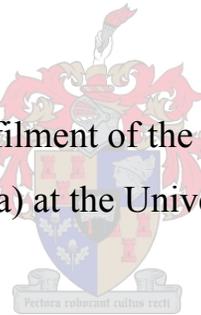


# **Tracing the impact of Stanislavski's System on Strasberg's Method**

By

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**DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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Signature

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Date

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the development of the Stanislavski system and the elements that influenced the growth of his theories and their impact on Strasberg's work. In other words, the thesis has an explicitly *historical* orientation, and is not intended as a training manual for contemporary actors. It describes the many challenges Stanislavski faced in trying to change the conditions actors worked under and the quality of acting in the Russian theatre of his day. It discusses how certain theatre practitioners influenced him and the development of his system, which he saw as more of a helpful guide in moments of difficulty concerning the acting process and process of creation of a character. It further discusses Stanislavski's relationship with Anton Chekhov, along with his learning experiences while working with actors at the Moscow Art Theatre.

The thesis then discusses the impact of Stanislavski's approach on Strasberg's method. This includes tracing how Stanislavski's system travelled to America and how it came to be introduced to Lee Strasberg. It then follows Strasberg's learning experience at the American Laboratory and how he adapted and applied what he learnt there of the Stanislavski system into the Americanized version known as 'The Method' that he used while involved with The Group Theatre from the 1930s and later in The Actors Studio and his private classes from 1949 onwards.

The thesis concludes with commentary on, and critiques of, Stanislavski's system and Strasberg's method from students who studied under them, fellow actors and their fellow theatre practitioners and contemporaries.

## OPSOMMING

Die tesis ondersoek die ontwikkeling van die Stanislavski sisteem en die elemente wat die ontwikkeling van sy teorieë beïnvloed het, asook hoe dit die ontwikkeling van Strasberg se metode beïnvloed het. In ander woorde het die tesis 'n uitdruklike *historiese* oriëntering en is nie bestem as 'n handleiding vir hedendaagse akteurs nie. Dit beskryf die menigte uitdagings wat Stanislavski in die gesig moes staar in sy pogings om die toestand en kwaliteit van die Russiese teater te verbeter. Dit bespreek die invloed wat sekere teaterkundiges op hom gehad het asook op die ontwikkeling van sy sisteem, wat hy meer as 'n hulpmiddel in moeilike oomblikke in die proses van toneelspel en in die kreatiewe proses van karakter ontwikkeling gesien het. Die tesis sluit in die verhouding tussen Stanislavski en Anton Chekhov, asook die groei en ontwikkeling ondervindinge wat Stanislavski by die Moskow Kunste Teater deurgegaan het terwyl hy met die akteurs gewerk het.

Die tesis bespreek dan die impak wat Stanislavski se sisteem op Strasberg se metode gehad het. Dit sluit in hoe Stanislavski se sisteem tot in Amerika gevorder het en hoe die sisteem aan Lee Strasberg bekendgestel is. Dit volg dan Strasberg se opvoedkundige ondervinding by die Amerikaanse Laboratorium Teater en hoe hy, wat hy daar van Stanislavski se sisteem geleer het, aangepas het tot die Amerikaanse weergawe van die sisteem wat bekend gestaan het as 'Die Metode' wat hy gebruik het terwyl by Die Groep Teater van die 1930s asook by die Akteurs Studio en sy privaat klasse wat hy aangebied het vanaf 1949.

Die tesis sluit af met kommentaar en kritiek op Stanislavski se sisteem en Strasberg se metode deur studente wat onder hulle studeer het, akteurs wat saam hulle gewerk het en menigte teaterkundiges en tydgenote.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

When I started with this project I was interested in finding out exactly what the term ‘Method Acting’ means and also interested in the debates around it, particularly with reference to film studies. As the research process developed I found that it led me back to Russian theatre and Constantin Stanislavski’s work. This led me to explore the development of Stanislavski’s ‘system’. I wanted to know how it is that a technique that is so well known and famous in the American film world of today is connected to, and derived from, a system that made its appearance in Russian theatre in the early 1900s. What is the connection between Russian ‘realist’ theatre and American film culture? Even though my initial interest was in film culture, the thesis mainly focuses on the developmental processes in theatre, both of Russian and American theatre. The focus of this thesis is twofold. Firstly, I followed the development of Stanislavski’s ‘system’, and secondly, I wanted to trace how Stanislavski’s elements influenced the way that Strasberg developed his ‘method’. In the present day ‘Method Acting’ is renowned as a technique used mainly in film, but it originated in the theatre world and among theatre practitioners. That is why the focus is more on theatre than film.

When trying to find out how Stanislavski arrived at his perceptions and ideas on acting, I undertook extensive historical research and came to concentrate on the developmental process of his ‘system’. But this turned out not to be such an easy task as the development of his approach was never linear. Stanislavski was inspired by a variety of things – sometimes by mundane everyday life, other times by greatly talented people; sometimes even an everyday moment, or someone whom he met in a restaurant would inspire him or open his eyes to new developments concerning his system. Stanislavski was not a theoretician; all his conclusions and theories came from experimentation and learning pragmatically from his own mistakes. From his childhood until the time before his death he worked constantly on improving actor training and on trying to keep his system relevant to the times.

In the thesis on the development of Stanislavski's 'system' I document some of the more important influences along the way that made an impact on his system. It is not possible to do in-depth chapters on all of the influences because, as stated above, there are just too many. It is true that I only touch on some of the more important influences such as Meyerhold and the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, but I had to make selective decisions to maintain the focus of the thesis. An example of this is that I place more emphasis on the relationship between Stanislavski and Anton Chekhov and the influence that this relationship had on Stanislavski's system, rather than elaborating on the influence of Meyerhold and the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen. The thesis does deal with Russian realism to a certain extent, but the development of Stanislavski's system and Chekhov was of greater importance in my view, seeing that Chekhov and his plays influenced the development of Stanislavski's system in a fundamental way. Chekhov not only had a great influence on Stanislavski, but also the MAT. This will be dealt with in detail in the chapter 2.

My next point is to clarify some terms that will be used frequently throughout the thesis. Stanislavski used terms such as 'truth', 'reality' or 'real', 'nature' and 'organic' frequently. Rayner helpfully indicates how these terms form a unit in the process of acting: "Truth is the goal, reality is the material, and nature supplies the laws" (1985: 341). In the following chapters these words and similar expressions will be used quite frequently, so to eliminate any possibility of confusion I will give definitions of each in the sense that I have used them. This in turn stems from the way Stanislavski used the terms. One word needs special consideration: *organic*. The way that Stanislavski used this word was in relation to the human organism and 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.

(in Benedetti, 2004: xi)

The term *truth* is usually used in the 'sense of truth on stage' and Stanislavski defines this by describing the sense of truth as

the best stimulus to emotion, imagination, creativeness.... At the base of every art is a reaching out for artistic truth. The actor must believe in everything that takes

place on the stage and most of all...in what he himself is doing and one can believe only in the truth.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 126)

The term *real* links with the above quote, what happens on the stage must seem real to the audience. There must be a sincerity of emotions and believability in the actions for it to portray a certain reality to the audience.

Lastly, when Stanislavski referred to the term *nature* he also meant the subconscious of a person. Stanislavski frequently stated: “The greatest artist we know [is] Nature, the creative nature of all artists, [which] is in all the centres and parts of our physical and spiritual make-up, even those of which we are not aware... In the realm of intuition and the subconscious I know nothing, except that these secrets are open to the great artist Nature” (Stanislavski, 1963: 101-102).

As a result of Stanislavski’s hard work and dedication, his ‘system’, made its way to America and there another passionate and dedicated man, Lee Strasberg, was introduced to Stanislavski’s ‘system’. Strasberg learnt the basics of Stanislavski’s system through his education at the American Laboratory Theatre and developed his own methods from this basis. He adapted the principles of Stanislavski’s system, changing the focus on some of the elements. In essence the basic aim that they both wanted to achieve was the same: to improve the standard of theatre performance by helping the actor achieve and portray experiences that they felt are more “truthful” on stage. In the second part of the thesis I document Strasberg’s dedication to developing helpful hints and methods to address actors’ problems concerning the creation process. Strasberg’s work and theories were profoundly influenced by Stanislavski’s principles, but if Strasberg did not fully agree with a point, he reformulated those elements of Stanislavski’s system and adapted Stanislavski’s principles to fit his own methods. From the moment that Strasberg’s ‘method’ became better known and popular within the acting community, he faced criticism on some of his more unconventional approaches, especially concerning his work on emotional memory. It seems that by having to defend his work, his own belief in his methods only grew stronger.

The thesis is structured as follows: **Chapter 2** documents the development of Stanislavski's ideas about actor training. This includes the many challenges he faced while he tried to change the state of Russian theatre and how certain theatre practitioners influenced him, sometimes negatively. This chapter includes a description of the development of the Moscow Art Theatre and Stanislavski's relationship with Anton Chekhov, along with their experiences while they were working together at the Moscow Art Theatre, and the mistakes that, according to Stanislavski, he had made along the way in developing his system. The chapter concludes with an outline of the beginnings of the development of Stanislavski's 'system'.

**Chapter 3** consists of an outline and discussion of the elements of Stanislavski's 'system'. It then traces how Stanislavski's 'system' came to be introduced to the American theatre and specifically to Lee Strasberg.

In **Chapter 4** I follow Strasberg's learning experience of the 'system' at the American Laboratory Theatre and how he applied it during his time with The Group Theatre. This chapter includes an account of the way that Strasberg adapted Stanislavski's 'system' and formed it into the 'Method' that he taught at the Actors Studio.

**Chapter 5** documents some criticisms of Stanislavski's 'system' and of Strasberg's 'Method' and the debates that still surrounds them long after both have passed away. It concludes with discussions of misrepresentations and misunderstandings of the 'system' and the 'Method'.

## Chapter 2: The Origin of Stanislavski's System

### 2.1. Russian theatre before the Moscow Arts Theatre

Constantine Stanislavski was a successful Russian actor, teacher, director, author, and co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre. His earliest inspiration came from Mikhail Shchepkin, who performed as a member of the Moscow Little Theatre. According to Stanislavski in *My Life in Art*, Shchepkin was “the first to introduce simplicity and lifelikeness into the Russian theatre, and he taught his pupils to distinguish the manner in which emotions are expressed in real life” (Stanislavski, 1985: 10-11). Stanislavski was born in 1863, the same year that Shchepkin died and in later years Stanislavski came to think of himself as Shchepkin's successor.

Stanislavski became concerned about the standard of modern acting when fellow writers, directors and theatre practitioners of his time such as Otto Brahm, André Antoine, and Copeau started to reject the “outmoded acting traditions of their day and called for the formation of a new theatre” (Cole, 1947: 10). Their concerns, also Stanislavski's concerns, about the state of acting, as explained by André Antoine (the founder of the Théâtre Libre), was that “though plays in a modern style were being written, they were being acted in such outmoded fashion that the intention of the author was completely destroyed” (in Cole, 1947: 10-11). The Moscow Art Theatre went on a tour to Petrograd in 1900 and the orator, Karabshevsky, said the following after being surprised by the natural ‘lifelikeness’ that the Moscow Art Theatre's players produced:

A theatre company has come to visit us, but to our complete amazement, there is not a single actor or actress in it. I do not see a single shaven face, nor any curled hair burned by daily application of the hairdresser's irons; I hear no artfully sonorous voices; I see no actorlike manner of walking, no theatrical gestures, no false pathos, no waving of hands, no strained animal temperaments. Where are their painted faces, their drawn eyebrows, their beaded eyelashes, their whitewashed foreheads and hands?

(in Stanislavski, 1985: 377-378)

This speech reads like a summary of all the conventions and traditions in the theatre of that time that the audiences were used to but found that the MAT brought them a kind of theatre that was the opposite of the usual ‘outmoded fashion’ expected in theatre.

Through my research I found that in early nineteenth-century Russian acting the emphasis was on the manner of delivering the lines and the actors apparently did not care to communicate the meaning of the text. Shchepkin states clearly the style of acting of his time:

At the time the playing of the actors was considered excellent when none of them spoke in his natural voice, when they declaimed their lines in a completely artificial manner, when they pronounced each word in a strong voice and when almost every word was accompanied by a gesture. The words “love”, “passion”, “treason” were uttered as loud as possible, but the actors’ facial expression did not carry out the meaning for they remained set and hardly natural.

(in Edwards, 1966: 15-16)

Another convention was that the actors made dramatic exits after a scene in order to arouse the audience to applaud the actor. Joseph Macleod, a Russian theatre historian, describes the behaviour of the audience and the actor:

Vociferous applause leads to a return on stage and a bow, which renews the applause, which renews the bow, which renews the applause, and so forward with the action suspended till player and applauder are satisfied and quiet ensues for the next passage.

(in Edwards, 1966: 13)

It became evident to me from the above statements that the theatre of that time seemed to only be a place where actors went mainly to be applauded and praised, and that they did not see the experience as an opportunity to create new and lifelike characters. By lifelike I mean that one would be able to believe that the character is a real person who exists with a life of his or her own, and not simply an actor standing on a stage and repeating a few lines and sometimes not even knowing those lines. This brings me to the next issue.

The accepted number of rehearsals before opening night was usually two, with three rehearsals the absolute maximum. This limited time devoted to rehearsals led to actors often did not knowing their lines on opening night and then stumbling over the words and needing to be prompted frequently. With the new modern texts that were being written, it became clear that a new style of acting was needed because, as André Antoine stated in the quote on the previous page, the meanings of the texts became distorted and lost in the display of acting that took place during that time.

These are only a few of the old acting conventions that stimulated a desire in Stanislavski to improve the standards of acting at that time. Seeing that Stanislavski was fascinated from an early age with the psychological aspects of creating a role (as will be shown in more detail below), he felt troubled by the prevailing acting conventions. He wanted the style of Russian acting to develop and modernize in order to keep up with the modern texts that were being produced; thus the quest for the Stanislavski 'System' began. Stanislavski's quest to find the tools to aid an actor in improving his craft entailed a lifelong study and he continuously researched and developed his craft until the day he died in 1938. His notes and research conducted over a lifetime culminated in the three handbooks *An Actor Prepares* (1937); *Building a Character* (1950) and *Creating a Role* (1961). The last two books were published after his death.

### **2.1.1. Growing up**

Constantine Stanislavski, named Constantine Sergeyevich Alexeyev, was born in Moscow on January 17<sup>th</sup> 1863. The stage name 'Stanislavski' was taken from an amateur actor named Doctor Stanislavski, whom the young Constantine Sergeyevich Alexeyev had known. Even at the young age of 14 Stanislavski felt the need to analyse his own acting and by the age of 22 (in 1885), his notebooks were filled with sophisticated questions such as: "What is the physiological aspect of the role? The psychic aspect of the role?" (in Merlin, 2003: 2). With questions such as these one can deduce that Stanislavski was already interested at an early stage in the intuitive and spiritual side of a character and not simply the outer physical aspects of the role. It seems to me that Stanislavski had an intrinsic need to develop an approach that would create a "real" life for the character and these questions were a definite indicator of the path that he was to follow in developing his system. Stanislavski's quest was to find a way to harness the actors' creativity, to form a system that would help the actor deliver performances that were more consistent and of the same quality night after night.

Stanislavski felt dissatisfied by what the dramatic school that he attended offered him. He stated his main dissatisfaction with the school:

We were told very picturesquely and with much skill what the play and the parts were supposed to be, that is, of the final results of creative work, but how we were

to do it, what road or method to use in order to arrive at the wished-for result – nothing was said about that. We were taught collectively or individually to play a given role, but we were not taught our craft. We felt the absence of fundamentals and of a system.... And I dreamed of one thing only – to be myself, to be that which I can be and must be naturally, something that neither the professors nor I myself could teach me, but nature and time alone.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 90)

He became acquainted with one of the teachers, Glikeria Fedotova. Fedotova had trained under Mikhail Shchepkin and believed that “acting is a skilled profession, the secrets of which can be discovered, learned, perfected, and reproduced through training and disciplined commitment to craft” (Schuler, 2000: 499). Glikeria Fedotova and Stanislavski’s paths crossed many times again and her timely advice had a huge impact on Stanislavski’s thoughts.

After Stanislavski left the Imperial Dramatic School, he and other amateurs acted in a play alongside Glikeria Fedotova and other professional artists of the Imperial Little Theatre. This was the first time that Stanislavski worked with true professionals and not only amateur artists. He tried to speak and perform as articulately, audibly and energetically as the professional actors, but his performance was inconsistent and he realized that:

...when you force yourself to be loud for the sake of loudness, courageous for the sake of courage, without any inner meaning and inspiration, you feel ashamed on the stage. This cannot put you into a creative mood.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 136)

With these concerns Stanislavski asked Glikeria Fedotova for advice and she said:

You don’t know, my friend, from which end to begin. And you don’t want to learn...There is no training, no restraint, no discipline. And an artist cannot live without that...

(Stanislavski, 1985: 137)

These words might sound harsh, but they were invaluable to Stanislavski in realizing the value of training and discipline in the theatre.

### **2.1.2. Stanislavski and the Society of Arts and Literature**

In 1888 the Society of Arts and Literature was founded. Stanislavski started working for Alexander Fillipovich Fedotov, Glikeria Fedotova’s husband. Fedotov had an ability to

believe in the seriousness of the circumstances in a play no matter how ridiculous the situation was and Stanislavski began unconsciously to copy Fedotov in his acting.

An example of this imitation would be of Stanislavski's favourite artist of the Imperial Little Theatre at the time, a comedian with a hoarse voice and funny facial movements. Stanislavski explains his imitation technique in regards to this actor:

It was these movements and his hoarse voice that I loved. All my work consisted in trying to imitate his movements and to develop a hoarseness in my voice. I wanted to be his exact double. I knew every bit of business..., I knew his every intonation, gesture, and his full scale of mimetics....all that remained for me was to repeat what I had seen.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 60)

Fedotov and Count Salogub grew tired of Stanislavski's perfect imitations of other actors' performances and wanted to discard what they called Stanislavski's "theatrical artificiality" (Stanislavski, 1985: 155). Stanislavski felt like he was being operated on and describes his two teachers' actions as

performing an operation that was an amputation, a search and a shaking out of all the theatrical artificiality that I had gathered through my amateur years.... At the beginning I was quiet, then I became ashamed, and at last I felt my nonentity. Something seemed to give way in me. All that was old was no good, and there was nothing new.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 155)

This experience opened his eyes to see how pathetic and ridiculous his old habits were and it encouraged him to find something to help his performances be more truthful and lifelike. Thus, Stanislavski wanted to find a system to stimulate an actor's source of creativity and this system had to be effective whenever the actor needed help in such situations of difficulty.

Stanislavski was always interested in the process of developing a character and not simply in the finished product. Stanislavski felt that directors

were interested only in the results. They criticized, telling you what was bad, but they would not tell you how to get what was desired.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 159)

The more Stanislavski strained to develop what they asked, the more tiring it would become and he would not be able to do the scene again from sheer exhaustion. Stanislavski stated:

I begin to understand what precisely it is that is so difficult in acting; the ability to throw one's self into a part no matter what external obstacles may present themselves, the ability to enliven one's self and not allow the part to grow stale.  
(in Chinoy & Cole, 1965: 427)

Stanislavski thought about the actor and his craft and came to the conclusion that actors did not study their art and its nature. Stanislavski came to the realization that

[c]raftmanship teaches the actor how to walk on the stage and play. But true art must teach him how to awaken consciously his subconscious creative self for its superconscious organic creativeness.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 168)

Stanislavski started using a technique of creating the character from the outer to the inner, meaning from the body to the soul of the character, in order to help him develop a character. When Stanislavski refers to the soul of a character I take it that he means something like the internal 'essence' of a character. What drives the character to its actions? He wanted the character to have an internal personality. I visualize this in terms of an empty shell of a character and Stanislavski wanted that shell to be filled with the secrets and thoughts of the character. He felt that this would create a person on stage and not simply an actor pretending to be a character. He began to realize the connection and symbiotic relationship between the physical and the psychical nature of a character. In this technique he would firstly focus on the physical aspects of the character and then start to develop the internal story of the character by using these external qualities that he has developed. This was quite a technical way of developing a character, but Stanislavski adds: "The technical methods of playing pushed me on to the truth, and the feeling of truth is the best awakener of emotion and the sense of living over a thing, imagination and creativeness" (in Edwards, 1966: 43). Stanislavski realized that he

had mistaken stage emotion, which is only one kind of hysteria, for true inspiration...had I substituted true inspiration for false stage emotion I might have gained a great deal of creative strength from the change.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 166)

### **2.1.3. Major influences on Stanislavski**

#### **2.1.3.1. Ludwig Chronegk**

During Lent of 1890 the famous German Saxe-Meiningen players, under direction of the stage director Ludwig Chronegk, visited Moscow and the Society. Chronegk was an extremely despotic director and did not work in conjunction with his actors. Stanislavski felt that he could relate to this method of directing, as Chronegk placed a lot of importance on the historical truth of a production, which was an aspect of the theatre that Stanislavski was very interested in at the time. What is meant by the 'historical truth of a production' is that the costumes, props, set, and thus the entire mise-en-scene was exactly reproduced as it would have looked in the time that the playwright intended. Stanislavski felt that this meticulous accuracy added to the realism in theatre that he wanted to achieve.

