etude possibilities for scenes not in the play* 64
- Fourth episode (1.1.183–231): Operative role of the theme, the personality of the actors, and clusters of psychology 64
- Exercise* 67
- Etude possibilities for scenes not in the play* 68
- Fifth episode (1.2): Operative role of the through action, controlled guessing, and gestation time 68
- Exercise* 70
- Etude possibilities for scenes not in the play* 72

6 Further Active Analysis and Testing 73

Psychological obstacles 73

Exercise 76

Etude possibilities for scenes not in the play 76

Blocking 76

Physical characterization 77

7 Conclusion: Rehearsal Realities 79**PART TWO Active Analysis of the Play and the Role** 83

Preface 85

1 General Principles of Active Analysis 87

Role of the director 89

Unity of mental and physical life 91

The position of the author's text 93

Etudes 94

Mental analysis 97

Super-objective 98

Action 99

Events 101

Evaluation of facts and events 103

2 Details are Important 107

Further active analysis and testing 107

Transition from mental analysis to etudes 108

Proceeding by fragments 108

Approximating the production values 111

Post-etude analysis 112

Managing mistakes in etudes 116

Moving to the next fragment 117

3 Main Advantages of Active Analysis 119

- Responsibility of the actor 119
- The creativity of the actor 120
- 'Me in the given circumstances' 121
- Character 123
- The author's special language 125
- The second plan 128
- Internal monologue 129
- Internal vision 129
- Characterization 130
- Tempo-rhythm 131
- Rehearsal productivity 132
- Adaptations 133
- Style and genre 137
- External form 138

4 Beyond Etudes 141

- Transition from etudes to rehearsal with the author's text 141
- Verification of the author's text 143
- Production values and staging 144

5 Active Analysis Compared to the Method of Physical Actions 147**6 Conclusion 151**

Notes 155

Bibliography 163

Index 167

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Finally yet importantly, I am indebted to Dmitry Krymov for permission to draw from the writings of his father, the legendary Russian director Anatoly Efros.

Preface

Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938) is the most influential and least understood, the most cited and, probably for that reason, one of the least read figures in the panoply of great theatre artists. His ideas have transformed acting and directing throughout much of the world and have contributed to the psychological depth and continuing vitality of the modern theatre as a whole. His ideas are also blamed for scores of the modern theatre's excesses and eccentricities that have arisen since his time. Moreover, since there has been a wide range of writings about Stanislavsky from many different perspectives, he has consequently been appropriated by many people, including entire academic and performance disciplines, schools of theatre, and aesthetic agendas – all to serve their own purposes. Nevertheless, Stanislavsky remains for the most part a respectable ancestor, but one whom too few actors, directors, or designers still read.

With such a fragmented and sometimes self-contradictory heritage, where can we find an account of Stanislavsky that we can trust, that sketches his ideas and traces their development, with proper reckoning of his time, place, and professional associations? A worthwhile place to start would be the writings by and about his work that have emerged since 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent opening of the Moscow Art Theatre archives to researchers from the West. These post-Soviet writings in their totality represent the most creditable English-language discussions of the full range of Stanislavsky's ideas, balancing the demands of scholars for precision and all the scholarly apparatus with the demands for an account that serves the practical needs of the stage. Chief among these are the new translations of Stanislavsky's major works by Jean Benedetti, in addition to the writings of Sharon Carnicke, Sergei Tcherkasski, Robert Leach, David Chambers, Bella Merlin and Jonathan Pitches. Important as well are the books of the legendary Russian director Anatoly Efros (1925–1987), whose productions and writings form a crucial link between Stanislavsky's ideas and contemporary practice.¹

Some of the most important information that has emerged since 1991 concerns Stanislavsky's final work, the Method of Active Analysis, or as it was misnamed at first, the Method of Physical Actions.² He devoted his last years to its development, and it comprises the summary of his life's work. The translations and writings noted above provide excellent explanations of this innovative practice. With the exception of Efros's books, however, the target readers tend to be actors and theatre scholars, not necessarily directors or directing teachers as such. Yet, in my view, it is of the greatest importance that directors should understand the value of this late movement in Stanislavsky's thinking – a movement beyond the actor's work on him/herself and towards a new type of rehearsal process, with associated changes in the role of the director. The more a director knows about these questions, the more he/she will be ready to offer the deepest and most sensitive support to actors and designers. This book is intended to fill that gap through a sustained treatment of Active Analysis *from a director's point of view*.

