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STANISLAVSKI
IN REHEARSAL

Vasili Toporkov
translated and introduced
by Jean Benedetti

B L O O M S B U R Y

STANISLAVSKI IN REHEARSAL

by the same author

Stanislavski: An Introduction

Stanislavski and the Actor

Stanislavski: His Life and Art

The Moscow Art Theatre Letters

The Art of the Actor

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Vasili Torporkov

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Introduction

Vasili Toporkov's book, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, is one of the most valuable and accessible books on Stanislavski's personality and working method. It contains, the Conclusion apart, the minimum of theory and jargon, although inevitably certain key terms of the 'system' will be found, since they were in regular use during rehearsal.

Toporkov gives a vivid personal account of an eleven-year period during which he worked with Stanislavski. It is an almost blow-by-blow account of someone learning to come to terms with the 'system'. The authenticity of Toporkov's account is attested by the number of passages which are similar to pages in Stanislavski's own writings.

Toporkov was one of those rare people who were taken into the Moscow Art Theatre from the outside. Most of company were either founder members or graduates from the Moscow Art Theatre School and were familiar with Stanislavski's ideas, in one form or another.

Toporkov was twenty-eight when he joined the Moscow Art Theatre. He had graduated in St Petersburg in 1909 and he gives an illuminating account of the deficiencies of actor training even in the best schools. So it was that for eleven years, from 1927 to 1938, he rethought and relearned his craft.

He provides a multifaceted account of Stanislavski's personality – kind, humorous, demanding, pernickety, angry, ruthless, tyrannical, dedicated, desperate to pass on his legacy despite his illness. There was very little that was personal in Stanislavski's anger. It was only his concern for artistic perfection that made him intolerant. Nonetheless, he inspired intense personal loyalty and affection not least because he did not ask others to do what he had not, often with great difficulty, done. Old and frail as he was, when he had to, he could stand up and do it.

The core of Toporkov's book consists of accounts of the rehearsals for three productions: *The Embezzlers* (1928), *Dead Souls* (1932) and *Tartuffe* (1938). Because of his enormous workload, Stanislavski took a supervisory role in most productions. A director would be assigned to a play, and would rehearse it until

the cast felt it was ready to show to Stanislavski. He would then revise, change and correct until he was happy.

The production of Kataev's *The Embezzlers* was part of Stanislavski's campaign to secure the position of the Moscow Art Theatre in the new Soviet Union. Although it had been defended by Lenin, it was seen by the hard left as a relic of a bygone era. One of the reasons for the European and American tours of 1923 and 1924 had been to remove the Moscow Art Theatre from the battlefield. Now Stanislavski had to demonstrate that it had a proper place in a new society and that the realism he advocated could be relevant to a new Soviet audience. He believed the 'system' was the best way to achieve performances that were both aesthetic and relevant. His determination to develop, apply and teach the 'system' increasingly, therefore, took on a moral and ethical character. He spared nobody, second-best was not good enough. It was into this situation that a largely unsuspecting Toporkov walked. This production was his baptism of fire and he recounts his struggles with great honesty.

There is then a three-year gap. *The Embezzlers* opened in April 1928 and in the autumn of that year Stanislavski suffered a heart attack that put an end to his acting career and altered the entire pattern of his life. Over the next ten years, both by choice and necessity, he turned away from directing to developing and teaching the 'system' and what came to be called the Method of Physical Action. He remained, however, until the mid 1930s very much in control of the artistic policy of the Moscow Art Theatre, defending it on the one hand against the party officials who wanted it to churn out more productions – 'pot-boilers' as he contemptuously called them – and the so-called avant-garde on the other, who reduced the actor to a mere cog in the wheel of a vast theatrical machine. Nowhere is this more clear than in his work on Bulgakov's adaptation of *Dead Souls*.

Sakhnovski was the nominal director for *Dead Souls*. Rehearsals were chaotic and were strung out over two years, mainly because of Stanislavski's illness. The play was not rehearsed in sequence but scenes were shown to Stanislavski as they were ready. The script went through three versions, and by the time Stanislavski had finished little was left of the original production, or the designs. He got rid of what he saw as the 'formalist' trappings of Sakhnovski's staging, with its grandiose sets, and focused on the interplay, the psychology of the characters. In this he was doing

precisely what Gogol had asked for in his notes for the original cast of *The Inspector General*: concentrate first on the way the characters feel and think, what drives them, and then think about their external behaviour and their costume. The production, rethought and redesigned by Stanislavski, received a mixed critical reception, but this was mainly due to the flaws in the script, which seemed little more than a string of small scenes with little dramatic growth. But Bulgakov's third version of the script provided excellent material for actors, which Stanislavski exploited to the full. It was precisely because the performances that Stanislavski drew from his cast were so real and vivid that *Dead Souls* remained in the repertoire well into the 1960s.