This technique of directing meant that all the power was put into the hands of the director. The director had all the power when it came to creative decisions. The director developed the entire mise-en-scene without the input of the actors; the director told the actors how to feel, move and speak at any given time on the stage. Chronegk had the biggest influence on Stanislavski during the period when his directing style was that of a despotic, autocratic director. Initially, I thought that Stanislavski's relationship with, and admiration of Chronegk, was detrimental to the developmental process of his system. It seemed to me that he was so infatuated with Chronegk's control and power over his cast and the fact that the productions should look so realistic because of the historical accuracy that Stanislavski forgot about the fact that he wanted inner truth of the characters, and not simply the production, to appear realistic and true on the outside. I realized though that, by contradicting himself and forgetting momentarily about his search for the inner truth of a character, he could learn from this experience and realize anew how important his search for the inner truthful portrayal of a character was to him.

It was during this period that Stanislavski had his first real experience of directing a drama with the production of the play by Lev Tolstoy, *The Fruits of Knowledge* in 1891.

Stanislavski fell back on his old habit and made use of ‘stencils’, the technique of imitating other great performances. Stanislavski

showed the actors what to do, because it was necessary to show them in order to make the production, because it was impossible not to show them, because [he] did not know how to do the director’s work otherwise.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 210)

Because of his lack of experience as a director Stanislavski turned to Chronegk’s despotic way of directing.

Lateness at rehearsal, a badly learned part, discussions during work, absence from the rehearsal hall without permission were punished by me with special cruelty. Garishness of attire, especially as far as the women were concerned, was banned from the rehearsals.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 208-209)

### **2.1.3.2. Thommaso Salvini**

Meanwhile, Stanislavski could not stop dreaming of doing a production of *Othello* after seeing a production of the play done by the great Italian actor, Thommaso Salvini. Stanislavski saw in this actor the amount of true dedication and preparation that went into a role and a performance. Stanislavski was introduced to Salvini during Salvini’s performance in the Imperial Great Theatre while on tour with his Italian troupe in Moscow. Stanislavski documented Salvini’s every move, trying to learn as much as possible from the actor. Stanislavski documented that

[t]he performance would begin at eight o’clock, but Salvini was in the theatre by five...He went to his dressing room, removed his overcoat, and began to wander about the stage. If any one approached him he would talk a little, then leave his companion, sink into thought, stand in silence, and then lock himself in his dressing room.... Having changed himself not only outwardly, but inwardly he would walk out on the stage again, his footsteps lighter and younger than before. And with each of his entrances it seemed that Salvini not only made up his face and dressed his body, but also prepared his soul in a like manner, gradually establishing a perfect balance of character.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 273-274)

Stanislavski wanted to apply these elements of preparation and dedication in his own career. Salvini made Stanislavski realize the importance of preparing the soul of a character and not only creating the outward character. He was so enthused by meeting this great and respected actor that he started plans for a production of *Othello*.

### 2.1.3.3. Ernesto Rossi

Before starting with the production of *Othello*, Stanislavski and his wife visited Venice and it was in one of the restaurants in Venice that Stanislavski came upon his 'Othello' character. While dining in the restaurant, Stanislavski saw a handsome Arab dressed in his national costume. When Stanislavski was faced with his own inadequacies while developing his character of Othello, he copied the Arab whom he had encountered in Venice. Looking back on this experience, Stanislavski remembers how much importance he put on the outer image of a character:

At that time I did not recognize the importance either of the word or of the speech. The outer image was more important to me. My make-up was not successful, but my figure seemed to do. I had made my own the suddenness of the movements of the Arab, his floating walk, his narrow palm...I copied him.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 279-280)

Stanislavski was someone who consciously learned from his mistakes and the failure of *Othello* made him realize the damage an actor can do to his artistic growth when portraying a character that the actor does not yet have the maturity to portray. Stanislavski knew that he had enough technique, voice, experience and ability to do most of the scenes, but soon realized he could not create the diverse emotions needed and this created a tension in him that led to a lot of muscular strain. Stanislavski said he experienced

nothing more than insane strain, spiritual and physical impotence and the squeezing of tragic emotion out of myself. In my strengthless struggle I even lost the little I had gained in other roles...There was no restraint, no control of the temperament, no placing of color; there was only the strain of muscles, the violation of voice and of the entire organism, and spiritual buffers that suddenly grew to all sides of me in self-defence from the problems which I had put before myself and which were too much for me.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 282)

Another much-respected Italian actor, Ernesto Rossi came to watch the production of *Othello* and Stanislavski desperately wanted his opinion of his interpretation of the role of Othello. The advice that Rossi gave Stanislavski was probably not exactly what Stanislavski wanted to hear, but it was the most valuable advice that he could have given

Stanislavski with regard to the development of the elements of his system that was already forming in his mind. He told Stanislavski that “[i]f there is no great master near you whom you can trust, I can recommend you only one teacher...[y]ou yourself” (Stanislavski, 1985: 286). Rossi’s advice also made Stanislavski realize his need and obligation to do further work on himself as an actor. Stanislavski commented on the advice that Rossi had given him

For this it is not enough to be simply talented and to have natural gifts; one needs ability, technique, and art. It is this that Rossi had told me, and he could not have told me anything else. Experience told me the same thing, experience and personal practice in the care I took of my future work, and for my future work.  
(Stanislavski, 1985: 287)

This was the start of a period in Stanislavski’s life where his quest for truthful emotions on stage was a major focus. Stanislavski stated: “More than all I wanted living, truthful, real life, not commonplace life, but artistic life” (in Edwards, 1966: 47).

## **2.2. The Moscow Art Theatre (MAT)**

### **2.2.1 The culmination of two men’s aspirations**

The need in Stanislavski grew every day to form his own theatre where he could do actor training. Meanwhile, he had been visiting the Philharmonic School and became acquainted with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943). Finally, in June of 1897, Stanislavski received a note from Danchenko, asking him to join him for a meeting at a restaurant, *The Slavic Bazaar*. On June 21<sup>st</sup> 1897, the legendary 18-hour meeting took place between Stanislavski and Danchenko. It ended the next morning in Stanislavski’s villa and by the end of the meeting the entire policy of The Moscow Art Theatre had been planned and worked out. This was the beginning of a revolution in Russian theatre as Stanislavski had by now already started working on his technique for the actor to believe in the given circumstances in a play and also the importance of communion with one’s partner on stage. What is meant by ‘the given circumstances’ is

the story of the play, the facts, events, epoch, time and place of action, conditions of life, the actors’ and regisseur’s (director’s) interpretation, the mise-en-scene, the production, the sets, the costumes, properties, lighting and sound effects - all the circumstances that are given to an actor to take into account as he creates his role.  
(Stanislavski, 1963: 67)

When Stanislavski spoke of communion he referred to the communication between acting partners and stated that

when you want to communicate with a person you first seek out his soul, his inner world...When you speak to the person who is playing opposite you, learn to follow through until you are certain your thoughts have penetrated his subconsciousness.  
(Stanislavski, 1963: 38)

Stanislavski was to be responsible and have the final say in all matters concerning production, and Danchenko had the responsibility of repertoire and scripts. There were a few concerns that they both felt very strongly about addressing in their new theatre:

- There would be no 'star' system, an actor would play the lead in one production and then be an extra in the next production. The reason for this was that Stanislavski wanted to create a genuine ensemble cast. One of Stanislavski's favourite aphorisms was: "One must love art, and not one's self in art" (Stanislavski, 1985: 298).

- Strict discipline would play a big role both for the cast and for the audience: the audience had to be seated before the curtain went up and the actors were not to talk in the corridors during a performance. Stanislavski and Danchenko wanted to do away with all the distractions and interruptions that plagued the actors during a performance. They felt that

[a]ll disobedience to the creative life of the theatre is a crime. Lateness, laziness, caprice, hysterics, bad character, ignorance of the role, the necessity of repeating anything twice are all equally harmful to our enterprise and must be rooted out.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 298-299)

- The playing of the orchestra during intermission was seen as an unnecessary distraction and was to be discontinued. The orchestra was said to be "destructive of the continuity of the play's mood" (Edwards, 1966: 65). They wanted to get rid of all the elements that take attention and focus away from the performance.

At this time such an approach represented a new outlook on how things should be done within a theatre. It was a movement discarding traditional theatre behaviour. Danchenko and Stanislavski both had too many unpleasant memories of the bureaucracy of the

imperial theatres which were the norm for that time and that is why they made such a strongly innovative attempt to develop a different kind of theatre. Stanislavski and Danchenko's ideal was "to reconstruct [theatre's] whole life...to change at the root the whole order of rehearsals and the preparation of plays" (Carnicke in Hodge, 2000: 12). Stanislavski and Danchenko wanted to

rejuvenate the art, we declared war on all the conventionalities of the theatre wherever they might occur – in the acting, in the properties, in the scenery, the costumes, the interpretation of the play, the curtain, or anywhere else in the play or the theatre. All that was new and that violated the usual customs of the theatre seemed beautiful and useful to us.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 319)

### **2.2.2. Chekhov and the MAT**

The first successful play by the MAT to secure the theatre a public was the historical drama by Count Alexei Tolstoy, *Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich*, which opened on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1898. However, it is the Chekhov play, *The Seagull*, which enabled the theatre and its company to find its identity. With Chekhov's plays Stanislavski was introduced to plays where most of the action in fact lies in the inner activity of the characters and the subtext, and not in the external elements of the play, which was the customary approach. The working relationship that developed between Chekhov and Stanislavski was of immense importance with regard to the way that Stanislavski's views on acting and directing evolved and helped to form part of his system that was still to come.

*The Seagull* was a play unlike any of the traditional, conventional plays of the time. Unlike the conventional plays there were neither traditional characters nor structural devices such as the unravelling of the plot or a climax. Chekhov had a style of writing where the plays had characters that possessed inner activity; there was no external action to keep the play going. According to Harold Clurman, drama critic and former member of The Group Theatre in the United States, what makes Chekhov's plays so touching

is not their depiction of the unhappy middle class of Russia at a certain period, but the use he makes of this subject matter. From it he wrings the 'music' of idealistic yearning, the aspiration which both torments and elevates the hearts of not particularly bright folk everywhere.

(in Rotté, 1992: 244)

Chekhov's desire was to create interesting roles for actors and through these interesting roles they could reveal "the beauty of the ordinary, the inconspicuous, everyday beauty of life" (Yermilov, 1946: 147). By using the middle class as his subject matter, he made the plays more accessible to different audiences. Chekhov said, to give a better idea of the inner action of the characters: "Let us be just as complex and as simple as life itself. People dine and at the same time their happiness is made or their lives are broken" (Braun, 1982: 62). This refers to the strong subtext that is present in Chekhov's writing. Characters did not openly state what they actually wanted to say. In Act one Nina asks 'What kind of a tree is that?', but by asking Konstantin this, she is trying to impersonalize a situation in which Konstantin is trying to confess his love to her. The contradiction between her subtext and his actions tells us that she is not interested in him, without her having to verbalize this.

Chekhov challenged the

actor and audience alike with his move from the melodramatic hyperbole of external action – with exposition, denouement, and a plethora of traditions in between – to indirect action or inner activity. With no exposition of dramatic action, the logic of plot and intrigue was replaced by the logic of sensation and emotion, as behind the apparent inactivity of each character lay a complex inner life.

(Merlin, 1999b: 222)

At first it was because of the lack of external action as mentioned in the quote above that Stanislavski found the play to be boring. As Stanislavski stated, to him *The Seagull* seemed "that it was not scenic, that it was monotonous and boresome" (Stanislavski, 1985: 321). The core of any play lies in the conveying of action, so if the play consists mainly out of inner activity, the actor's inner experience and the inner world of the play must therefore somehow be shown and motivated in action on stage. This was the challenge that awaited Stanislavski. Because of the lack of external action in the Chekhov plays, Stanislavski was forced to look deeper into the play and the characters to find the inner justification for the actions performed by the characters on stage. Stanislavski's reaction to the play was totally instinctive as he could hardly grasp what the play was about intellectually. Perhaps the fact that he did not have an intellectual understanding of the play caused him to look at the play on a more intuitive level and he began to experience the life of the play and the characters with his "inner eye and ear" (in

Balukhaty, 1952: 54). Stanislavski did not understand the play while he directed it. Maurice Valency has suggested that the reason for Stanislavski's lack of understanding the play is because Stanislavski

had no intimate knowledge of the provincial gentry, or the country environment which furnished the background of most of Chekhov's plays. The petty quarrels, the atmosphere of indolence and boredom, the economic exigencies and social amenities of provincial life were alien to his experience, and had to be reconstructed imaginatively. The sense of the mystery of familiar things, the feeling of the supernatural in nature, all the wonder and poetry of the countryside to which Chekhov instinctively respond were quite foreign to this city-bred director.

(in Braun, 1982: 62)

Nonetheless, the more Stanislavski studied the play the more he became aware of the subtext, the inner action, and activity that were going on within the characters hidden beneath the largely uneventful external surface of the play. It is during the rehearsals of *The Seagull* that Danchenko and Stanislavski introduced the term 'subtext'. This term was used "as a means of revealing and expressing the psychological motives hidden beneath Chekhov's lines, which only occasionally surface" (Merlin, 1999b: 224). Stanislavski stated throughout *Building a Character* and *Creating a Role* that at a performance the text is supplied by the playwright and the subtext by the actor. He states: "The most substantial part of a subtext lies in its thought...that conveys the line of logic and coherence in a most clear-cut, definite way" (Stanislavski, 1963: 137). Stanislavski saw pauses as the perfect moment to articulate the subtext of the moment. Chekhov supplied fine details of the characters and of their actions in the script. Chekhov included directions to where pauses should be included in the text and this showed Chekhov's understanding of the psychological and dramatic potential of a silent pause. An example of where Chekhov inserted a pause and of how Stanislavski filled the pause with physical movements that conveyed the subtext is in Act 3. At this specific point in the play Trigorin reminds Nina of the dead seagull. Stanislavski then filled the pause with the following actions

After a moment's awkwardness, Nina jumps to her feet to leave the room, but Trigorin catches her hand to stop her. She stands with her back to him in silence, as Trigorin raises her caught hand to kiss it. Gently she withdraws her hand from his lips and moves to the stove, where she traces something with her finger. This

is a moment of decision for her. That tracing finger marks a resolution, as she turns quickly to Trigorin to finish her speech and immediately exit.

(in Merlin, 2003: 105)

By filling the pause with so much detail Stanislavski created a moment filled with complex realistic human responses. The sequence of actions gives an indication of what is going on within the characters without their having to say anything.

It is evident in the detailed *mise-en-scène* that Stanislavski devised that he had an instinctive understanding of the psychological subtext that could be found within a pause. An example of how Stanislavski portrayed the psychological situation of the characters within a pause can be found in the third act of *The Seagull* in the scene between Arkadina and Trigorin. Trigorin has fallen in love with Nina and asks Arkadina if they could stay for just one more day. These are the stage directions that Stanislavski created to be executed within the pause:

Pause. Arkadina in silence goes up to Trigorin, who is sitting down in thought with his eye fixed on a point in the distance, stroking his head. Trigorin, still seated, raises his eyes to her, full of entreaty. Trigorin takes her hand. Troubled, Arkadina has never seen such an expression on Trigorin's face before. She is frightened, shaking, she moves away from him afraid, takes several steps, and stops beside the stove, leans her elbows on it and looks at Trigorin intensely. She gestures with her arms and covers her ears.

(in Hristić, 1995: 177)

Through the physical actions of the scene Arkadina portrays her true emotions without saying it. She covers her ears and this indicates that she does not want to hear or accept what Trigorin is actually saying to her through his intense expression. This is an example of how Stanislavski wanted the audience to read into the subtext created by the actors. Because the concept of subtext was new to the actors of the MAT, Stanislavski and Danchenko invented ways to assist the actors in understanding this concept. They encouraged the cast to create an inner monologue within their character. The inner monologue is “a constant stream of thought alerting the actors to the discrepancies between what they say and what they mean in response to the on-stage partner's words” (Merlin, 1999b: 225). The moment between Arkadina and Trigorin quoted above is a perfect example of realizing the discrepancies in meaning between what your acting

partner is saying and what he or she actually means. Stanislavski encouraged the actors not only to be aware of their own subtext, but also to try and understand their fellow characters' subtext. This would create a deeper sense of connection and tension between the performers and create the ensemble interaction that Stanislavski desired in the cast.

With this in mind, Stanislavski decided to focus on creating the correct mood on stage. An example of this can be found in Stanislavski's notes concerning the opening sequence:

The dim light of a lantern on top of a lamp-post, distant sounds of a drunkard's song, distant howling of a dog, the croaking of frogs, the crake of a landrail, the slow tolling of a distant church-bell – help the audience to get the feel of the sad monotonous life of the characters. Flashes of lightning, faint rumbling of thunder in the distance. After the raising of the curtain a pause of ten seconds.

(in Balukhaty, 1952: 139)

He planned the entire production of *The Seagull* from the detailed mise-en-scène to extensive character notes and imaginative background noises, “every gesture, from lighting a cigarette to moving a lamp, is prescribed, atmospheric effects are heavily laid on, pauses are inlaid, and intonations are described” (Senelick, 2004: 129). His directions were followed to the letter and even little personal idiosyncrasies of characters were dictated not by the actor's conception of the part, but by the detailed plan worked out by Stanislavski. An example of this is how Stanislavski developed actions for the character of Masha to give a clear indication of her characteristics:

Masha is seen to be earthy and noisy: she does solid physical things. She slurps her tea loudly, she sniffs snuff and, here, she cracks nuts. As we shall see, her noisy behaviour is often placed at exactly the point where she can gain attention, or ‘pull focus’. She is a needy character...By giving actors simple physical activities, Stanislavsky is able to touch upon deeper psychological implications. Although the audience may not consciously pick up on the reverberations, he has provided his actors with wonderful nuances with which to inform their characterisations.

(in Merlin, 2003: 90)

On looking back Stanislavski “acknowledged and defended this creative naivety as part of his own learning process” (Gorchakov, 1991: 143). Through this one can see clearly that there was a huge difference between Stanislavski the director and Stanislavski the actor. Stanislavski admitted that:

I was helped by the despotism I had learned from Chronegk. I demanded obedience and I got it...I cared little for the inner emotions of the actor. I sincerely thought it was possible to order others to live and feel according to another's will. I gave orders to all and for all places of the performance and these orders were binding to all.

(in Merlin, 2003: 12)

Of his directing Stanislavski said:

No matter how much I am ashamed to acknowledge it now, at that time, when I was not yet in full agreement with my actors, I liked Chronegk's despotism, for I did not know to what a terrible end it might bring an actor.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 200)

During *The Seagull* Stanislavski was still relying on the external rather than on the internal elements of a character. Stanislavski knew that he needed a new direction and approach when it came to character creation, but he admitted that his system was still in its embryo stage and he felt forced to create the characters from the outside. Stanislavski stated:

In my great desire to help the actor's I tried to create a mood around them, in the hope that it would grip them and call forth creative vision. In those days our inner technique and our ability of reacting on another's creative soul were very primitive. I took all the bypaths I could think of.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 420)

With this successful play, Stanislavski revolutionized two aspects of traditional theatre: theatre production and attention to detail; and the acting style seemed to be more truthful and lifelike on stage. This was even more profoundly so seeing that Stanislavski did not give the actors much creative freedom in creating these truthful portrayals. Stanislavski still had to realize that the subtext of the play could only be successfully conveyed by actors who had an understanding of the character's inner activity and this would not happen if Stanislavski dictated their every move and motivation. In spite of these mistakes Stanislavski introduced the audience to a very intimate style of acting, which he referred to as "limitless attention to your partner" (in Merlin, 1999: 225). Using this technique he drew the audience in closer to the stage so that it felt to the audience as if they were watching human interaction under a microscope.