Much of the systematic writing about directing has tended to deal with the 'objective' tradition (the text of the play dominates the style and practice) developed by the Moscow Art Theatre and probably the most widely in practice today. Additionally, directors in the 'virtuoso' tradition (the distinctive style and practice dominates the text) of Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook have made substantial contributions of their own.³ Much has also been written by them and about their work, and as a result, their characteristic approaches have become available to the wider theatre community as well. Active Analysis accommodates itself to all sorts of directorial viewpoints. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the attention given to this method does not imply that other approaches are less creative, less effective, or less valid. I have simply agreed to set them aside for the time being in favour of explaining Active Analysis. No single approach to play directing and rehearsal can ever be considered the best, of course, but I hope to convince readers that a large number of playable dramatic values can be discovered using this approach.

Regarding the arrangement rather than the subject, this book is intended to accommodate different reading, learning and teaching strategies. It is purposely organized deductively, that is, from the

application of Active Analysis in the first part to its theoretical basis in the second part. First, by the *how* of Active Analysis and *how* its application can lead to fresh contemporary outcomes for a well-known play, and only after that, by explaining the *what*, the theoretical principles upon which Active Analysis is based. The objective is to avoid taxing the patience of readers with too much abstract thinking at the outset. On the other hand, there is no compelling reason to follow this arrangement. Some readers may choose to read the theory before the practice; others may reference the headings to mix and interweave content from both parts; and still others may decide to use the book as a supplement for other approaches to directing. Nevertheless, a great deal can be gained, I think, by dealing with the book in its present configuration.

Introduction

The first part of this book is based on my experience with Active Analysis on stage and in the studio for more than twenty years, on ideas drawn from nearly two decades of classes and discussions with master teachers at the Moscow Art Theatre School, and from Russian stage performances too numerous to mention. Most of all, the first part has been influenced by the work of the Russian director Anatoly Efros (1925–1987). Although I never had the good fortune to meet Efros, I mainly acquired my knowledge and understanding of Active Analysis through translating his books, talking with his students and followers, and from my own practical work based on these encounters.¹ This is not to say the new translations of Stanislavsky and appraisals of his final work have been any less valuable for me. In important ways, they clarified and enhanced my understanding of ideas I acquired initially from Efros. That being said, none of the errors in Part 1 should be attributed to Efros, although much of what is sound and helpful can be traced to his influence.

My first effort at explaining Active Analysis focused on its intellectual features. I collected them under the label of Action Analysis and included them in my book on play analysis.² Although I also included a few general remarks in there about the practice of Active Analysis, I avoided talking about its applied features because the scope of that book was intended to be exclusively analytical. A few features of Action Analysis are included in Part 1 here, but in this book I attempt to organize ideas and practices that have been saved up for years in my directing and teaching. Therefore, Part 1 is more like a directorial case study in the form of a textbook, but also containing notes and a bibliography for scholarly requirements. The

interpretation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* put forward in Part 1 was developed in my Active Analysis workshops, and how those experiences worked themselves out is considered here. The first part of the book is intended mainly to serve as an illustration, however, rather than a proof. In other words, Active Analysis as an approach to directing should not necessarily be faulted if there are flaws in the interpretation of the play derived from it here. Since Active Analysis is essentially a rehearsal method, a systematic first-hand account of this type, I think, can be especially useful for directors. After all, they are the ones who most need to understand the distinctive mode of thinking that accompanies Active Analysis in the sphere of play production.

The second part of this book addresses Active Analysis in and of itself. What are the precise circumstances, ideas and methods associated with Stanislavsky's ultimate work? Fortunately, besides the important writings of the authors named above, we also have the first-hand account of Maria Knebel (1898–1985), who was one of Stanislavsky's personal students in the final years of his life. Not only that, Knebel had considerable standing of her own in the profession. First, as an actor and director at the Moscow Art Theatre, then as Chief Director of the Central Children's Theatre, where the rebirth of the Russian theatre began after the death of Joseph Stalin. Perhaps most important, Knebel was also Master Teacher of Directing at the State Institute for Theatre Training in Moscow (GITIS, now RATI), during which time she authored influential books on the pedagogy of directing. Anatoly Efros was one her students, and for many Russians then and now his productions epitomized Active Analysis in post-Stanislavsky theatre practice.

In a 1952 article titled 'Vysokaya Prostota' [Superior Simplicity] published in Russia's leading theatre periodical, *Teatr*, Knebel wrote about an important conference that took place earlier that year in Moscow.³ She reported that a group of prominent Russian actors and directors had met formally to talk about the experimental rehearsal method Stanislavsky developed during the last years of his life. Rumors about a puzzling change in Stanislavsky's thinking during his final years had passed around in Russian theatre circles ever since his death in 1938. However, the new method of work remained largely undefined until this historic meeting.