By the time Stanislavski came to work on *Tartuffe* he was extremely ill and housebound. He made it clear to the group of actors who came to Leontievski Lane that he was not interested in a finished production, only in applying the Method of Physical Action. He wanted to prove that it could be applied to a major classic play. Toporkov's account shows him using the same methods with seasoned professionals that he and his assistants were using with students at the Opera-Dramatic Studio, which are described in *Stanislavski and the Actor*.

Stanislavski died before work on the play was complete but he had done his essential work, which was to train a group of highly talented actors in the 'system' and the Method of Physical Action. The fact that they were able to implement his principles when working on the rest of the play, and to present a performance that all agreed was astonishing both for its quality and its innovation, vindicated Stanislavski's ideas.

Toporkov's book has a wider historical significance. Written between 1949 and 1950, it was the first description of Stanislavski at work. In his lifetime Stanislavski published only two works in the Soviet Union: *My Life in Art* (1926) and *An Actor's Work on Himself, Part One* (1938). The eight-volume edition of his *Collected Works* did not begin to appear until 1954 and *An Actor's Work on Himself, Part Two*, which had been published in a different version in the United States in 1950 as *Building a Character*, came out only in 1955.

Stanislavski's work was known only to a limited circle and was not universally accepted. There were those who considered the Method of Physical Action, with its emphasis on conflict and

contradictions, as incompatible with the theory of socialist realism, which was precisely based on an absence of conflict. But it was Stalin who decided policy and Stalin who decided that the Moscow Art Theatre, *his* theatre, should become the model for all Soviet theatres and the 'system' the method for training actors and directors. He had destroyed the avant-garde, executed Meyerhold, silenced others. The fiction was that socialist realism, as it had been proclaimed since the 1934 writers' congress, was the direct descendant of Russian realism of the nineteenth century. Thus Stanislavski, who had been perceived as the natural heir to Gogol, Ostrovski, Shchepkin and the Maly Theatre since he was a young man, became a key figure. We can see the beginning of this process in the final paragraphs of Toporkov's book. They may appear a necessary nod in the direction of conformity, but since nothing could be published without the most rigorous censorship, we can assume that Toporkov's words represented the party line.

Finally, Toporkov's book had one unexpected spin-off. In 1955, Brecht, who had been hostile towards Stanislavski at first and then cautious in his endorsement, read a German translation which appeared in 1955. Previously, he had identified the Stanislavski 'system' with the emotionally self-indulgent acting he had encountered in the United States, where everything revolved around the actor's personality. *Stanislavski in Rehearsal* showed him a completely different Stanislavski, someone concerned with action, structure and meaning. He wrote to Toporkov describing the book as the best source he had on Stanislavski's working method. He had, in fact, been testing out aspects of the Method of Physical Action since 1953.

The translation of *Stanislavski in Rehearsal* is intended to complete a set of books which began with *Stanislavski: An Introduction* and continued with *Stanislavski and the Actor*. These three books, it is hoped, will provide a comprehensive overview, both practical and theoretical of the 'system' and the Method of Physical Action.

This translation is by no means literal. This is a book by an actor talking about acting, using the everyday language Russian artists used. I have tried, as far as possible, to use the language that English-speaking actors and directors use among themselves. There are signs, towards the end of the book, that the final pages were written in a hurry, and inadequately edited. Readers will find that sometimes the same ideas are repeated, slightly differently, in

successive paragraphs. I have resisted the temptation to tidy up the material.

There are a small number of technical terms. These are all fully explained in *Stanislavski and the Actor*. One word, however, needs special mention: organic. This was a key word for Stanislavski in his later years. It has, unfortunately, taken on a very particular meaning in recent years. For Stanislavski it had nothing to do with food or drink. He used it in its original sense as relating to the human organism, its natural functioning. Organic is whatever is in accord with natural human processes. Acting is organic when it is based on normal physiological and psychological processes, not on artifice. As Stanislavski put it:

These two techniques are different from each other, in the way that real plants in a nursery differ from artificial flowers made in a factory.

I would like to express my grateful thanks to Dr Victor Borovsky, the eminent theatre historian, who went through the draft translation line by line and made many valuable suggestions based on his profound knowledge of Russian theatre. He also has the advantage of having seen Toporkov act. Any errors, of course, are entirely my own.

Jean Benedetti, 2001

About the Author

I finished drama school in Petersburg in 1909 when I was twenty, full of self-confidence, convinced of my talent, my knowledge, my technical proficiency and boldly set out on the difficult path actors have to tread . . . took one step and faltered.

My naive, childish prattle about the theatre was soon drowned in the confident, loud professionalism of the actors in the company I joined immediately on graduation.¹ Ever since then I have known alternate moments of hope and disappointment. They have often led me to the brink of despair – something any actor who has spent a lifetime in the theatre knows.

There are those for whom the absence of precise knowledge, of a theoretical basis for acting seems quite normal and natural to the theatre, but it is a major cause of these excruciating creative crises.