Another way that Stanislavski tried to make the play seem more lifelike was by using realistic sounds such as birds singing and dogs barking. Stanislavski and Chekhov seldom agreed on each other's ideas and visions, and Chekhov disliked Stanislavski's exaggerated use of sound effects on stage, but Chekhov seldom said anything to Stanislavski to his face about his dislike of the sound effects. Stanislavski tells of how he found out about Chekhov's grievances when Chekhov made the following comment in Stanislavski's company and Stanislavski understood that the comment was aimed at him:

“‘What fine quiet,’ the chief person of my play will say,” he said to some one so that I could hear him. “‘How wonderful! We hear no birds, no dogs, no cuckoos, no owls, no sleigh bells, no crickets.’” That stone was intended for my garden.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 420-421)

When we think of Chekhov and Stanislavski's relationship we do not think of it as a kind of idyllic cooperation between a great writer and a great director, but without Stanislavski

Chekhov would most probably have remained a somewhat unusual writer whose plays do not quite succeed on stage, just as, without Chekhov, Stanislavski would have been left without a writer whose plays would serve a serious basis for putting his concept of the theatre to the test.

(Hristić, 1995: 175)

I think silently both of them knew that they both had a hand in each other's successes. Unfortunately, Chekhov never had the chance to see how Stanislavski's method of directing or of approaching a character and acting in itself changed. Chekhov died before Stanislavski made some of his most valuable discoveries via Chekhov's work that influenced his system. Stanislavski's work in especially *The Seagull* was the starting point for the application of new methods and techniques in the acting process. Through Stanislavski's struggle to make sense of Chekhov's plays he created certain 'tools' to assist him and his actors. These included subtext, tempo-rhythm, ensemble interaction and inner action. All of these later formed part of Stanislavski's 'system'. The physical activities that Stanislavski devised for the actors to perform during the silent pauses to portray their emotional state was also an indication of the start of his later method of physical actions. Even though during this period Stanislavski still directed the actors as to what physical activity they should perform, in his later methods the actors could discover and explore it for themselves through improvisation exercises.

Through working on Chekhov's plays it was inevitable for Stanislavski to realize and value the creative contribution that is made by the actor to create 'the life of the human spirit', which was Stanislavski's main goal on stage. Because of Stanislavski's attention to, and exploration of, the acting process Stanislavski, in the words of the theorist Divadelni Ustav,

made possible, either directly or indirectly, the creation of dramatic works which their authors might never have created, if they had not been convinced that it was possible to interpret truthfully the finer shades of various psychological processes.  
(in Merlin, 1999b: 227)

Chekhov's plays led Stanislavski to create one of the most powerful elements of what later came to be known as his psycho-technique, the 'magic if'. The actor would ask him/herself, in order to create inner justification for an outer or inner expression on stage, 'what would I do, *if* certain circumstances were true?' Stanislavski used the 'magic if' as a tool that "transfers the actor from the world of reality to a world in which alone his creative work can be done" (in Magershack, 1950: 33). The 'magic if' was used in conjunction with the 'given circumstance'. The 'given circumstance' includes the story of the play, the facts, time and place, conditions of life, the mise-en-scene, events – all the circumstances that are given to an actor to take into account as he creates his character.

The 'magic if' could be seen as the starting point of the imagination and the 'given circumstance' is the fuel that keeps the imagination active in the creative process. In *An Actor Prepares* Tortsov, the acting teacher, give his students an imaginary scenario. He told them that they are in an apartment and there is a madman knocking at the door who wants to enter the room and cause them harm. The elements of the given circumstances, listed above, of the scenario are then given to the students to help them create their own picture. For instance, before the students lived in the imagined apartment, an insane man lived there. He had escaped from the mental institute where the authorities had taken him and now he was standing at the door. Tortsov then asks the students to use the 'magic if' to arouse true feelings from the students by asking them what *they* would *do* IF there was a madman behind the door. Asking this question immediately incites the performer into

action. The students then reacted in the way suitable to their imaginary situation and according to their inner justification and motivation. If the students really used their imagination, they would soon feel fear and excitement or any fitting emotion that arises.

### **2.2.3. Moving away from dictatorship**

Through the influence of working on the Chekhov plays, Stanislavski started to move away from a dictatorial mode of directing. He realized that it is not only the director's interpretation of the play that mattered, but also the company's creative input and contributions that would truly make the acting more truthful. Stanislavski changed his focus and discarded the notion that he should create the whole *mise-en-scène* by himself and he rather included the whole company to devise the *mise-en-scène*. This technique, better known as 'round-the-table analysis', included analyzing the text and the characters by the whole cast. Stanislavski stated that this was all "part of the single process of analysis, or coming to know the play and your parts" (in Merlin, 2003: 16). Together Stanislavski and the cast would unravel the text and the characters and discover the theme of the play. In Stanislavski's handbooks he also called the main theme of the play the 'through-line of action'. The cast would analyze the play's structure and break the play into units and they would try to find the characters' objectives within the units. These are also elements that are important in the work on a role. The discussions would not only focus on the intellectual aspects, but also on the emotional life of the character. Through these processes the actors got to know the characters they were portraying and the characters would become more real to the actor. These discussions were the starting point for what was leading to the notion of 'affective memory'.

Stanislavski was still fascinated with bringing the 'inner life of the human spirit' to the stage, but the inner life could not exist without the packaging of a human body. Seeing that Stanislavski had worked according to the 'outward to inward' technique earlier in his career and now placed a lot of focus on just the psychological aspect of a character, he started experimenting with ways to connect the body and emotions in order to form a character.

This is the beginning of what was later known as Stanislavski's psycho-physical technique. Stanislavski developed this technique at the end of his career into the 'method of analysis through physical actions'. What Stanislavski meant by the psycho-physical technique is that

[a]ll action in the theatre must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent and real...and as a final result we have a truly productive activity...A small physical act acquires an enormous inner meaning: the great inner struggle seeks an outlet in such an external act. There are no physical actions divorced from some desire, some effort in some direction, some objective, without one's feeling inwardly a justification for them; there is no imagined situation which does not contain some degree of action of thought...All this bears witness to the close bond between physical action and all so-called 'elements' of the inner creative state.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 8)

Stanislavski knew that the body had to be flexible in order to be able to adapt to the range of emotions necessary for a successful actor and thus wanted to start training the body. Stanislavski turned to former MAT actor, Vsevolod Meyerhold, who had left the company earlier to explore his own theories. Meyerhold focused on the physical in the theatrical and, even though the two of them did not part on good terms when Meyerhold left the MAT in 1902, Stanislavski started a studio, known as the Theatrical Studio, with Meyerhold in 1905 as an offshoot of the MAT to develop the physicality of the actors.

Stanislavski's interest in the psychological aspect of actor training grew in such a way that it started to change Stanislavski's focus as far as training was concerned. Stanislavski sought a perfect stage illusion representative of life and Meyerhold wanted to create a truly theatrical experience, where the reality should be created in the audiences' minds and not on stage. Meyerhold wanted the actor to

use the space about him on the stage three-dimensionally...Through exercises he is taught to achieve the feeling of the place of the actor in space, time and rhythm. But more important still, he is taught how to coordinate his own body with other people on the stage, with the properties he handles and the scenery he is acting against so that he becomes a plastic part of a harmonious whole.

(in Chinoy, 1965: 441)

Stanislavski's and Meyerhold's visions contradicted each other, even though Meyerhold's techniques were extremely progressive. The result was that the venture between Stanislavski and Meyerhold only lasted five months.

Following the failure of the Theatrical Studio, Stanislavski went on a tour in Europe with the MAT. Stanislavski became terribly depressed when he found his own acting to have become mechanical and empty and a "feeling of sterility" overtook him (Benedetti, 1982: 23). Stanislavski stated the

dissatisfaction with myself as an actor...gave me no rest, took away my faith in myself, and made me seem wooden and lifeless in my own eyes. I wanted to find out where all my former joy in creation had vanished. Why was it that in the old days I was bored on the days when I did not act, and that now I was happy on the days I was free from work?

(Stanislavski, 1985: 458)

Stanislavski took his family to Finland for a long overdue holiday. Here lies the start of the attempt to formally create and organize an acting 'system'.

#### **2.2.4. The start of a 'system'**

Once in Finland, Stanislavski surrounded himself with his twenty years of notebooks. These notebooks were filled with notes on acting, rehearsing and directing, and his experiences in the theatre over the years. Looking into his past he

came to see clearer and clearer that the inner content which was put into a role during its first creation and the inner content that was born in [his] soul with the passing of time were as far apart as the heaven and the earth.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 459)

Two questions filled his mind: "How could an actor's creativity be stimulated and kept alive? How could a production be centred on that creative energy?" (Benedetti, 1982: 27). Stanislavski wanted to learn how to create the conditions that would in turn create inspiration for the actor's creative state of mind. He wanted actors to be able to create these conditions by using their will. Stanislavski finally started to form a documented and organized system for the actor.

During a performance one night, shortly after his return from Finland, Stanislavski realized that

creativity on the stage demands first of all a special condition, which for want of a better term, I will call the creative mood. For an actor, to perceive is to feel...all men of the stage, from the genius to the mediocrity, are able to receive the creative mood, but it is not given them to control it with their own will. They receive it together with inspiration in the form of a heavenly gift. Are there no technical means for the creation of the creative mood, so that inspiration may appear oftener than is its wont?

(Stanislavski, 1985: 461)

Stanislavski realized that this 'inner creative state of the mind' cannot be attained all at once and that it must be constructed bit by bit, that one must develop the component elements separately and systematically. A very important shift had taken place in Stanislavski's thinking. He thought of acting no longer as the imitation of a character, but now as an ongoing process in developing the physical and the psychological aspects of a character in order to create a real person on stage and not simply an imitation of a person. I interpret this to mean that Stanislavski did not only want to create the outer 'shell' of the character, but also the personality of the character. He wanted to fill the 'shell', which is usually the only aspect created, with the history and personality traits of the character. Stanislavski so reached the conclusion that psychological as well as physical development was necessary for each performance. Stanislavski felt that if the character is well rounded, thus meaning it has an outside image as well as an inner thought process just as a real person; the subtext would come through in a more clear way. He also wanted conscious activity in preparing and rehearsing a role to be coherent, and so organized that it would create conditions in which spontaneous, unconscious and intuitive creation would occur. Stanislavski's goal was to learn how

to create a favourable condition for the appearance of inspiration by means of the will, that condition in the presence of which inspiration was most likely to descend into the actor's soul. As I learned afterward, this creative mood is that spiritual and physical mood during which it is easiest for inspiration to be born.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 462)

### **2.2.5. Affective memory**

Stanislavski started a period of intense study in the very early 1900s. He started reading books and essays on contemporary psychology.

The book *Problèmes de Psychologie Affective*, written by a French psychologist, Theodule Ribot (1839-1916), had the most influence on him. Here he learned about the notion of affective memory. Ribot discovered that when patients remembered times when they were healthy, they recovered faster than those patients who were not as actively engaged in their process of recovery. Stanislavski also learnt that the memory of a particular incident could evoke memories of similar incidents and similar feelings. Stanislavski applied this effect of past-tense memories on present-tense situations to fictional situations in the theatre and so developed his technique of using ‘affective memory’.

Therefore the main focus of ‘affective memory’ is to create inspiration by arousing emotions and feelings through stimulating the actor’s memories. These memories and consequent emotions of the actor are “brought to the surface of his consciousness by his five senses, through mostly sight and hearing” (Magarshack, 1950: 53). Explained in a very simplistic way ‘affective memory’ is easily understandable; the actors had to begin by remembering an experience from their own lives that was similar to an event in the play. Once the memories were clear and strong enough, the actors had to relate them to the given circumstances of their characters’ situations, so that the fictional roles would be filled with real emotional content. To Stanislavski it became increasingly important for the actor to create a background for the character and this background must be filled with emotions and memories. He was convinced that this would create a character of more substance and lead to a better and more ‘real’ performance by the actor. To achieve this, the ‘soul’ of the character created for the stage consists in this way of human elements of the actor’s own ‘soul’, out of his own emotional memories. The actor must also absorb everything that surrounds him on stage, the stage sets and the mood that they evoke, to stimulate his feelings. The actor must also not try to remember the specific emotion, but rather remember what caused the emotion. Stanislavski’s theory was that if you created the situation which caused the emotion, the emotion would arise naturally. If this does not happen, the actor must use the elements of the ‘magic if’ and ‘given circumstances’ to try to get a response in his emotional memory. To me it seems that what Stanislavski

wanted was for the actor to remember a memory of a certain situation in which a certain emotion arose. The actor then takes the emotion from that memory, then discards the memory itself, and then puts that emotion into the context of the play. The problem that I have with this is that it is not natural for the actors to retrieve the emotion from the memory and then forget about the memory completely. It proved to be more difficult for the actors to distance themselves from the memory than was originally thought, especially if it was a very traumatic memory for the actor. The question remains how does one train oneself to leave the memory behind after retrieving the emotion?

Still Stanislavski expected actors to lead a full, interesting and varied life, so that the 'stock room' of their emotional memory would not be empty and without experiences. According to Stanislavski, the actor

transforms all the impressions, passions and joys of life into the material for his creative work. Out of what is transitory and personal he creates a whole world of poetic images and ideas which will live for ever.

(in Magarshack, 1950: 58)

### **2.2.6. First disappointments with the system**

It was in the production of *The Drama of Life* (1907) by Knut Hamsun that Stanislavski consciously applied all his concentration on the inner character of the play and the inner life of the character. Stanislavski realized that

besides talent, an inner spiritual technique is necessary; without it one cannot find true psychological and physiological approaches to the soul of man for the natural and conscious birth of a superconscious creative impulse in it. Until art will learn how to create subconscious passions consciously all will remain as of old, and because of the lack of better means, the stage director will squeeze emotion out of the actor,....Passion was squeezed out for the sake of passion....It is natural that with such a violation of nature, living emotion hid within its secret sources as soon as it was approached by the direct route and forced to do something it was not able to do.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 475-476)

Stanislavski imagined that he would experience the release of creative energy, relaxation and freedom on stage; instead he experienced tension, strain and frustration. Stanislavski experienced that, with that amount of tension in his body, he felt his body move woodenly like on stage and that the tension caused strain to his voice. He realized that in

order for him to access his emotion/affective memory that will lead to creative emotion on stage, he must rid his body of negative tension, seeing that the tension not only caused his body to become stiff and less movable but also blocked his creative process while he was drawing on his affective memories. Doing so would in turn also lead to less bodily tension and so his performance will feel freer and less forced. Stanislavski realized that in the inner creative state

a large role is played by the absence of all physical tension, the complete subordination of the body to the actor's will...creativity is first of all conditioned by the complete concentration of an actor's entire nature. So an actor turns to his spiritual and physical creative instrument. His mind, will and feelings combine to mobilize all of his inner 'elements'. Out of this fusion of elements arises an important inner state, the inner creative mood.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 81)

Even though Stanislavski felt that the production of *The Drama of Life* was a personal failure for him, it was a turning point in his life and career. From this production onwards all his attention and focus were devoted to the study and teaching of inner creativity and the influence of negative bodily tension.

Although his first attempt was not successful, Stanislavski realized that, when doing the exercises, he needed to concentrate his attention on what was going on within him, i.e. to remain relaxed; this also kept his attention from moving to the audience. Stanislavski found that if he was fully concentrating on the life on the stage, meaning all the action that happens in the play on stage – such as the interactions between the characters – he would forget that he was on stage and thus be more relaxed. Stanislavski came to the conclusion that the first requirement for creativity is the complete concentration of the actor and his entire nature on the stage. Slowly but surely Stanislavski was building the foundations of his system not on theory, but on self-examination and observation. Although Stanislavski moved between the methods of training and directing actors, these methods “all shared the same aesthetic goal: the evocation of feeling in the actor, and its communication to the audience” (Lloyd, 2006: 73).

## Chapter 3: Stanislavski's system and its development in America

### 3.1. The Stanislavski system

Stanislavski eventually understood his system to be the result of lifelong searching:

[I]...groped after a method of work for actors which will enable them to create the image of a character, breath into it life of a human spirit and, by natural means, embody it on the stage in a beautiful, artistic form...The foundations for this method were [my] studies of the nature of an actor.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 158)

It is not a simple matter to give a precise overview of the development of his system, because Stanislavski's views were ever changing and evolving, and so his system did as well. As time went by Stanislavski changed the focus of his system as he tried to improve it. For example, at the beginning of the development of his system his focus was purely on the psychological aspects of a character. This refers to the way that the actor would psychologically create the character through affective memory in order for emotion to be the *end product*. By the end of his career he focused more on physical action and active analysis; he now wanted emotion to be a *by-product* through following the correct actions that would lead to the correct emotions. A common mistake made with the Stanislavski system is thinking that it is a formula or recipe to become a great actor, when in fact his system is a process to help the actor create ways in which to develop a character so that the character can be portrayed as truthfully and believably as possible. Stanislavski promotes analysis of the character in order for identification to take place from the actor's side and with identification a more truthful character will be developed. Stanislavski states: "Analysis studies the external circumstances and events in the life of a human spirit in the part; it searches in the actor's own soul for emotions common to the role and himself, for sensations, experiences, for any elements promoting ties between him and his part" (Stanislavski, 1963:19). When a character is truthful and believable, the actor has successfully created another person on stage with characteristics and a history and emotions of his own and it is not simply the actor pretending to be this character. The audience can then believe that this person really exists. When this happens it is easier for the audience to believe in the play and lose themselves in the theatre and forget about the outside world. This is the desired effect that Stanislavski wanted to achieve, even though

it was not what the whole theatre world wanted; for example, Meyerhold wanted to remind the audience the whole time that they were in fact in a theatre and that it is not real, so that they would not lose touch with reality.

Throughout the resistance from theatre practitioners, the development of his system followed a course that started with his years as dictatorial director, through the years when he placed so much focus on round-the-table analysis, until the time of active analysis and improvisation. Stanislavski had three basic propositions that had to coincide with one another in order to yield a truthful performance.

Firstly, Stanislavski felt that to give a truthful performance the actor had to achieve a normal living state on the stage. To achieve this state of normal living:

- a) the actor must be physically free and in control of all free muscles;
- b) the actor's attention must be infinitely alert;
- c) the actor must be in contact with the person playing opposite him; he must listen and observe as he would in real life;
- d) the actor must believe in the life on stage; he must believe in everything that happens on the stage that is related to the play.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 158-159)

Secondly, Stanislavski concluded that

in each physical act there is an inner psychological motive which impels physical action, as in every psychological inner action there is also a physical action, which expresses its psychic nature.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 159)

This was known as Stanislavski's psycho-physical approach. This meant that every action has an emotional motivation.

Thirdly, Stanislavski believed that true organic action by the actor – actions that are created within the actor by his own subconscious feelings – would cause sincere, genuine and authentic feelings to arise within the actor. To achieve true organic action, the actor must firstly place himself in the circumstances proposed by the playwright for the character. The actor must ask himself what he would do if placed in the same situation as that of the character in the play and how he would react in such a situation. The actor

must then find reasons to justify the actions of the character. Then the actor must act without reflecting where his own actions end and the character's begin. Thus, to summarize the above statements, Stanislavski states that

on the stage a true inner creative state, action and feeling result in natural life on the stage in the form of one of the characters.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 159)

What Stanislavski means by the 'natural life' on stage is that what happens on the stage should be a reflection of the real life of a human soul. There must be naturalistic details that actors draw from real life to provide both themselves and the audience with a feeling of authenticity.

Stanislavski faced much resistance and scepticism from some of his pupils and from some in the theatre world about his new techniques. To me it seems natural that Stanislavski would face resistance to his new methods. His pupils and the theatre world were now challenged with techniques that were totally strange to them and with change one can expect resistance. Stanislavski's use of organic action was also linked to his use of affective memory, and here he also had to face resistance. Apart from resistance to change and scepticism towards his new techniques, I think some of the people in the theatre world also saw the dangers that could go with these new techniques. The main danger in using these techniques I feel, especially with regard to affective memory, is that not all actors are strong willed or emotionally stable enough to go back in their memories and confront bad and traumatic experiences. Not all actors would be able to retrieve the emotion and leave the memory behind, and hence be able to differentiate between what is in their past and what is happening in the moment of the play. Even though Lee Strasberg tried not to go through the affective memory exercise with any of his students, if he felt that they were not emotionally stable enough to cope with facing traumatic memories again, he still made errors of judgement and some students could not deal with their memories. (Lee Strasberg and his method will be discussed in more detail in the final two chapters.) I feel that in theory Stanislavski's idea seemed effective and innovative, but practically there were certain dangers, as mentioned above, that he did not immediately consider and was faced with as his system developed and progressed.