This lack of definition was for reasons both in and outside of Stanislavsky. Ultimately, everything known about Stanislavsky's final work at that time came from his incomplete works, a few paragraphs published here and there by his personal students, isolated oral accounts, and the practical training done at his Opera and Drama Studio.⁴ Furthermore, in the years following Stanislavsky's death, his students went their separate ways, making use of their teacher's principles in keeping with their own requirements.⁵ Knebel felt this situation had unintentionally contributed to an alteration of Stanislavsky's original ideas, some of which, she said, had become seriously distorted in the process of adoption. Another source of confusion was Stanislavsky's way of constantly testing and revising his initial assumptions, a practice that resulted in long intervals between publications of his books.

According to Knebel, within a short time after Stanislavsky's death his followers found themselves divided into three distinct if informal factions. One faction believed that all of Stanislavsky's teachings were summed up in the so-called Method of Physical Actions and its associated ideas and practices. Another favoured the term Method of Active Analysis and a different set of ideas and practices. A third believed that Stanislavsky's importance resulted primarily from his earliest work, notably the well-known emotion memory, through-action, communion (communication), units (pieces) and objectives (tasks). Knebel belonged to the group that favoured Active Analysis. The participants of the conference identified and clarified these differences, but, as Knebel implied, they apparently fell short of harmonizing them. Thus, Stanislavsky's final teachings, the culmination of his life's work, continued to remain in question outside a small group of his personal students.

Knebel set out to change this situation through her writing and teaching. In the *Teatr* article, she briefly introduced Stanislavsky's breakthrough, explaining it as an approach to play analysis and rehearsal based on the natural processes and distinct individualities of the actor's own imagination. Drawing from discussions at the conference, Knebel acknowledged that at first it seemed to her and others that Stanislavsky had completely rejected his former principles. He seemed to be abandoning, for instance, the practice of lengthy concentrated study of the play text during the first period of rehearsal,

a practice that became the intellectual foundation of his work and that of Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Moscow Art Theatre. However, succeeding practice convinced Knebel that the new technique was solidly built on everything Stanislavsky had discovered earlier. Today, though, many directors and actors in the English-speaking theatre are still unclear about Stanislavsky's final work. After all, the Moscow Art Theatre had instilled in its followers an absolute reverence for its own special manner of analysis and rehearsal – extensive text analysis 'at the table', followed by a period of physical embodiment. Experience had proven this approach capable of producing consistently good, at times even brilliant results. In contrast, Stanislavsky himself came to believe the rehearsal process that he and Nemirovich-Danchenko developed had become outdated, even creatively harmful. Regrettably, Stanislavsky was unable to muster the strength necessary to record his late discoveries in writing or attempt to reorient the veteran actors of his own theatre. Thus, he decided to bestow the legacy of his new findings on a carefully selected group of apprentice directors. Maria Knebel was chief among those he personally chose for this purpose.

Stanislavsky's goal, Knebel reminded her readers, had always been to find a way to release the creative individuality of actors, to encourage them to take personal responsibility for their creative work, and to arouse their own psychological and physical resources. She explained that in his new work he was determined to avoid the pitfalls of memorizing a dramatic text by rote and to escape the artificial division between internal and external work. In her article, she only hinted at what Stanislavsky's new method might have involved. She was concerned that a condensed account might be misemployed as a solution to all the actor's creative problems. After all, she said, for those who are only concerned with results, it might seem that this new technique could be mastered with tempting ease. Taken all together, Stanislavsky's system could be considered as something bulky and immense, whereas at first glance Active Analysis appears to be tidy and manageable. It is only necessary to master its comparatively small number of principles and everything else becomes simple and clear. Knebel insisted that such thinking was deeply mistaken. Active Analysis does not remove or abridge anything from Stanislavsky's earlier work, but on the contrary, collects it all together and summarizes it. Not only does Active Analysis

incorporate all of Stanislavsky's previous work but also it provides a methodology for making the most of that work in real-world rehearsal and performance. Without understanding this key fact, it is hard to appreciate the long-term significance of his breakthrough.

In 1959, Knebel set down in writing all she had learned about Stanislavsky's final work in a monograph titled *O dejstvennom analize p'esy i roli* [Active Analysis of the Play and the Role].⁶ Not surprisingly, her article is enormously instructive; it is also rather verbose, containing numerous digressions about Russian drama and Soviet-Russian theatre with which Western readers may not have had much experience. In 1971, she prepared a revised version and included it with some of her other writings in *O tom, chto mne kazhetsâ osobenno vazhnym* [What is Especially Important to Me].⁷ This version is more concise and less specifically 'Soviet-Russian.' My translation of this version comprises Part 2 of this book.