Stanislavski shed light on many of the obscure aspects of the creative process, and rescued us from wandering aimlessly along unknown byways, showing us safer, truer paths towards the mastery of our art.

I had the good fortune to work and be guided by him first-hand.

When he was training an actor, Stanislavski not only provided him with his craft, but helped him develop spiritually in many ways, showing him how he could serve his art as a member of society. ‘We must love the art in ourselves, not ourselves in art,’ he used to say.

This kind of art, fully supported by the most advanced technique, with a mission to educate the people in the best ideas the modern world has to offer, was always Stanislavski’s ideal.

Stanislavski’s tremendous authority, his comprehensive knowledge of the actor’s creative nature, gave him the right to conduct daring experiments with them. The very high demands he made led, ultimately, to simpler, easier solutions to the problem of physically embodying a character being found.

In honour of a great theatre teacher, conscious of the debt I owe him that can never be repaid, I have decided that the main aim of my life is to make his ideas known.

¹ The theatre, the Guardians of Public Temperance.

2 *About the Author*

Every time I talk to young actors about technique, I feel the enormous interest they have in anything concerned with Stanislavski. This has led me to the idea of writing down the final occasions when I worked with this genius, and of discussing the newly discovered ways of creating a performance and a role, and thus smooth the path for our inquisitive young actors towards an understanding of Stanislavski's method.

The Journey Begins

I have trained as an actor twice in my life: the first time was at the Petersburg Imperial Theatre School, which was attached to the Aleksandrinski Theatre (1906–1909), and the second time when I worked with Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre (1927–1938).

When I look back at my first period of study, and compare it with what I learned from Stanislavski, I am more and more convinced that all the education I received at the Petersburg school did, for all its good points at the time, was to put an official piece of paper in my hand, acknowledging the fact that I had completed my studies. My work with Stanislavski, on the other hand, gave me a real chance to understand the basics of acting.

In this regard, it is of more than a little interest to recall the state which theatre schools were in before Stanislavski created his system. This little detour is not difficult for me since, as I have said, I studied theatre in a ‘pre-reform’ school, when Stanislavski was only just beginning his experiments to discover the theoretical basis of acting, and when his opinions carried very little weight in this field, especially for those of us in Petersburg.

The teacher of undisputed authority at the Imperial Theatre School in Petersburg was Davydov,¹ a famous actor at the Aleksandrinski theatre. He was the white-haired father figure. It was considered very good luck to be one of his pupils. His students adored him and obeyed him without question. Discipline in his classes was exemplary. On many occasions I was present not only as an observer but rehearsed plays with his pupils. At the time that made a great impression on me and, indeed, his classes were of genuine interest.

When he came into the rehearsal room, this venerable artist gathered the young students round him and gave inspiring speeches about the theatre, great Russian actors and the eminent Italian actor Tommaso Salvini whom he valued highly and skilfully imitated. Then he turned to the play that was to be rehearsed, told each actor where his abilities lay and where they

¹ Vladimir Nikolaevich Davydov (1849–1925)

4 *The Journey Begins*

didn't. He talked about the play itself and each character in detail. It was all very persuasive, clear and easy to understand. The students would rush on to the stage and start rehearsing, only to realise that they could not do what had seemed so simple, clear and easy a moment before. Their technique was inadequate. They couldn't achieve even a hundredth of what their beloved teacher had so clearly explained to them, and the more vivid his words, the more helpless and useless they felt. The stage exuded boredom, flatness and despair. The great master either fell asleep during his pupils' monotonous performance of a cheerful comedy, or burst out angrily, lambasting each actor in turn, giving devastating caricatures of their acting. Then, despite his advanced years and fatness, he would run on to the stage, like a young man, and give a brilliant performance of all the parts, then cheerfully go back to his seat to the applause of his flock and happily proclaim: 'Was that me or the devil incarnate?'¹

Basking in his success, he was soon in a good mood and would end the class with funny stories or a demonstration of conjuring tricks at which he was quite remarkable. He recommended his pupils to study the art of conjuring, 'An actor should be able to do everything, act, sing, dance and do tricks'.

This great actor's personal charm, his penetrating, persuasive comments, his demonstration of his own professional skill, his fatherly concern for his pupils, which extended beyond the confines of the school, could not but have an enormous influence on future young actors in the development of their talent. Teachers like Davydov lovingly introduced the style of realistic acting that had been created by Shchepkin² and which flourished in the theatre at that time. It could be seen in the work of a galaxy of great actors both in Moscow and Petersburg, and in theatre academies. Under Davydov's influence his pupils began to look quite different from provincial, self-taught actors.

Other teachers of the period had their own individual qualities, their own skill in training young actors, but they all lacked one thing: a firm theoretical base and a coherent teaching method. What looked systematic at the time was, in comparison with the

¹ One of his favourite expressions.

² Mikhail Semionovich Shchepkin (1788–1863), friend of Pushkin and Gogol, leading actor at the Maly Theatre from 1830 until his death. Stanislavski took him as his model.