What Stanislavski had 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” (Stanislavski, 1937: vii). Stanislavski divided his training method into two sections, namely the work on the actor and the work on the role.

### **3.1.1. The work on the actor**

The first part is the work on the actor. This consists of the preparation and development that the actor must go through to develop his skills. The actor must develop his skills to such a degree that he can control his skills of relaxation, concentration, imagination and communication. The only way for the actor to gain control over his instrument and these skills is to practise each skill individually. What follows are Stanislavski’s reflections on and examples of exercises on how to develop these skills and why he felt they were important.

#### **3.1.1.1. Relaxation**

Relaxation of the muscles was the starting point for Stanislavski’s class work. Stanislavski had by now discovered time and time again that physical tension is the main and greatest enemy of creativity. Stanislavski consequently developed numerous relaxation exercises. He had his students do a series of simple relaxation exercises that were designed to develop an inner voice within each actor called the ‘controller’. Stanislavski wanted the actor to develop such a strong relationship between the actor and his own body that this inner voice would then alert the actor at any moment when unnecessary tension developed in the body.

Stanislavski saw physical stiffness as a reflection of emotional inflexibility, thus relaxing the muscles received a lot of attention in his classes. An example of one of these exercises is that the actor has to

[l]ie on the floor, and work through the body, consciously tensing and releasing each set of muscles from the feet, the calves, the knees, the thighs, the buttocks (then the whole leg), the stomach, the chest ( then the whole torso), the upper arms, the lower arms, the fists (then the whole arm), the neck, the face, the whole

scalp. Adopt a series of poses sitting up straight, half sitting, standing, half standing, kneeling, crouching, alone, in groups, with chairs, with a table or other furniture. As you adopt each pose, make a mental note of which muscles are involved in the task, and how few are actually needed to carry it out efficiently. Then relax whichever muscles are unnecessarily employed.

(Merlin, 2003: 118)

Strasberg was influenced by Stanislavski's emphasis on relaxation as the first stage in all acting work. According to Strasberg,

Without relaxation a lot of things an actor might rightly want to do will be deformed as they enter [the actor's] instrument, because the instrument itself sets up resistance through tension. When that happens, the actor cannot achieve a real relation between what he is thinking and the expression which should be part of that thought or experience. The expression becomes contaminated.

(Strasberg, 1966: 89)

Even though Strasberg greatly valued relaxation exercises, he felt that Stanislavski's exercises were a bit too detailed and took too much of an actor's time to complete. He developed a more convenient form of training in relaxation that takes up less time than Stanislavski's exercises, but is just as effective. These exercises are described in Chapter 4.

### **3.1.1.2. Concentration**

The aspect of concentration is divided into two methods of sharpening the actor's concentration. First is the state of 'public solitude' that Stanislavski referred to during his classes as the state of total mental and physical concentration. For the actor to reach a state of public solitude, he has to tune out everything of the external world that does not affect the play and the action happening on stage. The actor must believe himself to be in a private situation so that, even though he is in public, he is behaving as if he were in private. This achievement of a state of 'public solitude' was one of the exercises that had a great influence on Lee Strasberg and his teachings in America. From these exercises Strasberg developed his controversial 'private moment' exercises, to be discussed in Chapter 4 dealing with Strasberg and his teaching methods.

Stanislavski begins developing this psycho-physical state of 'public solitude' by sharpening the five senses; and he adds a sixth sense of emotion. What is meant by

emotion becoming the sixth sense is that Stanislavski not only wanted his students to use their sensory faculties to remember a day or situation (were there certain smells or sounds that the student could remember?), but also was there a certain emotion that the student can remember about that day or situation. He developed exercises to sharpen these senses so that an actor can be better aware of what goes on around him. An example of one of these exercises is that Stanislavski would let his students focus on a specific day or situation in their lives. It could be a day like any other or a day or situation that had an impact in their lives. He would let them think back to this situation and remember it as clearly as possible. These exercises are part of the affective memory exercises, as explained in Chapter 2. Stanislavski did not put the emphasis on the actions of the situation, but rather on, for example, the smells or tastes and (as mentioned above) the emotions that the actors can remember. They would have to recall things that they saw or touched, and how it felt and how it made them feel. Stanislavski thought of emotion also as a sense now in relation to the other five sensory senses and by focusing on these sensory elements and emotion Stanislavski wanted to develop a heightened level of awareness and concentration in his students.

Stanislavski also faced resistance to this technique from Michael Chekhov, nephew of the playwright and one of Stanislavski's most talented pupils, who came out strongly against Stanislavski's use of this kind of emotional recall in 1918. Chekhov felt that the "use of personal experience and emotion...in effect, binds the actor to the habits of the everyday self which was not the way to liberate the actor's creativity" (in Chamberlain, 2000: 81). Furthermore, Chekhov "insisted on the importance of the imagination and attacked Stanislavsky's emphasis on emotional recall for being dangerous" (in Chamberlain, 2000: 83). Chekhov felt that the actor must not ask, "What would I feel?", but rather, "What would the character feel?". Chekhov also felt that the actor could easily get carried away in the memory and his own personal feelings and so lose control. Chekhov was quoted saying:

When we are possessed by the part and almost kill our partners and break chairs, etc., then we are not free and it is not art but hysterics. At one time in Russia we thought that if we were acting we must forget everything else. Of course, it was wrong.

(in Chamberlain, 2000: 83)

To a certain degree I have to agree with Chekhov's view of the dangers of Stanislavski's technique of emotional recall, but I do not feel that by using Stanislavski's technique of emotional recall that one is impinging on the actor's use of his imagination and creativity. Stanislavski never intended for the actors to bind themselves to their own habits by making use of emotional recall. I think he demanded quite the opposite as he wanted the actors to leave and forget about the situation after they could retrieve the emotion from the memory, but certainly that was also the most difficult part, and not all actors are equipped to distance themselves from their memories; it is here that the actor faces the danger of losing control, as Chekhov stated.

A second way of strengthening an actor's concentration, and certainly a less controversial way, is by using circles of attention. The actor can start by concentrating on a small object and then develop his concentration by making the area of concentration or the object of concentration bigger. As soon as the actor feels his concentration slip and his attention move to the audience, he must simply create a smaller circle of attention on stage again to re-focus his concentration. This technique of strengthening the actor's attention was more useful while on stage in a performance.

### **3.1.1.3. Imagination**

The next aspect is that of an actor's imagination. Stanislavski's system places great value on the capacity of the actor to treat fictional situations as if they were real. The method of developing the imagination for which Stanislavski is renowned is the 'magic if'. Stanislavski developed this technique from a game that he used to play with his niece. The actors were handed a certain object and then would have to change their relationship with the object or to change what the object is in their minds. For example, if an actor was given a hairbrush, he would have to imagine that it was a different object like a toothbrush or an ice-cream. This exercise was to develop the actor's ability to believe in imaginative objects or situations. This area also dealt with Stanislavski's acknowledgement of the actor's dual consciousness. By dual consciousness Stanislavski

meant that even though the actor knows that the set, props and given circumstances on stage are false, the actor asks himself: “What if they were real?”

Strasberg did not believe that Stanislavski’s ‘magic if’ was always effective. Strasberg felt that “it often leads the actor to an imitation of what he thinks he would do” (Strasberg, 1987: 52). Strasberg did, however, believe in the importance of Stanislavski’s recognition of the actor’s dual nature. Stanislavski also felt that visualization invigorates the imagination. What is meant by ‘visualization’ is the actor’s inner vision of the play and his character. Stanislavski placed a lot of emphasis on the point that an actor must not act without an image and clear picture of ‘the given circumstances’ in his mind’s eye.

#### **3.1.1.4. Communication**

The last section of the actor’s work on himself entails developing communication. Interaction between partners in a scene and interaction between an actor and the audience is of the utmost importance. Communication with words and dialogue is not the only kind of communication that Stanislavski found important. There is also the kind of communication that is hidden beneath the words, that the character feels, but cannot put into words. This was known as inner communication. Inner communication is usually communicated through non-verbal means, for instance, through body language, intonations or through the eyes. Stanislavski made use of improvisation exercises to refine the non-verbal communication of the actors by making them do improvisation exercises without their being allowed to communicate in words. He would ask the actors to create a scene; for instance, the one character has just bought the last loaf of bread at the grocery store and the other character was desperate for that bread. The goal of this exercise was that Stanislavski wanted the actors to be able to convey the characters’ feelings without having to verbalise them. Stanislavski referred in his handbooks to these improvisation exercises as ‘silent etudes’.

Strasberg used these exercises as the basis for the exercises that he developed and referred to in his handbooks as the ‘gibberish exercises’. In these exercises the actors were not silent: they spoke in a language consisting of sounds, but did not use any

language. The function of Stanislavski's and Strasberg's exercises was the same, even though they did differ in content, namely to create the ability within an actor to convey the emotion without necessarily saying the words.

Only when the actors had a firm grasp of communicating in a non-verbal way did Stanislavski have the actors move on to improvisation exercises where communicating through words was allowed.

### **3.1.2 The work on the role**

The second part of Stanislavski's system is his focus on the work on the role. This section focuses on the development and creation of a successful and truthful character. A truthful and creative actor shows sincerity of emotions and feelings that seem true within the given circumstances of the character and of the text, and in this way the actor creates a more believable character for the audience.

Stanislavski felt that for a production to be truthful

[t]he production of the stage director and the playing of the actors may be realistic, conventionalized, modernistic, expressionistic, futuristic – it is all the same as long as they are convincing, that is truthful or truth-like; beautiful, that is artistic; uplifted and creating the true life of the human spirit without which there can be no art.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 486-7)

He felt that for a character to be truthful the actor must get to know the character. But Stanislavski knew that in order for that to happen, the actor had to analyze and study the given circumstances; units and objectives; inner actions and physical actions; through-line of action and the super-objective of the character.

In the earlier days of Stanislavski's system he used a technique of analysis through imagination and intellect to analyze the text and the characters. Later on in his life, Stanislavski made use of the method of analysis through physical actions and active analysis. These methods will be discussed in detail in 3.1.2.3 and 3.1.2.4.

### **3.1.2.1. Round-the-table analysis**

The technique of analysis through imagination and intellect begins with analysis sessions around the table. The actors must analyze all the details given in the text to form a picture of the lives their characters lead outside of the text. These details include the given circumstances and social and historical influences of the time that the play is set in to understand the world and time period. This was revolutionary at the time, for it was not part of the work expected of the actors of the time to develop a history for a character. Stanislavski came to realize that such a hectic regimen of analysis by the whole cast might be too intellectual and that a more active and practical and individual analysis would be more helpful to the actors in the developmental and creative stage of a creating a character. He simply moved the focus of the exercise from being a purely historical and intellectual process to the physical analysis of a character. Stanislavski and his students still did the historical analysis, but on a much more individual level, much as Strasberg ultimately preferred the process of analysis to be. Stanislavski's techniques of active analysis and analysis through physical actions will be discussed later in this chapter

Strasberg did not agree wholly with the above method of round-the-table analysis. Strasberg stated, "Extensive analyses often do not affect at all what we essentially try to bring about in the actor – his ability to believe, his ability to experience, and his ability to behave" (Strasberg, 1966: 290). Strasberg was not against analysis as such; he did realize the value that it has in order for the actor to get to know the play and the character. Strasberg felt that analysis should be done individually by the actor himself only to help the actor with the process of creation. Strasberg's view is that

Analysis permits you to enter the fold of the role, to study its separate elements, its nature, its inner life, its entire world. Analysis consists in seeking to understand the outer, external elements and experiences in so far as they affect the inner life of the role. But analysis also attempts to find the comparable feelings, emotions, experiences, and other elements in oneself by means of which one will get close to the role. In short, analysis finds the material essential for the individual process of creation.

(Strasberg, 1966: 293)

Thus Strasberg did see the value of analysis up to a certain level, but he preferred that the process of analysis be an aid to the actor during the creation of a character. Stanislavski in turn had the whole cast do a very historical and intellectual analysis of the whole play and its characters.

Analysis by the actors to find the subtext of a character was also included in this process. What is meant by the subtext is the underlying meaning of the words of the character as explained in the previous chapter concerning Chekhov. In finding the subtext it helps to understand the actions of the character as will be seen in the following section.

### **3.1.2.2. Units and objectives**

To find the underlying meaning of the words would mean to discover what the character wants as a result of what he is saying or doing, and that is when the actor must divide the scenes into units and objectives. A different unit begins whenever the action and focus of a character changes within a scene. The actor examines the character's given circumstances to identify the problem within a scene and then formulate the action that needs to take place in order to solve the character's problem. Thus the actor's objective would be to find motivations to act according to the character's actions. The through-line of action in a play is created by connecting all the actions of all the actors within the scenes in a logical way. According to Stanislavski, the through-line of action "galvanizes all the small units and objectives...and directs them toward the super-objective" (Stanislavski, 1963: 146). The word "super-objective" is used to describe and characterize the essential idea and the core of the play. In a play the "whole stream of individual minor objectives, all the imaginative thoughts, feelings and actions of an actor should converge to carry out this super-objective...The most powerful stimuli to subconscious creativeness...are the through line of action and the super-objective" (Stanislavski, 1963: 138).

Strasberg later developed his own method of analysis derived from Stanislavski's concepts of given circumstances; units and objectives; inner actions and physical actions; through line of action and the super-objective of the character. Strasberg called this 'the

logic of the play'. To see the similarities between Strasberg's and Stanislavski's descriptions one must know that, according to Strasberg's analysis,

Every play has a complex unity of logic, but among objects deriving from the logic of the play it is possible to separate and distinguish the logic of previous circumstances, the logic of character, the logic of essential sensory objects, the logic of situation, and the logic of the particular event.

(Hethmon, 1966: 120)

All of these different elements of logic work together to form the logic of the whole play, similarly to Stanislavski's idea on units and objectives.

### **3.1.2.3. Method of analysis through physical actions**

The method of analysis through physical actions, also known as the method of physical actions, is a rehearsal method that Stanislavski started using later in his teaching career. He assumed that the emotions of a character are more easily aroused when certain physical actions of the life of the character are performed. In other words: "Playing the correct actions will cause the correct feelings to arise, provided the actor has analyzed the play and the character correctly" (Edwards, 1966: 101). The actor places his full attention on carrying out the desired actions and then the character's emotions will arise because of his actions. Kedrov, an actor who worked with Stanislavski in the MAT stated

Konstantin Sergeyeovich [Stanislavski] used to say that when we say 'physical actions', we are fooling the actor. They are psycho-physical actions, but we call them physical in order to avoid any unnecessary philosophizing. As for physical actions, they are concrete and easily understood. Precision of action - concreteness in its fulfilment in a given performance – this is the foundation of our art. If I know the exact action and its logic, then it becomes for me a score; how I carry out the action, according to the score, here, before this audience – that is creativity.

(in Toporkov, 1979: 211)

Stanislavski states that too many actors place the emphasis on the result and not on the process. He says that "[i]f our preparation work is right, the results will take care of themselves" (in Carnicke, 2000: 25). Using this method "the actor discovers and then performs the logical sequence of physical actions necessary to carry out the inner, purposeful actions of the scene" (Carnicke, 2000: 26). In doing so Stanislavski suggests that the correct emotions will arise from performing the correct actions.

Stanislavski noticed through his teaching of the above theory that body rhythms were a powerful trigger and stimulant for emotions. Thus, Stanislavski started concentrating on what he called tempo-rhythm. According to Stanislavski,

an actor on the stage need only sense the smallest modicum of organic physical truth in his action or general state and instantly his emotions will respond to his inner faith in the genuineness of what his body is doing. An actor need only believe in himself and his soul will open up to receive all the inner objectives and emotions of his role.

(Stanislavski, 1961: 150)

Stanislavski realized that each physical action is inseparably linked with the rhythm that characterizes it and that one cannot master the method of physical actions if one does not master the rhythm. The tempo-rhythm for an adult character would differ drastically from that of a child and, if the tempo-rhythms of the characters were not accurate, the rest of the portrayal would not be accurate and truthful either.

Charles Marowitz, author of *The Act of Being*, tells of a situation where Stanislavski was unable to get the right sense of a childlike quality from one of his actors. To try and remedy the situation Stanislavski

invited the actor to his house to ‘talk it over’. When the actor arrived, Stanislavski was seated on the floor in the midst of a pile of toys. Warily, the actor sat down and began to humour Stanislavski by playing with the toys. After a while a genuine fascination took over and the two men became engrossed in play, whereupon Stanislavski gleefully said, ‘There, now you have it. That’s what your character is like’.

(in Harrop, 1992: 59-60)

When the correct tempo-rhythm of the character is applied, the actor’s inner mood can be affected and the emotion memory can be excited, bringing the visual memory and images of the actor to life. So in Stanislavski’s view: “if the actor goes through the physical actions of the role in the way that has been laid down by habit, the correct internal experiencing will be brought about” (Whyman, 2007: 121).

#### **3.1.2.4. Active analysis**

The rehearsal method of active analysis was conducted in workshops at his home from 1934 right up until his death in 1938. In this method the actors understand and grasp the

play's structure or skeleton before memorizing the text. A student of Stanislavski explained it clearly: "The idea of any artistic work is contained not only in its words, but in its structure, and in the very medium of art" (in Carnick, 2000: 27). By improvising a scene from the text while not being bound by the text, the actors discover the actions and the counteractions of a scene.

The play is divided into a chain of events and these are divided into inciting, climatic, main and incidental events. The 'inciting' event is the event that starts the play and sets it in motion; the one that resolves the through-action of the play is the 'climatic' event; and the other two are based on their relativity to the importance of the story. In this method of analysis, the analysis is active; the actors are on their feet while discovering the play. Stanislavski stated, "The best way to analyze the play, is to take action in the given circumstances" (in Carnicke, 2000: 28). By this time Stanislavski had moved away from the inner, emotional technique of forming a character and the motivated actions.

This method of analysis is far removed from the intellectual exercises of his earlier work methods and he placed a lot of emphasis on improvisation exercises. He would let the actors read a scene and then do improvisation exercises where the actors must use their own words, but work into the scene any facts that they can remember from the reading. Afterwards the scene must be reread and compared with the improvisation exercise. This would be repeated a few times until there is an understanding of the actions and counteractions of the scene and only then may the actors memorize the words.

The documents and notebooks on this technique are sketchy and not very coherent as Stanislavski was old and nearing death while experimenting on it.

### **3.2. The First Studio**

In 1911 Danchenko made the surprising announcement that the MAT would adopt the 'system'. Stanislavski stated that

Very unexpectedly..., Nemirovich-Danckenko delivered a speech to the entire company, in which he insisted that all my new methods of work should be studied in detail by the actors of the main group and accepted by the Theatre....I was

overcome by the help that Nemirovich-Danchenko had given me, I am grateful to him for it to this day. But I confess that at that time I was not yet prepared to solve the difficult problem that Nemirovich-Danchenko laid before me. I had not yet found simple words for the expression of my thoughts and I fulfilled my mission far from perfectly.

(Stanislavski, 1985: 526)

Stanislavski believed that “nothing [could] be more harmful to art than the use of a method for its own sake” (in Merlin, 2003: 26). He believed this even more when he saw how the actors of the MAT adopted his terminology, but their acting remained the same as before. Stanislavski realized that the actors had to be trained in his system to acquire the techniques involved.

Stanislavski and a friend Leopold Sulerjitski – Suler as he was known – tried to instil the system into the actors at the MAT. Stanislavski came to realize that his system could not be explained and taught over a short period of time. They came to realize the need for a studio where they could train actors from a younger age who had not already formed their own methods and grown into their own methods. Stanislavski realized that his techniques had to become habitual within the actors, that the new had to become organically their own. Together these two men founded the First Studio in Moscow in 1912, a place where those who wanted to study with Stanislavski and be trained in his system could gather. The aim of the Studio was “to give practical and conscious methods for the awakening of superconscious creativeness” (Stanislavski, 1985: 531).

### **3.3. From Russia to America**

Stanislavski understood that in the life of the arts stagnation would mean the end of an artistic life. Stanislavski’s views on acting did not remain stagnant, but the changes that occurred were not fundamental changes. It was more a shift of focus and emphasis. The basic concept that he espoused – the truthful spirit of life in each character – remained an integral part of his method throughout the years. When Constantine Stanislavski died on August 8<sup>th</sup> in 1938, at the age of 75, he was still actively busy in the theatre and still improving his studies on the technique of acting.

Yet how is it that so many misinterpretations of his system arose? How did it happen that there were so many training schools that ‘trained’ their students according to the Stanislavski system, but their principles differ from what he taught? It seems that some actors took from Stanislavski’s system what appealed to them and discarded the rest, thus not following the system as a whole. This worrying aspect was highlighted in a series of articles written by the Polish director Erwin Axer in 1952-1953. He comments on the effect of Stanislavski’s system in the Polish theatre

The methods of theatrical work...in this resemble medical systemata, in that they give different results depending on whom, by who, and in what circumstances they are practised. These questions come to my mind at a time when our theatre is quickly and with great interest assimilating the theories of Stanislavsky and his followers. Misunderstandings are bound to appear when the ‘system’ or, what is worse, a fragment of the ‘system’, is believed to be a philosopher’s stone, a substitute for education, talent, culture, and skill... What we need is to know Stanislavsky, not to believe in Stanislavsky without knowing him.

(in Tyszka, 1989: 367)

I believe that the fact that some practitioners only taught a fragment of the ‘system’ explains why there are so many different versions of the ‘system’. Lev Dodin, Artistic Director of the Maly Theatre in St Petersburg, remarked on the problem that was created because of Stanislavski’s followers teaching only a fragment of the system

[Stanislavsky’s] investigations and experiences transmitted by those who left him early, say Boleslavsky...emphasized rational analysis [and] confirmed the rather naïve notion that the system was a collection of determined, fixed exercises and principles.

(in Shevtsova, 2004: 39)

Especially the followers of Stanislavski’s system in America were using only a fraction of his system. Stanislavski’s system spread like wild fire in America. One explanation for this could be as follows:

These Russian ideas caught on quickly in a foreign setting because in many ways they were not foreign at all. Stanislavsky challenged many of the orthodoxies within acting academies, but much of what he and his followers advocated meshed smoothly with developments in other areas of American life.

(Walden, 2003: 319)

The above quote makes a valid point, but now the question arises of how the system travelled to America. Two factors were mainly responsible.

### 3.3.2. Stanislavski's publications

The first factor that influenced the understanding of Stanislavski's system is the translation process from Russian to especially English of all his books. For more than 30 years Stanislavski made notes and drafts from his experiences and experiments in the theatre. Stanislavski wanted to publish his notes and research in the form of a book in order for his ideas to be accessible to a younger generation. He knew that one could not explain and try to teach acting methods written in a scientific style and by offering intellectual explanations. Stanislavski decided to write these handbooks in the form of a novel and, through the story of an acting teacher and his struggles with his students, explain his findings and introduce his system.

Stanislavski had a bigger plan outlined than just one book. In a letter written to his literary collaborator on 23 and 24 of December 1930, Mrs Liubov Gurevich, he outlined a sequence of seven books, which were to cover his entire process and aspects of thinking:

1. *My life in Art*: this book had already been published in English and Russian by 1930 and was intended to show the artist's progress from an amateur approach to knowledge of the system;
2. *Work on Oneself* was to be about actor training, divided into two parts: a) Experience, b) Physical Characterization;
3. *Work on a Role* would contain information about units, objectives and action. The area of study would not be scenes, extracts or exercises, but the whole play;
4. Possibly to be combined with 3, this book would continue further discussion of the work on a role, leading to the creative state in which the unconscious becomes active;
5. This book would be devoted to a broader discussion of the problems of performance, building on the material of the preceding books;
6. *The Art of the Director* this book would deal with the director's task of building and maintaining an ensemble;
7. The last book would deal with the problems of directing and performance in opera.

(Benedetti, 1982: 52-53)

With Stanislavski's ailing health, he never did see the publication of these seven volumes of his system, but only *My Life in Art* (1924) and *An Actor Prepares* (1936). Stanislavski was working closely with an American couple, the Hapgoods, on the manuscript of his system. He struggled to have his second book published in Russia in 1930. Everyone

had the same reply, namely that the book was too long. The Hapgoods offered to help Stanislavski to have his books published in America. His system could be divided into two basic parts and the publishers wanted to divide these two parts into two books. Stanislavski was very worried that there would be a separation of mind and body that the splitting of the book might encourage. According to Jean Benedetti, Stanislavski

was afraid that the separate publication of the first part of the book as *An Actor's Work on Himself I: Experience (An Actor Prepares)*, concentrating on the psychological aspects of training, would give the appearance of an ultra-naturalistic bias if it were not properly linked to the physical aspects of acting, physical characterization ('incarnation'), which were to be dealt with in Part Two, and to work on the text, which was to be the subject of a later book.

(Benedetti, 1990: 272)

The first part is on the internal and external work of an actor on himself, and the second part is the internal and external work on a role. Stanislavski did not want this separation as he felt that the process of the system had to be read as a whole, because all the parts are of equal importance. Stanislavski feared that by publishing two different books, people would place more importance on the one book than on the other, and thus place more importance on one part of his system instead of the whole process. He had already sent the first half of the manuscript to the Hapgoods, but Stanislavski died shortly before sending the second half of the manuscript. And then World War Two intervened and made it impossible for Stanislavski's family to send the second half of the manuscript to the Hapgoods in America. Elizabeth Hapgood went ahead and published the first half of the manuscript under the title *An Actor Prepares* in 1937. This book focuses on the work that Stanislavski did between 1906 and 1914 and this was the period of the system where Stanislavski placed an emphasis on the inner process.

The second half was finally sent to the Hapgoods after the war in 1947. The material Elizabeth Hapgood received was nowhere near sufficiently completed to be formulated into a book, and so she cut and reworked the material and published it in 1949 under the title *Building a Character*. This was based on the work Stanislavski did between 1914 and 1920. The book emphasizes the work he did on physical technique as well as the work on how to develop a character. The long gap between the two publications led

people to place more emphasis on the psychological side of his training than on the physical part of his training.

It was only in 1961 that Elizabeth Hapgood finished translating Stanislavski's last work, focusing on the method of physical actions, and this was published under the title *Creating a Role*. This book was compiled from incomplete drafts that Stanislavski had written before his death. Because of the fact that Stanislavski was still doing research right up until his death, the documents were not yet formulated into a book, but the Hapgoods felt that the documents were far too valuable not to be published. This book needed even more editorial work from the Hapgoods than the other books, seeing that Stanislavski's documents were in a state of confusion as they consisted mainly of rough material for a book and not yet a completed work.

Many people who read *An Actor Prepares* saw it as Stanislavski's whole system and never went so far as to read the following two books that made up his whole system. Jean Benedetti explains the effect of the time lapse between publications:

The failure adequately to present an integrated psycho-physical technique resulted all too frequently in an imbalance in training. *An Actor Prepares* became the book, while *Building a Character* seemed like a less important afterthought. The supposed supremacy of inner motivation, of 'feeling it', led several generations of young actors to reject or neglect the rigorous development of vocal and physical skills.

(Benedetti, 1990: 275)

I feel the impact of the fact that the books were published so far apart is monumental. By the time that *Building a Character* was published, Stanislavski's system had already received so much acclaim and numerous actors had started practicing his exercises. To the world *An Actor Prepares* was the textbook to the whole Stanislavski system and, as Benedetti stated above, *Building a Character* was merely an afterthought. The impact can clearly be seen in the work that Strasberg did and in the development of his method. Seeing that the first book focused mainly on the psychological aspects of creating a character, it comes as no surprise that Strasberg placed so much focus on the psychological aspects. Even though Strasberg's method became extremely well known,

it saddens me that Strasberg did not place as much value on the two following books as on the first. He did not experience Stanislavski's system as a whole and followed the intricate development and adaptations that Stanislavski made to his own system that is evident in the later books. An example of this is how Stanislavski's views changed on analysis. It is only in the later books that he writes of active analysis and analysis through physical actions. As written earlier in this chapter, Strasberg faced much criticism on that subject, but Stanislavski did change his view of analysis to something quite similar to Strasberg's opinion of the matter.

In 1961 a series of books was published in Russia entitled *The Complete Works*. This consisted of Stanislavski's notes, also including the notes that were sent to the Hapgoods to be translated into the three books noted above. Numerous protests were made about the differences between the Russian editions and the American publications. Questions arose about Elizabeth Hapgood's use of terminology and her understanding of the Russian language. Studies demonstrated

the inconsistencies and confusions in the translation of basic terms and revealed the distortions produced by injudicious cuts.... Mrs. Hapgood fails adequately to distinguish, and consistently to translate, terms such as 'to behave' (*deistvovat'*), 'to do' (*delat'*) and 'to act' (*igrat'*) which, for Stanislavski, have distinct meanings.

(Benedetti, 1990: 275)

Elizabeth Hapgood stood firmly by her point that she translated Stanislavski's texts for the American reading audience and she states in the preface to *Creating a Role*:

I believe that in preparing [these three texts] I have carried out once more the task entrusted to me by Stanislavski himself, to eliminate duplications and cut whatever was meaningless for non-Russian actors.

(Hapgood, 1961: xi)

Even though we should be grateful to Elizabeth Hapgood – for if she did not assist Stanislavski, his books might never have been published – one cannot deny the fact that so many students and teachers of the Stanislavski system are obliged to study material that might be far removed from the Stanislavski system as he himself conceived it.

### 3.3.3. The tour to America

The second influential factor explaining how Stanislavski's system became known in America was a tour to America by the MAT in 1922. The company split in two and Stanislavski led the more famous actors on a tour through Europe and America, while Danchenko stayed in Moscow keeping the theatre open. The tour lasted two years from 1922 to 1924.

Soon after the MAT's first tour to Europe in 1905 reports started making their way to America. Accounts of the company's success and new acting style stimulated journalists to make the journey to Russia to investigate the reason for the enthusiasm. Throughout the following years a constant stream of articles on, and reviews of, the work done by the MAT made their way into America. Oliver Saylor, author of *The Russian Theatre* and *Inside the Moscow Art Theatre*, wrote an article published in the October 1922 issue in the *Theatre Magazine* describing the effect of Stanislavski's system on theatre:

By a contagious alchemy of the spirit, which has baffled the descriptive powers of all Russian critics, Stanislavski implanted in his associates an inner vision of plays and roles and a general method of spiritual and psychological as well as superficially realistic interpretation which distinguishes the theatre's productions from all others.

(Saylor, 1922: 215-18)

In *The Russian Theatre* Saylor comments on the acting of Stanislavski in the first production of *Three Sisters* that he attended:

I suddenly awoke to the presence of towering genius in that great, unobtrusive scene in the second act. The third and fourth followed with the proud anguish of that farewell, and I understood the secret of the Moscow Art Theatre.... And so to Stanislavsky, producer, and Stanislavsky, actor, must be added Stanislavsky, teacher, and probably the greatest teacher of acting our generation has known.

(Saylor, 1922: 52)

With articles such as these being published in America praising the work of Stanislavski and the MAT, American audiences were being prepared to appreciate the MAT.

The results of this tour were far-reaching for the MAT as well as for American theatre in general, as some of the key MAT actors such as Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya decided to remain in America to work as actors, directors or teachers.

Richard Boleslavsky left Russia in 1920 and was already in America when the MAT made their tour through America. A week after the opening of the first performance by the MAT, Richard Boleslavsky began a series of lectures at the Princess Theatre in New York. These lectures offered the philosophy of actor training from the MAT. In April of that year Boleslavsky published an article entitled “The Man and His Method” in the *Theatre Magazine*. Boleslavsky specifically dealt with the realism of the MAT in this article and added:

By realism, however, is not meant sordid detail, mechanical cleverness, make-up, nor scenic intricacy. The realism that Stanislavsky preaches is internal, not external. An actor who can stand in an imaginary snowdrift and actually make the audience shiver has mastered the reality of his art.

(Boleslavsky, 1923: 27)

Miriam and Herbert Stockman, two patrons of the arts in New York, offered to find the finances to create the opportunity for Boleslavsky to direct a training school based on the principles of the MAT. Boleslavsky turned to his friend and colleague, Maria Ouspenskaya, who was also a member of the MAT, to help him with the training school. Together they formed the American Laboratory Theatre in 1923. Their teachings at the American Laboratory Theatre will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

The American Laboratory Theatre had a considerable effect on how Stanislavski’s teachings developed in America. It was at the American Laboratory Theatre that two of the most renowned and successful teachers of the Stanislavski System, Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, received their education. Some of the Laboratory’s students formed the Group Theatre in 1930, among them Strasberg and Adler. Here once again the Group Theatre adopted only some of the elements of the system. This led in later years to the founding of the New York Actors Studio and where under the guidance of Strasberg the ‘System’ evolved into the ‘Method’ as taught by Lee Strasberg in the 1950s. Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya were only familiar with Stanislavski’s earlier work, where the emphasis and focus were on the emotional and inner process. This was because they left the MAT before Stanislavski started his intense study of the method of physical analysis and active

analysis. Lee Strasberg took this aspect of Stanislavski's system and developed it into a complete process for the actor.

Thanks to these two Russian disciples of Stanislavski, Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya, Lee Strasberg was exposed to Stanislavski's system. Lee Strasberg became one of the most ardent followers and supporters and advocates of Stanislavski's system. He focused on only some of the aspects of the Stanislavski system and derived from them his own 'method', which some say took a very misleading turn away from Stanislavski's system as will be seen in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 4: Lee Strasberg and ‘The Method’**

### **4.1. Lee Strasberg before the American Laboratory Theatre (ALT)**

Lee Strasberg was born in 1901 at Budzanow in Galicia; Galicia was at the time part of the Austrian Empire. As the youngest of four children by Baruch Meyer and Ida Strasberg, there was never any indication in his childhood and young adulthood that he would be in the theatre world or one of the most influential people in the theatre for that matter. He did appear in some Yiddish amateur productions of playwrights such as Sudermann, but this was only child’s play for him and not something to build a future on. Shortly after young Lee’s birth, his father immigrated to New York, while his wife and children remained in Budzanow. Baruch could only afford to bring over half of the family at a time and in 1909 the two younger boys, including Strasberg, and their mother were shipped to America. They lived together as a family in Manhattan’s Lower East Side until the early 1920s, when they moved to the Bronx.

Strasberg had an intense interest in cultural topics. He started reading on cultural topics while in high school and, by the time he lived in his own apartment in New York, books lined his apartment from wall to wall. The one subject that started to interest Strasberg the most was the theatre. He read anything from biographies of actors to books on theatre histories and early issues of theatre magazines.

When Strasberg was in his early twenties, a friend convinced him to join the Students of Art and Drama (SAD). This group was a “social group of amateurs that met and performed plays at the Chrystie Street Settlement House” (Hethmon, 1966: 12), which was a community centre for the East Side. While playing a blind boy in a Maeterlinck play, he caught the eye of Philip Loeb, who was at that time a theatre professional and casting director for the Theatre Guild. He was so impressed by Strasberg’s performance that he asked him after the performance if he was interested in acting as a career, but Strasberg had not yet realized his passion for the theatre, and thought of it as something he did in his spare time.

His attitude to theatre changed dramatically during 1923. Many things influenced his change of heart. It was the year that Strasberg saw the famous actress Eleonora Duse in her farewell performance; it was also the year that Stanislavski and his theatre company, the MAT, visited America for the first time; and it was the year that Strasberg read *On the Art of the Theatre* by Gordon Craig, which had a huge influence on him and changed the way he perceived a career in theatre. These events made Strasberg realize that the theatre is not only a place for entertainment, but holds the possibility to be a place where great art could be made. Strasberg decided to enrol at the Clare Tree Major School of the Theatre. He attended the school for three months, but during this time Strasberg felt dissatisfied with the training he received without really knowing what it was that bothered him. Of his time at the Clare Tree Major School of the Theatre Strasberg says

I practiced speech, voice, ballet, and other generally recognized requisites of the actor's basic training. At the end of the period I felt the need for something beyond that, but had no knowledge of where to find it.

(Strasberg, 1987: 41)

Similar to Stanislavski Strasberg was not satisfied with his first experience of theatre training. It is interesting that both of them felt that something was missing in their training. They instinctively searched for something 'new', something that they felt were lacking in the training that they were receiving.

#### **4.2 Strasberg at the American Laboratory Theatre**

Strasberg auditioned for a theatre school that he had heard of in Greenwich Village. This school turned out to be the American Laboratory Theatre founded by Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya. Strasberg was accepted and introduced to the Stanislavski 'system' as taught by Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya. Not only had these two teachers worked intensely with Stanislavski, but also had worked with Evgeny Vakhtangov, who had studied under Stanislavski and was one of Stanislavski's most promising students at the Moscow First Studio, and they thus also introduced Strasberg to the teachings of Vakhtangov. The training he received from Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya had a deep and lasting effect on him. Strasberg remembers thinking during his first days at the Laboratory Theatre: "This is it. This is what it really means. This is what it is all about" (Strasberg, 1987: 64). What he refers to by these exclamations are the questions that had

been developing in his mind on how to achieve 'real' and 'true' acting and not just make use of an external skill. Strasberg saw the teachings at the Laboratory Theatre as a revelation and it opened his mind to another world of acting. In one of his notebooks Strasberg cites Boleslavsky's idea of performance technique:

The main point of this school is that it is not enough to live through a part only once, and then represent it many times. The actor must live it through every time. In addition to the technical means of the actor (voice, speech, body) attention is put on the technique of feelings, and the feelings are never dissociated from the outer technique; they are used in every performance.

(Strasberg, 1987: 66)

At the American Laboratory Theatre the emphasis was placed on the recognition that it was not only the actor's technical abilities, voice, speech, body, that could be trained, but also the actor's internal abilities like imagination, emotion and inspiration. The means of training the actor's imagination, emotion and inspiration were through concentration, affective memory and action. Boleslavsky described the way in which concentration, affective memory and action are connected for the actor: "What you are doing on the stage is the most important thing in the world at the present moment; and your memory must tell you how it is to be done" (in Strasberg, 1987: 69).

An example of an exercise in concentration introduced to Strasberg by Maria Ouspenskaya, or Madame as they were required to call her, is that the students were asked to get up and walk around in the classroom. Strasberg remembers that they felt very uneasy and uncomfortable with Madame watching them. Madame would then ask them to move some books from one place to another and, while walking, think about something or remember something: how many books they have read in the last year, etc. As they kept on walking, Strasberg noticed something strange happening. The rhythm became less self-conscious and more natural. Madame told Strasberg: "Always have a reason, a problem, a cause for appearing on the stage" (Strasberg, 1987: 68). The task for the actor was to keep his attention focused on what he is doing and so create the reality and truthfulness of the experience.

The next part of Strasberg's training at the ALT was affective memory. This part of the training affected Strasberg the most along with the discoveries that Stanislavski had made

about the psychological nature of the actor. When developing his own method Strasberg placed most of his focus on the training methods that Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya had developed on this area. Boleslavsky divided affective memory into analytic memory, recalling how an action should be done; and the memory of real feeling, which helps the actor to accomplish this feeling on stage. In his own work Strasberg divided affective memory into sense memory and emotional memory. These elements will be discussed later in the chapter.

The exercises with Boleslavsky and Madame were focused mainly on the area of analytic memory. These exercises were designed to train the actor's imagination. The work in this area was primarily with imaginary objects, what Stanislavski called 'objects in the air', and imaginary events on stage. The purpose of these exercises was that, even though the object or event is imaginary, the response is real. Strasberg states that the imaginary objects or events would "appear real and come alive on stage if the actor had been trained in stimulating the senses to actually respond to these objects" (Strasberg, 1987: 70).

Exercises in training the senses followed. The training began with the five senses plus the motor senses. The training of the senses was a vital part of the conscious training of the actor at the ALT. Each student was assigned an older student, who was called a shepherd, to help with these exercises. Strasberg tells of exercises he did with his shepherd:

We had to differentiate between picking up pearls, nuts, potatoes, cantaloupes, and watermelons. In other exercises, my shepherd would ask me to see a picture on the wall, hear a certain noise, and so forth. I then worked with my shepherd on an exercise that involved two simultaneous actions of affective memory. I was to drink a cup of tea and read a letter at the same time. One of the actions – drinking the tea – was to be entirely unconscious; my attention was to be wholly centred on the letter.

(Strasberg, 1987: 71-72)

The students were trained that the entire attention of the actor is focused on the objects and on the events that happen. The students were not to worry and focus on the emotion, but by focusing on the action the emotion will arise. This is a clear example of how

Stanislavski's focus had changed from emotion being the *end product* to the acquired emotion being the *by-product* from doing the correct actions.

This leads to the element of action, which was also a focus at the ALT. According to Boleslavsky, true action should be accomplished with the help of the senses and concentration. Actions are not only physical or mental, but physical, motivational and emotional. Strasberg describes action as

not a literal paraphrase of the author's words, nor a synonym for what transpires on the stage, nor a logical analysis of the scene. Action has always been *the* essential element in the theatre. The very word *actor* implies that. Every actor makes use of one or another kind of action.

(Strasberg, 1987: 75)

What influenced Strasberg the most about Boleslavsky's teachings was his notion of a unified system of actor training that correlates to Stanislavski's teachings. This included vocal training, relaxation, movement work, affective memory and an understanding of the given circumstances of a character and the play. Strasberg was inspired by the idea that there could be a sequence of exercises that would physically and mentally develop the necessary stimulations for creativity within the actor. The ideas brought forth by Boleslavsky at the ALT served to be the basis for the ideas Strasberg developed at the Group Theatre.

Strasberg did not simply accept what he was taught; he tested all the theories and training methods, mostly by trying to find for himself the meaning of Stanislavski's teachings by applying them to actual productions he was involved in. In 1924 Strasberg remembered his chance meeting with Philip Loeb of the Theatre Guild and contacted him. Strasberg decided to leave the American Laboratory Theatre and worked for the Theatre Guild until 1931 accumulating more knowledge and experience of the world of theatre.

### **4.3. The Group Theatre and The Method**

While working for the Theatre Guild, Strasberg met another aspiring actor, Harold Clurman. Clurman had also attended a course at the American Laboratory Theatre and, while there, he met Stella Adler, who also attended the classes by Boleslavsky and

Ouspenskaya on the Stanislavski system. Strasberg and Clurman became acquainted with Cheryl Crawford, then casting director for the Theatre Guild, and together they started dreaming of ways they could “personally develop as writers and the theatre could be made more responsive to the needs of its audience” (Bigsby, 1982: 159). The first meeting of this group was held in November 1930. As Adler stated: “The theatre was analyzed and dissected and reshaped” (in Chinoy and Cole, 1965: 536), and this generated a lot of interest among actors. With money raised from well-wishers, Cheryl Crawford, Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman secured a house in Brookfield Centre, Connecticut, for the summer of 1931 and invited 28 actors to join them there for a workshop. This was the start of The Group Theatre.

Strasberg describes the period during The Group Theatre’s existence as

not so much a period of discovery as it was a period of utilizing previous discoveries in the process of actual professional productions. The concern during this period was with practical application rather than theory. It was a way of testing what we had learned from the Stanislavsky system as presented by our own teachers; it was also an attempt to check our knowledge and our ability to use those principles to achieve our own results, without imitating what Stanislavski and his other followers achieved.

(Strasberg, 1987: 92-93)

Two main ideals emerged from all the discussions and became the signature of the Group Theatre. Firstly, the actor had to become aware of himself, meaning that he had to self-evaluate himself in terms of understanding his problems in relation to his whole life and society. It would be beneficial for the actor to have a common point of view which could be shared with the other co-workers of the theatre and then to the audience. Secondly, the actor had to develop himself as an actor through his craft. The ideal was for all the actors to use the same basic craftsmanship and only in this way could the company achieve a real ensemble and truthful creative interpretations of a play.

Strasberg’s principal method for actor training was the use of improvisation and exercises in affective memory. This technique was one of Stanislavski’s main methods whereby the actor had to recall an experience from his past in order to recreate through those emotions truthful and psychologically convincing action. Both of these types of

exercises were steps towards truthful performance, which was the aim of the Group Theatre. Group actor and teacher Robert Lewis explains that real behaviour on stage must be “really experienced, but artistically controlled, and correctly used for the particular character portrayed, the complete circumstances of the scene, and the chosen style of the author and the play being performed” (Lewis, 1958: 99). This is what Strasberg aimed to achieve within The Group Theatre.

One of Strasberg’s chief achievements as the director of The Group Theatre was his reformulation of Stanislavski’s ‘magic if’ as well as his adaptation to the ‘given circumstances’. Strasberg did adapt Stanislavski’s view on the given circumstance to resemble something closer to Vakhtangov’s view. Stanislavski asked that, given the particular circumstances of the play, how would you behave; what would you do, how would you feel, how would you react? Or in other words: ‘What would I do if I was in the situation?’ Strasberg felt that

whereas this is suitable in plays close to the contemporary and psychological experience of the actor, it fails to help the actor attain the necessary intense and heroic behaviour that is characteristic of the great classical plays.

(Strasberg, 1987: 85)

Strasberg’s reformulation asked, although the circumstances of the scene indicate that the character must behave in a certain way, what would you, the actor, have to do in order to feel the emotions and behave in that particular way that the character behaves and the emotions that the character feels? In the Vakhtangov approach this becomes: ‘The circumstances in the play indicate that the character must behave in a particular way, but what would motivate me, the actor to behave in the way that the character does?’ This reformulation not only requires the actor to create the emotional result desired, but in order for the actor to achieve that result it demands from him that he makes it real and personal to himself. Strasberg placed a lot of emphasis on the truth and reality of the situations within a play. He felt that this could only be achieved if the actor was able to create the truth of experience, of behaviour and of expression. Strasberg moved away from Stanislavski’s approach in this area and preferred Vakhtangov’s approach. I myself prefer the Vakhtangov/Strasberg approach. I feel that their approach is one step removed from the actor, the person, where Stanislavski’s approach was directly linked to the actor.

I find it psychologically healthier to be removed from the character. I do not feel that such close submersion is the best option for any actor and their mental health. Stanislavski asks: ‘What would I, the person, do in such a situation?’ where Strasberg asks: ‘What would I, as the character, do in such a situation?’. In Strasberg’s method the actor had to create a motivation for himself so that the character’s actions could emotionally stem from the actor in order to get a truthful performance.

Strasberg felt that his approach was less limiting to the actor. The actor had to create a substitute reality to that of the play to help him behave in a way that was truthful to the character. An example of where Strasberg helped an actor with substitution was in John Howard Lawson’s *Success Story*, which he directed in 1932. The actor Luther Adler played a hot-tempered character, but Adler could not find the true emotion of his character. Strasberg dealt with the situation in the following manner:

After some work in rehearsal, I finally asked him, “What makes you angry?” Luther replied, “When someone does something awful to someone else, I get furious.” Luther therefore created a substitute situation in his own mind: a wrong done to someone close to him. This allowed him to produce the character’s destructive energy.

(Strasberg, 1987: 87)

This leads Strasberg to an area in the Stanislavski system of great interest to him, i.e. the ‘affective memory’. Strasberg extensively studied and experimented with this method of using memory to arouse emotions until it evolved into the concepts of ‘sense memory’ and ‘emotional memory’. These elements will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter on the work that Strasberg did at The Actors Studio. Strasberg emphasized the use of the five senses in his exercises of emotional recollection. He wanted to discover techniques that led to truth in performance to be generated through work that is based on what the actor knows, through his own reality.

A slight difference in approach between Stanislavski and Strasberg concerning the technique of emotional recall is that Stanislavski wanted the actor to remember a similar event in his past as to the one the character is meant to experience. Having then recalled a similar event, the actor must apply the memory of his emotions to the event in the play. Strasberg concluded that emotional recall is more easily accessible and more consistent if

the actor does not work directly to retrieve the emotion, but rather tries to recall all the sensations and circumstances that he associates with the event that produced that emotion in the first place. Strasberg's training stimulated the actor's sense memory so that

the experience the actor is trying to create can be recaptured not only mentally, not only externally, but by the actual sensory and emotional reliving of the experience.

(Hull, 1985: 226)

This was, however, what Stanislavski was leaning towards in his later work with active analysis that was later published.

Stella Adler, who was actively involved in the Group Theatre and also studied at the American Laboratory Theatre with Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya, felt that Strasberg misinterpreted Stanislavski's system and that he over-emphasised the technique of 'affective memory'. Some of the other directors of the Group Theatre also became concerned with

penetrating the psychological truth of individuals, with tapping emotional verities rather than with subordinating character to action, the individual to the type, private anguish to public meaning.

(Bigsby, 1982: 163)

Adler's emphasis was placed on the given circumstances of the play, the actor's imagination and the physical actions. She always acknowledged the importance of drawing on oneself in a role, but felt that the main source of inspiration is not only psychology or past memories, as with Strasberg, but the actors' imagination as they relate to the given circumstances of the play. According to Adler, 99% of the events onstage derive in part from the imagination. She states that this is the case because onstage

you will never have your own name and personality or be in your own house. Every person you talk to will have been written imaginatively by the playwright. Every circumstance you find yourself in will be in the actor's imagination.

(Adler, 1988: 17)

Adler wanted the actor's inspiration to come from the world of the play itself, while Strasberg emphasised the realisation of the character from the actor's own personal life. Adler never abandoned the inner belief of the actor's performance completely. She stated: "The whole aim of modern theatre is not to act, but to find the truth of the play within yourself, and to communicate that. If you play simply for the lines, you're dead"

(in Hirsch, 1984: 216). In this instance I agree with Adler that Strasberg over-emphasized affective memory and emotional recall. This might be because I myself am not an actress who uses emotional recall and affective memory in every instance and for every emotion that the characters go through. I also feel that the sources of imagination and inspiration can be found within the material of the play and the text itself. Nonetheless, I say this not to discredit Strasberg's methods. There is definite value to Stanislavski's and Strasberg's techniques of using an actor's personal emotional memories. Having tried these techniques myself during certain exercises and in creating certain characters, I feel that emotional recall should only be the last resort to help with an emotion for a character or situation that the actor has difficulty with. I feel that this is the function that Stanislavski created the notion of affective memory to serve – for it to be a helpline for an actor struggling with a certain emotion or character. But Strasberg took one bit of Stanislavski's system and created the basis of his whole 'method' around this one aspect of a much bigger system.

Adler could not agree with Strasberg on this aspect of affective memory and decided that she and Clurman would make a trip to the Soviet Union and on their return to America meet up with Stanislavski while he was on tour in Paris. Adler spent six weeks with Stanislavski and during this time she studied his system and his working methods intensely. After she returned from her time with Stanislavski, Adler challenged Strasberg by pointing out that he was misapplying Stanislavski's work in placing too much emphasis on the emotional memory. The already strained relationship between Strasberg and Adler worsened.

On Adler's accusations Strasberg commented:

She was always over-emotional...Then she went to Stanislavski. Of course, he said that this was misuse of the Method, and that was all she wanted to hear. She came back and told the Group we were misinterpreting. But the results were right. You can't be doing it wrong if the results are right

(in Bigsby, 1982: 163)

Strasberg also made the point that, even though Stanislavski had a huge influence on his work, he had the right to develop his methods into something of his own. Strasberg stated:

It has always been fed by those principles that derive from Stanislavski, but I never do anything because anybody said so...I do something because I have tried it and think it works. I am always very careful about saying that what I use is Stanislavski's, because I am liable to misuse it or use it wrongly. It is true that the basic elements are Stanislavski's, but I hope I have gone beyond some of it and have contributed something of my own.

(Strasberg, 1966: 40)

The other area on which Strasberg placed a great deal of emphasis was improvisation. This element will also be dealt with in more detail in the section concerning Strasberg's work at The Actors Studio. Strasberg felt that this related to the creation of an ensemble and that improvisation permitted the actor to develop the necessary flow of thought to develop spontaneity on the stage. At The Group Theatre the improvisation procedures were all applied within the context of rehearsing a particular play, seeing that Strasberg had not yet developed specific standard improvisation exercises. Because the improvisation exercises were done in the context of particular plays, Strasberg noticed that the improvisation

leads to a process of thought and response and also helps the actor to discover the logical behaviour of the character, rather than "merely illustrating" the obvious meaning of the line.

(Strasberg, 1987: 91)

Even though Strasberg and Stanislavski used slightly different techniques and devices, both of them were after the same goal. Both believed that actors should continually seek inner truth and so justify their actions; this would create more credibility and a sense of reality to their roles. Ultimately, they both wanted an actor to seek and find his own truth in the work he does. Strasberg, like Stanislavski, "wanted to see both human beings as having depth, and the actor as a complex psychological being who generated layers of meaning in performance which lie beyond easy comprehension" (Krasner, 2000: 130). As an actor, director and teacher, Strasberg continuously modified Stanislavski's approach. He would develop and adapt his method to the modern American theatre as he thought necessary. Strasberg did not see this modification as irreverent; he knew that Stanislavski himself continuously changed and adapted his own system. Stanislavski was known to say

Create your own method. Don't depend slavishly on mine. Make up something that will work for you. But keep breaking traditions, I beg you.  
(in Hull, 1985: 224)

In 1941, after a decade of being a major influence on American theatre, the Group Theatre came to an end. The Group Theatre had a great influence on the American theatre as it introduced to America

a highly naturalistic, inner-focused style for a naturalistic drama dealing with the modern American psyche: together with the universal expansion of that originally American and highly naturalistic form, film – for which Method acting was peculiarly suited – it led the American theatre to receive international recognition as a distinct and influential force.

(Harrop, 1985: 231-232)

In 1947 Cheryl Crawford, Elia Kazan and Robert Lewis founded the Actors Studio and in 1949 Lee Strasberg joined them and later became the director.

#### **4.4. The Actors Studio: A Brief History**

The Group Theatre was the first American company that was fully trained to perform as an ensemble and, as Harold Clurman wrote after The Group's first production,

They succeeded in fusing the technical elements of their craft with the stuff of their own spiritual and emotional selves. They succeeded in doing this because...they were prepared by the education of their work together before and during rehearsals.

(in Hethmon, 1966: 15)

It was these kinds of traditions and sentiments that they wanted to recreate in The Actors Studio. Kazan, Crawford and Lewis founded the Actors Studio in 1947 and it was only a matter of time before Kazan approached Strasberg to teach there. Kazan said about Strasberg that he was "one of those people that are by very nature teachers" (Hethmon, 1966: 16). It was not long before Strasberg became the main teacher in charge of the actors' unit and in 1951 he was appointed as the Artistic Director. Finally Strasberg could train the actors according to his application of Stanislavski's system, now better known in America as 'The Method'. Kazan commented on his decision to include Strasberg in The Actors Studio that

Strasberg ...[is] a superb teacher. The Actors Studio and he became synonymous, which is the way I wanted it. The Actors Studio and this kind of acting have

become the central tradition of American acting. Now, not only all these actors have become famous, but they have followers.

(in Ciment, 1974: 37)

On May 11<sup>th</sup> 1962 it was announced that a new unit was being formed at The Studio and it was going to be known as The Actors Studio Theatre. It had been a hope for The Studio from the beginning to form a theatre that was linked with The Actors Studio. Kazan stated in a motivational speech at the opening of the season in October 1958

Here is material to create probably the best theatre possible outside of Russia. I will never feel within my heart that this organization is a success until we have created from the material here an organization that implements our aesthetic of theatre.

(in Hethmon, 1966: 21-22)

On March 11<sup>th</sup> 1963 The Actors Studio Theatre opened at the Hudson Theatre in New York with its first production, Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*.

#### **4.5. Strasberg and teaching at The Actors Studio**

According to Strasberg, the fundamental nature of the actor's problem was the "actor's ability to create organically and convincingly, mentally, physically, and emotionally, the given reality demanded by the character in the play; and to express this in the most vivid and dynamic way possible" (Strasberg, 1987: 105). By using Strasberg's method and applying it individually, the actor can evolve his own technique for utilizing and controlling his resources and so be prepared when a moment of difficulty arises, so that the actor does not become paralyzed with fear, but can work through it. While so many wrongly thought that Strasberg gave the members a series of rules that define and constitute a system of acting, he rather tried to show each actor the nature of his individual instrument.

Over the years the work that Strasberg did at The Studio became known as 'The Method' and the members became known as 'Method Actors', but people at The Studio itself seldom referred to themselves as 'Method Actors' or their way of acting as 'Method Acting'. It seems that it was only when The Studio's work began to attract attention from

the outside world that the term 'method' was used. In the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Strasberg wrote:

The Method represents a development of his [Stanislavski's] procedures based not only on his writings but also on his actual achievement in his major productions. It includes the work of Vakhtangov, who demonstrated that Stanislavski's ideas apply to the essential problems of the actor in any style and not only the realistic style most often associated with them. The Method became widely known in mid-twentieth century largely through the work in films of such actors as Marlon Brando, Rod Steiger, and Geraldine Page, who had studied at the Actors Studio in New York City. These actors made a powerful impression and showed a remarkable ability to bridge the gap between stage, screen, and television to an extent that aroused excitement and interest in the rest of the world. So strong was the fusion of performer and role that many of the traits of the character were confused with those of the actor, which led to serious misunderstanding.

(in Hull, 1985: 15)

Strasberg decided to document the work that he has done over the years on the 'method' in his book *A Dream of Passion* (1987). In this book Strasberg divided his training into two stages. He then also separated it into basic training for the actor and dealing with central problems that arise. It is very important to notice that even though he did divide his method into parts, all the different parts are integrated. Some exercises were not only limited to one section in his work, but were multifunctional.

Strasberg placed a lot of emphasis on the fact that every actor is an individual and that every individual has different problem areas. Strasberg approached every actor and his problems with this in mind and therefore with every actor the sequence of exercises would differ and exercises of the different stages of training would be used to solve the actor's problems. Strasberg's approach to actor training is similar to Stanislavski's in the sense that both of them divide the training into two integral parts and both start their actor training with work and development on the actor himself.

#### **4.5.1 The first stage of actor training**

As stated above, the first stage of actor training is similar to Stanislavski's as it starts with the actor's work on himself. Strasberg describes this stage:

First he must have the ability to relax, to concentrate, to be able to sense and experience intensely. At the same time, he develops the external faces of his being. He must develop and strengthen the voice and body by eliminating the

stifling grip of habit and the inhibiting factors of nonexpression encouraged by social conditioning.

(Strasberg, 1987: 159-160)

Strasberg discovered during his classes that conditioning from personal habits of the actor frequently led to tension in the actor's body, which blocked the actor from experiencing the free expression of emotions demanded for a character.

#### **4.5.1.1. Relaxation**

The first thing Strasberg did in his classes – whether in his private classes or at The Actors Studio – is to check the actor for tension. Strasberg then tried to recondition the actor over a long period to function in a state of relaxation, by making him aware of the cause of tension. Strasberg took this emphasis on relaxation from what he had learned of Stanislavski's system seeing that Stanislavski also stressed that relaxation is the essential first stage in all acting work.

One of Strasberg's exercises in training the actor in relaxation exercises was to ask the actor to find a position in which he will be able to sleep, either sitting or standing. The actor must not go to sleep, but he must be convinced that if he stayed in that position long enough he would be able to fall asleep. The actor must try to relax his body as much as possible.

After that exercise, Strasberg moved on to the second phase of dealing with the problem of tension. Whatever tension that could not be eliminated through physical relaxation now had to be dealt with on a mental level. To Strasberg mental tension was a worse enemy to an actor than physical tension. Strasberg found through years of practice that there are three areas which indicate mental tension:

- The temples are the area where a lot of nerves and blood vessels feed into the brain and it is mostly this area where headaches occur. The actor is asked to relax the muscles in this area, but not by using his hands, rather through inner concentration.

- The area from the bridge of the nose into the eyelids is very responsive. This tension can easily be relaxed by simply letting the eyelids droop. A feeling of losing control of these muscles usually accompanies this action.
- The mouth is also a very active muscle and again this is an area where a lot of tension accumulates. The actor must release this tension by releasing the energy around this area. Strasberg compares this releasing action as feeling similar to being drunk. He states that when one is drunk, one does not worry how one is speaking.

Stanislavski felt that tension was the biggest enemy to the stimulation of an artist's creativity and always spent a huge amount of his classes on relaxation and working with tension on his actors. Strasberg also would take thirty to forty minutes at the beginning of a class and train the actor to release tension in the areas named above. The depth of concentration and focus of the actor also benefited from these exercises. Strasberg saw actors become "completely responsive. His instrument gives forth a new depth of resonance. Emotion that has been habitually held back suddenly rushes forth." (Strasberg, 1966: 92-93).

#### **4.5.1.2. Concentration**

Strasberg learned from Stanislavski's system that relaxation and concentration are connected, as relaxation is the prelude to the actor's main concern, which is concentration. Strasberg felt that Stanislavski's

two basic early discoveries, primary to the suggestions he makes to the actor, are the importance of relaxation and concentration....the only sure thing the actor has in order to combat and do away with tension is concentration.

(Strasberg, 1966: 95)

According to Strasberg, the purpose of the concentration exercises is "to train the actor to create and recreate any object, or group of objects, which combine into an event that stimulates the desired experience called for in performance. Thus, the actor is motivated into the necessary logical behaviour of his character" (Strasberg, 1987: 131). Concentration allows the actor to focus on the imaginary requirements and the reality of

the play. Strasberg concluded from this that concentration is a key element for the actor to have a strong sense of imagination. The kind of concentration that is necessary in acting is to recreate something that is not there. Along with imagination, belief or faith has also been characterized as essential elements in acting. Belief/faith is essential because actors have to create something that will be believable to the audience even though it is not real and if the actor does not find the believability in the situation how is one to think that the audience would find it believable?

Strasberg started the training of concentration with an exercise that he was introduced to at the American Laboratory Theatre. The actor had to develop the ability to recreate objects that he encounters every day. The route to concentration in this first exercise is through sense memory and involves imaginary objects. Stanislavski placed a lot of emphasis on using the five senses in concentration exercises. Through his experimentation Stanislavski found that by sharpening the senses the actor's awareness and concentration would increase. The actor must learn how his senses react and respond to an object and then try to recreate those reactions when the object is not present. Strasberg gives an example of this first exercise

The first exercise deals with whatever the actor drinks for breakfast: coffee, tea, milk, orange juice. The actor first practices with the real object, trying to define for himself the elements which he refers to when he says, "This is real." He explores the weight and texture of the cup or glass, the sense of the liquid in the container, the temperature of the liquid as he experiences it through the container, etc. As the actor raises the cup to the lips, the weight changes and affects other areas of the arm. He explores the aroma, the temperature of the drink, and finally the taste. The actor then performs the exercise without the presence of the object.

(Strasberg, 1987: 132)

With this exercise Strasberg realized that, even though the exercise involves all the senses, the concentration is only on one object and therefore remains a simple exercise. He concluded that these exercises become more difficult when different objects that are unrelated to each other stimulate the senses.

With these exercises the emphasis for the actor is not on imitating the action, but rather to concentrate on the objects in order to develop the ability to recreate the objects, in the finest detail, that go into the performance through sensory memory. Strasberg describes

the purpose of the concentration exercises “to train the actor to create and recreate any object, or group of objects, which combine into an event that stimulates the desired experience called for in performance” (Strasberg, 1987: 131). Strasberg also gathered from these exercises that the actor developed a greater awareness of his own presence and this helps to stimulate the actor’s sensory response.

#### **4.5.1.3. The problem of sensation and experience**

A different aspect of sense memory exercises are used in dealing with this section. In the concentration exercises, the sensory memory exercises were used to concentrate on an object and to recreate it. In the sensory memory exercise the actor must remember the people and the surroundings of the memory in order to experience and recreate a situation similar to that of the character, but not the emotion. Emotion exercises are dealt with in the next stage of training.

Strasberg developed these exercises based on the work Stanislavski did on the effectiveness of creating and recreating sensations through the memory of the senses. An example of one of the first exercises that Strasberg used in developing the actor’s sense of sensation is an exercise where no muscular movement is involved. The actor sits in a chair and he must imagine that he is sitting in the sun. The actor must recreate the sensations his body went through the previous time that he actually did sit in the sun. The actor must then concentrate a particular area of his body toward the sun. At the same time he must relax the areas of the body which are not at the time involved in the concentration. In this way he must be able to create the sensation of sunshine on his body.

Strasberg continues with these kinds of exercises testing the presence as well as the intensity of sense memory. Strasberg then moved on to exercises where an overall sensation is required and not just focused on one particular area. This means that the entire body must experience sensation. Strasberg usually started with exercises like a shower. The actor must remember that different parts of the body experience a shower separately and differently and each area is able to generate an independent response. All

the different areas must produce a sensation to create the overall sensation of the body. With these exercises Strasberg made two discoveries that were of great value to actor training.

Firstly, the exercise developed the senses and the kind of sensations that are connected to the senses. Secondly, he discovered that it helped to unblock areas in the actor's body that may be locked or inhibited. These blocks may be from tension, habit or conditioning. As the areas were unblocked, using the appropriate exercises for tension, habit or conditioning, sensations and emotions began to pour through the actor and lead toward a fullness and vividness of expression. Stanislavski already made it clear that tension is detrimental to the ability to express by an actor. Strasberg went a step further to say that not only tension, but also every day habits and social conditioning acts as a barrier to the actor. Thus if the actor became more aware of his body and how these negative aspects impact on his body then by practising control over it would lead to the actor being freer of those negatives and lead the actor to be able to reap the benefits by having a fuller and freer and more vivid range of expressiveness without the habits holding his body captive. This is what Strasberg tried to achieve with the above exercises and certainly with the exercises following where he deals specifically with the problem of habit and social conditioning.

#### **4.5.1.4. The problem of habit and social conditioning**

In seeking the source of the problem with expression that not only the actor but all human beings experience, Strasberg realized that whatever capacities we as humans are born with are developed through means of training and conditioning, and so we also develop habits of expression. Stanislavski felt that habits could be used in a productive way:

Habit is a two-edged sword. It can do great harm when badly used on the stage and be of great value when proper advantage is taken of it. It is essential...to establish the right creative state by forming trained habits. The unfortunate and dangerous part...is that habits can be developed in the wrong direction...It is essential to work...step by step when you are learning to establish...trained habits.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 70)

Strasberg found through the work he did at the Actors Studio that the actor

is conditioned to express his feelings and emotions not by nature, character, and strength of his own emotional responses, but by what society or his environment will permit. He is usually aware of his physical habits, but has little knowledge of his sensory and emotional reactions. I had to find ways of dealing with an actor's mannerisms that obscured the truth of expression that involves the relationship between intensity of feeling and emotion.

(Strasberg, 1987: 95)

Very often Strasberg found that these difficulties were formed from a definite experience that led to the creation of unconscious habits.

Mostly Strasberg could work on these habits through exercises that formed part of the relaxation training, seeing that tension caused the unconscious habits to become worse. Sometimes the problem had to be approached through the connection between the mind and body, and Strasberg would make use of his emotional memory exercises to try to find the reasons for certain habits. Emotional memory exercises are dealt with in detail in the second stage of Strasberg's training.

Strasberg discovered an exercise in the mid-fifties that not only helped with overcoming habits and conditioning, but that if done correctly led to full and intense expressiveness on the actor's side. He named this exercise the 'song-and-dance' exercise. By this time Strasberg had singers and dancers attending his private classes and, since both singers and dancers have definite rhythmic and physical patterns that had developed through their training, Strasberg devised this exercises to help them break from their usual verbal and movement patterns.

He then found that it worked just as well on actors. The exercise involved Strasberg asking the person to do something that goes against the grain of his training and habits. He would first ask the actor to stand on the stage, not in a pose, simply just to stand on the stage without any effort, not anticipating difficulty, which would cause tension. Even this turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. Then the actor had to sing any song, but he must sing it differently to the way he might be accustomed. Strasberg would stop the actor continuously and ask the actor, for instance, to separate the syllables and give

each syllable equal value, but without changing the melody. This shows the actor that, as an exercise of will, he can sing the song in an unaccustomed way.

After that exercise, Strasberg would ask the actor to stand at ease again and then tell the actor to move without knowing in advance what he is going to do. Especially the dancers would start to do dance movements, but Strasberg would encourage them to do something that they were not accustomed to do. If Strasberg felt a spontaneous movement had occurred, he would ask the actor to repeat that movement also with the same rhythm as before. This would prove to the actor that he could be both spontaneous and at the same time be able to repeat what he had done spontaneously. The important value of this simple sequence of exercises is for the actor to break his verbal and physical habits and thus extend his ability to control his expressiveness.

#### **4.5.2. The second stage of actor training**

We now come to the second stage of Strasberg's actor training. In Stanislavski's training the second phase of his training was on the work of the role and thus including the work on the character. Strasberg explains the second stage of his own training

The second stage in the actor's training is to develop the ability to carry out actions truthfully and logically. At the same time, the actor learns to respond and adjust to his partner, not simply in a mechanical way, but by actually trying to convince his partner by making sure his meaning is clear.

(Strasberg, 1987: 160)

The work that Stanislavski did on ensemble acting is valuable in this area of Strasberg's work. Stanislavski wanted his actors to pay full attention to their fellow actors on the stage and to really listen to what the actors are saying and how they are saying the specific dialogue in order to try and pick up on their subtext. Stanislavski found that this created a true connection between the actors on the stage and Strasberg also strived to achieve this true connection between his actors.

##### **4.5.2.1. Improvisation**

Improvisation was one of the basic elements in Stanislavski's work especially in the later years. Stanislavski felt that

when teaching is oriented toward a practical and even interesting objective it is easier to convince and influence students....Our point of departure in training actors is to have them learn by acting[improvisations]....One cannot go on teaching for years in a classroom and only at the end ask a student to act. In that space of time he will have lost all creative faculty...

(Stanislavski, 1963: 78)

Improvisation was of primary importance in the work that Strasberg did at the Actors Studio, even though he had already started using these exercises in the Group Theatre. Strasberg used improvisation mainly to explore the actor's and the character's feelings and to create logical reactions for a character. Strasberg felt that a real character should have a continuous process of thought and sensory and emotional response and it was the improvisation exercises that created a continuous flow of response and thought within the character.

Another concern of Strasberg was that often an actor would enter a scene and because he knows how the scene is going to end, he would then unconsciously indicate the outcome of the scene in his acting. Strasberg feels that "by improvising, the actor finds a way to play the scene more logically and convincingly, not just from his point of view, but also from the audience's" (Strasberg, 1987: 108). Stanislavski also knew the importance of improvisation when it came to putting spontaneity into an actor's acting. Stanislavski stated: "In our kind of acting we make frequent use of improvisations...This kind of creativeness gives a freshness and an immediacy to a performance" (Stanislavski, 1963: 78). With improvisation exercises, the actor discovers the logical behaviour of the character and this combats the actor merely illustrating the obvious meaning of the words. Most of the time improvisation exercises were done by the actors in conjunction with a scene that they were working on. These exercises would also attempt to create the illusion of spontaneity in the scenes.

#### **4.5.2.2. Physical characterisation**

The next exercise that Strasberg would incorporate is what he called the 'animal exercise'. This helps the actor to develop the ability to recognize the difference between himself and the character. Stanislavski felt strongly that all actors should be able to do character work:

Characterisation, when accompanied by a real transposition, a sort of re-incarnation, is a great thing. Since an actor is called upon to create an image while he is on the stage...[characterisation] becomes a necessity for all [actors]. In other words all actors who are artists should make use of characterisation. A capacity to transform himself, body and soul, is the prime requirement for an actor.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 33-34)

The training that the animal exercise offers is that the actor is forced to deal with the character's behaviour instead of relying on his own feelings.

Firstly, the actor must observe an animal to notice the purely physical differences and must then create the differences by controlling his physical energies. The actor must try to build the sensation of the physical life of the animal, for instance, the strength and power of a lion or the sleepiness of a cat. Once this is achieved the actor must begin to make the 'animal' that he is portraying stand up and only then can words be added. The result is a human standing and talking but with the characteristics of an animal. This exercise helps the actor to create a character that is different and separate from himself. Strasberg noticed that some actors hated this exercise and later realized that it was a struggle that they had with their own habitual behaviour.

#### **4.5.2.3. Emotional memory**

All the training this far led to preparing the actor for emotional work. Strasberg very carefully points out that much of acting is also non-emotional work and that non-emotional must precede emotional work in a proper course of training. We now enter the area of Strasberg's training that focuses on the emotional memory. This is the area of training that Strasberg received from Boleslavsky and Madame Ouspenskaya at the American Laboratory Theatre.

Most of his work in this area is based on the principal starting point of Stanislavski's theories of affective memory. The purpose of emotional memory is to be able to repeat an emotion on stage night after night and ensuring that it seems truthful and fresh. Emotional memory is a memory that involves the actor personally. Through specific exercises done by Strasberg the memory of the actor is exercised and certain triggers are developed so that deeply rooted emotional experiences begin to respond whenever the

actor needed a certain emotional connection to the character he/she is portraying. According to Strasberg, the exercise should have happened at least seven years prior to when the actor is attempting the exercise. When asked by an actor/student why an older memory would be of more use to an actor Strasberg answered:

Do not pick a recent experience; not that the recent thing won't work. But the older the experience is, the better it is. If it works, it's going to last for the rest of your life. Whereas, something recent might work now and two years from now it won't. The fact that something has already worked, has existed for a long time and then is recaptured, means it is there for all time.

(Strasberg, 1987:149)

The use of sensory memory is integrated to achieve the emotion. Stanislavski put a lot of emphasis on the fact that these experiences would be brought to the surface through the senses and especially through sight and sound. The actor must find an experience remembered from his own life that is equal to the character's experience. This process can also be referred to as 'substitution' as the actor would then use this memory and substitute it within the character's situation in order for the actor to achieve the desired emotion. Only after the actor has mastered the concentration exercises on sensory memory, as explain earlier in this chapter, can he begin with work on emotional memory, because he will use his senses to remember the specific situation. With the emotional memory exercises the actor must go back into his memory and remember a situation or occasion that was similar to the situation in a play or in the improvisation exercise and remember that emotion and then put that emotion back into the play or exercise.

The typical sequence of actions for an actor doing an emotional memory exercise to recapture or relive an experience would firstly be to relax. Tension interferes with the spontaneous flow of sensation and thus emotion. The actor must concentrate to create not just a memory, but must actually relive the particular moment. The actor must try to remember the event that caused the emotion and not aim for the emotion directly. By this I do not mean that he must remember the sequence of events that took place, but rather recapture the various senses that surrounded the event; where he was, who he was with, what he was wearing. Again this corresponds to what Stanislavski aimed for in his later

approach. The actor must also try to remember aspects like the smell of the air, the sound of the footsteps on the ground.

These exercises could be especially harmful for actors with a traumatic past who might need to explore their past and deal with the hidden issues by seeking psychological help. It could be harmful to the actor in the sense that he could get caught up in the memory and the underlying emotions that has not been dealt with. For such an actor

substitution is an empty promise. Even as the wounded actor uses such techniques to explore his feelings, he remains once-removed from the experience he craves deep in his heart: an encounter with the true, repressed and often ugly feelings of his own childhood.

(Lloyd, 2006: 72)

This is why Strasberg was so very selective with whom he would allow this exercise; if someone was in need of psychiatric help, he was adamant about not doing this exercise with the actor. Strasberg felt that it is very important to note that the story of the experience is not what is asked for; only the details that would help recreate the memory. The actor must have control over his sensory concentration in order not to be carried away by the emotional experience. This is a point where many teachers have abused the emotional memory exercises and forced the students to tell the whole story to satisfy their own curiosity.

By exercising the emotional memory, the actor develops control over emotional expression and for this reason the actor must first do training to develop his ability to relax and concentrate. The main difference between Strasberg's approach to emotional memory and Stanislavski's approach is that Stanislavski "did not propose that the actor should recall or rely upon affective memory during performance itself. In contrast, Strasberg's American Method did make such a proposal" (Merlin, 1999a: 230). As the quote implies Stanislavski saw the emotional exercise as a rehearsal method whereas Strasberg used it as an exercise used while doing a performance. The exercises applied to the preparation of a role differ in a large extent from those that are applied to its performance. Stanislavski used affective memory as a means to trigger the actor's inspiration and enthusiasm for a role and thus enabling the actor to connect his own inner

life with that of the character's. Once the preparation for a role was complete this preparatory work would be discarded.

An example of using this affective memory as preparatory work, especially in film, can be seen in how Marlon Brando prepared for his portrayal of a paraplegic in the film *The Men* (1950). Brando did not feel that he had the emotional memory or capacity to understand the complexities of being a paraplegic. Seeing that the film dealt with newly returned veterans now paraplegic because of war injuries, Brando decided to live in the Birmingham Veterans Hospital in Van Nuys for a couple of weeks. He wanted to study the paraplegics. Brando was treated as a real patient; he lived in a ward, underwent therapy, and moved around only in a wheelchair. He responded when questioned about his decision to live there: "This is about a man made completely helpless, worse than a baby or animal. It's impossible to realize such terrible frustration and hopelessness unless you live like that" (Thomas, 1975: 27). This use of affective memory as preparation for a character became synonymous with 'Method Acting'.

Strasberg, on the other hand, did not think of the exercises as only preparatory work and requested the actor to actually summon up an affective memory while on stage during the performance. This meant that

At the same time as concentrating on the details of the private event, the actor should of course keep up the appearance of listening and responding to the on-stage partner.

(Merlin, 1999a: 230)

Strasberg stated that this memory process could be quickened with practice until eventually the recall "actually takes no more than two minutes" (Strasberg, 1966: 111).

Some of the actors struggled with achieving the kind of concentration needed to master the skill of retrieving a private emotion and placing it into a productive piece of work in front of an audience. The fact that certain actors had a problem with the above exercises is absolutely understandable. It seems that Strasberg expected too much when it came to acting in front of an audience. I can see the value of Stanislavski's practices, where the emotional memory exercises were done as preparatory exercises and not actually done

during a performance. It seems to me that an actor could easily become too self-involved during the performance while engaged this emotional recall process. Stanislavski and Strasberg both placed a lot of emphasis on ensemble work, but if an actor was to do these emotional recall exercises during a performance, it would very easily create the feeling that the actors were not interacting and reacting with each other at all. In fact this is exactly some of the stigma that started developing around 'method actors', as they were called (for example, James Dean in *East of Eden*).

Nevertheless, Strasberg devised another exercise to help the actors create the ability to use their own memories and to express themselves in acting. Strasberg also used this exercise to strengthen the actor's ability to concentrate and to work with problems of expression. Strasberg got the idea from one of the phrases that Stanislavski used to illustrate the need for an actor to establish for himself the necessary privacy on stage that he needed to stimulate his concentration. Stanislavski called it the actor's need to be 'private in public' or 'public solitude'. This once more was an exercise that Stanislavski used in preparation of a character. Strasberg had read this phrase a few times, but rereading it one day he realized that people generally have behaviour patterns which they perform only in private. Thus in the mid-1950s Strasberg developed his exercise known as the 'private moment' exercise.

A private moment does not necessarily mean that the person is alone, and it is not characterized by what it is, but rather the significance that it has for the actor that makes it private. To create the private moment for the actor is quite a simple task. The actor must choose certain behaviours in his life that he does only in private and he must feel so intensely private about this behaviour that he would stop doing it if someone was to interrupt him. The actor then starts to create the environment in which the private moment usually occurs, for instance, the actor's room. He must concentrate on the sensory memory until he can see, touch and smell the objects and the surroundings of the room or space. The actor must now try to perform the activity by dealing with the original motivation leading to the private moment. This exercise can take up to an hour to complete, depending on how easily the actor feels private in public.

The function of the private moment exercise is to allow the actor to become less aware and self-conscious of the audience and thus be able to concentrate more on the experience he is trying to create. Because of the term ‘private’ that is used to name the exercise, it has been misunderstood at times. Some have said that the term has suggestive connotations and have described them as ‘private, obscene moments’. This suggested that the activities taking place in the exercise were reprehensible and sexual. For Strasberg, however, if the private moment would lead to an action of bad taste, the actor would have to walk off stage and finish the action backstage and then come back on stage to carry on with the private moment.

The exercises of stage two of Strasberg’s training are practised even as he moves into stage three of his training. He felt that the actor can only learn and develop from regularly making progress in the above exercises.

#### **4.5.2.4. Textual work**

The actor now starts to do work with scenes from plays. The focus is on the actor’s interpretation of the theme of the play and his character. Strasberg says that “at this point in training, these scenes are not important as they relate to the play; rather, they offer the actor an opportunity to exercise his ability to maintain his training skills within set dramatic sequences” (Strasberg. 1987: 160). Strasberg followed many of Stanislavski’s formulations in this area. Strasberg used ‘given circumstances’; ‘subtext’, the underlying meaning of the words, both the sensation and emotions behind the words; and ‘units of actions’, Stanislavski named it ‘units and objectives’, in this area of training. Combining the subtext and the given circumstances and units of actions within a play, Strasberg concludes that the actor will be able to create the state of mind and the emotional experience of the character. The character’s physical actions will be determined by the character’s emotional state and, if the actor was able to create a truthful emotional state, then he will be driven towards logical actions and behaviour of his character.

This approach of Strasberg is opposite to Stanislavski's working method in his last years. Stanislavski worked from the approach that, if an actor does the logical actions true to the character, then the correct emotions would arise from those truthful actions. In my experience I have been in plays where the director's first step was to create the 'blocking', the movement and actions of a character in a scene, and only after that where the emotions added as the work progressed. And I have also been in situations where text and character analysis preceded the 'blocking' process. I am more sympathetic to Strasberg's belief that if you have an understanding of the subtext and of the character's personality and behaviour, the correct logical actions for that specific character would follow. I am not opposed to the idea of creating the movements and actions first on the presumption that the correct emotions would arise, but it simply seems to me that there is a greater danger that the movements and actions can become mechanical and unmotivated. Because of the fact that the actions were created before the emotions, the actor might become lazy and simply walk through the actions without creating the necessary emotions. This is what I believe can lead to mechanical acting. When the actions arise out of the character's emotional motivation, it seems that in the future when doing the actions it would be easier to associate the emotions that arose with the actions.

The first step for Strasberg was to understand what is taking place in each scene. This does not mean simply understanding the plot, as the plot is not always equivalent to the event that is taking place in the scene. Strasberg often used short stories when working with actors on developing the skill to find the event in a sequence. He mostly used short stories written by Ernest Hemingway, Irwin Shaw, Dorothy Parker or de Maupassant because "they are complete, self-contained, and usually well-written units. They serve to train the actor's awareness and understanding of a situation" (Strasberg. 1987:161). The dialogue in a play sometimes contains elements that people would never say, but convey important information to the audience. In a short story the writer can consign this information to the descriptions in the story and thus the dialogue would be more representative of what people would really say. The short story exercise helped to find out what the character is actually saying and how it relates to what the scene is all about. When the actor is aware of the situation in a scene as contrasted to the plot, he can then

divide the scene into units of action to create not only the behaviour of the character, but also the state of mind and the emotional experiences of the character. As stated above, Strasberg felt that physical actions are determined by the character's emotional state.

Strasberg used Chekhov's comic short plays as an example. He would ask the actors working on one of Chekhov's plays what they wanted to achieve with the play. They would answer that their intense desire was to make it funny. He would then ask if they found the scene funny when they initially read the play and invariably they would answer that they did. To which he would then explain that the author has already done the work in writing and creating a situation that is funny; all that they as the actors had to do was to create as fully as possible the reality of the situation. The actor does not need to be funny, but the result will be. This I have definitely experienced when working on comic plays. So many actors try to be funny to portray the comic situations when all they actually had to do was to find the reality of the situation and the comedy would arise out of the reality of the situation.

According to Strasberg, if the actor is able to find the reality in a situation and so create a truthful portrayal, he will be "accomplishing the primary task of the actor: to act – that is, to do something, whether it be psychological or physiological. He must utilize his entire capabilities and equipment to create a human being on the stage acting within the conditions set by the playwright" (Strasberg, 1987: 165).

#### **4.6. The last years**

Strasberg had the great ability as a teacher to adapt himself to each individual actor with whom he had worked. He had an amazing talent to observe and analyze and most of his work was concerned with helping an actor find out what his particular problems were and how the actor could solve them by developing a technique that would take into account his own 'non-perfect' instrument. Strasberg stated that actors who have been trained in the procedures outlined above "can create a reality on stage and still adhere to the demands of the play. They can also make adjustments set forth by the director and still maintain truthfulness" (Strasberg. 1987:174).

Something that was evident in both Stanislavski and Strasberg is their absolute dedication to, and passion for acting and actors. Robert Hethmon, editor of *Strasberg at The Actors Studio: Tape-recorded Sessions*, had an experience with Strasberg in 1963 that gives a good account of him and his passion

I attended a preview performance of *Strange Interlude*, and as I entered the Hudson Theatre's lobby during the dinner intermission, I saw a small figure in a black raincoat standing by the box office. It was Strasberg, and he was engaged in an exercise familiar to every theatre director: he was listening to the comments of the crowd. I went to say hallo, and I was shocked by what I saw. He was haggard. He looked like a gray ghost. And as I walked on out of the theatre, I couldn't help saying to myself, "The theatre is a mug's game. Here's a world-famous theatre man. Three weeks ago I heard him lecture to a thousand people in this same theatre about his visit to Moscow as American representative to the Stanislavski Centenary. And here he is – driving himself to exhaustion and testing the house like any commercial Broadway director." And then I thought back to all the things I have heard him say about the art of the theatre, the search for truth, the true meaning of reality, the need for discipline, and I realized that he is exactly where he should be – doing exactly what he should be doing.

(Hethmon, 1966: 23)

Words like monster, cruel, egocentric, childish, and inspirational have been used to describe him. That was how people experienced Strasberg during his search to achieve truthful experiences whether onstage or in front of the camera. At the end of the day this is what Strasberg had to say about that elusive topic:

Some directors talk vaguely and philosophically of the truth of the play, or of the author's truth, when what they mean is nothing more than their own interpretation of the play. The actor's truth is first and last the truth of experience, of behaviour, and of expression!

(Strasberg. 1987:173)

In 1966 Strasberg established the Actors Studio West in Los Angeles. He wanted to make his teachings available to a larger group and in 1969 he began the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute in New York and Los Angeles and was considered as being among the most prestigious acting schools in America. At the age of 74 when most people have already retired, Strasberg made his film debut in *The Godfather: Part II* (directed by Francis Ford Coppola) in the role of Hymen Roth. Strasberg received an Academy Award nomination for best supporting role for this character and lost to Robert

DeNiro, one of his former students. Other actors under his tutelage include Geraldine Page, Paul Newman, Al Pacino, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Fonda, James Dean, Dustin Hoffman, Eli Wallach, Eva Marie Saint, Ellen Burstyn, Dennis Hopper and Marlon Brando to name but a few. The move to play in a movie at such a late stage in his life and career not only proved to the world his talent and true worth, but also that he practised what he preached and this silenced a lot of his critics.

Strasberg died of a heart attack in New York City at the age of 80 on February 17<sup>th</sup> 1982 and is interred at Westchester Hills Cemetery in Hastings-on-Hudson, Westchester County, New York. Strasberg is still today considered as the patriarch of American 'method' acting and he was the inspiration for generations of actors during his lifetime and also will be for generations to come through the legacy that he left behind.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The previous three chapters have addressed my questions: What is ‘Method Acting’? What was the impact of Stanislavski’s system on Strasberg’s method? How does the one differ from the other? I wondered how many commentators have misguided perceptions about especially Stanislavski’s ‘system’ because of the delay in the publication of his books, seeing that so many wrongful assumptions, accusations and criticisms have been made about ‘The System’ and ‘The Method’ and so-called ‘Method actors’ from Stanislavski’s time to Strasberg and The Actors Studio. In the following paragraphs I am going to discuss some of the views and debates concerning aspects of Stanislavski’s and Strasberg’s teachings.

Three Polish directors and critics, Erwin Axer, Bohdan Korzeniewski and Jerzy Kreczmar raised three main objections to Stanislavski’s system in the 1950s. They stated that “it was old fashioned, it pretended to be universal without really being so, and it was incompatible with the convictions and opinions underlying Polish theatrical traditions” (in Tyszka, 1989: 366). Stanislavski and Strasberg prided themselves on the fact that their systems were universal and timeless, so these objections discredited both of Stanislavski and Strasberg’s belief systems. Apart from the animosity between the Poles and the Russians after the Second World War, Stanislavski’s ‘system’ was introduced to Polish theatre during the reign of Stalin. Polish commentators felt that Stanislavski’s system was “complying with the principles of utilitarian Stalinism” (Tyszka, 1989:365). Adding to this misperception of the ‘system’ was the fact that the Polish translation of *My Life in Art* appeared only in 1952 and the Polish publication of a fundamental presentation of the ‘system’ as *An Actor Prepares* was published only in 1954. Also, the books that followed *An Actor Prepares* were only made available in Poland much later. Because of this delay, the ‘system’ was treated with reservations and even suspicion, and it was “the general belief of most artists and critics that the ‘method’ was the creation of a man of little learning, and is in fact a naïve concept, lacking in theoretical underpinning, and in any case only applicable to naturalistic theatre” (Tyszka, 1989:365). The criticism that Stanislavski’s ‘system’ and Strasberg’s ‘method’ were applicable only to naturalistic and realistic theatre was one of the main and frequently mentioned reservations.

Stanislavski emphasised the fact that his 'system' was accessible to all types of theatre, no matter how unrealistic or absurd. I think that the link between Stanislavski's 'system' and realism and naturalism was the result of the fact that his system became more known while he worked with Chekhov and his realist plays. Society became aware of the success that the 'system' could have through Chekhov's plays and because of that viewed the two as inseparable, and thus the stigma clings to the 'system' that it only caters for realist or naturalistic theatre.

Again it is because of distorted versions of the 'system' and because the artists could not consult the original sources that there were misunderstandings and abuse of Stanislavski's views and techniques. Fragments of the 'system' were being used in productions and therefore critics, as the three named above, had their misgivings about the 'system'. Finally in 1977 an article written by Zygmunt Hübner, a director and well-known actor, was published in Poland in the monthly publication *Dialog*. The article is not exclusively supportive of Stanislavski's system, but Hübner made a very positive observation:

If today we treated Stanislavsky's theatrical thought seriously and put it into practice, we could arrive at a theatre working by a method considerably more modern than the one we use and take pride in at present.... Stanislavsky must be read through the experience of our time.... We must see the theatre such as it is today and try to fit it to Stanislavsky's ideas.... We will find out then that he has things to tell us which we have completely forgotten.

(Hübner, 1977:140)

Sonia Moore, President of the American Centre for Stanislavski Art in 1973, wrote a letter to the journal *The Drama Review* responding to the types of objections such as those made by the three Polish authors. She said

Since the rules developed by Stanislavski are based on objective natural laws, they can never be outdated. It is also obvious that the system is not a Russian phenomenon; the laws of nature are universal, the same for all people in all countries, and in all times.

(in Schmitt, 1986: 350)

When Moore refers to 'the laws of nature', she refers to Stanislavski's views on tension and relaxation and how they influence the voice and the bodily posture. Stanislavski worked according to the way that the body reacted to certain events, whether it be how

tension affected the body or how one's memory can be stimulated. For this reason he says that his practices are developed according to the 'laws of nature'. To this extent I have to agree with Moore that Stanislavski's 'system' is universal. I do not agree, referring to the quote above made by the Polish directors, that it is only applicable to Russians or Americans or that it is outmoded, for as Ian Watson states: "The success of the Stanislavsky system confirmed the foundation of a professional identity in an American setting. If a Russian can provide a model for this identity, why not an Asian, a Latin American, or an Israeli?" (Watson, 2003: 40).

I also agree with Zygmunt Hübner that we should read Stanislavski through the experience of our time. More than twenty years after Polish publications of Stanislavski's work, the public still had a fragmentary view of his work caused mainly by delays in publication. Adding to the fragmentary view is that some of the more modern users of the 'system' put it through a filtering system and only took from it what they saw as adequate or relevant for their own purposes.

The dramatist David Mamet, author of *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*, attacked Stanislavski's system and said that it reduced real human contact on the stage and that it created a situation in which

I will agree not to notice what you are truly doing, because to do so would interfere with my ability to trot out my well-prepared emotion at the appropriate instant. In return, you must agree not to notice what I am doing.

(Mamet, 1998: 65)

What he is criticizing is rather much closer to Strasberg's process of emotional preparation during performance, as Stanislavski always "maintained that the key to the life of the human spirit on the stage was 'limitless attention to the partner'" (Merlin, 2000: 251). I have to agree with Mamet in some respects, because as I stated in a previous chapter one of my concerns about doing an emotional recall exercise while in performance is that the actor might become too self-involved and forget about interaction with fellow actors on stage. I have to emphasise, though, that Mamet's comment is much more applicable to Strasberg's methods than Stanislavski's. As I stated earlier, Stanislavski did not intend for the emotional recall exercises to be done during a

performance. They were only to be used as a rehearsal and preparatory tool, whereas Strasberg wanted these exercises to be done during a performance for the emotions to be as real as possible. In such an instance I feel that Mamet's assertion may well be applicable to what happens on stage.

It was also claimed that Strasberg turned rehearsals into therapy sessions. As St. Denis stated in *Training for the Theatre*, he felt that the Method was "characterized by its emphasis upon subjective characterization...I saw this introspection pushed to the point of psycho-analysis.... I felt we had left the theatre to enter therapy" (St. Denis, 1982: 46-7). Psychologists have criticized this experience stating that "this tendency to make the actor's life and personal experience the centre of his creative journey ... plays into the narcissistic disorder" (Lloyd, 2006: 72). These criticisms are not unfounded, but they are misguided. Seeing that the actor has to delve into his own memories and experience to extract emotions, the actor can start to feel self-important. There are actors who are not balanced enough to control these exercises and lead people to develop a wrong impression about the emotional recall exercise, such as the psychologist quoted above. Strasberg put a lot of emphasis, especially in his book *A Dream of Passion* (1987), on the fact that, while doing the emotional memory exercises in class, the exercise is not about hearing the story and the details of the memory of the actor, but simply to assist the actor in retrieving the emotions of the memory. Strasberg did not ask his students to tell the story in order to retrieve the emotions; he asked them to describe the situation by using their sense memory. For example, they had to remember if it was a cold or rainy day and whether they can remember any significant smells or the type of clothing they were wearing and how it felt against their body. If Strasberg's methods are studied intensively, practitioners would be aware that Strasberg was not interested in the story behind the emotion, but only the emotion that was needed. This remains a very tricky area in Stanislavski's and Strasberg's work to me. The question still remains of how one would ensure that students are sufficiently trained to be able to extract only the emotion and leave the memory. Strasberg stated that they must have total control over all their other senses. Then the students will also be able to develop control over what he called the

sense of emotion and only then will he attempt the emotion memory exercises with them (cf. 4.5.2.3 on emotional memory).

Strasberg, working at The Group Theatre with his ‘Americanized Stanislavski System’, as Ian Watson refers to it, was accused of cultivating an acting style in the actors that produces poor speech and articulation in American Theatre:

The Group Theatre and the teaching that grew out of it moved the emphasis away from the mechanics of speech and onto the inner justification for how one’s character spoke.

(Watson, 2003: 36)

Nonetheless, clear and correct speech and articulation, which includes distinct diction and pronunciation, and perceptible pauses and accents, were of the utmost importance to both Strasberg and Stanislavski, and both felt that this kind of speech should be the first element that an actor must develop. Stanislavski felt that

every actor must be in possession of excellent diction and pronunciation. He must feel not only phrases and words, but also each syllable, each letter. You cannot bring back the spoken word....Poor speech...even conceals the thought,...its very plot....This spells ruin for the play....One means of guarding against this is the use of clear, beautiful, vivid speech. To an actor a word is not just a sound, it is the evocation of images.

(Stanislavski, 1963: 128)

Strasberg stated, when he was told by a director that Studio actors can never be heard on stage and that all Method actors have poor speech, that when an actor cannot be heard he tells them:

“You have to speak clearly...you have to work on speaking clearly and precisely.” Where that is not a problem, we do not make a problem out of it. Where there is actually a problem, which means that the actor is either unable to be heard even when he tries, or that he is psychologically unwilling to be heard, then it becomes an acting problem here.

(Strasberg, 1966: 351)

Someone who understood how it felt when your methods were misunderstood was Brecht. He understood how others could misunderstand one’s own theories. Initially he was one of Stanislavski’s biggest theoretical rivals. It must be noted that Brecht’s views on Stanislavski’s work were based on only limited sources of information about the ‘system’. It seems that he only had access to notes mostly on Stanislavski’s early

psycho-technique, which Brecht detested, and nothing on daily training and production rehearsals. Stanislavski and his 'system' became very popular during the 1950s and with this popularity more of his written work became easily accessible. Brecht then decided to study Stanislavski's theories and realized how he never really had a firm grasp and understanding of Stanislavski's system. Brecht wanted to examine Stanislavski's theories and acting approach not only in a theoretical manner but in practice. He applied Stanislavski's notes to the production, *Katzgraben*, to assess his approach. Brecht stated "the theory contradicted the practice. Stanislavski's theory was obviously as misunderstood as his [Brecht's] own" (in Mumford, 1995: 256). Brecht remained cautious about isolating the psyche as a key behavioural determinant; he highlighted the social determinants of behaviour. Even though Brecht now had a more positive view of Stanislavski's 'system' and recognized certain affinities, he always maintained a critical attitude and certain scepticism towards Stanislavski.

Stanislavski's followers say

his system is flexible, allowing for the interpretive variations of it made by the likes of Strasberg and others without losing its integrity. His system is also accessible, reasonably adaptable to different types of theatre, and lends itself to a systematized linear curricular format which is easily taught.

(Watson, 2003: 38)

All the work that Stanislavski and Strasberg did over the years was directed toward helping the actor create an imaginative process when he approaches the creation of a role. Both of these masters of their craft insisted that they did not offer a recipe that could be mechanically copied and so solve all the actor's problems. This is indicative of their understanding of the individuality of creation and the creative process. Some stated that Stanislavski had a tendency to "objectify the intuitive processes of acting" (Pitches, 2005: 111). I feel that one should rather see the system that Stanislavski proposes as active and conscious, and as one that will allow the mysterious, creative, intuitive and subconscious processes to express themselves.

Both Stanislavski and Strasberg made mistakes and both had times when they refused to compromise on their ideas and beliefs, but both of them were responsible for revolutions

in the art of acting in their respective countries. Some have put them and their theories on pedestals and some have tried to pull them down. What emerges from all the arguments and debates is that, as Robert Lewis said, “followers of masters are often inclined to be more dogmatic than the masters themselves” (Lewis, 1958: 162). This is in my opinion the biggest reason why there are so many misgivings and misrepresentations about the work of both men. Misguided devotees of Stanislavski’s system and Strasberg’s method would not use the full and complete method, but simply take one link of the chain and place most of the focus on that one element. An example of this is that the first book by Stanislavski *An Actor Prepares* was seen by some as the whole ‘system’. I see Strasberg in a certain sense as someone who also did just that to a certain extent. He did not use the whole of Stanislavski’s ‘system’ while forming his ‘method’; instead he also placed more focus on certain aspects such as affective memory. Strasberg’s teachings focused on drawing on personal experiences to recall a memory of an emotion that must be used in the specified acting situation.

This led to numerous acting teachers stressing that one play oneself rather than playing the character. Thus, “the personality cult of the teacher was thus reflected in the students, with an approach to acting that was extremely self-centred” (Hornby, 2007: 67). This in turn led to American actors tending to think of themselves as business people and marketing themselves as individuals who can sell a service. So the actor wants to be a star and it is their persona that the studios want to put in a film. I realized that this was the exact opposite of what Stanislavski intended. I come to this conclusion because one of the major problems that Stanislavski had with the theatre of his time was the ‘star-system’. It was one of the main aspects that he and Danchenko wanted to eliminate from the theatre. Even though most acting teachers condemn the star system, by focusing on the actor’s personality they helped to create such ‘stars’.

Strasberg and Stanislavski criticized each other’s work as well as that of other theoreticians and theatre practitioners. This they did for their theories to evolve, grow and move away from stagnation. Their methods and systems are based on what had

worked for them and others. Naturally, for some they were not effective and it was important to realize this. As Stanislavski said:

My sensations may be purely individual to me, the whole thing may be the fruit of my imagination. That is of no consequence provided I can make use of it for my purposes and it helps me. If my practical and unscientific method can be of use to you, so much the better. If not, I shall not insist on it.

(Stanislavski, 1937: 187)

To say that I am a devoted believer in either the Stanislavski system or Strasberg's method would be misleading. I needed to find out what lies behind all the debates that had been going on for years about the 'method'. Neither of them intended their methods as the be all and end all of the acting process. Stanislavski especially repeatedly stated that his approach provided guidelines for when the actor has problems with expression and the creative process. This I do appreciate and believe that when one feels creatively blocked or unable to connect with a character, one will at the very least find something that will help with motivation and inspiration on the pathway towards find truthful expression under imaginary circumstances.

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